

Keeping up with the times

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Celestine Cheong argues for improvements in the fire safety guidance in Approved Document B

Why does fire safety matter when the built environment sector faces other pressing questions, such as how to access a skilled workforce that will meet the nation's construction and infrastructure needs? Aren't buildings already safe?

Despite the number of [fire deaths having fallen 30%](#) over the last decade, the [financial losses from fire are increasing](#) at a worrying level year on year. However, it is not just financial loss that needs to occupy us. Fire concerns life safety, business resilience and continuity, our health, our children's education and the environment, affecting both commercial and residential properties – the very places we live and work.

Yet if fire deaths are at an all-time low, then surely the [Building Regulations](#) and the guidance in [Approved Document B](#) are working?

In short, they were and – to an extent – still are. The issue is that we are moving at great speed but the regulations and associated guidance have not kept up, and this puts us in a dangerous situation.

What's wrong?

The last revision of the guidance in Approved Document B was in 2006. Just think about how different our mobile phones were 10 years ago – construction methods and materials in the built environment were different then, too.

We have transformed a great deal over the last decade. Our obsession with DIY has seen more conversions and extensions, while more people live in cities where residency churns several times a year, and the introduction of new insulation materials and techniques poses a range of fire safety threats not thought of even 5 years ago, let alone 10.

Major cuts in public-sector funding are already affecting the regulatory frameworks, the risks the fire and rescue services face and their response times. This is placing a greater burden on these services and their partner organisations to develop innovative and successful strategies for our changing world. Matters will intensify.

To put things into perspective, the measures in Approved Document B's guidance assume a certain level of fire safety management. The rise in the use of booking systems such as Airbnb, which offer more rooms than the world's largest hotel chains without actually owning a single property, is an area of concern. Many such premises, including registered smaller hotels, are unstaffed at night. This is an increasingly common trend, but building fire safety requirements

are not adapting to take account of it.

In 2014, the [Fire Sector Federation \(FSF\)](#)'s [Built Environment Issues and Affairs \(BEIA\) workstream](#) was established, for 2 main reasons. The 1st was that [the inquest into the 2009 Lakanal House fire](#) in London recommended a review of Approved Document B to provide clearer counsel, with a special focus on the spread of fire over the external envelope of the building.

This called for the language in the guidance to be made more comprehensible to the wide range of people engaged in construction, maintenance and refurbishment of buildings; during the inquest, even the experts disagreed on the interpretation of guidance in the document.

The coroner's [section 43 letter to the then Communities Secretary](#) Eric Pickles recommended a review of Approved Document B to improve useability. This review has not yet been undertaken, however, which means that fire can still spread externally and penetrate walls with no resistance, at great risk to a building's occupants.

The second factor in the formation of BEIA was the publication of three independent studies by Bureau Veritas, BRE and the Centre for Economics and Business Research respectively, all of which highlighted that there were policy flaws in the guidance.

BEIA studies

The workstream has since conducted its own studies, gathering expert opinion from the FSF's membership in conjunction with the Construction Industry Council (CIC) on the Building Regulations and Approved Document B.

The goals of [the two surveys](#) were to garner an impression of understanding about and the clarity and ease of use of the current guidance; and to establish whether the system should look beyond the capacity of 'life safety', gain an impression of the importance of the fire and rescue services in decision-making and determine, by today's standards, which areas require further investigation and discussion.

[The studies found](#) that 92% of FSF members who responded believe changes are needed to Approved Document B, and 91% said there should be new or additional guidance provided with easy-to-read text. When assessed for user-friendliness, the guidance presented various degrees of difficulty, according to 79% of FSF members and 66% of CIC members.

Three-quarters of FSF members also agreed that the fire and rescue services should have the final decision with regard to [B5 compliance](#) 'access and facilities for the fire service' while all responding FSF members agreed on the need to address inconsistent building definitions.

Other responses include 88% of FSF members saying that Approved Document B need not adapt to suit the trends in modern methods of construction (MMC). Forty-two per cent of CIC members agreed that the document is flexible, but worryingly, some 21.4% of CIC members felt that they did not know whether Approved Document B is flexible enough to respond to MMC trends, indicating a need for better education in this regard.

Two of the BEIA workstream's aims are to promote dialogue about buildings policy and fire between policymakers and stakeholders, and to help develop recommended and revised policy material. In response to the survey results, consensus that the guidance is extremely difficult

to understand, the workstream has formed a voluntary task group in which the building control profession and civil service are represented, and which meets on a regular basis to enable more consistent interpretation of the document. As for accessibility, navigational aspects and improvements to policy, it is working with a think tank on potential approaches.

In February 2016, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) launched an online consultation via the National Building Specification, part of RIBA Enterprises, on improving the usability of Approved Documents B and M. The survey closed in April, and while the results have been tallied and a report prepared, this has yet to be published.

The study sought views on issues such as:

- the use of tables and diagrams;
- suggested design approaches;
- the consistency of terms used;
- whether it achieves the right balance between being prescriptive and non-prescriptive; the wording suggests that the DCLG could be minded to make Approved Document B more prescriptive and rule-based in the future;
- an appropriate online format.

Respondents were asked in particular what percentage of the regulations should be guidance and what percentage regulatory, indicating a possible compliance check is in prospect.

Parliamentary response

In a written response to a letter from Sir David Amess, Chairman of the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety & Rescue Group, the Under Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government James Wharton said he was not yet in a position to set out plans for Building Regulations. Wharton has acknowledged that it is policy not to increase the burden of regulation but instead to aim for its simplification: if one measure is to be introduced, then it would need to be offset by the removal of two others, depending on validity.

In a parliamentary question asked in June, Lyn Brown asked about Wharton's plans to review the guidance provided in Approved Document B to the Building Regulations 2010, to which he replied: 'My department is considering a number of issues related to the Building Regulations and building control system matters. We will make an announcement in due course.'

A review of the guidance in Approved Document B was then on the cards; but with the UK getting ready to consider new deals as it prepares to leave the EU, there is concern that the government may claim such a review is now an unnecessary complication. However, it should definitely not stall or be postponed. In this volatile landscape of ambition and uncertainty, wouldn't fewer headaches and a simpler, clearer overall picture be desirable?

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Further information

- Related competencies include [Fire safety](#).
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building control journal* (November/December 2016).