

Part M and housing:

The relationship between Part M of the Building Regulations and housing has never been a straightforward one. It is a complex and stormy relationship, more of a fatal attraction as opposed to a marriage made in heaven, says Edna Jacobson, Access Officer for Staffordshire Moorlands District Council

David Petherick, Principal Architect at the ODPM is charged with comprehensively revisiting, reviewing and revamping the housing aspects of Part M. It is likely that this review will be completed within two years. However, it is worth looking at the complexity of the relationship and some of the difficulties faced by BCO's, planners and perhaps initiating some debate whilst this review is undergoing.

Some may argue that Part M has never been a faithful partner to the housing requirements. The philosophy of Part M was such that public buildings were always the focus of Part M's attention, with housing being the wallflower, desperately keen to attract the attention of Part M.

The main standard of Part M (housing) is visitability, ie. enabling a disabled person, including a wheelchair user, to visit someone in a house, but this does nothing to actually solve the long term housing needs of disabled people. (Generally a person with a significant mobility impairment would not be able to live in a house, only visit it). This is as though a half hearted, almost token effort is being made to improve the nature of the housing stock. Moreover, the provision within Part M is very much geared towards people with a mobility impairment, when in reality, many other impairments exist and these needs are still not being catered for.

Professor Rob Imrie's powerful work on the

a fatal attraction?

impact of Part M on the design of new housing for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has uncovered other reasons, as well as the above, as to why the relationship between Part M and housing may be subject to irreconcilable differences.

The first is that some people simply do not care about promoting access to the housing stock. Others would prefer to see a quota of housing built to Part M, feeling that the Part M requirements add to the cost of new housing. This is mainly felt by builders. Some Building Control Officers and builders feel that the Part M requirements are 'out of proportion to the scale of the problem'.

Another finding of this work is that there is a completely variable and inconsistent interpretation of Part M by Building Control Officers and in that we can include Approved Inspectors. This inconsistency is important from a Building Control point of view. Some BCO's have hinted strongly that there is less demand for strict compliance on larger sites. One salient point is raised by a BCO, talking about enforcing the Regulations, who says that when faced with an enforcement issue he does not enforce the requirements "because the NHBC or my competitors might say 'We'd have accepted that.' I'm not going to put men's jobs on the line". Perhaps this needs to be raised as a valid issue during the review of Part M Housing requirements.

Another interesting point from a BCO point of view is that it is 'difficult to enforce a requirement you don't understand yourself'. This is a good, honest statement and we should look at producing information to guide and inform Building Control Officers through the requirements, rather than assuming that everyone knows and understands the reasoning behind it. The DSA 'guide' to the public buildings aspects of Part M goes a long way, but feedback from architects and developers suggest that that

while they find the reasoning behind the provision useful, this seems to be lacking within the actual documents. When the changes to Part M are made, we need to look beyond the changes and ask why is that being asked for.

It would also be helpful to have standards which are a little more logical. Sometimes it can be hard to justify why we are insisting on a ground floor toilet, the minimum dimensions of which mean that if a wheelchair user visits the toilet (with their wheelchair) they cannot shut the door. The stock response from builders is often: "That's stupid". While it is at least some provision and does mean that toilet accommodation is available to wheelchair users, it is difficult to offer a robust defence of toilet accommodation which many wheelchair users say they find 'degrading'.

Furthermore, the issue of lifts being non-mandatory in blocks of flats relies heavily on the persuasive arguments of Building Control Officers/Access Officers, despite the fact that some planning authorities have been sending mixed messages out to architects by telling them that lifts are mandatory. Whilst we may wish that lifts were mandatory in accommodation, they are not and inconsistent approaches by planning and Building Control authorities lead to confusion and irritation for our clients, none of whom we wish to lose.

The review of Part M allows there to be a vigorous debate about what should be included, what is simply not feasible and why requirements have been introduced. It is an opportunity to introduce standards which are not only pragmatic and practical, but can dramatically augment the quality of the housing stock and its up to us to raise these issues and foster the debate. For a full copy of Professor Rob Imrie's report, at £15, please telephone 01784 443 654 or download free from www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/jrf.pdf. His latest book *'Accessible Housing Quality, Disability and Design'* is published in September 2005, at a cost of £70 in hardback or £35 paperback. Contact r.imrie@rhul.ac.uk for further details.

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Part M guidance from the DSA

The District Surveyors Association has produced a guide for Building Control Officers to use as an aide-memoire when checking compliance with the amended Part M for buildings other than dwellings.

This initiative will help to provide a more consistent level of interpretation between local authorities and therefore provide more confidence for the client so that their designs will be acceptable wherever they wish to build.

The guide takes the form of a checklist that shows the changes together with the relevant clauses and selected tables and diagrams from Approved Document M.

The guide also gives some advice on Access Statements, what they are, why they

are required and what they should include.

Guidance is also given on the provision of lifts and some of the factors to be taken into consideration when accepting variations from the Approved Document, as well as a list of sources of further information and advice.

Two complimentary copies have been sent to each local authority, and the document is also available for downloading in the member's area of the LABC website.

Some local authorities have also produced useful Part M guides for designers using the diagrams and tables from Approved Document M, but the DSA guide (pictured right) is intended for Building Control Officers rather than designers.

