

Keep it simple

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Sarah Chilcott explains why Approved Documents need to adapt in an increasingly digital sector

In February, the Department for Communities and Local Government published [research](#) into the useability of [parts B](#) and [M](#) of the Building Regulations? Approved Documents.

The findings identified some quite simple yet vital improvements, such as the ability to copy, cut and paste files for internal company use. The survey also prompted a number of more challenging recommendations such as the need to standardise and clarify information, which is potentially problematic considering the disparate kinds of users who are accessing the documents.

Alongside a desire for more prescriptive language, users expressed the need for clearer illustrations. The [new Part M](#) was favoured in terms of format, using a single-column design with more white space, not unlike a webpage.

Navigation was also identified as needing improvement, particularly the lack of hyperlinks in the contents pages of the PDF documents. Users expressed their desire for a more visible search facility with contextual results that span all Approved Documents; to allow a cross-document search for "windows", for example.

To address these issues and reflect the requirements of an increasingly digitised sector, HTML versions of the Approved Documents need to be developed. This would allow for internal and external links from the documents, contextual searches, the ability to print specific sections, and easier tailoring of guidance to suit the readership.

Those accessing the Approved Documents should be made aware that these are subject to change, and that they should always use a reliable publisher ? such as the [Planning Portal?s own library of Approved Documents](#) ? to ensure that the information is as current as possible.

Having a fully mobile-responsive website is an absolute necessity for users. Mobile devices account for 35% of traffic to the Planning Portal, so ensuring a good user experience across all devices was a priority when we relaunched the site last year. In developing and publishing content, we are careful to make sure visitors will have the same positive experience however they access the site.

Challenges to overcome

Standardising Approved Documents, and regulatory guidance in general, is a significant challenge. Information must be widely accessible and in plain English. Adding context across the guidance will benefit all user groups, and help applicants to submit correctly first time. The

Planning Portal has always been committed to communicating with our readers using clear, accessible language, and providing illustrations where appropriate.

Our popular [interactive house](#) is a prime example of where a lot of content that is potentially difficult to understand can be clarified when supported by images. Along with other interactive guides, the house provides specific information relevant to different developments as well as further links to planning and building advice.

Integration with building information modelling (BIM) is another area that needs to be addressed. Two-thirds of the respondents in the research identified the need to link with BIM in the near future, with half of them thinking they will need to check a model's compliance with Building Regulations.

Simplifying the process

As well as providing statutory guidance and authoritative advice, the Planning Portal continues to look for new ways to simplify the building process. Because of this, we launched a [free building control application service](#) in October 2016, and have been delighted with the take-up from local authorities linking to the service from their websites, as well as from approved inspectors keen to promote their businesses on our directory.

At the time of writing, we have nearly 200 local authorities linking to the service and processed more than 6,000 applications. Twelve approved inspectors are also availing themselves of the directory. We are [actively recruiting](#) more. We anticipate application numbers will continue to rise as more inspectors and building control bodies come on board and knowledge of the Planning Portal service increases.

As with the feedback on Approved Documents, the priorities for industry professionals navigating the building control process are efficiency, ease of use and correct submission the first time. The ability for users to complete the entire process online, from their desk or anywhere else, rather than filling and submitting paper forms is key to ensuring a smooth and timely application. Instant receipt notifications, fee calculators and the ability to purchase compliant maps further expedite the process.

We have been working hard to expand our guidance to help visitors navigate the application process successfully, as well as advising on good practice for home improvement and commercial projects ? from inception to completion. We have also launched our own fully compliant digital mapping tool, [ReQuestaPlan](#) .

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Further information

- This feature is taken from the [RICS Building control journal](#) (September/October 2017)
- Related categories: [Building control](#) ; [Planning](#) ; [Planning policy and regulation](#)