

National Builders' Merchants vs Independent Local Merchants vs Specialist Suppliers vs Online-First Suppliers vs Direct-from-Manufacturer

Choosing the right self-build supplier is not just about who can quote the cheapest bag of cement on a Tuesday morning. It is really about who can keep the job moving, who understands the technical detail, who can supply the awkward items as well as the obvious ones, and who can deliver when the site is ready rather than when the spreadsheet says it would be convenient. In practice, self-builders usually end up weighing up a mix of **national merchants**, **local independents**, **specialist distributors**, **online-led suppliers**, and sometimes **direct manufacturer supply**. Tekgroup sits most naturally in the specialist-distributor space, with a strong focus on insulation, acoustics, screeds, underfloor heating, drylining and related technical product areas.

What the supplier types are generally used for?

National builders' merchants such as **Travis Perkins**, **Jewson** and **MKM** are generally used when a self-builder wants broad coverage, everyday materials, branch access, account options and a supplier that can support lots of different work stages in one place. Travis Perkins describes itself as the UK's largest builders' merchant with more than 500 branches, while Jewson says it has over 400 branches and MKM says it has 130-plus branches nationwide.

Independent local merchants are generally used where service, flexibility and local relationships matter more than national scale. They often work well for brick, block, timber, aggregates and general day-to-day materials, especially when the buyer wants quick local problem-solving rather than a large corporate process tree. That said, they do not always have the same breadth in specialist systems as the larger national or niche suppliers. This is an inference based on how the bigger merchant groups position themselves around range, scale and branch footprint.

Specialist suppliers such as **Tekgroup** are generally used when the project includes more technical product categories or where the buyer wants better support around a specific part of the build, such as insulation, acoustics, screeds, render, UFH or passive fire protection. Tekgroup describes itself as a specialist solutions provider with those product categories at the centre of its offer, rather than simply trying to be all things to all trades.

Online-first suppliers are generally used when the buyer wants fast comparison, convenience, and product visibility without always needing branch interaction. They can be useful for straightforward items, repeat buys and price-checking, but they are not always the strongest option for project sequencing, technical coordination or awkward delivery requirements. That conclusion is an inference from how branch-led merchants emphasise advice, delivery coordination and local service as part of their offer.

Direct-from-manufacturer supply is generally used where the project is system-led, volume-led or specification-led. This can work well for certain windows, timber frame packages, specialist boards, UFH systems or roofing systems, but it is less convenient when the self-builder also needs all the supporting products, sundries and delivery coordination wrapped into one supply chain. That final



point is an inference from the way mixed-range merchants and specialist distributors position their broader offer.

Why each one is used?

National merchants are used because they are broad, familiar and easy to access. Travis Perkins highlights thousands of products, click and collect and national coverage; Jewson promotes expert advice and branch reach; MKM promotes local-branch expertise with national coverage. For a self-builder, that usually means convenience and a decent chance of sourcing a wide range of materials without opening ten different trade accounts and losing the will to live.

Independent local merchants are used because they can be commercially sharp and more flexible in the way they deal with customers. On the right project, that can mean better service, faster decisions and a more human buying experience. The trade-off is that they may not always match the branch footprint, product depth or specialist manufacturing links of larger or more niche players. That trade-off is an informed inference from the strengths highlighted by the national groups and specialists.

Tekgroup and other specialist suppliers are used because some parts of a self-build are not just commodity purchases. Tekgroup specifically highlights insulation and acoustics, construction accessories, screeds, render, underfloor heating, dry screed, drylining and passive fire protection, and it also says it innovates, manufactures, stocks and delivers specialist solutions. That makes it particularly relevant where the self-builder needs technical product support rather than just a price on standard materials.

Online-first suppliers are used because they make comparison easier and can be efficient for simple procurement. They are often good at helping people see product options and pricing quickly. The weakness is that the build does not happen on a product page; it happens on site, with delivery constraints, sequencing and technical issues that often need real people involved. That last point is an inference, but it is grounded in the logistics and advice-led emphasis used by merchants and specialist distributors.

Direct manufacturer supply is used because it can give access to stronger technical support, system warranties and clearer product ownership. It tends to work best where the build element is specialised and self-contained. It tends to work less well when the buyer wants one supplier to help coordinate multiple categories, accessories and deliveries around a live site.

Ease of use

National merchants are often the easiest option for general procurement because they offer online ordering, branch collection, account structures and a broad stock profile. Travis Perkins offers free click and collect and next-day delivery thresholds, MKM says orders can be placed online, by phone or in branch, and Jewson pushes its branch network and self-build advice content.

Independent local merchants can be very easy to deal with when the relationship is good, but ease of use depends more on the individual business than on a standardised national model. In practice,



they often win on responsiveness rather than process. That is an inference, but it fits the contrast between local merchant culture and the more formal systems shown by national chains.

Tekgroup is especially strong where delivery logistics and specialist products matter. Its brochure states that it can deliver with rigid vehicles and mechanical offload available at no extra cost, and its website emphasises large stockholding and an extensive fleet. For self-builders dealing with awkward access, specialist products or timed deliveries, that is not a small detail — that is the difference between progress and chaos in a hi-vis vest.

Online-first suppliers are easy for browsing and buying, but they can be less easy when the project moves beyond simple ordering into substitutions, sequencing, technical advice or split deliveries. They are excellent for convenience, less brilliant when the site manager's version of "simple" has twelve moving parts and a forklift issue. This is an inference from the strengths the branch-led and specialist suppliers actively promote.

Direct manufacturers can be easy when the job is focused around one system and the specification is locked down. They become less easy when the project needs cross-category buying and flexible supply. That is why many self-builders still end up using merchants and specialists even when some major components come direct.

Technical characteristics that matter

The biggest technical difference between supplier options is not the product itself but the **level of support around the product**. Jewson actively promotes self-build advice through its branch network, Travis Perkins positions itself around comprehensive range and trade support, and Tekgroup positions itself around specialist technical product categories. In other words, the supplier choice shapes how much help you get when the build detail gets more technical.

Another major factor is **range breadth versus range depth**. National merchants generally win on breadth: bricks, blocks, plasterboard, insulation, aggregates, tools, timber and general materials are all readily available. Specialist suppliers such as Tekgroup usually win on depth in narrower categories, offering more focused expertise in things like acoustics, screeds, underfloor heating and drylining systems.

A third factor is **delivery capability**. Tekgroup's published material emphasises specialist logistics, rigid vehicles and mechanical offload, while national merchants emphasise branch collection and general delivery coverage. The right one depends on the job. A clean click-and-collect is fine for a few tools or bags. It is less useful when you are trying to land technical boards, screed or UFH materials onto a tight self-build site without wrecking the programme.

Approximate costs of the supplier route

This is one of those sections where honesty matters more than pretending there is a neat price chart. Suppliers are rarely "cheap" or "expensive" across the board. **National merchants** can be competitive on standard lines, especially where account pricing, branch competition and volume come into play. **Independent merchants** can be surprisingly sharp where they want the business and know the local market well. **Specialists such as Tekgroup** may not always be the cheapest on a line-



by-line basket comparison, but they can be stronger overall when technical support, reduced mistakes, better logistics and correct product selection save money elsewhere. That is an inference, but it is grounded in how these businesses position their value.

Online-first suppliers can look cheapest at first glance because comparison is easier, but that does not always include the commercial value of service, split loads, technical coordination or recovering from a wrong purchase. **Direct manufacturers** can be cost-effective for system packages, but not always for the supporting basket around them. Procurement cost and project cost are not the same thing. That is where self-builders either make a smart buying decision or accidentally benchmark themselves into a corner.

How they tend to be sold and availability

National merchants are available through dense branch networks and online ordering. Travis Perkins says it has over 500 branches, Jewson says over 400, and MKM has recently highlighted 138 branches nationwide in a 2026 branch-opening announcement. That makes national access one of their biggest strengths.

Tekgroup is available as a specialist national supplier rather than a giant branch network. Its website and brochures focus on stockholding, warehouse capacity, specialist categories and fleet-supported delivery across the UK. It also says it has over 200,000 sq ft of warehouse space, which reinforces its role as a stocked specialist distributor rather than a light-touch broker.

Online-first suppliers are available wherever they can deliver, which is their obvious strength. **Direct manufacturers** are available where their own route-to-market allows, though many still work through installers, stockists or merchant partners rather than trying to service every self-builder directly.

Other points a customer should know before choosing

If the project is mostly **general building materials**, a strong national or local merchant often makes sense because the basket is broad and the buying pattern is repetitive. If the project includes more specialist areas such as **insulation build-ups, acoustics, screeds, UFH, drylining or passive fire**, a supplier like **Tekgroup** becomes much more relevant because those are core parts of its offer rather than side shelves at the back of the branch.

If the site has **access issues, offload problems or awkward delivery constraints**, logistics should be part of the supplier decision, not an afterthought. Tekgroup explicitly markets mechanical offload and specialist delivery capability, while national merchants lean more on branch accessibility and general distribution scale. Both can work; they just solve slightly different headaches.

If the build is being run tightly on cost, the best route is often a **blend** rather than a single supplier for everything. Many self-builders use national or local merchants for commodity materials, then bring in specialists for technical categories where wrong choices or poor delivery would cost more than any headline saving. That blended approach is an inference, but it follows directly from the different strengths shown by the supplier types above.



Conclusion

If you want the blunt version: **national merchants** are strong for range, convenience and broad project buying; **independent local merchants** can be excellent for service and local commercial support; **online-first suppliers** are useful for quick comparison and simple orders; **direct manufacturers** are strongest on system-specific supply; and **specialists like Tekgroup** are where the value really shows when the job gets more technical.

For a self-build, there is no universal winner. If you need bricks, blocks, timber and general materials every week, the mainstream merchant model usually makes sense. If you need help with more technical categories such as insulation, acoustics, screeds, UFH, drylining and specialist site delivery, **Tekgroup deserves to be on the shortlist** because that is exactly where it is positioned. The smart move is not choosing a supplier based on one price line in isolation. It is choosing the mix of suppliers that gives you the right products, the right support and the fewest delays when the build is live.

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