

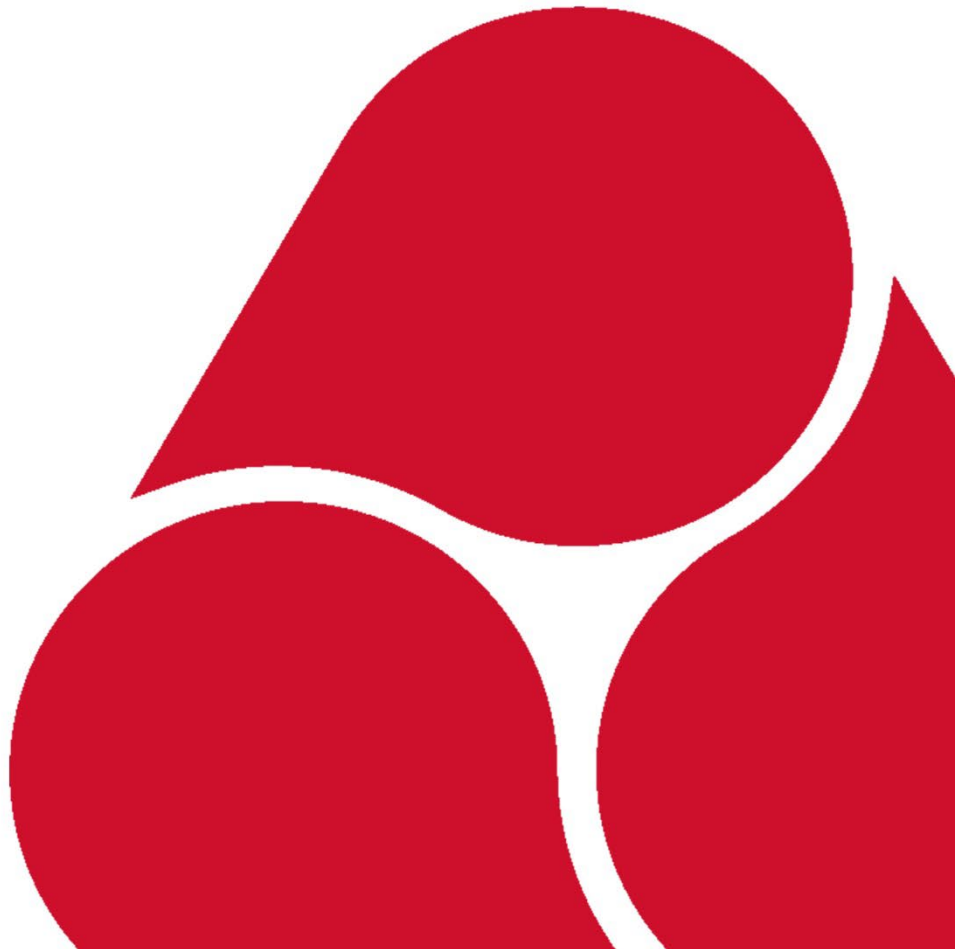


Office for Product
Safety & Standards

Exploring the experiences of 'Domestic Clients' undergoing construction work on their property

Qualitative research report on behalf of OPSS from YouGov

December 2024



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Project background and objectives

OPSS is exploring and building an evidence base regarding attitudes, understanding and behaviour around domestic clients' and understanding of construction products.

A 'domestic client' is defined as any individual who has construction work carried out on their home, or the home of a family member, that is not done as part of any business (e.g., a hotel, restaurant, local housing association etc.)¹.

The subsequent research aims are exploratory in nature as YouGov will outline domestic clients' awareness and understanding of the construction process, including safety information and other potential risks.

The key research areas for this project were to uncover:

- General awareness of construction products, safety and technical information related to construction;
- The process of selecting a provider and the factors that are important around safety;
- The role of the participant in selecting construction products and the product safety implications of different products; and
- Knowledge, awareness and understanding of specific legislation.

Research methodology and sample

As part of this research, we conducted 25 interviews with domestic clients in January 2023. 20 of these interviews were conducted over Zoom or over the phone; a further 5 interviews were conducted in the homes of domestic clients².

The sample were all recruited through the YouGov panel. A small survey (called a screener) was deployed to ensure the sample frame below was achieved. Following the fieldwork YouGov's team of qualitative researchers undertook thematic analysis on the data collected.

The sample frame for recruitment is outlined below:

- All participants were currently undergoing construction work or had conducted construction in their homes in the past 12 months.
- Construction was to be extensive, defined as having undergone some form of structural work (shown below in sample achieved).
- Mix of attitudes around engagement with contractor (excluding DIYers and Self-builders); from those who were very engaged with contractor and the construction process to not very engaged with the contractor and the construction process – for example being hands on in the construction material process, to allowing the contractor to undertake all aspects.
- Mix of age, gender, ethnicity, and region.
- Mix of education level and household income.

¹ CDM2015 domestic client definition – <https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/cdm/2015/domestic-clients.htm>

² The in-home visits allowed moderators to use clients' home as a piece of stimulus, many were reminded of specific issues whilst looking around rooms. Upon reflection YouGov did not see a significant value for conducting these interviews in home.

Sample achieved:

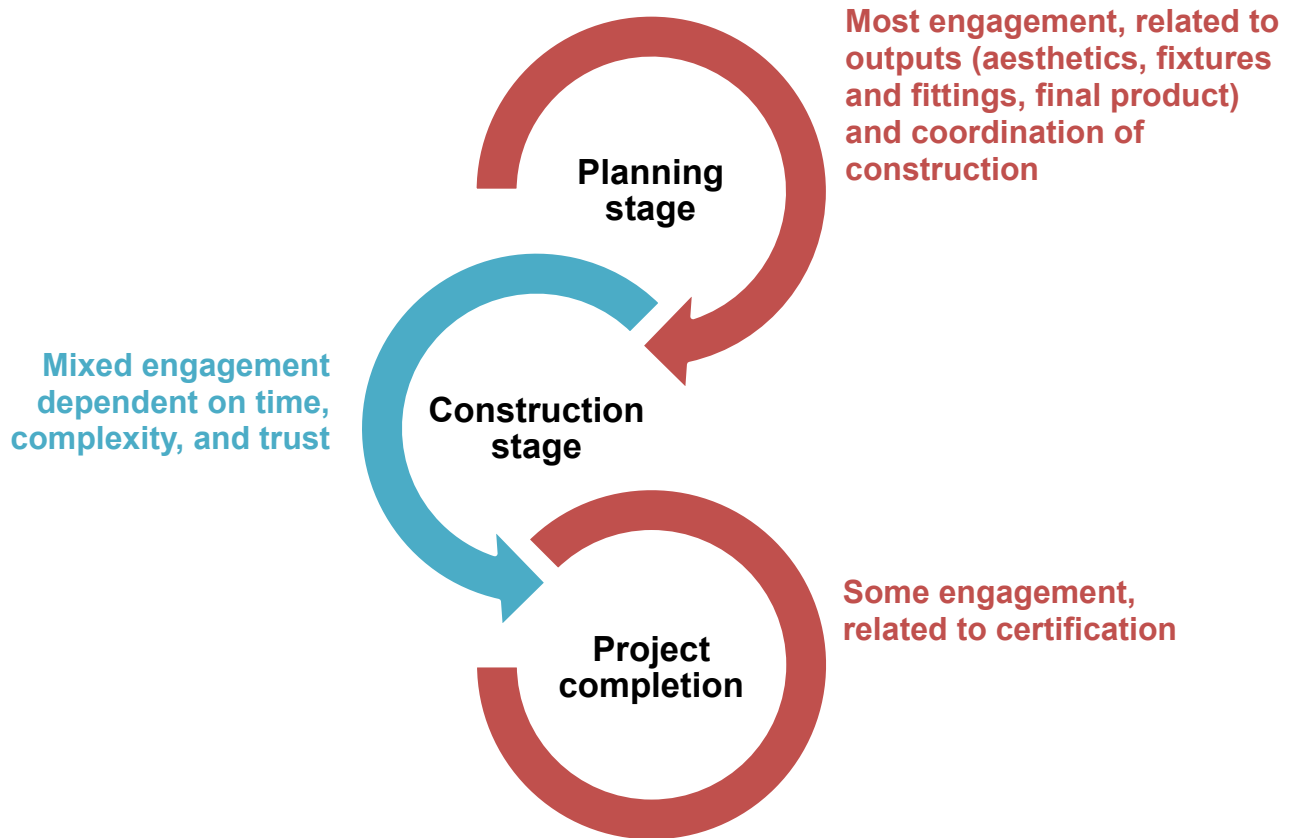
Age	Gender	Social Grade	Location	Construction
43	Female	B	Yorkshire and the Humber	Kitchen and dining room conversion
60	Female	C1	South East	Kitchen, dining room conversion
57	Male	B	Wales	Conservatory, solar panels, new kitchen and bathroom, internal walls removed
34	Female	C1	North West	Extension
45	Female	C2	Yorkshire and the Humber	Extension
69	Female	B	Yorkshire and the Humber	Loft conversion
63	Male	B	London	Extension
59	Male	C2	London	Extension
49	Male	C2	North West	Loft conversion
72	Female	E	South West	Extension and energy retrofit
43	Female	C1	London	Extension and loft conversion
58	Female	D	Yorkshire and the Humber	Extension
34	Female	B	Scotland	Bathroom extension
38	Male	B	London	Extension
34	Female	C2	East Midlands	Extension
43	Female	A	London	Extension
59	Female	B	Scotland	Extension
42	Male	A	East Midlands	Extension
60	Male	C2	North West	Bathroom and bedroom conversion
62	Male	C1	East Midlands	Extension
35	Female	A	South West	Extension, energy retrofit and loft conversion
55	Male	B	London	Extension
42	Female	D	South West	Energy efficiency retrofit
44	Female	A	London	Internal reconfiguration

Analysis:

The qualitative data was analysed using thematic analysis. This is an inductive technique that involves establishing categories and then identifying systematic links between them. The thematic analysis was conducted by the three researchers who conducted the fieldwork. The researchers referred to professional transcripts during their individual analysis, alongside this they collectively analysed findings in a joint brainstorm session to increase the validity and objectivity of the analysis.

Key findings/themes

Involvement from the homeowners / domestic clients ebbs and flows throughout the construction process. Most involvement takes place during the planning stage, confirming designs and approving costs and timelines. This then wanes during construction as clients lack knowledge of the materials and building process. Moving into the closing stages of construction, involvement increases as they seek certification.



Involvement is largely seen as signing off on the decisions and actions of the architects and contractors. Domestic clients do not tend to be experts in construction and do not possess the knowledge and time to comprehend the specifications and technical understanding to make informed decisions.

Confidence is a core driver of involvement, with many clients building confidence through past experiences of construction or through friends and family who have previously undertaken construction. In these cases, domestic clients possess a higher level of knowledge and will be more diligent with their contractor.

There is a spectrum of clients' interest in the construction process, but most are trustful of their contractors. Trust is built in the initial meetings with a contractor and is one of the core drivers of selecting a contractor. Unsurprisingly, highly communicative, and thorough contractors are preferred over ones less forthcoming with details.

Most domestic clients rely on their contractors for the sourcing, purchase, and installation of construction materials. Clients showed more interest when a material has ramifications on the outputs of the building or the building's environment (e.g., light and heat). When plans change and different materials are needed, clients tend to become more involved, often asking 'what went wrong?' and what alternative products are needed.

Our research found a range of experiences with contractors. Some were seen as diligent in disclosing what they are buying and why, offering choices to homeowners, explaining what was possible or not (in terms of safety) and having open channels of communication both verbally and with documentation. However, other contractors are less professional and more informal in their approach to the construction project. This may be linked to the size of their construction company or personality/character but further research is needed to validate this.

There are large amounts of assumptions made around the knowledge and expertise of contractors. Many clients assume that the contractor will purchase and install materials according to current regulations and standards. Building inspectors act as another layer of validation for the client as they ensure that the build is meeting regulations. The research found that there is a system of trust due to requirements for planning permission and completion certificates, meaning that domestic clients do not feel that they need to engage with the intricacies of the construction process.

Many clients lack an understanding of construction and do not wish to learn about the regulations of materials due to their limited time. Clients also feel that it is the responsibility of the inspector and contractor to ensure everything is compliant, it is part of what they are paying them for.

Clients are aware they need to gain certification regarding their build for safety assurances and insurance. However, many admit that they do not understand what the certificates say but are reassured by being certified.

The construction process: Planning phase

Involvement

The planning phase tends to have the most involvement from domestic clients. During this phase, they often work with architects and contractors to ensure that the construction will meet their requirements. This involvement can include reviewing plans and choosing materials (typically based on aesthetics).

Those who had not previously undertaken any work in their homes tended to be concerned about how long the process might take and what their responsibilities were. Those who had social connections within construction or previous experience with construction tended to be more confident before the process began.

“I’d not had work done like that before, my cousin had that work done before, told me what to expect and what to do, how to interact” (49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)

“All major fittings were pre-decided, from the taps to the shower, there weren’t really any ambiguous areas when it came to the aesthetics” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)

“I was more involved in deciding where everything goes, with the decoration and the planning. I would devolve the practical elements because they have the knowledge” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

Knowledge and concerns

Outside of those who had undertaken work before, most participants have little knowledge of the construction process and in particular, materials. Initial considerations from clients focused on the design and aesthetic elements of how they wanted their home to look and feel. Price was also a point of interest when looking at construction materials, many were concerned by the rise in cost of living and increase in materials due to supply chain issues. Most are not given a choice of different materials by their contractor, those who are given a choice do not tend to consider the safety of the item as they assume that it would be safe.

“We obviously made all the decisions about the kitchen, but as regards to actually buying any products, no, I left that up to the builders” (38, Male, B, Extension work)

Architects and contractors are the domestic client’s source of information on the construction materials, as the participants feel they do not hold the expertise to make decisions. Contractors tend to be contacted more frequently due to their proximity during the construction process. Architects are more likely to be involved during the planning phase when products are being chosen.

“[It was] important in terms of how the finished look would be ... But it wasn’t important to me that I knew all the technical process that they would go through to do the work” (60, Female, C1, Wall removal – kitchen/diner conversion)

Domestic clients were concerned about disruption to their home lives during the build, the length of the build and the overall cost. The more cautious participants (which were a minority within the sample), had concerns primarily around fire safety and the structural integrity of their builds. However, they looked to the expertise of the contractors and architects to provide information on this.

“I think it was more of a case of that, yes, we had to trust them because they've done it before, and we didn't have the specific knowledge” (59, Female, B, Extension work)

Choosing a contractor

Most domestic clients chose a contractor based on recommendations, preferably from friends and family, and occasionally through online research (if they do not have relevant social connections to draw from). Price was often the leading factor to determine which contractors make the shortlist for their final decision. Outside of price, they used a combination of recommendations from online sources and from personal and professional connections (i.e., from their supplier, or neighbours) to help determine which contractors to choose. The architect was seen as source of authority and trust in providing recommendations on the contractor due their position in the industry (i.e. being seen as highly skilled expert) and that if the contractor wasn't competent it would reflect poorly on them. Often an architect's recommendation would create a starting stock of trust in the contractor.

“I think that's their job. Obviously, they know a lot more. I'm not an expert, I've never done a building thing. They came recommended by the architect, so, you know, we knew that they were going to do a good job” (58, Female, D, Extension work)

Often their initial meeting with the contractor determined whether they would work with them. Many looked to meet the contractor to determine their aptitude, knowledge, and importantly, character. Domestic clients assessed how the contractor replied to the questions and needs, seeing if the response displays knowledge (i.e., being expansive or articulate). The contractor that seemed most trustworthy/capable was viewed as being very comprehensive in these initial meetings, showing the potential client past work (via pictures or at current sites), certifications and accreditations.

“I looked on social networking sites like Facebook and Nextdoor for recommendations, sometimes you need to be wary of those sites, but I saw their name pop up a few times, they came over, including the guy running the show and I liked them and they seemed to check out” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

“Recommendations are important, if you have friends and family who have worked with them before you can also see their previous work.” (45, Female, C2, Extension work)

Following their selection, conversations around health and safety and product safety are typically minimal as the domestic client assumed that the contractor would adhere to regulations 'as a given'. The principal areas of planning discussions revolved around timelines and the planning of the work (i.e., what rooms in the building would be affected / worked on).

The cost of materials formed a part of the planning process. Only a few proactive contractors outlined potential suppliers and why they had chosen certain materials over others in relation to the appropriateness of the installation. In rare cases, contractors offer domestic clients detailed reports of the material's quality and if they adhered to regulations, but clients rarely reviewed these reports. If cost options are proposed most clients assume that each option would adhere to safety regulations but there could be a difference in performance e.g., if they chose cheaper installation, it wouldn't be as effective.

“I was able to have a conversation about what product was used and that was just to do with cost, really.” (60, Female, C1, Wall removal – kitchen/diner conversion)

“I was confident it's safe, he discussed with me about roof insulation and how much you need and he'd, say well, this is the legal amount but if we put in this, it's a bit warmer. So, I had no reason to think otherwise.” (45, Female, C2, Extension work)

A proactive contractor was characterised by:

- Being communicative in discussion and outreach to the domestic client (either by phone or face to face).
- Offering the client paperwork regarding timelines, products to be purchased and timelines.
- Outlining potential complications to the build, if certain issues arise (i.e. if removing a wall and a steel may need to be put in).
- Offering alternatives to clients suggests which can't be installed (i.e. window placement, fixture and fittings) and choice in materials.



Case study – Michael (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom Conversion)

The contractor was chosen based on a recommendation from somebody Michael knew, which was important for the trust-building process, especially as he was able to see the work that they had previously done. When choosing the contractor, trust was the primary factor, as he was not living in the house when the construction was taking place and needed to be certain that he could entrust them with the process and access to the house. In the initial stages, he would visit more frequently to check the quality and the progress of work that was being done, which was also a key in building trust with the builders and making him feel reassured.

He was particularly engaged in the planning stages of the construction and worked with an experienced designer, predominantly to make product and design choices. Most of these products were then pre-ordered to make the process simpler and more straightforward, and to make sure that the contractors would follow the agreed design and work based on that. Throughout the building process, his engagement with contractors was predominantly centred around checking the progress of the work. He felt that the builders were effective in their communication, particularly if there were any changes that needed to be made, or if there were any issues.

“We were involved in all of the pre-planning, ordered all of the (materials) and then... actual work started based on that.”

“Because we were away, it meant that we were going to have to entrust them with entry into the house ... So, the trust came from the fact that ... he had worked for somebody else that we know, that we trusted their opinion, so therefore, it was an implied trust.”

The construction process: Construction phase

Involvement, knowledge and confidence

The construction phase is where domestic clients displayed the least knowledge of the process, especially regarding construction materials. This is due to the level of time and effort needed to gain expertise and make informed decisions on the purchase and installation of materials. Furthermore, clients lacked confidence in their ability to comprehend the construction process, leading them to defer most decisions to their contractors.

*“I mostly trusted them to make the decision because that's their background, I suppose. Like, for me, I thought they're probably more qualified than I was to make those decisions”
(34, Female, C2, Extension work)*

Client involvement is conversational, including getting confirmation on how the build is progressing³. Domestic clients were most concerned with anything that could have a major impact on the project's initial plans and if they would have to alter them.

“I want to be involved in anything that could have a lasting effect” (44, Female, A, Internal reconfiguration)

Most defer decisions to contractors, however there was a spectrum of behaviour on how involved they were in the construction phase on a conversational level. This is in relation to a number of factors:

- **Time** – the more time the domestic client has, typically sees them have more conversations with the contractors about what is happening during the build and being more inquisitive.
- **The level of complexity of the work** – where a build is more complex involving foundational work (i.e., extensions) or heavy restructuring of the building the domestic client feels they need to be involved to ensure the build meets their requirements.
- **The disposition of the homeowner** – some homeowners feel the purpose of the builder is not only to undertake the construction but also to take the responsibility for decisions. Some have an attitude that ‘the contractor knows best’ and are happy to let them progress without their input. But others would like to be asked for their feedback during the construction process.
- **The level of trust in the contractor** – despite trusting the contractor during the planning, trust can decrease in the construction phase. This can occur due to delays in the build, delivery of materials, observing safety issues and unexplained costs. These types of complications can lead them to question the builder's aptitude. In these cases, clients tend to ask more questions about what work is being undertaken and why.

³ Please note that the sample did not include DIYers or self-builders, so they were not physically hands-on in the construction process.

- **Past experiences** – where domestic clients have undertaken projects in the past and those experiences have gone poorly, they feel more inclined to ask the contractor about what is happening with the build; if there are complications, delays or spiralling costs. Those who had previous experience completing large-scale construction in their homes were more confident during the construction phase.
- **Living on site** - Domestic clients who live 'on site' during construction tend to be more engaged with the process as they have proximity to the works and can share their views on materials used or configuration of the build as its being conducted. They can also notice safety issues whilst living on site, which they can challenge. For those not living 'on site' many elements of the construction process are 'out of site and out of mind'.

“I’m a planner and a project manager so I definitely like control, I was involved in sourcing materials like the flooring, but I have my limits, I don’t know how long some things take” (62, Male, C1, Extension work)

“I think it’s really important to be engaged, you’re spending a lot of money plus it’s good to see how things are developing so that you can imagine where you are going to put things like your bed” (49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)

During the construction phase, some clients mentioned instances where they did not feel safety rules were followed, e.g., not using hard hats or using a ladder instead of scaffolding. They did not feel confident to challenge the contractors on this safety hazard as they were not sure what the regulation or legislation was.

“I did question a few things that they did, when they were painting the outside I think they should have used scaffolding but they used ladders, I’m fairly sure that’s not safe” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)

Builder’s experience

Open and continual conversation with the contractors engendered a trusting relationship and confidence during the construction phase. The level of communication varies but was dependent on the domestic client’s attitude, whether this is a good or bad thing (i.e., how much they want to know). Contractors’ updates to clients can range from daily, monthly or until a phase is complete.

Those who had communication with the contractors tended to feel more confident throughout the process and had their expectations managed.

“They [the builders] would send us photos and ask what we wanted where and would give their own recommendations and advice – there is definitely a collaboration” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)

“We were away for the construction process, so we had to trust them, we left them the keys and the alarm codes. Eventually our trust grew once we saw the work that they were doing” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)

“I thought it would be stressful, we didn’t know whether we got the wrong person, but they were great, their communication was good and they always had a plan and they were consistent” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

Clients often felt that they did not have time or energy to build knowledge on the construction process so relied on the builder’s expertise and assumed that their work would be efficient and safe.

“I don’t know about quality, and it would take me too long to build my knowledge. Undertaking construction is a massive thing but we just trust that they would be able to take it on because they [contractors] have the knowledge” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

“It’s all a bit like when the hairdresser asks how you want your hair done... They are ultimately the expert, they know what will look good, so you need to trust them, or trust them to help you to make the right decision” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)

Complications to the plans forced many domestic clients to seek clarification from their contractor. For example, if a wooden beam needed to be replaced for a steel beam, then domestic clients would like to know how this will change the shape, look, and feel of the room (alongside cost and time implications).

“For example, the contractor actually recommended we use a system called TeleBeam which we’ve not come across before. So, instead of using steel beams, TeleBeam is an aluminium frame system to just have a lot more structure” (59, Female, B, Extension Work)

Many felt that the process was not explained to them in detail and that they would have liked to have given more input when facing complications and during the process in general.

“When you decide you want some clarification or you want to discuss something, sometimes they either wouldn’t call back immediately or ever. So, sometimes they gave us what they wanted to give us rather than what we wanted.” (57, Male, B, Remodel and Solar panels)

“I had the option of sticking with the existing boiler and getting it changed at some future date myself... They would always explain where they felt things could be done... I had the confidence that they were looking out for me and that they were trying to keep my costs as low as possible.” (59, Male, C2, Extension work)

During this phase, the contractor is not the only source that the domestic client places trust in to ensure adherence to the project plan or schedule. The building regulator helped inspect and validate the trust they have in the contractor and the construction project.

The subcontractors were an area of focus for the domestic clients, as their electrical, plumbing, and decorating work have large implications for the finish. Domestic clients often requested certain light placements, bathroom/kitchen fittings and wanted to ensure these are installed correctly. Conversations around the movement of fixtures and fittings can lead to safety ramifications, which the sub-contractors deferred to the client.

“The fact that they had qualifications gave me peace of mind” (49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)

“The design and stuff of how we want things and then where we want things, fixtures and placing more around, [regarding involvement with subcontractors]. It’s been more, like, ‘Where do you want this hole?’ (34, Female, C2, Extension work)

Construction materials

Construction materials were where domestic clients had the least interest. Even if a domestic client wanted to be in control of purchases, they tended to rely on the contractor to specify which products to buy, along with how they should be installed. Most did not have an idea of what ‘looks right’ and placed trust in the contractor.

“I mean, you know, they were buying stuff at builder's merchants and various firms would come and drop stuff off but you just assume it's okay and to be honest I'd never ever thought about it” (58, Female, D, Extension work)

The contractor tended to take charge of the sourcing of materials, while domestic clients tended to consent to this due to a lack of knowledge. In some cases, domestic clients sourced materials themselves, in search of better prices. There was one instance where a client overlooked the reputation of the buyer in favour of value. The contractor informed them that the material was not of sufficient quality and did not adhere to regulations, suggesting an alternative from a reputable wholesaler. In many cases, the domestic client is content with receiving paperwork from the contractor on materials bought as a form of reassurance.

“I think, because some of it, I was just, 'Let's just get this off eBay,' and they were like, 'No, we can't buy it off eBay because you can't then search by where they are from.’” (34, Female, C2, Extension work)

“They [the construction materials] were my choice but my builders offered advice” (69, Female, B, Loft conversion)

In terms of products and materials, elements that do not have aesthetic implications are of the least interest to domestic clients. Structural elements like cement, foundation products, pipes, wires, structural timbre, and metal are also of little interest. However, products that affect the energy efficiency of the build were of concern for some homeowners, as they want to know how effective insulation and window choices will impact them.

Many struggled with delays in receiving products due to supply chain issues and fluctuating prices (COVID and Brexit related). This was a major frustration that brings the domestic client more into the construction product side of the build, opening conversations around substitutes to circumnavigate delays.

“We did run into ... problems with pretty much every other supplier, as well, mainly to do with delays ... [there were] either problems that are outside of their control, or things that they needed to come back and re-do” (59, Male, C2, Extension work)

The most common point of concern when it comes to products revolved around fire retardancy. Many had questions specifically around installation, which stemmed from Grenfell and how the cladding was installed. Concerns were also raised around the lifespan of products, many sought confirmation of the expected lifespan through certification and guarantees from the contractors and building regulators. However, not all builders were able to provide their clients with these guarantees.

“I wanted to make sure ... that the windows are safe and secure and warm as well. I wanted to make sure they were a good standard so that they kept a good amount of heat in the winter” (45, Female, C2, Extension work)

“For example, the insulation boards for the plastering, we had to upgrade on that and they had to make them thicker because we had too many windows, basically ... so we had to discuss all of that as well and the costing of that” (34, Female, C1, Extension work)

“We didn't have the technical knowledge to know whether one product is more fire retardant than another. You can only hope you have a reputable supplier” (59, Female, B, Extension work)

“I assume that materials that are used are fire retardant... you have to trust that the regulations” (59, Female, B, Extension work)

“I guess I probably knew very little before we started. Not going to say we know a huge amount now, but I'd say we picked up some things along the way I suppose, like the need for fire doors or smoke alarms” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

“We're a lot more conscious of things like fire doors, certainly that's been something that shifted even pre-Grenfell” (43, Female, A, Extension work)

Few contractors offered a choice of materials proposed, but domestic clients did not tend to be concerned about being given a choice. They presumed that the contractor would buy materials that adhered to current product safety regulations. If a product had impacts on aesthetics or the environment then a choice is more likely to be offered i.e., colour of bricks, assorted sizes or types of windows (glazing).

“I wasn't offered any choice [on construction materials], to be honest I'm not sure we'd have wanted to decide because we can't make an informed decision” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

“We had no input in that, or no reference to that at all [on construction materials]” (59, Female, B, Extension work)



Case study – Rita (45, Female, C2, Extension work)

Rita was heavily involved in the construction process, which was in part driven by the determination to reduce costs. In the planning stages, she was involved in the planning of the electrics, plumbing and the design to avoid increasing architects' fees, but also to make sure that this was done in accordance with her preferences and the way in which she would use the space.

Throughout the construction process, she was involved in choosing the materials, and would research information about the materials and the costs to ensure that the builders were getting them at the best rates. However, whilst getting materials at good prices was important for her, she would always discuss the choice of materials with the builders and would frequently take their advice, particularly regarding the safety and sustainability of the products. As she felt that the builders had the knowledge and expertise in this area, she was confident leaving these choices to them.

“I'm certainly not someone that would be happy to just let my builder decide which doors we're having or which skirting we're having or something. I've very much made all of those decisions myself.”

“From the beginning we've had a very detailed list of the majority of materials being used ... We Googled ourselves to see what prices they were coming up at, just to check the builder is getting the best rates that he can.”

“Ultimately, we've never dictated anything. While it's been a conversation and we've always taken the builder's advice, we've always felt that they've known what the right material to buy is for a particular area.”

The construction process: Project completion

Gaining reassurance through certification

At project completion, the involvement of the building regulation inspector was reassuring for many. They felt that the presence of an inspector meant that the construction followed legal guidelines and regulations. However, most were not aware of what these checks involved or what certification they needed. Therefore, they made assumptions.

Construction material certification or proof of meeting regulations was a major area where domestic clients assumed was correct if the building passed inspection.

“I would hope that the materials are conforming to the standards if they are being sold... plus it's a local reputable company” (59, Female, B, Extension work)

“I guess, they need to check their certifications and stuff and show that they're all qualified to do it. But we haven't really been involved in those discussions” (42, Male, A, Extension work)

For some, the certificates were important because they provided proof that the building works done on the property were compliant with the law and regulations. Particularly they were aware they would need the certificate if they wanted to sell the house in the future. Some did not care about receiving certifications and only did so because it was required by the law – safety consideration was not a primary reason for getting the certificate.

For others, they felt that they had invested a lot of money in the construction and therefore wanted to make sure that they had a guarantee that if anything goes wrong with the materials, or if there are any safety issues, they would be protected.

“Certainly, something that costs so much money and is obviously a fundamental, kind of, safety there as well as other things. It's your home and yes, you want to make sure you're protected” (38, Male, B, Extension work)

Some felt frustrated with the process of acquiring the certifications and felt that the process was long and unnecessarily complicated and that the communication throughout was very poor. They felt that this should be simplified for those doing the constructions in their own house to give them the reassurance of safety and compliance with the standards.

“It took a while to come through, but we've now got that guarantee document from the company, as well as the building control certificate as well that's all been signed off ... [there is] always a danger when a project ends that you're still waiting for this final piece of information” (38, Male, B, Extension work)

“I got my FENSA certificate along with something for my gas and electric and something from my buildings inspector to say everything had been checked properly and was up to standard” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

“The certification reassures you that it [the construction] has been done properly” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

Personal safety was also very important, and they felt that getting a certificate reassured them about the compliance with safety standards, but also offered protection.

“There must be building regulations for what goes where, I wouldn't feel qualified to challenge them on that, I just have to assume they're doing it” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)

“It’s really important that everything meets regulations, it’s for your own safety” (49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)

Some participants received certification about the work that had been completed, however, there were mixed attitudes around liability in case there are issues after project completion. Most believed that contractors were liable for mistakes made if they failed to follow plans.

“I think I make an assumption [that they would be liable]. The builders have the experience, and they can make adjustments to things, so everything is on their heads if things go wrong” (59, Male, C2, Extension work)

“I felt liable to some extent, but you do have to trust that they will get it right especially if the building inspector comes. I didn’t really have a clue about it, we’re not builder so we have to give them freedom to some extent” (43, Female, C1, Extension work and Loft conversion)

“We didn’t have proper floorboards; the electrical wires were exposed... We sort of assumed that’s how things worked because we don’t work in that environment” (60, Male, C2, Bathroom and Bedroom conversion)



Case study – Neil (38, Male, B, Extension work)

Following the completion of construction, Neil acquired building control certificate, along with a guarantee document from the company, which guarantees the building structure for a period of 10 years, and includes plumbing, electrics and the materials used in construction. Receiving these certifications was important for him, as he felt that he had invested a large amount of money, and the certification provided him with a guarantee of the safety, as well as offered protection, in case if anything goes wrong or if there are any issues.

However, he felt that the process of acquiring certification was not smooth and that it took a very long time before he could receive it. He also felt that the communication process was very poor, and it would have been helpful for him if it was communicated more clearly about the length of time it might take to acquire it.

“We had to chase it for a while and there was a bit of lack of communication. Always a danger when a project ends that, you know, actually you’re still waiting for this final piece of information.”

“Certainly something that costs so much money and is obviously a fundamental, kind of, safety there as well as other things. You know, it’s your home and yes, you want to make sure you’re protected.’

Improving safety, knowledge, and regulation

Construction product regulation vs build

There was a clear divide between safety and regulation related to construction and construction materials. Most domestic clients were interested in the safety and regulation regarding the building process, ensuring that the fire, electrical, and plumbing regulations had been met for their own safety and to validate their insurance / being able to sell their home in the future.

*“In terms of regulation, I don’t have much knowledge. I think it’s the builder’s daily life and daily work so they can work these things out quickly because they have the knowledge”
(49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)*

“[Because] I had to sort out the building regulations, I did find out the legal things regarding the electrics ... because I ended up getting a different electrician to come and do me a certificate so that I could get it all signed off” (45, Female, C2, Extension work)

“It was just because one of our parts didn't fit with the regulations that it was flagged up, but if it had passed then I probably wouldn't have been involved as much as I was originally” (34, Female, C1, Extension work)

The construction materials tended to be trusted as clients assumed that they had been checked by both contractors and buildings inspectors. Many saw materials arrive on site or saw invoices/receipts. Those who had built trust with their contractor assumed that they would be buying from a reputable source. Furthermore, the building inspector was a person of authority and most clients had confidence in them.

There was little appetite to become knowledgeable on the safety and regulation for both the construction project and materials. This was due to a lack of time, but more crucially, it was beyond their ability to confidently comprehend the regulations. In rare cases, some domestic clients did build knowledge if they were more cautious, had previous experience or were to embark on future projects.

“The information is out there but builders should hand out this information to customers so they can see what regulations should be being followed” (49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)

“We never had an actual discussion about it. I just I presumed that he followed the regulations that he had to follow” (45, Female, C2, Extension work)

*“I've kind of used Google in the first place to find it out, but then I went on the government websites as well just to see what their regulations were and the law surrounding these buildings ... And then I also spent a bit of time on different websites in terms of the products and where are they from and the advice from them as well”
(34, Female, C1, Extension work)*

Searching for knowledge and regulations

Domestic clients primarily sought out pricing differences and often deferred all procurement of materials to the contractor. When asked if they were to search and source themselves for information on safety and regulation, online would be the first port of call (excluding contractors).

There was a mix of where clients felt they could find the right information; some felt that supplier sites held the most accurate information on the products. Others felt that they should rely on government-backed sources. However, some were unsure of which government department was most relevant and could supply information about construction materials and regulations. Alternatively, they wanted clarity as to whether they needed to contact their local council.

“I mean, the building standards regs go on for books, and books and are constantly changing.” (59, Female, B, Extension work)

“I would've thought there must be some government regulator or some kind of, you know, Ofqual, Ofgem equivalent or something maybe that regulates the building industry or might be able to give a bit more information.” (38, Male, B, Extension work)

Domestic clients expected that information about regulation may not be structured in a digestible way, using informal language and clear tips for ensuring proper regulation whilst planning and conducting construction.

However, even if the information was comprehensible some still cannot imagine themselves engaging with it as they feel that this information should be reviewed by the contractor, as this is the role they have been employed to complete.

“To be honest, I can't really recall looking up a lot of safety information. The mind-set was more about – is it a quality product?” (49, Male, C2, Loft conversion)



Case study – Kate (34, Female, C2, Extension work)

Due to having children, Kate felt it was particularly important for her to ensure the safety of materials used in the construction process, as well as that the build was completed safely and that there would be no potential hazards arising in the future.

Whilst she felt there is information available around the safety and regulations of the construction process, she felt that this information should be more easily accessible for individuals carrying out construction work in their homes. For instance, when she would search for safety information, she had to read through several resources, which was time-consuming and she was not always able to find the information that she needed. She felt it would be very useful to her if there was an official website that could present this information in a digestible and user-friendly format. According to her, it would be helpful in providing key information that people need to be aware of when undergoing construction work, helping them to ensure that the building works are being carried in accordance with the standards.

“(For example) with some official sources, I found that you'd have to be scrolling through ... and then you'd have to look through all the downloads to find that area, but it doesn't necessarily take you straight to the information you want to go to.”

“If you could maybe search a specific question and then it came up with, 'Are you knocking down a wall?' Yes, 'Is it a supporting wall?' No. Like, that kind of thing that answered those questions for you ... even just for knowing that what the builder is telling you is right.”

Recommendations

The small-scale qualitative piece of research has shown that a majority of clients do not engage with the construction materials, safety and regulations due to time and knowledge barriers. They feel it is the responsibility of the contractor and building inspectors to cover this area for them. For participants in this study there is little appetite to be involved in this aspect or to have legislation to increase their exposure to the rules and regulations surrounding the purchase and installation of building materials.

However, this devolvement of decisions and trust placed on the contractor to act accordingly does expose them to risks. Without comprehension of the process domestic clients cannot themselves be expected to understand the decisions around construction products made on their behalf. This research further suggests that contractors generally do not offer choices around products and were not forthcoming with regards to information surrounding regulation or the quality of products. This means it is necessary for Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2015 to perform as intended to protect domestic clients.

For some domestic clients, it was unclear who ought to be providing them information to enable them to be 'intelligent consumers'. Official sources could supply more information and guidelines, for domestic clients who wish to be involved in the construction process, including what certifications they should request and approved construction materials, alongside this there could be information regarding what 'good' and 'bad' construction practices look like.

At this level of research, it would not be wise to propose regulation, rather further quantitative exploration is needed to understand the full picture of drivers and barriers to engagement. We would recommend the following areas to investigate:

- **Contractors' exploration:** We have one point of view in two-way exchange. The contractor's point of view and experience should be considered to understand their own understanding of product safety and installation, and how they behave with clients on this front, to help corroborate findings from both sources. The audience here should cover from sole contractors to large building firms, as experiences and behaviours will vary widely.
- **DIYers / Self-Build exploration:** Within this current research involvement was related to the price of supplies, aesthetics, and design rather than the construction materials themselves. The sample specifically excluded the DIYers and Self-builders who as an audience would have a much higher level of involvement in the construction materials and therefore be more liable for following regulations. Being 'self-taught' it will be interesting to see their attitude and behaviour towards the issues of product regulations and see if they have a higher level of understanding or if it is something they lack awareness in or understanding like that of the domestic clients.
- **Home-owners survey:** This research was based on a sample of X25 domestic clients, the insights are directional. A quantitative survey would be needed to put robust numbers behind the findings uncovered so OPSS can be confident in any future strategy into this area.

Appendix

Qualitative Research into construction products

Discussion guide for interviews

Introduction (2 minutes)

Thank you for making the time to participate in this interview. My name is [XXX] and I am calling from YouGov. Thanks for agreeing to talk to me today. As we indicated in our invitation, we are going to be talking to you today about your knowledge and experience of construction products on behalf of a government department today.

This is an informal discussion, there are no right or wrong answers, and I am here to hear your thoughts and opinions, so please be as open and honest as you feel comfortable with.

The discussion will take approximately 45 minutes. We will audio record the interview for note-taking purposes only – the recording will not be shared with anyone other than YouGov and will be used for internal use only. YouGov will type up anonymised notes from the interview recording which will be used for analysis and report writing. We will not share your contact details with any 3rd parties, and we will secure your personal data securely in line with data protection regulations. Are you happy with that? (turn on recording)

Do you have any questions before we start?

Current construction project (5 mins)

- Firstly, could you tell me a little bit about yourself, your home, and the work you are having done / you have completed in your home?
- When did it start? How long is the work going to take/was taking? When did it finish / should finish?
- How has the process been? Have you come across any challenges? This could be before, during or after the work has been done. *Probe on planning, safety and regulation.*

Involvement / Relationship with the contractor and the construction process (10 mins)

- How involved were you in the construction planning?
- How involved in the construction process have you been and why – which areas have you been more / less involved in and why?
Probe on planning, purchase of products, and choosing products.
- Is involvement with the construction process important to you? Why so?
Probe on which parts; planning, choice, sourcing, and purchase of products (primary vs. fixtures/fittings)
- How knowledgeable about the construction process do you feel you are? Did you look to build your knowledge during or before the build? If so in what areas and why?
Probe on safety and regulations

- How did you go about choosing your contractor? What factors were important to you when choosing the contractor?
- How was/is trust built in your relationship with the contractor?
Probe around builders of trust, any issues or red flags i.e. warning signs
- How has your relationship with the contractors / experience of involvement in the construction process been?
Probe around participants assumption of contractor's knowledge / confidence on different aspects i.e. safety and regs, the building process
- Do you prefer to make choices/decisions about the construction process yourself or do you devolve it to the contractor? Why?
- What choices do you devolve to them, if any? Why so?
Probe: construction products.
- What choices/decisions do you take charge of, if any, and why?
 - Were you aware of any assumed liability you took based on taking charge of those choices/decisions?
 - Did any member of your design team (contractor/architect/engineer) inform you of any possible assumed liability based on a choice/decision?
- Have you had discussions around the following with your contractor – construction products, safety and regulations, quality/safety of the products/proper installation? If so, at what point did you have these conversations, and how did they go/what was the outcome? If not, why not?

Construction product knowledge and choice (10mins)

- How knowledgeable do you feel you are when it comes to construction products?
Probe on understanding the quality of products, what's required where (use), what's safe to use vs not
- Is knowledge and understanding of construction products important to you? Why/why not?
- During your experience with the construction process, was safety relating to construction products a priority for you? Why/why not? If yes, were there any steps you took to ensure the safety of products?
- Were you involved in the purchase/choice of products? If yes, how were you involved? What factors were important to you when choosing the products (probe on product use and safety)? Did you look up any information beforehand?
- Which kind of products did you talk about (focus on structural products)?
- Did your contractor offer you a choice when it came to products? Probe around quality, pros/cons of product, aesthetics, and finish
- What was the outcome of these conversations, and did you feel you were given enough information on the implication of choice of products?
- If you were not involved, why was that? Were you provided with information about the specific products used in the project by your contractor?

- Were you aware of construction product regulations and the need for construction products to conform to standards when it came to purchasing and installation? If so, how did you come about this knowledge? Is there anything you feel is confusing / you still lack knowledge about?
- Do you have any specific health and safety concerns about the products or part of the construction? If so, what are those concerns/why?

Improving safety, knowledge, and regulation (10 mins)

- How confident do you feel in your knowledge about the safety regulations and standards, when it comes to the construction process and product use?
- Would you assume that a contractor would only use compliant construction products under the existing regulations?
- Have you received any certification regarding the construction/build?
 - If so, what was this certification (*Probe on understanding/purpose of the certification*)? If not, are you aware of what certification you require and from whom?
- How important to you is receiving documentation and certifications in terms of ensuring that the construction works have complied with all relevant legislation? Why/why not?
- Where would you look for information (on the products, retailer's website, or other websites) about safety and regulations related to construction products and/or processes?

Probe around if they would directly engage themselves or at all

- Does the way in which you look for information differ for product use and installation?

Probe around formal (professionals) vs informal (friends) channels and how this differs for products

- Do you feel there could be improvements in the safety standards and regulations of building products? If so, why? And how could this be communicated?

Thank and close.

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