

# Opening up access

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**With provision of wheelchair-accessible homes already at a premium, Simone West looks at whether more flexible local rules will provide the solution**

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The UK government's [Housing Standards Review](#) has resulted in new optional technical standards giving local authorities the ability to vary requirements according to local housing needs, while remaining within consistent national standards.

The aim of the review was to consolidate and simplify standards, making it easier to navigate and reduce contradictions while retaining local choice.

The optional standards include:

- the national space standard, which is applied by the local authority at planning stages that does not form part of the optional technical standards monitored and regulated by building control
- M4(2) of [Approved Document M \(ADM\)](#) ? provisions for accessible and adaptable dwellings, applied by the local authority but monitored and regulated by building control
- M4(3) of ADM ? suitable space for most wheelchair users ? M4(3)a is for wheelchair-adaptable homes while M4(3)b is only allocated through the local authority when there is a specific requirement for an individual.

In addition, where evidence is provided, a local authority may set different standards if an individual's needs would not be met by the optional standards and they are allocated to a property.

The revisions to the Building Regulations ADM Dwellings were introduced on 1 October 2015 (see [A more accessible part M?](#) ).

Regulation M4(1) remains the mandatory standard and will be met when a new dwelling makes reasonable provision for people to gain access to and use the dwelling and its facilities.

It provides four key features:

- level access
- flush threshold
- suitably wide doors and circulation space
- a WC at entrance level.

The Department for Communities and Local Government estimates that only 5.3% of all housing has these features.

The powers to introduce the optional requirements are contained in the [Building Act 1984](#) as amended by the [Deregulation Act 2015](#) , which states that "a planning authority makes compliance with the requirement a condition of a grant of planning permission".

Planning authorities will only be able to apply the optional technical standards where they demonstrate a clear need within their local plan in line with the [National Planning Policy Framework \(NPPF\)](#) and planning guidance.

They need to identify the proportion of each optional category that should be applied to each different tenure, in accordance with their local plan. To do this, they will need to understand existing local needs and potential needs of the future population.

*There is evidence that 20% of disabled people are living in unsuitable homes*

It is the duty of the person or organisation seeking building control approval to divulge which ADM optional standards have been applied at the planning stage. Building control is responsible for ensuring that new homes meet the appropriate technical standard.

Viability is also key. The NPPF states: "In order to be appropriate, the cumulative impact of these standards and policies should not put implementation of the plan at serious risk, and should facilitate development throughout the economic cycle."

Affordable homes are clearly needed, but consideration should also be given to the costs on care systems and support services when suitable accommodation is not provided. There are implications for the cost of adaptations, the potential reduction in injuries caused by unsuitable housing and the social costs to those living in unsuitable accommodation.

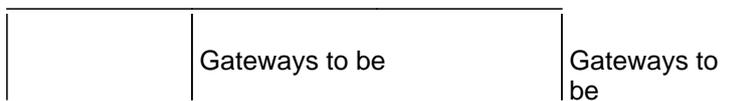
The optional M4(2) and M4(3) substantially increase the standards within ADM, but those who have worked with the lifetime homes design standard and the wheelchair housing design will find the obligations familiar.

The scope and structure of each section is similar, with guidance becoming more detailed in M4(2) over M4(1) and still more detailed in M4(3)? see Table 1 for an example.

**Table 1: Abbreviated contents of ?general provisions? for ?approach routes? in categories 1, 2 and 3**

Section 1 Category 1 (1.3?1.6)	Category 2 (2.6?2.10)	Category 3 (3.7?3.9)
Level, gentle slope or ramped and step-free (where possible).	Level, gentle slope or ramped and step-free communal entrance. Main or alternative private entrance to be step-free.	Level, gentle slope or ramped and step-free to all entrances.
Suitable ground surface.	Suitable ground surface.	Suitable ground surface.
900mm wide with maximum cross-fall of 1:40.	Private ? 900mm Communal - 1,200mm	All 1,200mm
900mm space beside parked car.	Communal space near to access and a minimum of 900mm space beside the car.	Communal space near to access and a minimum of 1,200mm to the rear and one side of the car.
	A private standard bay is capable of being widened to 3.3m.	A private standard bay has clear access zones of 1,200mm to the rear and one side.
	Parking bay has a suitable surface and is level or gently sloping where unavoidable.	Parking bay has a suitable surface and is level.
	No obstruction can occur opposite or close to a doorway and can be no longer than 2m.	No obstruction can occur opposite or close to a doorway or change of direction and can be no longer than

2m.



	a minimum clear width of 850mm with a 300mm nib to the leading edge.	a minimum clear width of 850mm and a 300mm nib to the leading edge. 200mm nib to the following edge.
	Where ramped approach is over 300mm rise, alternative steps should also be provided.	Where communal ramped approach is over 300mm then alternative steps should be provided.
		1,500mm x 1,500mm level area at start and finish of approach and at no more than 10m intervals.
		Illuminated approach route.

**Future demand**

The Office for Disability Issues states that 20% of disabled people are currently living in unsuitable homes and a survey by Bournemouth Borough Council, in 2013, put the figure at 62%. A survey for Barnado's in 2002 highlighted that "living in unsuitable accommodation causes major problems for families", citing a specific example where a father had to carry his 18-year-old daughter to the school bus stop because the entrance to the house was not suitable for a wheelchair.

Families with young disabled children are sometimes put into accommodation for the elderly as the only properly adapted property available. Many people find themselves trapped, unable to afford to move or to pay for adaptations. Even when they can afford to move, no suitable accommodation is available.

At the same time, the Office for National Statistics estimates that the population of pensionable age will grow by 3.8 million in the next 25 years, with an increasing number of people surviving to 100 years old (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Projection of future UK population (ONS, 2013)**

The prevalence of disability increases with age, from approximately 6% of children, 16% of working age adults to 45% over the state pension age. On this basis, the demand for accessible and adaptable homes will inevitably grow.

Will the new requirements for local authorities to understand their regional housing need start to deliver much-needed accessible and adaptable housing to meet current as well as future needs? For many areas, this means not only collecting and making sense of their data but also allowing developers to take any changes to local space standards into account in the price that they are willing to pay for development land.

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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)