

GETTING BUILDERS IN: A GUIDE TO A VERY GREY AREA



It's the dilemma of our time: keep people employed and improve your home, or close sites to observe social distancing? By *Helen Davies* and *Hugh Graham*



Grey is the colour that has defined our interiors over the past decade. From gunmetal to anthracite, it was the designer shade of austerity. Now it is the moral colour of lockdown. As Britain sneaks back to work, should you or should you not get a builder in?

Some owners with cabin fever, fed up with staring at their own four walls, are reaching not just for the paintbrush but, in some cases, the plumber, the tiler, the decorator, the builder and the gardener. Many independent tradespeople are keen to work because they are not eligible for financial support — posters are appearing on lampposts offering “lockdown rates” in return for discretion.

There is a growing “grey”, if not black, economy in which non-essential works are under way, as guidance on safety and working in the age of social distancing is interpreted according to self-interest. The comparison website MyJobQuote reports that house shaming is a genuine concern for many. Of the Brits it surveyed, 78% admitted to not being happy with their home. Mould spores were the biggest issue (88%), followed by creaky floorboards (64%) and incomplete work in the house (58%). It’s no wonder we want to improve our properties.

Along with the nation, the Home team is feeling decorative ennui. One of us wants a new lawn. After



Not all landscapers are prepared to lay a lawn
BREBCA/GETTY IMAGES

posting pictures and measurements to local landscapers and forums, one company replied with a quote, one offered to come round “double-masked” to measure up and quote, and yet another said: “Due to the access, I am unable to offer you a quotation on this occasion.”

Confusing, isn’t it? Then there’s the fact that local hardware stores and even B&Qs are opening their doors. Skips are appearing on streets and scaffolding is going up.

So what can you and what can’t you do? And where do you — or your neighbours — draw the line?

Everyone can agree that no work should be carried out in a household that is isolating or where an individual is being shielded, unless it is for an emergency repair. Yet in other

homes workers wearing masks, with sanitisers in hand, are laying patios, knocking down walls, tiling bathrooms and adding loft extensions.

John Thompson, chief executive of the Association of Plumbing & Heating Contractors, advises that plumbers are able to carry out essential repairs and maintenance in people’s homes, providing that the plumber is well and has no coronavirus symptoms. But how do you define maintenance? Is it OK to retile and get rid of a damp patch? To regROUT and reseal the bath, but not replace the bathroom?

Jeremy Corbyn has a new boiler, but Calisen, the FTSE 250 energy meters group, has given up installing smart meters for now and furloughed 1,400 workers,



though it still does essential work such as urgent repairs.

This month the freelance labour platform TaskRabbit announced its “Tasks for Good” initiative, which connects at-risk and vulnerable people with organisations that have access to volunteer taskers who can safely provide essential services free of charge. After a successful test in New York, Tasks for Good is now launching in 20 cities across the UK, Germany, France, Spain, the US and Canada.

Building work, though, is tricky. Brian Berry, chief executive of the Federation of Master Builders (FMB), says: “To protect both builders and the public, the FMB has advised its members that only emergency or critical works should take place at this time.” Almost two thirds of FMB members have stopped at least 91% of their work, as they are finding it hard to get supplies and to maintain social distancing on site.

That said, each site is different. The FMB recommends having an honest and open conversation with builders about how they can adhere to the health and safety advice provided by Public Health England should they need to visit your home.

HaMuch, a trades comparison website, has published tips on how best to have a tradesperson do essential work in your home while coronavirus remains. First, get a remote quote or



Back in the fold: despite the lockdown, scaffolding is going up
JJ FARQUIRECTOS/GETTY IMAGES

advice. If you’re not sure whether your work is essential, or you are but you want to get a quote, contact several tradespeople and request one. Platforms such as HaMuch, MyBuilder and Checkatrade allow you to post jobs so that you reach a number of contractors at once; you can stipulate in the job advert that you want a quote either over the phone or via video call.

Next, take precautions. The chances are that all good tradespeople will be following their own strict regime, but don’t be afraid to ask questions such as where they have been working and how many people have been on site; whether they, their colleagues or any family members have shown symptoms, and, if so, how long

ago; what they are doing to maintain hygiene and halt the spread of the virus; who they will be working with at your home; and what protective measures they will take while in your property.

You can also reassure your tradesperson about the precautions you will take to ensure their safety. Most of the time you should be able to allow them access to the required area without the need to enter other parts of your home. Think about the best route: if, for example, they will be working at the back of the house, allow them access through a side gate rather than the front door.

While tradespeople are at your property, restrict all members of your family, including pets, to other rooms until the work is completed. If



it is a relatively small job, you could advise your family to take their hour of exercise outside of the house, leaving just one adult to let in the tradesperson. This would reduce any potential spread of the virus in a worst-case scenario.

If possible, ask the workers to use a different lavatory to you and your family. Deep-clean all areas of work and the lavatory before and after use. Provide antibacterial products on the off chance that they don't have their own. And keep to the rules of social distancing.

Tarquin Purdie, chief executive of HaMuch, says: "It's completely understandable that you may have some hesitations about



Skips are reappearing on Britain's streets

DAVID BURTON/ALAMY

allowing a tradesperson into your home, and we don't advise you to do so for anything that can wait."

Opening image: some labourers are offering lower rates in return for 'discretion' (Getty Images)

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