

A taste of things to come?

Last year the Government published a paper setting out its thoughts on 'the future of building control'. A detailed consultation paper is expected shortly which will contain specific proposals for public comment. The outcome could see major changes in the way the Building Regulations are enforced, with proposals ranging from self-regulation on one hand, to increased penalties and new powers to prosecute on the other. Here Dave Baker (pictured), Chief Executive of Robust Details Ltd, gives *SiteLines* readers his insight into what the future may hold for the Building Regulations



One of the issues for consideration is the scope for a wider use of 'pattern books' and single-element certification. The experience of the Robust Details (RD) scheme in providing an industry-friendly solution for Requirement E1 has been widely cited as a good example of how such initiatives might help achieve high levels of compliance with regulatory standards. The scope for extending the current RD scheme into other technical areas is bound to figure prominently during the course of this consultation.

It is interesting to consider which parts of the regulations

would be suited to such an approach. So far RD opportunities have been limited by the current framework of regulation. If this were to be opened up, following the public consultation, Part L (and areas such as airtightness testing) would seem to be a good fit for an RD-type approach. In short, wherever a pattern book would help with workmanship, where sample testing would help with compliance, where a national database would assist with monitoring and where industry involvement and co-operation would help foster best practice and continuous improvement, then an RD-type service could bring the kind of

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benefits we have seen with Part E.

There are many benefits of adopting an RD-type approach, all of which have been demonstrated by the RD scheme for Requirement E1. For example, independent sample field-testing and during-construction inspection by experts (under contract to RDL) enables high levels of compliance to be achieved. RDs for Part E have achieved above 97% compliance with regulations.

Systematic or other repeat failures are immediately highlighted, and diagnosis and corrective action is taken by RDL in a way that ensures that the 'lessons learned' from failures can be universally applied. Under current building control arrangements, individual failures are addressed at a local level, with no mechanism in place to establish a 'national' picture, or indeed determine the most effective long-term solution.

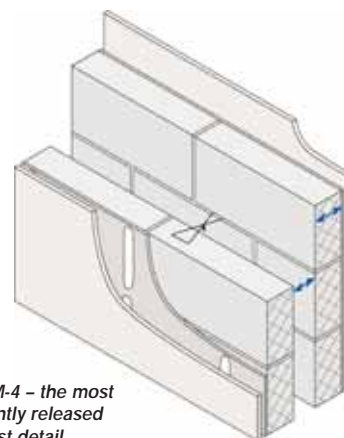
Current building control resource and priority issues that, anecdotally, have resulted in low levels of compliance with Part L (and formerly with Part E), would be at least in part addressed by the introduction of a new 'intelligent' sample testing and inspection resource as RDL has done for Part E. As an additional procedure, supplementary to normal building control surveillance, this is certain to increase levels of compliance on site.

For Part E, the use of a loose-leaf, regularly updated handbook, with advice given on a dedicated website, coupled with checklists for use by site operatives and





E-WM-4 – the most recently released robust detail



supported by a programme of seminars, conferences and training events, has been well received by users. Once again, supporting the Approved Document and existing building control procedures, this can only improve rates of compliance with other parts of the Building Regulations that can include such an approach.

Experience of Part E shows that many building control 'customers' (housebuilders and designers) are electing to follow the RD route to compliance, with RDL benefiting from a two-third share of the attached homes market. Reasons cited relate to the certainty and the reduced cost of RDL procedures compared with PCT. It is to be anticipated that, for instance, an RD 'option' under Part L could be equally popular if it were seen by building control users to have the same certainty and cost benefits.

RDL's comprehensive database of site performance supports the collection and publication, where appropriate, of actual performance measurements. This enables early warnings of 'slippage' or systematic failure; allows customers to make an informed choice about best options and highest performing constructions; provides confidence about levels of actual (rather than theoretical) performance; and more importantly, provides results which may be used to inform the development of future RD standards, and indeed future reviews of Building Regulations.

If extended beyond Part E, the RD handbook could – in one document – contain sufficient information to meet the external fabric requirements of, say, Part L1 as well as the separating floor and wall requirements in Part E. As well as being a matter of convenience for the housebuilding industry, this could be taken as a first step towards an RD handbook for domestic new-build that would link together all technical regulatory requirements for new houses and flats.

RD auditing and monitoring of 'as-built' new homes also provides significant advantages for Government, including confidence about levels of compliance with the relevant regulations; a huge database (relative to any Government-commissioned research project); a means of supporting building control bodies in securing compliance with requirements; independent of local priorities and resources; and a way of closing the gap between theoretical and actual performance on site.

This will be of particular interest when applied to Part L, given the apparently diminishing returns associated with the incremental changes made as performance standards get higher and higher. More importantly, a universally applied scheme would provide an industry-led approach to Building Regulations problem-solving, simplifying the entire process.

Three years since the launch of Robust Details Ltd (RDL), Government has provided its full endorsement of the RD scheme, following a

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comprehensive independent review. This recognition not only secures the future of RDL in its current role to provide a solution for Part E of the Building Regulations, but also opens up the opportunity for expansion to other areas of the regulations. As Shona Dunn, Head of the Sustainable Buildings Division at Communities and Local Government recently said in support of RDL's work: "The Robust Details Scheme is a success story for the housebuilding industry."

If applied to other areas of the Building Regulations in a bid to change the way in which compliance is achieved, there may possibly be even greater success ahead for the industry.

Photographs show housing constructed using robust details

