



Domestic cleaning services

Fancy a break from your household cleaning chores? *Consumer Choice* takes a look at what's on offer from domestic cleaning service providers.

Domestic cleaners may not be so much in demand at the moment as people cut back on their discretionary spending amid the recession, but it's clear that their services remain very much in demand by large numbers of households around the country. Thanks to longer hours at work, looking after the kids, and the ongoing struggle to find a little time for yourself, the task of keeping the home clean is sometimes too much for busy working parents to handle on their own.

There also may be other situations where home cleaners become an indispensable service, such as for elderly or disabled people still living independently. Or even perhaps reasonably well-off single parents with more than one child. But what should consumers look out for when seeking to use a domestic cleaning service?

Finding a cleaner

Finding a cleaner may seem

straightforward enough. A quick look in your telephone directory or an online search will display a wide range of domestic cleaning services, including agencies as well as freelancers, particularly if you live in a city or an urban area. However like any domestic service that involves strangers working in your home, there are a number of factors to consider when choosing the right cleaning service. Here are some tips for hiring the right company or person to suit your needs.

Reputation

Traditionally, the best way to find out which company you can trust is through word of mouth testimonials from your friends and neighbours, but if you don't find a recommendation that way, you can check the references of any agency you are considering hiring.

Given that you are letting strangers into your home on a regular basis, references are critical, whether the person

or agency comes recommended or not. If you choose to hire an agency rather than a freelancer, you are likely to come across a few firms that are run as part of a branded franchise, such as Merrymaids or Maid4u, some of which are based in the UK.

Any reputable firm will be happy to supply references, so don't be shy about contacting them. You need to be able to fully trust anyone who has access to your home.

All of the agencies we spoke to said they thoroughly vet their cleaners before hiring them, which may involve anything from phoning up references, to interviewing the applicant in their own home, as well as checking with the Gardai. One firm said they had a number of 'grades' of vetting depending on the client's needs. For example, for clients like high profile business people or celebrities, or customers who are more vulnerable, such as senior citizens or parents with small children, Garda

AT A GLANCE

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DOMESTIC CLEANING SERVICE COMPANY COSTS

Company	Cost per hour (€)	Cost for a weekly/fortnightly clean? (€)	Minimum no. of hours per week/visit?
Maid4u	13.60	40.80 for three hours	Minimum 3 hours per week or fortnight
Mauds Merry Maids	30	60 per visit (two cleaners, two hours)	Minimum 2 hours per week or fortnight
Maid2Clean	15.50	31.00 (two hours)	Minimum 3 hours per week or fortnight
Dailypoppins	20	49.50-59.50 (two cleaners, 2.5-3 hours)	Minimum 2.5 hours a week for apartment, three hours for three-bed semi
About Time	30	90 (two cleaners, three hours)	Minimum 3 hours per visit
Chip and Dale	15	30 (two hours)	Minimum 2 hours

clearance may be offered.

Freelance cleaners

Choosing an agency may seem like the more attractive option if you need a reliable and accountable service. For instance, they can usually supply cover for when your regular cleaner may be ill or absent. However they are likely to be more expensive than the freelance cleaners who may advertise through the small ads or classifieds.

Of course, the reasons why many freelance cleaners will be far cheaper will relate to tax and insurance. All agency cleaners will be expected to have public liability insurance to cover them in case of accidental damage to your home or contents, and the agencies will also provide you with an invoice for their services, as well as ask you to sign a contract.

Much depends on your budget and how important a cleaning service is to you, but many households will be prepared to hire freelance cleaners and pay them cash-in-hand. Freelance cleaners may be accountable to no-one but themselves and very often they will be hired through word-of-mouth, or strong recommendations from family, friends or neighbours, which offers the key assurance.

This is not to say that all freelance cleaners will be insisting on cash-in-hand. Some may well be happy to provide you with an invoice, and some may be insured. Needless to say, those that do will likely represent a safer choice than those that don't.

Flexibility

If you need flexibility and a range of services beyond just a basic regular clean, this is where agency services will come into their own. You may just want a basic weekly or fortnightly cleaning service that includes cleaning the bathroom and

kitchen, vacuuming, dusting and polishing, but some firms may offer additional services, such as ironing, carpet and window-cleaning, laundry, floor-polishing and waxing.

In addition, most firms will offer a once-off 'super' clean service, which would often be used by landlords who want to clean up a property before a new tenant moves in, or to prepare your property for viewing by prospective buyers. Such a service might also be useful to prepare for an important occasion or celebration taking place in your home, or cleaning up after the builders have been in.

Equipment – yours or theirs?

Most agencies will bring their own equipment and cleaning supplies, but some may operate a slightly cheaper regular cleaning service by asking that you provide your own cleaning materials, and they use your vacuum cleaner. This means they don't have to supply a company van vehicle to haul equipment and supplies in.

Environmental concerns

Increasingly, consumers are demanding green, safe and eco-friendly cleaning techniques and many cleaning services are now offering non-toxic alternatives and up-to-date equipment that will help keep the home clean and free of harmful chemicals. If this is important to you, one way to ensure that eco-friendly

materials are used, as well as save money, is to choose a service that requires you to supply the cleaning materials.

Prices

We asked a few firms around the country for information on their prices and services, and received a number of responses, mostly from firms in and around Dublin.

Judging from the information we received, the hourly rate would appear to start at about €12 or €13, but as with most services, firms based outside Dublin may charge a little less. While this may seem reasonable, most agencies will insist on a minimum number of hours per week or fortnight, usually two or three. In some cases, this may involve two cleaners each doing 1.5 hours. The cheaper firms may well be those who would use your own cleaning materials and vacuum cleaner, rather than bring their own.

An alternative to a weekly or fortnightly clean may be an occasional once-off 'deep' clean, but prices for this vary considerably as well. For instance, one firm offers a once-off clean lasting three hours for €75, while another offers a once-off clean of a three bed house for €160, although it doesn't specify how long this would take.

Most agencies will ask you to sign a contract, but usually for no longer than one month judging by the responses we received, or else they ask for one month's notice of cancellation.

Report by
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choice comment

The domestic cleaning services sector enjoyed considerable growth during the boom years, but even amid the recession, having a regular cleaner is something all kinds of households are now loath to do without, not just the well-off. Word of mouth is still the primary means by which these services are marketed, but like any labour-intensive service, it pays to shop around, as prices vary considerably. But whether you choose an agency or a freelance, you should take care in choosing someone you trust to come into your home once a week or fortnight. Be sure to check out all references and, if necessary, get Garda clearance.