Finding and fitting out lab space

A step-by-step guide

North East Combined Authority | Kim McGuinness North East Mayor

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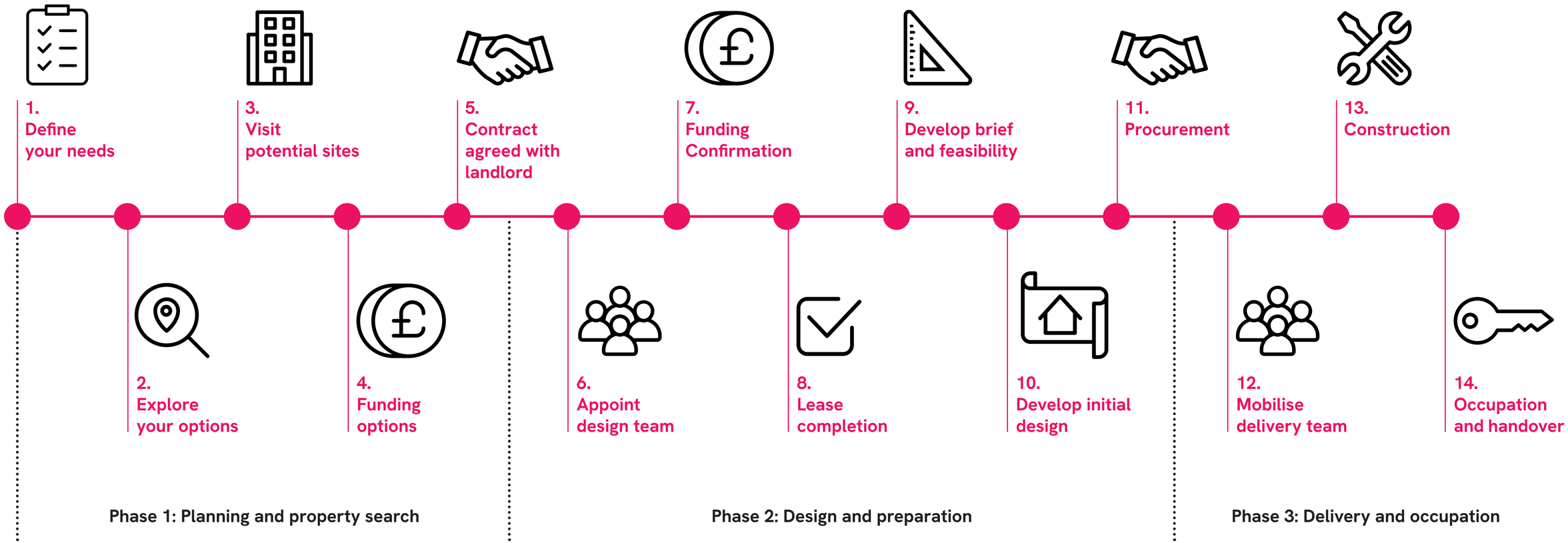
Introduction

Whether you're expanding an established lab-based company or just getting started, finding the right space – and adapting it to meet technical, legal, and operational needs – can be a complex process.

This guide outlines the key steps involved in securing and fitting out lab premises, from identifying your requirements and shortlisting properties, through to design, procurement, and occupation. It's designed to support life science businesses of all sizes looking to make confident, informed decisions when creating or growing their laboratory space.

Overview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Phase 1: Planning and property search

Step 1

Define your needs

Start by developing a clear business plan – this will help shape your property requirements, including:

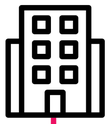
- Team size
- Location
- Budget
- Collaboration space
- Support services

Step 2

Explore your options

Start by shortlisting available spaces that meet your requirements – our property list is a helpful place to begin. As you refine your choices, prepare a list of questions to guide your decision-making.

At this stage, it may be worth appointing a property agent to act on your behalf. They can help clarify your needs, identify suitable options, and negotiate the best terms in line with your objectives.



Step 3

Visit potential sites

Arrange site visits to explore layout, customisation, and fit-out potential. During your visits, consider the technical feasibility of each space – including loading access, drainage, MEP (mechanical, electrical, and plumbing), and floor strength.

Ground floor units often offer simpler access and loading, but if you're considering a higher floor, check whether the lifts can accommodate your largest equipment.

It's also a good time to involve a design professional to carry out a feasibility study. They can help assess what modifications are needed, provide early guidance on costs and programme, and ensure these factors are considered before progressing further.

Step 4

Funding options

Business support funding is available in the North East but applications must be submitted before any work begins.

Visit the North East Growth Hub website for more information.

Step 5

Contract agreed with landlord

When you're confident that the space is suitable and the terms of occupation meet your needs, you can move forward with agreeing Heads of Terms. At this stage, it's advisable to appoint a solicitor to act on your behalf and guide you through the lease agreement process.

Phase 2: Design and preparation

Step 6

Appoint design team

If you need to carry out alterations to the space you intend to occupy, it's important to appoint a design team to support you. They can advise not only on layout and costs but also on legal and statutory requirements. You may need formal consent from building control, planning authorities, and your landlord before any work can begin.

The size and scope of your design team will depend on the extent of the works proposed. Crucially, you should ensure that all key elements – including costs, programme, required consents, and contractor lead-in times – are confirmed before you complete the lease. This will help you avoid a situation where you're liable for rent, rates, and service charges without a clear plan in place for delivering the necessary works.

Step 7

Funding Confirmation

Once you've confirmed the cost and programme of works, and before completing the lease, make sure all funding is in place – both for the capital works and any contingencies. It's also important to update your business plan to reflect these costs, along with the confirmed ongoing expenses of your new premises, such as rent, rates, and service charges.

Step 8

Lease completion

When both you and your solicitor are satisfied with the lease terms – and funding and the works programme are in place – you'll be ready to complete the lease.

Step 9

Develop brief and feasibility

Engage design professionals early to work closely with lab users and stakeholders. This helps ensure a clear understanding of spatial, technical, and operational requirements, and supports the development of efficient, practical design solutions.

- Define non-negotiables from both a health and safety and workflow perspective
- Assess energy demands – including the need for emergency power backup
- Involving professionals at the proposal stage ensures more accurate costings, a better-informed tender process, and smoother contract planning

Key actions at this stage include:

- Appointing the project team
- Defining the project brief and assessing feasibility
- Reviewing client needs and the business case
- Identifying key risks and constraints
- Developing project objectives and design requirements
- Carrying out site and feasibility studies

Step 10

Develop initial design

With the brief and feasibility established, the design team can begin developing the initial design. This stage refines the concept into a coordinated, practical proposal that can be assessed, costed, and progressed through planning.

Key activities include:

- Creating initial design concepts
- Outlining proposals for the building structure and services (e.g. MEP systems)
- Consulting with stakeholders and reviewing the planning strategy
- Refining the design through coordinated input from architects and engineers
- Preparing documentation for planning submission
- Updating cost plans and risk assessments
- Finalising detailed designs and technical specifications
- Coordinating all building elements into a single, integrated package

Step 11

Procurement

At this stage, you'll need to appoint a specialist contractor with a strong track record in delivering similar lab or technical projects. Begin by selecting an appropriate procurement route and preparing tender documents for issue to potential contractors.

Key actions:

- Select your procurement approach (see right)
- Issue tender documents to shortlisted contractors
- Respond to contractor queries during the tender period
- Evaluate tender responses and assist in selecting the preferred contractor
- Advise the client on procurement strategy, contract terms, and risk allocation

Procurement routes:

Design and Build Procurement

- A single contractor is responsible for both design and construction
- Contractor is often appointed early, based on an outline design
- Enables faster delivery through overlapping design and construction phases
- Offers cost certainty and reduces the risk of disputes
- Provides less client control over detailed design
- Greater risk is typically transferred to the contractor

Traditional Procurement

- The client appoints the designer and contractor separately
- Design is fully developed before the contractor is selected
- Clear separation of design and construction responsibilities
- Gives the client more control over design quality
- Often involves longer timelines due to sequential stages
- Design changes during construction may increase costs

Phase 3: Delivery and occupation

Step 12

Mobilise delivery team

Once the lease is signed and the property secured, the next step is to mobilise your contractor and project manager as quickly as possible. This ensures the works are delivered according to the agreed programme, allowing you to take occupation and begin operating your business without delay.

Key roles and responsibilities

A successful lab fit-out relies on a skilled team of professionals, each with specific responsibilities. Understanding these roles, and appointing the right team early, is essential for a smooth project.

- **The client** – the organisation or individual commissioning the project. They are responsible for approvals, funding, and key decision-making throughout.
- **Project manager (PM)** – Responsible for delivering the project on time and within budget, managing communication, coordination, and the overall programme. Note: You may appoint both internal and external project managers depending on your needs.
- **Architect** – Leads the design process, develops the spatial layout and overall concept, and ensures the design meets functional and aesthetic objectives. The architect may also act as lead consultant, coordinating the wider design team.
- **Structural engineer** – Designs the building's structural framework, ensuring it is stable, safe, and compliant with regulations.
- **MEP (Mechanical, Electrical, and Plumbing) engineers** – Design and integrate building services such as ventilation, heating, cooling, power, lighting, and plumbing to ensure the space is functional and energy efficient.
- **Planning consultant** – Provides expert advice on planning policy and manages the process of securing planning permission for the works.
- **Cost consultant (Quantity Surveyor)** – Develops cost plans and budgets, provides procurement advice, and helps manage financial risk throughout the project.

Step 13

Construction

Health and safety, along with compliance with building regulations, are major considerations during the construction phase. Regularly check in with contractors to ensure these are being met, and engage a consultant if possible to provide additional oversight.

Key activities during this stage include:

- Mobilisation of the contractor and commencement of construction
- Ongoing site inspections and quality control by the design team
- Regular progress reviews to track timelines, manage risks, and resolve issues promptly

Step 14

Occupation and handover

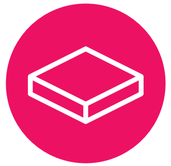
Following the completion of construction, the building should be thoroughly inspected before formal handover. This stage ensures everything is ready for safe, functional occupation and long-term operation.

Key actions include:

- Conducting a final inspection of completed works
- Handing over the building to the client
- Providing user guides, maintenance manuals, and training where required
- Monitoring building performance in the early stages of use
- Carrying out a post-occupancy evaluation
- Capturing feedback to inform future projects

Additional fit-out considerations

To ensure your lab is safe, practical, and compliant, consider the following design and performance details:

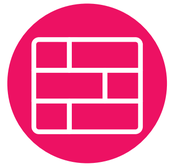


Floors

Should be sealed, easy to clean, and slip resistant.

Doors

Ensure all lab doors allow for equipment movement; a ‘door and a half’ is recommended as a minimum.



Walls

Should be cleanable; consider using a hygiene-grade paint such as Dulux Sterishield.

Gas supply

If required, it should be housed externally for safety.

Ceiling height

Lowering high ceilings can improve HVAC efficiency and reduce energy use.

Air inlet and extract

Positioning should minimise the risk of cross-contamination.