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## Access to Buildings for People with Disabilities

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## **ACCESS TO HOUSING FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES**

*This article looks at the main requirements of the Building Regulations dealing with access to housing by people with disabilities and the level of compliance with the regulation.*

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 Requirements of Part M of the Building Regulations**

The regulation requires 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 every such 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 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 regulation was 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.

#### *Comment*

The results indicate 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 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.

### **References**

*Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2000) Building Regulations 2000 - Technical Guidance Document M Access for People with Disabilities. Dublin: Stationary Office*

*Fionnuala Rogerson et al (2004) Review of the Effectiveness of Part M of the Building Regulations. National Disability Authority.*