

Plastering - a guide for homeowners

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1. Types of plastering

Plastering is a wet trade where Gypsum plaster is generally mixed on site and hand applied to a prepared surface. Undercoat plasters (solid) are generally applied 11mm thick (for walls), or 8mm (for ceilings) and finish coat plasters (skim) at 2mm thick. Some one coat plaster is applied at 13mm thickness (for walls), or 10mm (for ceilings).

There are three main types of plastering commonly found in houses:

- Solid plaster and skim (walls in older properties)
- Lath and plaster (ceilings in older properties)
- Plasterboard and skim (new build)

2. What to consider before obtaining a quote

Preparation is paramount if the finished surface is to meet your expectations. Plastering can only be as good as the background (existing wall/ceiling) will allow.

It is common to find existing plaster to be loose (known in the trade as blown). This can be due to a range of factors such as poorly keyed undercoat, moisture ingress, the use of wallpaper strippers and/or excessive heat eg from a fireplace/wood burning stove in close proximity. Any adverse conditions will need to be addressed /rectified before the plasterer can make good.

Hairline cracking in plaster is common and is generally associated with shrinkage of a sand and cement undercoat. Larger cracks are often due to movement or vibration. If the current plaster is cracked, then cracks are likely to reappear after skimming. Lining the walls with plasterboard may help but is no guarantee, particularly where cracks are due to movement or vibration.

If your existing wall or ceiling is not plumb / level consider having it lined with plasterboard. The plasterer will be able to advise.

Whilst the quality of completed work will in part depend on the quality of the background, it will also depend on the level of finish you advise the plasterer you are looking for. You will need to advise the plasterer how you intend to finish the walls (ie: paint, wallpaper, tiles) as this will affect the level of finish.

Level of finish can be graded 1-4, though in practice level 3 is the minimum standard that most UK customers find acceptable.

Level 1 for use in areas where finish is not critical

Level 2 to receive a textured wallcovering or a textured paint

Level 3 to receive a matt paint or smooth wallpaper or smooth wallcovering

Level 4 to receive a semi-gloss (silk) paint and/or with glancing illumination

Note: Plastering is a hand applied finish using wet materials. However skilled and conscientious the plasterer, plastering is a craft and it should be appreciated that it is not possible to achieve a completely smooth and level finish.

3. Obtaining a quote and employing a plasterer

The best way to find a plasterer is through recommendation - ask friends, local businesses, trade counters. Ask for references or to see examples of their work.

The plasterer should hold suitable third party insurance. We would recommend that the plasterer is a member of a trade body however for self-employed plasterers carrying out small domestic works this is unlikely. Some plasterers hold relevant qualifications such as City & Guilds or an NVQ.

It is usual for the plasterer to attend site to quote. Remember to be clear as to the type of finish, timescales and payment terms. Ideally put your requirements in writing. It is common practice to obtain three quotes, ideally these should also be in writing.

If you require the plasterer to quote without attending site he will need to know exactly what is required. This will include the area of the work with walls and ceilings separated (in square metres), if there are window and door reveals, what type of plastering is required and the quality of finish. If available supply drawings.

Before accepting a quotation make sure it reflects your requirements. Ideally place your order in writing, including a copy of your original requirements and agree terms of payment before work commences. Keep a copy of all correspondence.

4. Preparation

The site should be weather tight, and the temperature maintained at above 5⁰ Centigrade.

Ensure the plasterer is able to work in a clear area and any remedial work is carried out in sufficient time to ensure the surface is completely dry before work commences. As plastering is a wet trade, when carried out in occupied areas ideally items like curtains, furniture, carpets etc should be moved away from the working area and/or provided with appropriate protection.

Electrical sockets, ceiling roses, wall lights and light switches will need to be removed and wiring made safe prior the plasterer commencing work and refitted by a qualified electrician.

Radiators, wall heaters and associated brackets, as well as items such as stair hand rails and other wall or ceiling mounted items, may also need to be removed and refitted.

5. During and after plastering

The work should be carried out under similar or better lighting conditions that will exist in the finished room; this is especially the case where wall wash lights/uplighters or strong sunlight will illuminate a wall or ceiling from the side.

If there are multiple rooms to be plastered ask for a control sample to be done in one of the rooms. Once satisfied, this can be used as a benchmark for the rest of the job.

It is important the plaster should then be allowed to dry naturally, as the use of dehumidifiers or increased heating to accelerate drying may cause the plaster to crack.

6. Inspecting the completed work

When inspecting completed plasterwork for acceptance, surfaces should be viewed from positions normally used in an adjacent area. In general, this would be from the entrance doorway and from the centre of the room in a normal domestic house and from about two metres away from the surface in larger areas.

REMEMBER: When inspecting completed work be realistic in your expectations - there will always be small imperfections and varying levels of flatness, depending on the background.

7. Painting finished plaster

If the walls are being painted, a mist coat (normally diluted emulsion paint) is generally applied to the surface once the plaster is dry. Once applied, minor imperfections may become more apparent, particularly where the plasterwork is subjected to intense or shallow angle lighting. These can be made good using fine filler as necessary.

Always check the paint manufacturers' instructions before use, finish is also dependent on paint quality. Dark coloured paint with a silk or gloss finish tend to emphasise surface variations whereas lighter coloured matt paints tend to hide surface variations.

Useful contacts:

10 things you should know about plaster.

<http://www.british-gypsum.com/product-range/plaster-products/10-things-you-should-know-about-plaster>

<http://www.knauf.co.uk/product-range-overview/plasters>

References:

BS EN 13914-2:2005 is the recognised industry standard for the application of plaster. This has been referenced in the writing of this guidance.

IMPORTANT NOTE

This guide has been produced by FIS, which represents companies involved in the finishes and interiors sector of commercial construction. FIS does not represent individuals or companies carrying out domestic plastering and other small projects for homeowners. It is therefore unable to comment on such works.