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IMPROVING ACCESS TO HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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This article looks at the level of compliance with the Building Regulations dealing with access to housing and the issue of Lifetime Adaptable Housing Standards.

Part M of the Building Regulations

According to the 2002 Census of Population almost 324,000 people, or 8.3 per cent of the total population, have a disability.

In 2000 an amendment was made to Part M of the Building Regulations to make dwellings “visitable” by people with disabilities. The reasoning behind the amendment was to ensure that new dwellings are socially accessible. However not all dwellings to which the regulation applies need to be wheelchair accessible - an exception are duplexes where the first floor level is accessed by stairs.

‘People with disabilities’ covers people who have an impairment of hearing or sight or an impairment which limits their ability to walk or which restricts them to using a wheelchair.

The regulations require that dwellings should be designed so that:

1. People with disabilities can safely gain access by a level or gently sloping approach (steps are acceptable for duplexes).
2. People with disabilities can have access into the dwelling.
3. A WC is provided at entry level.

Approach to a dwelling

- At least one entrance on the boundary of the dwelling plot should have a minimum clear opening width of 800mm.
- The main entrance to the dwelling should be accessible to wheelchair users.
- There should be a clear area at least 1.2m wide x 1.2m deep in front of the entrance.

Access to a dwelling

- Minimum clear opening width of the entrance door should be 775mm.
- The entrance should have a level entry, i.e. with a maximum threshold height of 15mm.
- Doorbells, entry phones etc should be at a height between 900mm and 1200mm above floor level.

Circulation within a dwelling

- Hallways and doors to habitable rooms in the entry storey should not have stepped changes of level.

- Hallways should have a minimum width of 900mm.
- Saddleboards, where provided, should be bevelled with a maximum upstand of 10mm.
- Door handles and light switches should be located between 900mm and 1200mm above floor level.

Sanitary Conveniences

- A WC should be provided at entry level.
- The WC should be located in a bathroom or separate WC compartment e.g. under a stairs.
- A clear space 750mm x 1200mm, accessible by wheelchair users, should be available adjacent to the WC so as to facilitate sideways transfer from the chair to the WC.

Level of Compliance with Part M

The survey

The National Disability Authority (NDA) undertook a survey in 2004 of one-off houses and housing schemes, under construction and newly built, both in rural areas and in towns and villages, to establish the extent to which the regulations were being observed. For the purposes of the survey, the dwelling in question was deemed to have complied with Part M if there was no step at the entrance.

The survey took into account dwellings in counties Donegal, Cavan, Longford, Leitrim, Limerick, Tipperary.

The findings

One-off houses

Forty eight single one-off houses were observed. Eleven had a level entrance. Thirty seven houses contravened Part M by having stepped entrances. The results showed a 23% compliance rate for one-off houses surveyed.

Housing schemes

Fourteen housing schemes were studied. Nine schemes had a level entry to the houses. The other five developments had stepped entrances. The results indicated a 64% compliance rate for housing schemes surveyed.

Lifetime Adaptable Housing

Lifetime Adaptable Housing (LAH) makes provision for possible future alterations of new build and renovated housing stock at low cost to accommodate the changing needs of occupants as they age or suffer ill health.

In the UK much work has been carried out by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to raise the profile of lifetime homes. The Foundation has come up with a set of agreed requirements for an adaptable home:

Outside

1. Parking space capable of enlargement to 3.6m.
2. The distance from the parking space to the entrance should be kept to a minimum.
3. The paths to all entrances should be suitably wide and level or gently sloping.
4. Covered and illuminated entrances without steps.

Inside

5. Wide front door and ample hallway widths (for wheelchair).
6. There should be space for the turning of wheelchairs in all ground-floor rooms.
7. There should be a wheelchair-accessible downstairs toilet.
8. The sitting room should be at entrance level.
9. Walls in bathrooms and toilets should be capable of taking handrails.
10. In houses of two or more storeys, there should be space on the ground floor for a bed.
11. There should be provision for a future stairlift and a space for a future house lift from the ground to the first floor.
12. The bathroom and bedroom ceilings should be strong enough to support a hoist.
13. Provision should be made within the bath/bedroom dividing wall for a future floor to ceiling door, to connect the two rooms by a hoist.
14. Easy-access bathroom layout.

Features and fittings

15. Window-sills no higher than 750mm, windows easy to open.
16. Switches, heater control etc. easy to reach (i.e. between 600mm and 1200mm from floor.)

In a submission to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government on the review of Part M of the Building Regulations, the NDA recommended that 10% of new homes in housing schemes and all one-off houses should be built to full LAH standards.

In several countries including Italy, Spain and The Netherlands, government policy drives the delivery of housing built to adaptable standards. In other EU countries adaptable housing is either encouraged through various incentives or is dependent on co-operation between the public and private sectors.

Aside from the obvious gains for a person with a disability, adaptable housing offers benefits to many others in the housing market. The absence of steps from the front entrance makes it easier for families with young children in prams. Older people also find it safer and easier to get around. Wider doorways are helpful when furniture is being brought into a house and moved from room to room.

Comment

The results of the NDA survey show a poor level of compliance with regulations aimed at improving access to housing for people with disabilities. Particularly disappointing are the results for one-off housing. This may be due to lack of awareness of regulations regarding accessibility among contractors who undertake smaller-scale building work.

The primary responsibility for observing the requirements of the Building Regulations rests with designers, contractors and owners of buildings. It is essential that the implementation of the regulations is monitored by the 37 Building Control Authorities. However, perhaps through lack of sufficient resources many local authorities have not reached the inspection target set by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The Building Control Bill 2005 which is due to be enacted later this year provides for a Disability Access Certificate (DAC) confirming that the designs of new non-domestic buildings and apartment blocks comply with Part M. Local authorities will be able to seek injunctions to prevent the construction or use of buildings where a DAC has not been complied with. Certification will increase awareness of the issue of accessibility.

Demographic projections indicate that the number of people aged over 65 will more than treble from a current level of under 500,000 to 1,500,000 people by 2056. Improved housing accessibility standards should be put in place to prepare for this demographic shift. New regulations, incentives and information are seen as the main ways to promote the building of adaptable housing.

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