Ready mix concrete vs site batching for footings

Choosing the right approach for your concrete footings

When you're planning a construction project, one of the early decisions is how you'll get the concrete for footings. You have two main routes: ordering ready mix concrete delivered by a truck, or mixing your own concrete on site using a mixer and bags of cement, sand and aggregate. Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and the right choice depends on the scale of the job, your timeline, and how much control you need over the mix.

Footings are the foundation of a structure, so the concrete used needs to be consistent, strong and properly placed. Getting this wrong can lead to cracks, settlement or worse. Understanding the trade-offs between ready mix and site batching helps you make a decision that suits your project without unnecessary cost or risk.

What is ready mix concrete?

Ready mix concrete is produced at a batching plant and delivered to your site in a truck mixer. The concrete is mixed according to a specific recipe, called a mix design, that matches the strength class and workability you need. For footings, common strength classes are C20/25 or C25/30, though structural slabs or retaining walls may require higher grades. The truck arrives with the concrete already mixed and ready to pour, so you need to have your formwork and reinforcement prepared and your pour schedule organised.

One of the main advantages of ready mix is consistency. The plant uses precise volume calculation and quality control to ensure every batch meets the specification. This matters for footings because variations in strength can compromise the load-bearing capacity of the foundation. Ready mix also saves labour: you don't need to haul bags, operate a mixer or manage stockpiles of aggregate on site.

However, ready mix requires good site coordination. The truck needs access to the pour area, and you need to be ready to place the concrete within a certain time window, usually a couple of hours from batching. Delays can cause the concrete to stiffen, affecting workability and strength. You also need to order the right volume: too little and you have to pause the pour, too much and you pay for waste.



What is site batching?

Site batching means mixing concrete on site using a mixer, typically a drum mixer or a volumetric mixer. You buy cement, sand and aggregate in bags or loose loads, and combine them with water according to a mix design. Some projects use a small mixer for footings in confined spaces or for several small pads where a truck cannot reach.

The main advantage of site batching is flexibility. You can mix exactly what you need when you need it, adjusting the mix as you go. This can be useful for retaining walls or other elements where the pour is spread over several days. Site batching also avoids the delivery constraints of ready mix: no waiting for a truck, no access worries, and no minimum order quantity.

But site batching comes with its own challenges. Consistency depends on the skill of the operator and the accuracy of measuring materials. A small error in the water-cement ratio can weaken the concrete or cause shrinkage cracking. Quality control is more difficult, especially for larger pours where you need multiple batches. The labour and time involved can add up: mixing, moving materials and cleaning equipment all take effort.

When ready mix suits footings better

For most footing projects, ready mix concrete is the practical choice. If you have a reasonable volume, say a cubic metre or more, and the site is accessible by truck, ready mix saves time and gives you a reliable product. The consistency is especially important for structural footings where the engineer has specified a particular strength class. Stacey Concrete supplies ready mix for domestic and construction projects across Derbyshire, and many builders find that the convenience of delivery outweighs the slightly higher material cost compared to site batching.

Ready mix also works well when you have a tight pour schedule. Foundations for a house extension, a garage base or a retaining wall often need the concrete placed in one continuous operation. A truck can deliver the full volume in a single pour, reducing the risk of cold joints between batches. The concrete arrives at the right slump for the application, so you can place and finish it without adjusting the mix.

If your site has good access for a concrete pump, ready mix can be pumped directly into deep or awkward footings, which is difficult to do with site-batched concrete. This is common for strip footings, trench fill or pad foundations where the formwork is narrow or the ground is uneven.

When site batching makes sense

Site batching can be the better option for small, scattered footings where the volume per pour is low. For example, fence posts, gate pillars or small garden structures might only need a few wheelbarrow loads. Ordering a ready mix truck for less than half a cubic metre is often uneconomical, and the minimum delivery charge can make it expensive. In these cases, mixing on site with bags of concrete mix is straightforward and cost-effective.



Site batching also helps when access is tight. If the site is down a narrow lane, through a gate or across soft ground, a ready mix truck might not be able to reach the pour area. A small mixer and a wheelbarrow can get concrete where a truck cannot. This is common on rural or constrained sites in Derbyshire, where the terrain and lane widths vary.

Another scenario is when you need a non-standard mix. Some footings require a specific aggregate size, a low-shrinkage mix or a special additive. With site batching, you can control the ingredients and adjust the mix as you go. Ready mix plants can produce custom mixes too, but you need to order well in advance and may have to pay for a full load.

Site batching also gives you more flexibility with the pour schedule. If the weather is unpredictable or you are working alone, you can mix small batches and pour at your own pace. There is no pressure to empty a truck within a set time. This can reduce waste and stress on smaller jobs.

Key factors to weigh

Volume is the first thing to consider. A rough guide: if you need more than a cubic metre of concrete for footings, ready mix is usually more efficient. Below that, site batching may be

cheaper and less hassle. But volume is not the only factor. The strength and consistency required by the structural design matter too. For a structural slab or a retaining wall that carries load, the reliability of ready mix is hard to beat.

Site coordination also plays a role. With ready mix, you need to have everything ready for the truck: formwork, reinforcement, access, and a plan for placing and finishing. A pour schedule that accounts for the concrete's setting time is essential. With site batching, you have more control but also more tasks: measuring, mixing, moving and cleaning. The labour cost can add up if you are paying for time.

Quality control is another consideration. Ready mix plants test their concrete for slump, strength and consistency. Site batching relies on the operator's judgment and the accuracy of measuring materials. For critical footings, the peace of mind that comes with a tested product is valuable. For minor works, the risk is lower and the savings may be worth it.

Making the call

There is no single right answer for every project. The choice between ready mix and site batching depends on your specific circumstances: the size and location of the footings, the strength requirements, your budget and your timeline. For larger, structural footings, ready mix offers consistency and speed that site batching struggles to match. For smaller, isolated pours, site batching gives you flexibility and lower upfront cost.



One way to decide is to think about the worst-case scenario. If the concrete fails, what are the consequences? For a footing that supports a building, the cost of digging out and replacing bad concrete is high. Ready mix reduces that risk. For a garden wall or a shed base, the consequences are lower, and the savings from site batching may be worth the extra effort.

If you are unsure, it can help to talk to a supplier who understands local conditions. For projects in Derbyshire, Stacey Concrete provides ready mix and can advise on volumes, mix designs and delivery access. Their experience with domestic and construction projects means they can help you match the right concrete to your footing requirements. Whether you choose ready mix or site batching, the key is to plan ahead, prepare your site and make sure the concrete is placed and cured properly.

In the end, both methods have a place on a building site. The best approach is the one that fits your project's demands, your site's constraints and your own capacity to manage the work. By weighing the trade-offs carefully, you can get concrete for footings that performs as it should, without overspending or overcomplicating the job.