

Below the grass: how builders should prepare a new-build garden

What should be beneath the turf, why buried rubble is not acceptable and when poor preparation may be responsible for lawn problems

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General advice

The short answer: a builder should not simply lay turf over compacted construction ground or building waste. The garden should be cleared, graded, decompacted where necessary and finished with suitable topsoil before turfing or seeding. The precise contractual standard depends on the home's warranty provider, applicable edition, approved design and any site-specific remediation requirements.

CheckSure's Homeowner Knowledge Base draws on practical experience of building, inspecting and resolving defects in new homes. Our aim is to explain what homeowners should reasonably expect, what may require further investigation and what steps they can take next.

A green lawn can hide what is underneath

A garden is built in layers. Turf or seed is only the finish: usable ground also depends on suitable topsoil, prepared subsoil and a surface that drains without directing water towards the home.

Fresh turf creates an immediate finished appearance, but it tells you very little about the ground beneath. Grass may remain green for several weeks using moisture and nutrients held within the turf itself. Problems caused by thin topsoil, compaction, debris or poor drainage often appear later, after the homeowner has moved in.

This explains why stories about buried bricks, concrete and general site waste are so persistent. Construction inevitably produces excavated material and debris, but a finished garden is not an appropriate place to dispose of it. Warranty standards recognise this and require deliberate preparation before topsoil and turf are placed.



Figure 1. Turf, paving and drainage depend on suitable ground preparation and correctly formed layers below the finished surface.

Are these Building Regulations requirements?

Not usually in the simple sense often suggested online. Building Regulations mainly address the health, safety, accessibility and energy performance of buildings. Garden preparation may instead be governed by the sales specification, planning conditions, approved landscape drawings, warranty-provider standards, drainage design, contamination strategy and general contractual duties.

NHBC Standards apply to homes registered for NHBC warranty and insurance, using the edition linked to the date the foundations began. Other warranty providers have their own technical manuals. A requirement quoted from NHBC should therefore not automatically be presented as applying to every new home in the UK.

What the current NHBC standard expects

For NHBC-registered homes whose foundations began on or after 1 January 2026, Chapter 11.0 separates garden preparation into subsoil preparation and garden finishing. In accessible language, the principal expectations include the following.

Remove obstructions and construction debris

Old foundations, concrete bases and similar obstructions should be removed from within 450mm of the finished ground surface where garden areas are to be cultivated. Construction rubbish and debris should be removed during decompaction and before topsoiling. Subsoil should not be placed over topsoil.

Restore compacted subsoil

The subsoil should be appropriately decompacted and free draining so that its structure and drainage characteristics are restored after construction traffic. NHBC 2026 states that simple rotavating is unlikely to deal effectively with a compacted or 'panned' layer and refers to decompaction to a minimum depth of 300mm.

Grade the garden appropriately

Ground disturbed or reprofiled during construction should be re-graded to conform with the design and sit generally in harmony with adjacent ground. Levels should support the intended drainage strategy and should not create an obvious route for surface water towards the home.

Provide suitable topsoil

Where turf or seeding is the specified finish, NHBC 2026 calls for a minimum thickness of 100mm of topsoil. It should be suitable for general landscape purposes and free from contaminants that could present a hazard. If topsoil is compacted or disturbed after placement, it should be reinstated before turfing or seeding.

One hundred millimetres is a warranty minimum in this context, not a statement that exactly 100mm is ideal for every garden, plant or soil type. Deeper soil or a designed clean-cover system may be required by the landscape design, planning approval or contamination strategy.

Why compaction causes so many problems

Housebuilding involves excavators, dumpers, cranes, delivery vehicles and stored materials. Repeated loading can compress subsoil into a dense layer. A thin cultivation of the surface may look acceptable while the layer below remains almost impermeable.

Compaction reduces the spaces through which air, water and roots move. Water can perch above the compacted layer, leaving the lawn waterlogged after rain, while the same shallow topsoil dries rapidly during warm weather. Roots remain close to the surface and the grass becomes less resilient. Adding turf or a thin layer of topsoil does not correct the underlying problem.

What does 'suitable topsoil' mean?

Topsoil is not simply any brown material placed at the surface. It should have physical and chemical properties suitable for the intended landscape use. BS 3882 provides a recognised specification for

topsoil, including classification and testing, but whether a particular supply must be certified to that standard depends on the project specification.

Some stones are normal in natural and manufactured soils. The presence of an occasional small stone does not prove that the garden is defective. The more important questions are whether the soil is of the required depth and quality, whether it is hazardous or contaminated, and whether excessive rubble or obstructions interfere with cultivation, drainage or reasonable use.

Buried rubble: what is and is not acceptable

Homeowners sometimes uncover brick fragments, concrete, plastic, timber or packaging when planting. A single small fragment does not necessarily establish wholesale misuse of the garden as a waste tip. Construction rubbish and debris should nevertheless have been removed before topsoiling where NHBC 2026 applies, and significant quantities are a legitimate reason to investigate.

Context matters. Engineered fill or recycled aggregate may be properly designed and used elsewhere on a development, for example beneath roads or as part of an approved earthworks strategy. That is different from loose construction waste left within the cultivated garden profile. Material can be acceptable in one designed location and unacceptable immediately beneath a lawn.

Drainage and waterlogging

A lawn is not guaranteed to be dry immediately after heavy rain, particularly on naturally heavy clay or during winter. Some temporary surface water can occur when the ground is saturated. Persistent waterlogging, however, can damage turf and prevent normal use.

NHBC requires garden areas within 3m of habitable parts of the home not to be waterlogged, using appropriate soil selection and management and, where necessary, drainage or other suitable measures. Across the wider garden, the builder should follow the approved levels and drainage design. Installing land drainage is not automatically the answer: it needs a lawful, suitable outfall and a design that does not create problems elsewhere.

How can a homeowner check the garden?

Begin with observation rather than immediately lifting large areas of turf. Record conditions after ordinary rainfall and again after a dry period. Look for repeatable patterns rather than a single event.

- Ask which warranty provider and edition applies to the home.
- Request the landscaping specification, approved levels or relevant handover information where available.
- Photograph standing water and note how long it remains after rainfall.
- Check several representative locations rather than relying on one edge or planting hole.
- Measure topsoil carefully only where it can be done without damaging services, membranes or the lawn.
- Record the type, quantity and depth of debris found, using a ruler for scale.
- Do not undertake extensive excavation before giving the developer an opportunity to inspect.

Service cables, pipes, drainage runs and protective membranes may be present beneath gardens. If intrusive investigation is required, use a competent person and check service information first.

When should you raise the issue?

Report the concern promptly if you find widespread shallow topsoil, severe compaction, repeated waterlogging, unsafe settlement, significant construction debris, visible contamination or turf that

repeatedly fails in the same areas despite appropriate care. Send dated photographs and a factual description rather than relying on general claims about all new-build gardens.

Give the developer a reasonable opportunity to investigate and propose a remedy. If the response is inadequate, follow the developer's complaints process and consult the warranty provider's current resolution or claims procedure. Planning enforcement, environmental health or a specialist ground consultant may be relevant where the concern involves an approved landscape condition, contamination or a potential health hazard.

What might a proper remedy involve?

The remedy should address the cause, not merely replace the visible grass. Depending on the findings, work may include lifting and preserving usable turf, removing debris or obstructions, decompacting the subsoil, correcting levels, installing designed drainage where justified, replacing or increasing suitable topsoil and then re-turfing or seeding.

Simply spreading a small amount of soil over a persistently compacted or poorly drained layer may improve appearance briefly without restoring long-term performance. Equally, complete excavation is not proportionate for every isolated stone or dry patch. Investigation should establish the scale and cause before remedial work is agreed.

Common misunderstandings

“Turf can be laid directly over construction ground”

Suitable preparation, debris removal, cultivation, levels and appropriate soil are important for establishment and drainage.

“Finding one small stone proves the garden is defective”

Some stones are normal in soil; widespread rubble, shallow soil or repeated obstructions are more significant.

“Every puddle means the drainage has failed”

Short-lived surface water after exceptional rain differs from persistent ponding under ordinary conditions.

Frequently asked questions

Does every new-build lawn legally require 100mm of topsoil?

No single answer applies to every home. The 100mm figure is an NHBC warranty standard for specified turfed or seeded garden finishes under the relevant edition. Check the actual warranty provider, specification, planning documents and site requirements.

Can rubble ever be left below a garden?

Properly specified engineered fill may exist at depth as part of the site design. Loose construction rubbish should not be left in the cultivated garden profile. Under NHBC 2026, debris should be removed during decompaction and before topsoiling, with substantial obstructions removed from within the stated depth.

Is clay soil automatically defective?

No. Clay is a natural soil type and can support healthy lawns, but it is vulnerable to compaction and slow drainage. The issue is whether the garden was appropriately prepared and performs reasonably for its design and ground conditions.

Should a snagging inspection dig up the lawn?

A normal visual inspection can identify levels, ponding, settlement and surface debris, but it cannot prove the full soil profile without intrusive work. Timing matters: if turf is newly laid—or the ground is soft or wet—walking across it can move the rolls, leave deep impressions and damage developing roots.

The inspector should first decide whether the lawn is ready to be walked on. Visible concerns can be photographed from paths or accessible edges, with a fuller walk-over arranged once the turf has rooted and the ground is firm. Targeted checks may then be agreed. extensive excavation should be treated as a separate investigation. Delaying access should not prevent prompt recording and reporting of concerns.

Key takeaways

- Turf is only the visible finish; the preparation beneath determines long-term performance.
- Warranty standards—not Building Regulations alone—often provide the clearest garden requirements.
- NHBC 2026 requires debris removal, appropriate decompaction and at least 100mm of suitable topsoil for turf or seed.
- A few small stones are different from widespread rubble or buried construction waste.
- Document recurring problems and investigate the cause before agreeing a remedy.

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EXPLORE FURTHER Explore the CheckSure Homeowner Knowledge Base for related guidance on buying, inspecting and looking after a new home. Please visit checksure.co.uk/knowledge-base/

Sources & References

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