

Up to the mark

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The National Quality Mark Scheme has been developed to prevent expensive and time-consuming delays when substandard land contamination documents are submitted to planning authorities

The National Brownfield Forum, of which RICS is a member, was known as the Land Forum and set up in 2009. Its remit, as set out in the House of Lords, is to 'oversee the implementation of the national brownfield strategy, to improve coordination on contaminated land and brownfield policy between government, devolved administrations, regulators and practitioners, and to encourage the exchange of best practice and knowledge'.

Over the past decade it has received repeated complaints from members that documents submitted to planning authorities about land contamination are often not up to the required regulatory standard. So in 2014, the forum began developing the National Quality Mark Scheme (NQMS), since promoted by the [Environment Agency](#) and the [Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government](#). The scheme aims to encourage applicants under the [Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#) to get their submissions right first time.

Brownfield redevelopment projects can be held up by submission of substandard documents

Although the focus of the NQMS is the documents themselves, the scheme has required the identification and registration of those in both public and private sectors who are competent to review the submitted reports. These suitably qualified persons (SQPs) understand the specialist technical issues involved in the assessment and remediation of land contamination and they are assessed by the Specialist in Land Condition Register, of which RICS was a founder.

The relevant land contamination documents tend to be one of the following:

- preliminary land contamination risk assessment;
- phase 2 land contamination assessment;
- remediation options appraisal/remediation strategy;
- remediation plan/remediation statement; and
- remediation completion/validation/verification report.

For a fee of £75 each, an NQMS mark and declaration of conformity can be submitted with any of these reports to show the regulator that it has been reviewed by an SQP and found to be of the standard required.

With regulatory budgets depleting, it is imperative that precious resources are not expended on bringing submissions up to standard rather than on regulation itself. In truth, both regulator and applicant incur large costs every time substandard documents are submitted and a game of ping-pong ensues until omissions or mistakes are corrected and the document is acceptable.

The presence of an NQMS mark immediately assures the contaminated land regulator that an expert has reviewed a particular document and found that it meets the necessary technical and regulatory standards. While inadequate documents may not put any lives at risk, they can result in significant project delays. Members should also note that local authority regulators are not bound to report any proposed remediation measures that may be technically unnecessary or superfluous.

The quality mark is a voluntary, low-cost scheme that can be applied to any development. Knowing that a document bears the mark assures clients and regulators alike that a report will meet the planning requirements without rework, thus saving both time and money.

Seamus Lefroy-Brooks is chair of the NQMS steering panel

Further information

- See also the [NQMS for Land Contamination Management](#)
- Related competencies include: [Contaminated land](#) ; [Environmental assessment](#)
- This feature is taken from the [RICS Land Journal](#) (January/February 2019)
- Related categories include: [Brownfield developments](#) ; [Planning and development](#)