

# A more accessible Part M?

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**Vivien King considers the implications of recent changes to Part M**

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Updates are being made to the UK Building Regulations. Some Approved Documents in England and in Wales and Technical Handbooks in Scotland include 2015 editions. Northern Ireland's Technical Booklets underwent change in 2014. So, check for updates before use.

English and Welsh Approved Documents may be accessed through the government's Planning Portal, but make sure that either the [English or Welsh version](#) is selected, as appropriate.

The new English edition of [Approved Document M](#) (access to and use of buildings) came into force on 1 October 2015. It differs from the previous 2004 edition (although the online version incorporated the 2010 and 2013 amendments), and is divided into two distinct parts:

- [Volume 1 ? Dwellings](#)
- [Volume 2 ? Buildings other than dwellings](#) .

Both are hefty documents, at 59 and 70 pages respectively. Volume 1 has three separate categories:

- visitable dwellings (pursuant to requirement M4(1) of the Building Regulations)
- accessible and adaptable dwellings (optional requirement M4(2))
- wheelchair user dwellings (optional requirement M4(3)).

Category one is mandatory, while categories two and three apply only when a relevant condition is imposed by a planning permission. Each commences with the relevant Building Regulation requirement followed by (in a section headed Performance) the Secretary of State's view as to how this can be reasonably met.

## New dwellings

New dwellings require reasonable provision to enable most people, including wheelchair users, to approach and enter and access habitable rooms and sanitary provisions on the entrance level. Delve deeper and one finds (at paragraph 1.18) that this means, for instance, switches and sockets including doorbells, entry phones, light switches, power points, TV aerials and phone jacks in habitable rooms are positioned at a height that will assist all, including people with reduced reach.

Volume 2 requires buildings other than dwellings and the facilities within them to be accessible and useable by all people, visiting, living (e.g. in student accommodation) or working in the buildings, regardless of disability, age or gender.

Take, as an example, a hotel room. Sleeping accommodation should "aim to be convenient to all" (paragraph 4.17) but it is recognised that people who use wheelchairs will require additional space to access en-suite facilities. One room in 20 (5%) is to be wheelchair-accessible, adjacent to accessible routes to all facilities within the hotel and situated so as to provide a choice of location, room standard etc. equivalent to that provided to guests in other bedrooms.

*All rooms are to have doors wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair*

Whether classed as wheelchair-accessible or not, all rooms are to have doors wide enough to accommodate a wheelchair and, for instance, visual as well as aural fire alarms, easy-to-grip doors and windows that can be used without requiring use of both hands.

Some are setting the aims even higher, including the Mayor of London. His supplementary planning guidance, published in October 2014 as part of the Shaping Neighbourhoods portfolio, requires, for instance, 10% accessible hotel rooms (Appendix 9). Whether that means wheelchair-accessible or not, it does not say. It talks, too, about "locating the accessible rooms adjacent to the lift", which would require a considerable number of lifts.

This is an excellent document, but with respect to the Mayor, there could be some difficult discussions between planners and building control departments in many a London borough council.

Other difficult discussions and decisions may arise over the inter-relationship between the [Equality Act 2010](#) and Part M. [Section 20 of the Act](#) imposes a duty on, for instance, service providers to make reasonable adjustments to, *inter alia*, physical features of a building that put a disabled person at a substantial disadvantage.

Physical features do not arise from access to or within a building or to its design or construction alone, but extend to, for instance, furnishings and materials. Approved Document M recognises the issue ? let us hope others do too.

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## **Further information**

- Related competencies include [Legal/regulatory compliance](#)
- This feature is taken from the RICS *Building Control Journal* (February/March 2016)