

The reality of being a small housebuilder

Serious material shortages have put livelihoods and developments at risk. By Sarah Lonsdale

Chris Carr has a problem. The small-scale builder's great-grandparents started putting up houses 100 years ago for the citizens of Cleethorpes and the surrounding countryside, and the Carrs have seen off wars, recessions and oil crises. But the family firm hasn't seen shortages like this since the Second World War. Until this year Chris and his brother David have normally built homes between the wild North Sea and the rolling Lincolnshire Wolds at a steady rate of between eight and ten a year — solid, well designed and practical.

In the past 12 months, however, Carr has completed just three homes, although he is hoping to complete four others before October — if he can source the materials to finish them. He is going to have to mothball the next phase of a new development until next year unless the material shortages improve.

The Green is a small-scale development of 98 homes around Waltham golf course in the gently green hills of northeast Lincolnshire. A mix of affordable, social rented and larger four and five-bedroom properties, the houses are just the kind that are needed to lessen the housing crisis.

"Some of the delays have been down to Covid, like the rule we



Chris Carr's business is struggling with no supplies
LORNE CAMPBELL / GUZELIAN STORY

can only have one trade per unit at a time," says Carr, who chairs the SME Homebuilders group on the Construction Leadership Council. "We're short of electrical appliances, garage doors, front doors, timber, roof tiles, chipboard — you name it, we can't get it. And what we can get, there are long, long delays and massive price hikes. Some materials, like timber, are now costing double what they did six months ago.

"We've had break-ins and thefts on site. Usually when this happens it's for expensive items like electrical power tools. This time they stole plaster and timber."

One big global issue is that China and America are both kick-starting their post-pandemic economies with a huge building drive. "The US is hoovering up timber and China has become a net importer of steel for the first time in over a decade," says Brian Berry, chief executive of the Federation of Master Builders.

Lorry driver shortages due to about 15,000 European drivers leaving the UK since Brexit and 30,000 cancelled HGV tests due to coronavirus are now also a serious concern, says John Newcomb, CEO of the Federation of Builders Merchants. "And now we've got

literally dozens of drivers having to self-isolate due to track and trace. The perfect storm just got worse.”

The knock-on effect is devastating, both to builders’ trades and to prospective purchasers. Simon Skeffington, a small-scale design-and-builder, has stopped taking on new jobs because of spiralling costs. “We’re losing jobs left, right and centre,” he says. “Last year we pitched jobs at £2,500 per square metre; now we have to pitch at £3,200 per square metre to cover rising materials costs. For someone who has been dreaming and saving for that longed-for kitchen extension, it just goes out of their price range.”

Skeffington, director of Kent-based Architecturall, adds that

penalties for lateness are also forcing him to drop contracts: “Why would you take on a contract with a heavy lateness penalty clause if there’s no way you can guarantee you would finish on time?” he asks.

Buyer Matthew Abbot, who reserved one of Chris Carr’s homes at the Green in March, hoped to be moving in later this month — but now it will be touch and go to get in before October. He and his partner, Chloe, are instead having to live with Chloe’s parents in Grimsby while they wait. “The parents have been understanding, although we are rather overstaying,” says Abbott, 26, an electrician for the oil and gas industry, “but we’ve had to reapply for our mortgage because the offer was only valid

for three months.”

Not only has Abbott had to reapply for the mortgage, but the dark green tiles he and Chloe chose for the bathroom were also not guaranteed to arrive on time for when they were needed to be fitted so they have gone for white instead. “We couldn’t order the kitchen in time to take advantage of a money-off promotion either. All in all it’s been quite stressful, but I don’t blame Chris, he’s doing his best.”

[Click here to see the materials and appliances holding up construction](#)



Construction obstructions

Roof tiles wait time up from two to 24 weeks. "The danger is by the autumn the fabric is going to start deteriorating."

Chipboard flooring
"We've used everything on allocation and I'm not sure when we're getting the next delivery."

Garage doors "Just one small component, springs, from Belarus is holding this up," says Chris Carr. "I've been told it will be another ten weeks."

Cement for concrete lintels (and fence posts)
widespread shortages due to soaring demand and a massive shortage of hauliers.

Front door wait time from four to 18 weeks. "Our manufacturer can't get the panels from China."

Kitchen appliances
16-week delay. "There's a sub-component coming from the EU that hasn't arrived. It shows how inter-connected we are."

Windows and window frames
six to eight-week delay. "The irony is the frames are made locally but we're waiting for the handles to come from China."

Concrete blocks for walls
wait time up from two to 16 weeks. "I've had to order materials now, that I won't actually need for months, just so they arrive in time."

Hard wood for staircase handrails and newels
wait time unknown. "We're having to use softwood instead of the oak because we cannot source oak."

