

Open options

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Michael Morgan reflects on the impact that changes to Part M have had on accessibility

I have often thought that housing diversity should be a function of supply and demand, backed up by planning legislation. For example, there is a particular need for so-called affordable housing in certain areas; but, although most people are looking for more affordable property, there still seems to be a surplus of sites producing high-end apartments and houses. Is this to do with the demand from foreign investors as well as buy-to-let entrepreneurs?

An often overlooked factor is the variety of accessible and specialised housing. More and more of us are living longer, there is an emphasis on equality, and adapting existing dwellings for wheelchair access can be difficult and costly, so it is increasingly important to ensure that these issues are considered at the design stage.

Wheelchair-accessible and adaptable housing was previously dealt with by a variety of planning guides, but [the Part M guidance documents issued in 2015](#) now tackle this subject. However, it is difficult to tell even after a year or so whether the changes made in these documents are having a positive impact on the housing market.

Reasons for change

One intention of the Part M changes, which were prompted by the housing standards review of 2015, was the reining in of planning departments, which imposed different requirements by area; for example, it was reported that there were 12 different wheelchair-accessible housing standards in London alone.

The best-known planning guide is probably [Lifetime Homes](#) , but there are also some lesser-known standards for sheltered housing and similar accommodation. This national technical standard is imposed by planning departments, with the technical content seen through to completion by building control bodies (BCBs).

In practice, it is envisaged that a local planning authority is to set policy in its local plan to allow it to impose the optional standards established in the revised Part M document. For each development, the local authority's planning department should decide whether it wants to apply 1 of the technical standards and must then make a specific condition on the relevant approval notice, stating the Building Regulation and optional standards that are to apply.

Further along in the process, the developer must then notify its BCB of the planning condition before work commences; this should be highlighted in the description of work for the local authority, or in the initial notice if an approved inspector is dealing with the project. The BCB will then apply the optional technical standard specified in the conditions, as defined in the amended [Building Regulations](#) .

The guidance

The main changes made to Part M in 2015 are that it has been split into volume 1 and volume 2. The 1st relates to dwellings only, and [requirement M4 has been given a big shake-up](#) . Conversely, volume 2 relates to buildings other than dwellings, with requirements M1, M2 and M3 remaining relatively unchanged (see [Approved Document M](#) , [A more accessible part M?](#) and [Opening up access](#)).

The changes in volume 1 are where the optional requirements are found. Requirement M4(1), known as category 1 and entitled "Visitable dwellings", has had no substantial changes made to it other than improved guidance and clarification on the original Part M scope.

The optional requirements M4 (2 and 3) are instigated at the planning stage and known as category 2, "Accessible and adaptable dwellings", and category 3, "Wheelchair user dwellings". Where there are no requirements that have been imposed by the local planning authority, designers only have to meet 1 of the requirements.

Category 2 introduces further requirements on step-free access and includes connections to outdoor space associated with the dwelling. Space standards are also imposed, such as clear access zones to principal bedrooms, and examples of adaptable toilets or cloakroom layouts for potential future use as level-access showers.

Category 3 guidance includes specific requirements for wheelchair users. This includes details on making provisions for lifting devices, the ideal kitchen space for a wheelchair user, and space planning guides for use when designing a suitable wheelchair-accessible bedroom.

These are much-needed changes, given the findings presented at a [recent parliamentary Women and Equalities Select Committee meeting](#) on disability and the built environment. Committee member Andrew Gibson stated that the [English Housing Survey](#) in 2016 highlighted that only 7% of properties in the country were suitable for even a "visitable standard", which is the basic category 1 criterion.

To help increase the supply of varied and suitably accessible housing, I certainly welcome the inclusion of these optional standards ? but we should bear in mind that they are optional and depend on planning authorities implementing them.

Michael Morgan is Senior Project Manager at consultancy [Butler and Young](#)

Further information

- Related competencies include [Building control inspections](#) , [Legal/regulatory compliance](#)
- This feature is taken from the [RICS Building control journal](#) (September/October 2017)
- Related categories: [Building control](#) ; [Disability discrimination in property](#)