



Enlightened Clients' Guide to Project Quality and Compliance Detailed Notes

Procuring a main contractor – the benefits of early involvement

It is important to recognize that all projects benefit from tapping into a main contractor's knowledge of project delivery, buildability and construction techniques during the design stage and before the range of design options are evaluated, the option deemed most appropriate chosen, and other options rejected. The involvement of a main contractor at this early stage will help ensure the quality of designs and design information, their feasibility and help reduce errors emerging later in the process. Rectifying errors in the design stage is easier and much less expensive than dealing with those errors during construction on site or in the factory.

The design process involves the identification and exploration of possible solutions before selecting the most appropriate design to meet your desired outcomes. But the time of designers is often wasted working up options that are later revealed by a main contractor to have fundamental flaws in terms of buildability, delivery, and the availability of materials and skills. Involvement by a main contractor at the design stage can help ensure designs are workable and eliminate or certainly reduce the need for design changes after tender award that can result in errors impacting on quality as well as generating unnecessary waste and cost.

This means that main or specialist contractors, with their specific knowledge of key elements of the building, knowledge and experience of delivery, buildability and performance, should be involved in all projects at an early design stage, regardless of the form of procurement you choose. This may involve appointing the main contractor early, to harness their knowledge of construction during the development and refinement of the design, or alternatively appointing a main contractor or specialist contractor on a consultancy basis to assist the design team.

However, do bear in mind that procurement procedures and commercial constraints may prevent this early involvement of a main contractor. Procurement and commercial rules, particularly those that govern the tender process, can prevent this type of input as there are concerns that consulting a main contractor before tender could create an unfair or uncompetitive tender process. And if a contractor is appointed through some form of 'early contractor involvement', it can be difficult to ensure that the contractor's price is competitive. You need to discuss with your independent client adviser, legal adviser and other consultants as to the options available to you.

If you do decide to appoint a main contractor to consult with your design team as the design develops, it should be on a formal basis with the appropriate stipulations and conditions. The designers' duties, as described in their scope of services, should be made available to the contractor to allow the design to be challenged if it fails to satisfy the agreed requirements at a particular project stage. Whilst this might be seen as controversial by many, over time it could help enhance the quality of designs, and hence reduce errors.



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Here are the views of Rupert Perkins, managing director and owner of main contractor John Perkins Construction, on the value that a main contractor can add to your project, particularly when they are engaged as early as possible in the design stage.

Early contractor involvement can, Rupert argues, right from the outset, establish strong working relationships between the client, the contractor, the architect, and other key members of the team. When everyone already knows each other from a positive pre-construction period, it cuts out the uncertainty that can plague the beginning of a project. Getting everyone's input early in the process also improves the accuracy of the programme, leading to a more effective build. He goes on to say, saving on time goes hand-in-hand with saving on cost. The early contractor involvement that comes with the partner builder approach can unlock ways to shorten the construction programme and get the project completed more efficiently. This is especially important for organisations that are working towards hard deadlines, such as schools carrying out upgrades outside of term-time. A partner builder approach can help to create certainty around these critical dates.

Rupert reminds us that an unfortunate feature of the construction industry is the artificially low price. This is what happens when a client commits to a low price from the contractor at the tender stage, but ends up paying a much higher price over the course of the project. This only causes clients aggravation. What they need instead is certainty over cost.

He maintains that cost certainty and risk management can be better achieved through a negotiated contract or two-stage tender, where an 'open book' cost plan is developed with early contractor involvement (this approach is examined later in these Detailed Notes). This type of transparency means there are never any secrets around what's being spent. What's more, he says, working with a contractor to look into the cost implications of different design options and methodologies at an early stage can reveal cost savings that wouldn't be possible using the traditional procurement route.

But there's more. He contends that the true value of taking the partnership approach can best be achieved by building a relationship between you, the client, and your contractor for the long term. It's never about just doing the job and getting off site (and out of touch). In a long-term partnership, there is an in-built incentive for the contractor to always deliver the best quality work possible. The client knows the contractor will always be on their side if there's a problem.

'Pleasant' and 'enjoyable' may not be the first words that spring to mind when clients think about a building project. Yet clients have called construction projects with John Perkins Construction "a genuinely pleasant experience" (Andy Battle, Widcombe Baptist Church), "an enjoyable experience" (Dave Somers, Hutton Moor Leisure Centre), and praised the fact that everything was completed "always with a smile" (Marcus Chapman, The Corsham School).

John Perkins believe this is the ultimate benefit of thinking of a contractor as a delivery partner. It fosters a positive working environment, and means that clients can enjoy the process, rather than enduring it.

For an examination of the main most commonly used options available to you for procuring a main contractor and supply chain refer to the separate Detailed Notes.