

The dynamic world of the Building Control surveyor

As part of a research project looking at how the Building Regulations influence the design of buildings, Marian Hawkesworth, Research Associate at King's College London, reports on the changing role of the Local Authority Building Control surveyor



Breaking the mould... the LABC surveyor has entered a new era of responsiveness

No LABC surveyor needs to be told of the profound changes that have transpired in the way they work.

When the Regulations changed in 1985, LABC entered a new era of responsiveness and marketing, casting aside the old days when they were reputedly 'building policemen', following a prescriptive 'book of rules'. It is also about a different style of delivery and a professional pride in their ability to be of value in the design process with other professionals.

One most obvious feature of Building Control – to the author – is that the profession continues tradition in being recognisably male. One can ask to what degree this may be connected to the current recruitment difficulties LABC managers spoke about, and whether school leavers and graduates (and people planning a new career) have heard of the Building Control side of surveying.

Just as Local Authority Building Control has done a lot to get out of building policeman mode, surveyors equally believe it is good to distance LABC from enforcement action, even though enforcement is embodied in the legislation. As one team leader pointed out: "The part of it that they don't change is the Building Control, and that's the horrible part of it really."

In this context, he and others recognise the added value side in describing themselves more as enablers and less as enforcers of

building standards and requirements. This is echoed by those who feel they are much more someone's (eg the architect's) Building Regulations consultants.

Others are concerned that Building Control is like a square peg in a round hole, not fitting easily into local authorities' structures, unlike planning which is in the grip of their 'political masters'. One manager made the point that "people [within the context of environmental services] don't really seem to understand what our role is and how vital it is."

There is a question here because of the variance in local authority procedures and the potential lack of interest and/or understanding by elected members of issues to do with Building Control as to whether or not this should remain within the remit of a local authority or possibly become independent from them as a public service.

Due to losing some of the market share to Approved Inspectors, there is at least one Building Control Consultancy which claims to have "broken the mould in LABC," while others are planning similar moves, developing partnerships further with other authorities.

The idea, according to one senior surveyor, is that although Building Control will remain part of local government, it disengages from some of the local authority bureaucracy: "Having to go through committees to get approval for various things, that side of things."

A heightened concern is evident when surveyors and

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managers speak about their competitors. LABC staff – and Approved Inspectors for that matter – commented that LABC is fearful of being left with the smaller, less rewarding work that nobody else wants.

Others feel that the way Building Control is going, with increasingly complex regulations, surveyors will have to become very specialist in certain areas, in acoustics or thermal insulation, for example. The alternative, many speculate, will be to bring in specialists from outside, for example, to test the air tightness of buildings, leaving them to consider whether this will dilute their role.

One manager summed up the future: "It's very much more a paper checking exercise. We're looking to balance a number of issues. We're also looking at third party accreditation, taking some of the roles away from us to a third party and then feeding it back through us. So it's taking the hands-on approach away from us. I think that's how most people see the changes affecting them."

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