

Looking Forward to a new Part B

As I think everybody in England and Wales is now probably aware (certainly the readership of Fire Prevention) Part B (Fire safety) of the Building Regulations is under review. The current version of Part B and the current edition of Approved Document B have been in force since 1 July 2000. Amendments were issued later in 2000 to take account of a consolidation of the Regulations and again in 2002 to provide visible recognition to the new European technical specifications and supporting fire test methods. This current review however is a fundamental one covering everything within the scope of Part B.

In the past the production of a new Approved Document has been regarded as a bit of a closed shop, the draft for consultation is produced by a select few government officials and some 'experts'. I've never been entirely comfortable with this term, according to my Job Description I am an expert but I'm really not convinced!

Once the consultation is published the public are then given three months to comment on the draft before a working party of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee (BRAC) is convened to run through the comments. The difficulty with this approach is that respondents to the consultation often come up with new ideas that were not in the consultation paper, if the working party like the idea and want to incorporate it into the new AD there is no opportunity for another consultation.

Stakeholder Engagement

These days things are a little different, Stakeholder Engagement is very much the order of the day at ODPM and this is more than just an impressive sounding buzzword. Much of the research work that we carry out in support of the Building Regulations is overseen by industry steering groups. These groups, made up of people from fire brigades, Local Authorities and Industry help us to understand the problems on the ground and the impact that any proposed changes can have on the fire industry in its broadest sense. There is also a sense of ownership amongst the steering groups which means that any proposals that are generated have the widest possible support.

Of course these groups tend to be populated by the leading lights in their field and by more 'experts'. However we were well aware that there are many other professionals around the country who are using ADB every day and it was felt that we should try and listen to what they had to say before we started the review in earnest. From this idea came the task which has been given the snappy title of the *Forward Look*.

Timetable

The review of Part B is one component of the Governments strategy for fire safety, as such there is a fairly strict timetable to fit in with. The Consultation paper is due out early next year. That may not sound like a tight timetable but, trust me it is! This meant we had around three months to carry out the Forward Look, a process designed to give as many people as we could the chance to comment on their likes and dislikes, hopes and desires for Part B.

From experience we knew that whilst people often have a lot to say about the AD when they are using it or just after it has been published. What's difficult is getting people to say something up front, so it was felt that a series of open forum workshops would be a good catalyst to get people talking. Three were organised, one at BRE Garston plus one in Cardiff and one in Manchester. There was no time to advertise in the trade journals so we sent out flyers to a range of organisations and individuals inviting them to come to one of the workshops or, if they couldn't make it, fill out an on-line questionnaire.

We sent out more than 1200 flyers to Architects, Building Control Bodies, Fire Brigades, Fire Consultants, Local Authorities and Manufacturers. We then set about trying to ensure that the delegate lists for the workshops had a reasonable balance from each group. By the time we had finished we had spoken to over 180 people and had further comments from another 50 or so. If you consider that when the consultation paper for the 2000 edition was published there were only 199 respondents I think we have done well.

Workshops

The workshops were certainly lively affairs with plenty of debate about what we should or should not be doing with Part B. There were of course a few doubting Thomases "This is all well and good Brian" they said "but will anybody actually take any notice of us?" It's nice to know that British cynicism is still alive and kicking but I can assure you that this exercise has been more useful than I think any of us thought it would be. I am already working up proposals for the Working Party to consider that have been influenced by the feedback we have had from the Forward Look. In fact there are some proposals which have been generated directly as a result.

A report detailing the findings of the Forward Look will find its way on to our website (www.bre.co.uk/frs/adb) soon, so you can have a look yourself to see what people had to say. If you keep your eye on this page and ODPMs website you won't miss your opportunity to comment on the consultation paper when it's published next year.

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Editor - Put this in a separate Box

Emerging Themes

Fire safety is a very broad subject and this was reflected in the wide variety of issues addressed and comments made. However, some strong common themes did emerge;

Fire Safety Management

The vast majority of delegates believed strongly that this issue needed to be addressed. Views about what should be done in Part B varied widely but there was a common theme that information about the fire safety design of the building must be passed on to the person responsible for its management. This was felt to be essential given the move to a risk assessment based regime for fire precautions in buildings in use.

Residential Sprinklers

This was clearly a very topical subject; many delegates were disappointed that recent research indicated that their widespread use would not be cost effective. Their potential use as a compensatory feature was raised with delegates but there was no clear consensus as to what design freedoms would be acceptable. Many delegates felt that open plan layouts were popular with designers but there was concern that in a fire sprinklers would not prevent escape routes from becoming smoke logged.

Means of Escape for Disabled People

It was clear from the comments made that current guidance on this issue was inadequate and is an issue that should be addressed. One of the main difficulties concerns how people are assisted from refuges to a final exit. This is generally regarded as a management procedure but there may be built-in solutions that could facilitate this process and guidance was required. The use of lifts was thought to be the ideal option; however it was felt that the potential costs may be prohibitive.