

# NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances 2017: How to Use It as a Fallback (Not a Playbook)

NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances 2017 explained in plain English. What it is, what it isn't, and when it's actually useful.

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## NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances 2017

If you're building or renovating in NSW, it's worth knowing the NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances 2017 exists — even if you never need to use it.

Most people don't even know this document is a thing. Then, when something doesn't look quite right, stress kicks in and everyone starts guessing.

The Guide is widely used across the industry as a reference point. It helps people work out whether something is acceptable, needs fixing, or sits in a grey area.

This blog is here to help you understand:

- that the Guide exists
- what it's there for (and what it's not)
- how to use it calmly and practically if questions come up

No sales pitch. Just clarity.

## First: what is the Guide?

The NSW Government describes the Guide as a general reference. It helps homeowners understand whether building work meets acceptable standards.

It's also clear that it's a guide. It's a convenient reference point. It doesn't replace your contract documents. It also doesn't replace the higher-order rules that govern building work.

Here's the reality: if you've chosen a good builder and you start the build the right way, you'll probably never open it.

That's the goal.

So, don't treat this as a document you quote line-by-line during the build. Instead, think of it as a fallback reference. It's there if a genuine question comes up.

## What do "standards" and "tolerances" actually mean?

These two words matter because they explain why a home can be built well and still not be "perfect".

## Standards

Standards are the expected level of workmanship and performance. In simple terms: is it built properly, safely, and to the agreed requirements?

## Tolerances

Tolerances are the acceptable range of variation.

Homes come together from thousands of parts. Materials expand and contract. Sites move. Weather changes. Trades overlap. Because of that, small variations can happen without affecting safety, function, or quality.

This doesn't mean "anything goes". It means there's a line between:

- a genuine defect, and
- a minor imperfection that falls within tolerance

The Guide helps explain where that line usually sits.

## What the Guide is NOT (this is where people get stuck)

This is where many avoidable conflicts start.

It does not replace your contract

Your contract documents come first. That includes plans, specifications, selections, and variations.

The Guide is most useful when your documents don't clearly answer the question.

### It doesn't override the Building Code or Australian Standards

The NSW Government is clear on this. The Guide does not replace the National Construction Code (NCC/BCA) or relevant Australian Standards.

### It isn't a "gotcha" document

This isn't a tool to help one party "win".

It's meant to give both sides a fair reference point. That way, issues don't become personal.

Also, it's not a "running commentary" document. If you're pulling it out every week, something else is off. Expectations may not be clear. Communication may have broken down. Or the builder may not be the right fit.

## The most practical way to think about it

Most of the time, you shouldn't need the Guide at all.

A well-run build comes down to:

- choosing the right builder
- getting clarity upfront (plans, specs, selections)
- keeping communication simple and consistent
- raising concerns early, calmly, and in writing

The Guide is best seen as a backup tool. It can help if there's genuine uncertainty about what's considered "acceptable" in a specific area.

We've found that Australian family couples who are smart about their investment in their family home tend to get the best outcomes when they focus on the fundamentals first. Clear documentation helps. Clear selections help. A builder who communicates well helps. Reaching for reference documents too early usually doesn't.

## The simple "pecking order" (use this before you reach for the Guide)

When something looks off, don't start with opinions or online forums. Start with the documents in the right order.

### 1. Your contract documents

Plans, specifications, selections, signed variations, and any written confirmations.

### 2. Manufacturer installation requirements

Many products have specific installation rules.

### 3. National Construction Code (NCC/BCA) and relevant Australian Standards

These set minimum performance and compliance expectations

### 4. Then the NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances

Use it when the above still don't give a clear answer.

In other words: the Guide helps interpret expectations in a grey area. It does not replace the rules and documents that govern the work.

## When the NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances 2017 is actually useful

The Guide is helpful in moments like this:

- you notice something in a finish (paint, plaster, tiles, cabinetry, gaps, alignment)
- something feels uneven (floors, benches, joins, lines)
- a door doesn't close smoothly, or a window seems off
- a crack appears and you're unsure what it means
- you're approaching practical completion and want a fair way to review items

Again, it's not the first thing you should reach for. However, it can be a steady reference when there's a real question to answer.

## How to use the Guide well (homeowner checklist)

Builders get better outcomes when they use the Guide proactively and calmly.

Use it to set expectations early

Many disputes come from expectations that were never discussed.

The Guide can help explain that:

- some variation is normal
- some movement is expected
- "perfect" isn't always realistic in a real-world build

Use it as a shared reference, not a shutdown

Tone matters.

Good conversations sound like:

- "Let's check what the Guide says about this," and
- "If it's outside tolerance, we'll sort it."

That feels very different to:

- "It's within tolerance. End of story."

Use it to triage fairly

Not all issues are equal. So, sort them:

1. safety / compliance items
2. functional items (doors, windows, leaks, drainage)
3. finish items

The Guide supports this common-sense approach.

## The most common misunderstandings (and how to avoid them)

### "If it's not perfect, it's defective"

Not always. Some finish imperfections fall within tolerance.

A better set of questions is:

- is it noticeable under normal viewing conditions?
- does it affect function or performance?
- is it outside what the Guide generally accepts?
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### "The Guide is the law"

It isn't. The NSW Government describes it as a general reference. It does not replace the NCC/BCA or Australian Standards.

### "The Guide overrides what I paid for"

If your contract documents specify a higher standard, the contract matters. That's what both parties agreed to.



## “Everything is the builder’s responsibility forever”

Homes need ongoing care.

Some issues relate to maintenance. Some relate to settlement. Some are defects. Some are normal wear. The Guide helps clarify categories, so people aren’t guessing.

## Think of it like a spare tyre

You don’t buy a car because you’re excited about the spare tyre. You buy it because you want a reliable car. The spare is there just in case.

Same idea here:

- best case: you never need it
- if a genuine question comes up: it helps both sides get on the same page
- worst case: it helps keep things factual and fair if there’s a dispute



Read this  
blog online

## Where to find the Guide

The NSW Government hosts the NSW Guide to Standards and Tolerances 2017 for download. It’s worth bookmarking if you’re building.

## Final thought

The best outcome is a smooth build. That happens when the builder and homeowner stay aligned from day one.

In that world, the Guide stays bookmarked but unopened.

Still, it helps to know it exists. Not so you can quote it at every step. Instead, use it as a practical fallback if a genuine grey area pops up and you need a calm way to reset expectations.

That’s the heart of it. Building should feel human. It should feel steady. It should feel like everyone is working toward the same end goal — **Building Stories, Crafting Homes** — and ideally, you never need a fallback document at all.

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