**Revealing and exploring the insider/outsider role of the building control officer in England.**

**Abstract**

Relatively few studies to date have focused on the role of the building control officer in England and their relationship with the design team. The research reported in this paper addresses this gap. Key studies in the field were reviewed to identify the most salient points related to the role and relationships between the building control officer and members of the design team. Interviews were then held with ten experienced professional actors to explore these points. The interviews highlighted three key findings. (i) The building control assessor role currently straddles an internal/external position: as an internal member of the design team as well as an external policing, checker or referee role. (ii) This position and the perceived success of this role is partly the result of different relationships between the building control officer and key actors in the design team. (iii) Part of the building control officer’s role is not constrained to a specific individual, but is also acquired as a ‘voice in the designer’s head’.

**Key words:** Building Regulations, Building Control Officer, Role, Relationships, Design Team

**Introduction**

In England and Wales, most building work is subject to approval under the UK Building regulations as set out in the UK Building Act 1984. Other counties in the UK, Scotland and Northern Ireland, have adopted different building standards (the Building (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Building Regulations (Northern Ireland) Order 1979).

The UK Building Act 1984 sets out, what are probably, the two most fundamental changes in the history of the UK building regulations in England and Wales. The first of these reflects a shift from the prescriptive, universal method of determination set out in the 1963 regulations to a performance-based approach as defined in Section 1 of the Act. This is defined through the concepts of ‘reasonableness’, ‘adequacy’ or ‘appropriateness’ to provide the design and construction industry with sufficient flexibility to respond to the unique ‘functional requirements’ of a scheme (DCLG, 2011).

The second significant change concerns the introduction of a second, private-sector route to building regulation approval as set out in the 1984 Act. The Act states that building regulation compliance can be determined by the local authority building control officer or an approved inspector acting as a qualifying member of an appropriate building control body. Whilst there are slightly different processes required of these two routes, both parties must use the same performance-based method and exercise professional judgement to ensure that the requirement for ‘reasonable provision’ has been met.

For the most part, these two changes have been framed and discussed by the academic community in the context of regulatory theory and ideology more broadly. The first has been framed as part of a shift towards flexible regulatory practice (Meacham, Bowen, Traw, & Moore, 2016). Such flexibility has gained support amongst the academic community (Edwards, 2008) despite some of the perceived limitations in the application of this approach (Gann, Wang, & Hawkins, 1998; Rob Imrie, 2007). A small body of studies based on empirical enquiry have questioned the normative use of performance-based regulatory methods (May 2003). However, there have been few ‘on the ground’ studies and even fewer studies looking at how this balance is achieved in practice through case studies in England and Wales.

The second change defined in the Act has been less favourable with the academic community. The introduction of the approved inspector has been viewed by many as a ‘trend towards the gradual privatisation of building control’ across Europe (Branco Pedro et al. 2010: 46-7). However, the ‘opening-up’ of statutory regulation to the private sector approval has been questioned by the academic community in very broad terms, mostly in relation to Town and Country Planning and often as part of a broader critique of neoliberalism (see Boland 2014; Lord & Tewdwr-Jones 2014 for example).

Whilst these shifts have fed into debates in regulatory theory and policy few studies have reviewed changes to the building control system in the UK (Imrie 2004; see also Imrie 2007; van der Heijden & de Jong 2009), or how such changes have affected the ‘day-to-day’ practices of design professionals working in England and Wales (Fischer & Guy, 2009: 2577). Exceptions to this include studies undertaken by Fischer and Guy (2009), Imrie (2007) and Imrie and Street (2009) whose work focuses on the implications of changes to the UK building regulations for architectural practices in England.

This research reviews and build on the insights drawn from these three precedent studies to develop a richer understanding of the roles played by the building control officer in England (as local author *or* approved inspector) and the relationships they forge with key members of the design team.

**Understanding roles and relationships**

***Building control officer as policing role and member of the design team.***

One of the most striking findings from all three of these precedent studies concerns the interviewees’ perception of a shift in the role of the building control officer from an external ‘policing role’ to an internalised member of the design team. Whilst such changes are captured in broader literature on self-regulation (see Ayres & Braithwaite, 1992; Baldwin, Cave, & Lodge, 2012; Fairmain & Yapp, 2005), these three studies highlight the ‘real-world’ implications associated with such shifts.

Fischer and Guy’s study (2009) draws on 21 in-depth, semi-structured face-to-face interviews with a randomised sample of architects working in a range of roles from junior members of staff to principals. Many of the architects interviewed considered the appointment of a building control officer as a development of the project teat (2009: 2586). The findings from Fischer and Guy’s paper demonstrate how, for many, the risks of ‘capture’ associated with an internalised building control officer (van der Heijden and de Jong, 2009; Baldwin et al. 2012) are mitigated through an ongoing conversation between both actors. The study also suggests that, for many such architects, this conversation helped establish clearer boundaries for defining ‘reasonable provision’.(Fischer & Guy 2009: 2586).

The apparent success of this ‘conversation’ can be explained in broader academic literature. Van der Heijden and de Jong (2009) suggest that by positioning themselves ‘inside’ the design team the building control officer can gain access to actors and information that would be otherwise beyond their reach. Furthermore, by actively engaging within this process, all actors are far more accepting of the way the regulations are interpreted as they are seen to be ‘their own rules’, or at least their own interpretation of those rules (2009).

***Building control officer as facilitator.***

The findings from Fischer and Guy’s study also suggests that, to some extent, the building control officer helps educate the architect in the use of the building regulations. Such findings are not unique to this study. Looking across a range of studies van der Heijden and de Jong (2009) found that a new facilitating role was common in practice as it helped motivate design team members to actively seek compliance (2009: 1043; see also Wood & McGahey 1995). The idea that the building control officer should work as educator as much as facilitator is reflected in the conclusions drawn by Imrie’s study of disability in the design process in the UK (2004). In this study, Imrie suggests that to improve the effectiveness of the UK building regulations and to help promote improvements beyond these regulations, the building control officer should act as an ambassador by promoting the importance of inclusive design (Imrie 2004: 435).

***A new role for the architect / designer***

This insight does not only have implications for the building control officer. It also points to a new role for the architect who takes on greater responsibility for interpreting and translating the building regulations into design problems. The result, Fischer and Guy argues, is that architects must, themselves, act in a self-regulatory role and, as lead designers, must regulate the work of other built environmental professionals (2009: 2592). This new role, they add, extends beyond the traditional perception of the architect as designer and demands that they ‘reinvent themselves as interpretive intermediaries, thereby escaping their perceived inability to act within existing constraints’ (2009: 2592).

Like Fischer and Guy, Imrie’s study draws on 18 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with a randomised sample of architects working in professional practice. Imrie’s interviews with senior architects highlight the success of so-called ‘partnering’ arrangements between architects and building control officers. His study also reveals the importance of this relationship and the mutual learning opportunities it offers. Drawing on the interview data, Imrie shows how the rapport established between an architect and a building control officer helps reduce the level of uncertainty in a scheme and allows the design to progress more effectively (Imrie 2007: 939).

Like Fischer and Guy, Imrie goes on to suggest that these relationships offer new opportunities for the architectural profession. Imrie sees these as opportunities to set out a new role for architectural practitioners, but also in terms of the way architecture and the regulations are perceived. Rather than seeing architects as passive actors in the regulatory process, Imrie argues that such changes position the architect as an active contributor to the way regulations are understood and operationalised. The result, he adds, is an understanding of design as a ‘dynamic unfolding process’ that engages with, and becomes inseparable from the socio-political contexts in which it is embedded (Imrie, 2007: 929). This idea of an active engagement with plastic regulations reflects a broader view of the built environment created through collective endeavour based on the unique contributions of different actors (Carmona, 2009).

Whilst the studies undertaken by Fischer and Guy (2009) and Imrie (2007) point to a positive, new direction for architecture based on this change in the regulations and the role of the building control officer, such views are not reflected in all academic studies. Imrie’s subsequent co-authored study draws on data from a set of scoping interviews with key figures in architecture, a UK postal survey and a series of 20 in-depth and face-to-face interviews with a semi-randomised sample of architects working in a senior capacity (Imrie & Street, 2009). Many of these respondents framed changes to the building regulations as an increase in the level of risk undertaken by the architectural profession. Such risks, they added, are owing to a lack of trust in the check-and-control processes undertaken by regulatory actors (Imrie & Street, 2009: 2565).

As this finding demonstrates, not all professional architects have benefitted from the close relationships with the building control officer or other members of the design team as outlined in both Fischer and Guy’s study (2009) and Imrie’s study (2007). In the absence of a close relationship, such respondents feel exposed to the loss of the building officer’s external ‘policing role’. This observation is important as it suggests that, for the building control officer’s role to be perceived in a positive way, it must be accompanied by greater levels of trust shared within the design team and with the building control officer as a perceived ‘member’ of that team.

All three studies discussed above (Fischer & Guy, 2009; Imrie, 2007; Imrie & Street, 2009) consider the changing role of the building control officer and its impact on their relationship with the architect. Very little research to date has considered how such observations may or may not relate to other members of the design team. Given the different power relationships between these actors (Carmona, 2009: 2644) one should not assume that the observations made by such studies are equally applicable to other key disciplines. The absence of such studies points to an important gap in the literature and the basis for this research.

**Method**

This study used methods of data generation and analysis to:

1. Explore the perceived role of the building control officer and their relationship with key members of the design team.
2. Align as far as appropriate with the methods used in the three precedent studies (Fischer & Guy, 2007; Imrie, 2007; Imrie & Street, 2009) in order to contribute to the findings and observations formed through such studies.

***Data generation method***

This study employs the term data generation rather than data collection to reflect the author’s position that data is co-constructed between the researcher and participants in the research. In line with the three precedent studies, this study was undertaken as a series of in-depth interviews with professional actors. According to Edwards and Holland (2013), interviews offer unique insight into the way individuals produce meanings in response to specific experiences and social processes and practices. For Johnson (2001) the depth of understanding generated through interviews allow the interviewer to go beyond common-sense explanations of specific activities to reveal multiple understandings of events and practices that are otherwise hidden from the researcher.

Interviews were structured around several broad questions conceived in advance, as well as a series of responsive questions that were generated within the interviews. The broad questions were generic in nature and designed to encourage the respondent to discuss experiences or arguments that they felt to be relevant (What are your experiences working with the building control officer? Using these experiences, can you outline specific instances that demonstrate how they engaged in the project?). Responsive questions, as illustrated in the results section below, were formed during the interview to encourage the respondents to provide further detail or clarity on a comment made during the interview. This combination of interview questions allowed for improvisation and exploration of emerging themes and sub-themes (Wengraf, 2001) as well as opportunities to explore and re-test the validity of a theme by re-phrasing the question in several ways. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

***Sample selection***

The three precedent studies were based on random or ‘opportunistic’ (Fischer and Guy, 2009: 2579) samples rather than the purposeful sampling strategy used in this study. These two sampling strategies (random and purposeful) reflect very different objectives. Whilst the former favours generalizable findings, the latter is employed in qualitative research to achieve a specific aim or to provide greater insight into a finding developed elsewhere (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Patton, 2015; Ritchie, Lewis, McNaughton Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). The purposive sample used in this study was established through selection criteria to identify and assess the suitability of a potential respondent.

Criterion 1 (Range of actors): Respondents were selected from several key disciplines: building control officers, architects, structural engineers, services engineers. The sample included a minimum of two respondents from each group. Whilst this does not include all members of the design team, it expands on the three precedent studies whose samples comprised of architects only. Architects and engineers were selected because such roles are engaged on most complex schemes. However, it is acknowledged that this sample does not account for other key actors particularly architectural technologists and civil engineers or specialist members of the design team including fire consultants, acoustic consultants and lift consultants.

Criterion 2 (Experience): Only participants with a minimum level of experience were included in the study. This second criterion defined a minimum of five years professional accredited experience (accredited by their respective professional body) or experience working on a minimum of two large projects in England (of a contract value greater than £10m) and across RIBA Work Stages 2-5 (RIBA, 2013). This criterion ensured all respondents had an in-depth and informed understanding of the building regulation process.

As with the sample selected in Guy and Fischer’s study and the sample in Imrie’s study all respondents were chosen from England rather than England and Wales or the UK. This limitation was introduced to avoid potential discrepancies owing to national differences in the building regulations and their application. It should be noted that the UK building regulations do not apply to Scotland and Northern Ireland, where both countries operate national building standards.

Criterion 3 (Seniority): The sample focused on professionals operating in a senior project management capacity or in an associate role. This criterion aligns with the resulting sample of respondents in studies by Imrie (2007) and Imrie and Street (2009). This level of seniority ensured a broad understanding of the building regulation process, not only in terms of their respective role but also in terms of the roles played by others within the design team (internally and externally).

As with most purposive samples, the use of restrictive selection criteria had an impact on the number of respondents willing to participate in the research. This was particularly relevant to Criteria 2 and 3. This is because the demand on the respondent’s time was far greater than less experienced actors. Not only is their time more expensive in financial terms but their pivotal role in their respective company means it is also more costly in functional terms. The resulting sample of 10 respondents comprised three architects, two structural engineers, two service engineers and three building control officers (with extensive experience working in a public and private sector role). As a purposive sample based on strict selection criteria this sample size was deemed acceptable, especially in consideration of Guest et al’s study which found that ‘a sample of six interviews may have been sufficient to enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations.’ (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006: 78). Although the study is not statistically representative, drawing on the arguments posed by Mitchell the value of this research lies in the validity of the analysis. This validity is achieved when a study identifies a logical or explanatory linkage between two or more characteristics identified in the analysis (Mitchell, 1983: 199–200).

***Method of data analysis***

Mitchell’s (1983) argument for establishing logical or explanatory links relies on the analytical process through which theoretical inferences are drawn from qualitative data. Analysis can be characterised as a search for patterns and for ideas that help to explain the existence of such patterns ideas that help to explain (Bernard, 2006: 452) Analytical methods used to identify such patterns have been discussed at length in qualitative research methods literature. According to Miles et al (2014) data analysis can be characterised according to three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display and conclusion / verifications (2014: 10).

The first of these activities was achieved through established coding techniques. In its simplest form, coding can be seen a process used to arrange and classify or categorise data (Saldaña, 2016: 9). For Patton, one must select a coding strategy based on the specific demands of the research and adapt one or several established methods to suit those ends (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Patton, 2015).

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Following a review of the 29 coding variants outlined by Saldana (2016), a three-stage coding strategy was established. The first stage used provisional coding techniques (Miles et al, 2014: 77) to establish logical links between the raw, transcribed data and pre-defined categories identified from a review of the three studies discussed above. These acted as provisional categories of analysis. The three principle provisional categories identified from the literature were:

1. The inside/outside role of the building control officer.
2. The relationship between the building control officer and members of the design team.
3. The designer acting as building control officer.

These broad categories contained provisional sub-categories drawn from the literature such as *‘member of the design team’* and *‘policing role’*. This use of provisional coding techniques to build on previous studies is supported by broader academic literature (Sandana, 2016).

As per the conventions with this technique, data was collected and organised into provisional categories to allow for a second, more detailed round of coding in which these categories were refined by identifying and exploring other dimensions. This second stage drew on a combination of descriptive coding, where the data is summarised in a word or short phrase and In-vivo coding, where the data is coded through the terms used by the interviewees. In line with Miles et al’s arguments for effective data display, these provisional categories and codes were captured in a tabular matrix that evolved alongside and as part of these two coding stages. This condensed table was formed and marked-up by hand to establish key observations across and within categories as they emerged and evolved. These were verified using a third coding stage broadly in-line with hypothesis coding techniques. Taken together this iterative process of coding, tabularising, concluding and verification reflects Miles et al’s arguments for an interwoven approach to analysis (2014: 14).

**Results and discussion**

The following texts sets out the principle results of this analytical exercise. For the purpose of clarity some of the most significant categories and codes have been integrated into the text and identified using an italicised font as well as quotation marks for In Vivo codes.

***The inside / outside role of the building control officer***

The first stage of coding supported the provisional category, *The inside / outside role of the building control officer*and the two provisional sub-categories: *‘building control officer as* *integral member of the design team’* and *‘building control officer as* b*uilding regulation police’*. The following text highlights the key dimensions of these sub-categories identified through the first and second stages of coding. Both sub-categories were used by members of the same discipline and, in some instances, by the same respondent at different points in their interview.

One of the architects interviewed noted that:

[Building control officers] are like an external consultant. No, … like a bubble on the side like the planners. They have a vested interest but they don’t have the same responsibility. They have an input in terms of flexing the regulations but they are not within the sphere of the design team because the design team is designing to work to regulations that they police – they are like the building regulation police.

This perception of a building regulation officer operating in a *‘bubble’* outside the design process contrasts with the arguments presented by another architect working on schemes of a similar size. When asked to describe his relationship with the building control officer this architect noted,

…They get involved face to face – they know who the structural engineer is. They are part of the team.

Is that how you see them? As part of the team?

Yes. Definitely.

These two responses show a different perception of the building control officer’s role and the exteriority / interiority of that role. One possible explanation for this distinction lies in the *appointment method*. The data from these two architects showed that whilst the architects worked on very similar schemes the former had mostly worked on schemes regulated by local authority building control officers whilst the latter had only worked on schemes regulated via the approved inspector route.

However, the third stage of coding revealed that this distinction between local authority and private building control officers (approved inspectors) could not fully explain these two views. A review of the interview data from a private building control officer for example, captured the same duality. Early in the interview she discussed instances where she had worked as part of the design team but then went on to add that ‘In the end we are not liked. We are building control officers and we are like an informal version of the police’.

A stronger explanation for this duality is captured in the response offered by one of the other building control officers who suggested that their image has evolved over the last few years shifting from ‘…being a barrier to compliance to being part of the design team’. Building on this, he added,

… I think more and more people are seeing us as part of the design team. You do get a body of people who just want a checking and approval and that is all they want. But especially on larger or more complex schemes people value it as part of the design process: as a consultant that can help they with compliance rather than just someone who checks a scheme.

This explanation suggests that the building control officer, as *‘integral member of the design team’* and *‘building regulation police’* are not necessarily the result of a *public/private distinction* but are owing to a broader *shift in the construction industry* and the demands made upon the building control officer’s role. This explanation was equally visible in an interview with a service engineer who highlighted instances when the building control officer had not engaged with them to discuss opportunities for compliance. The solution, he added, was to encourage building control officers to participate in design workshops identified at key stages of the design process.

Such comments support the idea of a shift in the industry towards further engagement with the design team. This transition, the building control officer added, is part of a move across the industry more broadly from *regulation-led design* to *performance–led design*.

The three coding stages also showed how the image of a building control officer acting as an *‘integral member of the design team’* might relate to the idea of *‘capture’* as set out in academic literature. One respondent argued that the Building control officer ‘…cannot be compromised at all. Like architects they have a code of conduct – that would affect them if they were negligent or seen to not be acting appropriately.’ Thus, it seems that, whilst there appears to be an issue in principle concerning the idea of a regulatory officer acting as an *‘integral part of the design team’* and as an *‘external policing role’*, this risk is considered unproblematic owing to the support offered by an overarching body and professional code of conduct.

Despite the respondents’ support for the view of the building control officer as a *‘consultant that can help them with compliance’*, the evidence also suggests that there remains a continued demand for a *‘checking’* service, particularly amongst engineers. One structural engineer for example, noted that a building control officer is beneficial to a scheme because,

… they have no vested interest whereas otherwise all internal checks are done in your company. With building control, even if you have done something that doesn’t meet the guidance – someone is independently checking it and it is a fresh pair of eyes. It is an independent person.

However, for the other engineer interviewed, the problem is that these checks are often not completed, or are not completed to a satisfying level. These engineers offered two reasons for this problem. Firstly, they suggested that most building control officers are *not sufficiently trained* to review the work completed by their respective professions. In one such example, a structural engineer noted an instance when an approved inspector attended site to review their design proposals in response to land contamination and was unable to offer any useful comments because their training was based in mechanical and electrical design rather than civil engineering. A similar point was raised by a services engineer who noted:

… Unless it is presented in a particular way they (building control officers) don’t understand M+E design…. I think it is because their training is through surveyor training courses. From experience surveyor courses shy away from any M+E. They turn it into a black art by their own default.

The second argument presented by these structural and service engineers is that the checking role is not undertaken to a sufficient level because the building control officer relies on the *internal checks* undertaken by the designers. A structural engineer noted that if the plans and structural calculations,

…come from a recognised company they won’t check it physically … where you have a recognised company and name and calculations that say they are done by and signed and checked by it will just get filed because someone has checked it.

This latter argument is supported by the comments made by one of the building control officers who noted that they generally approve the schematics produced by service engineers if they are issued by a *‘good company’*. In both instances, one can see that these engineers assumed that the building control officer has a duty to check the validity of their proposals and to take responsibility for those checks. However, this position is not equally held by one of the building control officers who stated that,

… the way the regulation is written – the responsibility of compliance lies with designers, builders and ultimately with the end user. Building control are not responsible for compliance but we facilitate compliance.

The discrepancy suggests that many of the issues and frustrations surrounding the building control role may be owing to a lack of clarity concerning their responsibilities for *approving* or *facilitating compliance*.

The perception of the building control officer as facilitatoris not entirely absent from the responses given by engineers. However, rather than facilitating compliance, one structural engineer discussed instances when the building control officer had facilitated the project design *through compliance* by

...(acting) like a referee basically – so they come in and we (contractor and designer) both put our points across and he (building control officer) makes the decision... they were fundamental to that decision because… they are independent from our interest, the contractor’s interests and the client’s interests. Seeing it purely from a legislation point of view and meeting design standards, which is where their remit comes into it. So regardless of costs or the pressures on site they assess using independent criteria.

As demonstrated in this quotation, this respondent holds that by remaining external to the design and construction team, the building control officer can form judgements free from programmatic or cost-based pressures.

***The relationship between the building control officer and members of the design team***

As part of the second provisional category of analysis, one respondent discussed the ‘*special relationship’* between the building control officer and the architect. This idea of a *‘special relationship’* was discussed by all respondents, each offering a different explanation for the formation of this relationship.

The first of these explanations is captured by an architect who noted that whilst the architects,

…do a lot of drawing information that reveals a lot of detail …the other packages [produced by other disciplines] are less so. The M+E requirements are usually schematic until the sub-contractor is on board.

As this quotation suggests, this architect believes the special relationship develops because such professions produce large quantities of information in the early, conceptual stages of the scheme. Building on this point, he added that the areas of design undertaken by the architect are,

…described in more detailed in the approved docs and in the British Standards so there is possibly more to review within our packages… The result of which is that there are more sections there for things to be interpreted differently.

Thus, it seems that for this respondent, the close relationship between the architect and building control officer arises from the *kind of work* they undertake and the difficulties associated with pairing their design proposals with a reasonable interpretation of the building regulations.

A second explanation was offered by a service engineer who suggested that the relationship developed out of the architect’s role as *lead designer* and their responsibility for coordinating the scheme.

Whilst these two explanations refer to the work undertaken by the architect within the design team, a building control officer suggested that the relationship develops out of the *appointment process*. As the architect is one of the first consultants to be appointed by the client, and often responsible for helping to expand the project team, they felt that this created a strong and early bond between them.

So, what are the dynamics of this special relationship? The data suggests that it provides *flexibility* and *reassurances* to both parties. One architect noted instances when they could achieve many of their goals whilst ensuring compliance against the most fundamental building regulation concerns. In return, two of the architects and one of the building control officers interviewed suggested that the special relationship provided the latter with unique insight into the details of the scheme without having to work through the large quantities of information captured in the drawings and specifications submitted. Their responses suggest that on-going discussions between both parties built a level of *trust* that provided the building control officer with the reassurance to accept the submitted information without scrutinising it in detail. As one architect noted:

… Anything product wise they rely on our spec – particularly the performance spec to cover all the actual requirements form a British Standards point of view. That comes down to what we have drawn and spec’d and based on what we have agreed with them.

The above suggests that, in such instances, the special relationship between these architects and the building control officer has mutual benefits. For the former it ensured they can develop a scheme that is as close to their original design intent as possible, and for the latter it provided assurances that they can approve a scheme without reading and re-reading all the information submitted for approval.

The data suggests that a *very different relationship* is constructed between the building control officer and other members of the design team. Rather than demonstrating a willingness to be involved in the design one of the service engineers noted that, ‘…you have to force the issue with them [building control officers] and then they sit and talk to you.’ The respondent expanded on this further by noting

… we have come across some Local Authority building control officer who don’t really want to get involved. …some really don’t want to engage and just sit remotely from the team and don’t want to engage with the design team even on something contentious – they say they just don’t offer that level of advice. Advice that you would expect from them.

This response contrasts with the view expressed by the architects interviewed who suggested that the building control officer was available at short notice to speak on the phone and attend design team meetings and workshops. These respondents felt that this engagement was a fundamental part of problem resolution.

A similar frustration was captured by a structural engineer who asked, ‘What is the point [of the building control officer]? They don’t do anything – in my experience they don’t actually do anything from a design aspect…’. However, whilst one of the service engineers felt this reluctance was consistent across all building control officers, this respondent suggested there was a distinction between building control officers working for the local authority and those working as approved inspectors:

…the only difference is that approved inspectors might cater to the specific project whereas [building control] officers from the LA would give a generic answer. It won’t be true to the nature of the project or the type of building you are working on. It will just be this is a certain type of building so we would require this kind of material or this solution. That is where it falls down I think.

Such comments suggest that these architects and engineers have very different relationships with the building control officer and, thinking back to the first provisional category, these relationships seem to have an impact on the way the officer’s role is perceived i.e. as an *internal member of the design team* or an *external checker* and *referee*. This seems to suggest that by not investing in relationships with other members of the design team, the building control officer is, in these instances, unable to make the transition from an external regulatory actor to an internal member of the design team.

***The designer acting as building control officer***

The third provisional category adds greater clarity on this shift by looking at the idea that design actors also assume the responsibilities of thebuilding control officer. This idea of a *responsible actor* is discussed by one architect, who noted,

There were instances when we knew what building control would say because we had built that relationship – we could think on their behalf so they don’t need to get involved in certain issues… There were instances when I said – I know building control won’t like that… After a while there was a little building control voice in my head saying, ‘no you can’t do that’. And I think that was acquired – not only from that the building control officer but more generally from interaction with the design team and contractors.

This quotation demonstrates that, for many stages in the project, this architect could make decisions without speaking with the building control officer. In doing so, he had assumed part of the building control officer’s role by drawing on a ‘*building control* *voice in his head’*. This voice, he added, is partly the result of a relationship that had built up with the officer over the course of the project but also through interactions with other members of the design and construction team. This highlights three important and connected points. Firstly, that the role of the building control officer role is not necessarily unique to the individual actor and can be assumed by other members of the team. In such instances, the building regulation officer represents *a way of thinking* rather than specific actions undertaken by specific individuals. Secondly, it suggests that to assume this way of thinking, designers have drawn on their relationship with the building control officer appointed to the projects. This second point is important considering the findings outlined above namely, that only the architect had developed a special relationship with the building control officer. Thirdly, it suggests that to develop a building regulation *‘voice’* one may also need to draw on interactions with other members of the project team who have had to resolve other building regulation-focused design issues.

A similar position is reflected in the responses offered by one of the other architects, who believed that they acted as the building control officer for all sections of the building regulations that related to their design input. Such views are offered further support by one of the building control officers interviewed who added:

Any architect with experience can look at the building regulations and say that it [the design proposal] is not that far off [the approved document] we will go with it and other times they could chance it – but I think if an experienced architect is sceptical that they are pushing too hard – chances are it won’t pass building regulations anyway.

This leads to two logical questions: In the absence of a special relationship are other actors able to acquire the *‘building regulation voice’*? If so, does this voice also develop from interactions with other members of the design and project team? The response from one of the structural engineers goes some way to answering these questions.

… we know what they are going to be looking for from a safety point of view … So we want to produce information at an early stage and that is the precedent moving forward… [to identify such issues] we have an internal pro forma we use for every project and it is flagged up on there. But it builds on your personal experience also and what you’ve done before.

In this quotation, the structural engineer demonstrates that they could identify and resolve contentious building regulation issues without input from the building control officer. However, it suggests that this is not developed as a *‘voice in the head’* acquired through interaction with the building control officer but through a *quality assurance process* developed within the company. That said, he does acknowledge that this voice exists, and is the result of experiences developed over time and through interaction with many different design problems across a range of projects.

Thus, it seems that actors who do not benefit from close, regular interaction with the appointed building control officer may fill this gap by creating a formalised voice through an internal checking processes and a less formal voice through accumulated experiences. The difference between these voices, however, is not clear and would require further empirical enquiry.

**Conclusion**

***Developing the three themes drawn from previous studies***

The first provisional category of analysis drawn from the three precedent studies concerns the role of the building control officer and their position within the project. Most architects interviewed in studies by Fischer and Guy (2009) and Imrie (2007; 2004) suggested that the building control officer acted in a *facilitating* and educator capacity and was considered to act part of the design team. Such views were predominantly expressed by architects who had developed a close relationship with the appointed building control officer. However, Imrie and Street’s study (2009) also revealed an opposing view, which was mostly held by architects who did not feel they had developed a strong level of trust with the building control officer or the project team more broadly. For these practitioners, the shift towards an internalised role resulted in the loss of the officer’s valuable *‘policing’* or *checking* responsibilities.

The empirical study provides greater insight into these observations. It supports the idea that some architects see the building control officer as an internal member of the design team working in a facilitating capacity, whilst others see them as external ‘building regulation police’. However, the study also suggests that this difference is not wholly owing to the level of trust and the depth of the relationship between such actors. Rather, it suggested that it is also owing to a broader shift in the industry as part of the move from prescriptive regulation to performance-based regulation initiated in the 1984 Building Act. The study also sets out the basis for a further role not explored in academic literature: the role of ‘referee’.

The second provisional category of analysis concerns the relationships between actors. Despite the points raised in the first category, the study highlights the importance placed on relationships especially when considered across groups of architects and engineers. The data identified a *‘special relationship’* between architects and building control officers. This special relationship was seen to have mutual benefits to those interviewed. For architects, it offered greater flexibility in their reading of the building regulations, whilst for the building control officer it afforded them valuable insight into the scheme without having to read large quantities of information.

The empirical study suggested that engineers working in the design team had a *‘not-so special relationship’* with the building control officer. Both structural and services engineers felt that they did not benefit from individual workshops or ongoing discussions during the design process. The evidence suggests that this lack of contact and the poorer working relationship between these actors influenced the perceived role of the building control officer. In some cases, this poor relationship had led some engineers to challenge the contribution made by the building control officer and to ask ‘What is the point [of the building control officer]? They don’t do anything …’.

The third provisional category of analysis concerns Fischer and Guy’s (2009) comment that changes to the building regulations and the role of the building control officer has resulted in a fundamental change to the architect’s responsibilities. Through such changes, architects are expected to act as regulators of their own work and the work of others in the design team (2009). This idea was supported and expanded through this study. The data suggests that some designers had acquired a ‘*building regulation voice in their head’* that they use to form complex regulatory decisions often without informing the building control officer. However, the data also suggests that this voice may be different for architects and engineers and that this is owing to the nature of their relationships with the building control officer. For the architects interviewed, the ‘voice in their head’ was acquired through numerous meetings with the officer and their engagement with the project team more broadly. In the absence of the former, one engineer noted that the ‘voice in their head’ was the result of practice-wide experience captured in a pro-forma checklist, their individual experiences developed over their career and their engagement with the project team. This suggests that, to some extent, the building control officer’s role may not be limited to an individual but is distributed across all members of the design team. But, it also suggests that these voices may differ between architects and engineers and that such voices may be used in different ways.

***Limitations of the method and opportunities for further research***

The methods selected for data generation and sample selection introduced three limitations. These limitations and opportunities for addressing them through further research are set out as follows:

1. Data generation methods. The first limitation concerns the use of a single method of data generation. All methods of data generation contain inherent strengths and weaknesses. The use of multiple methods as part of a triangulation rationale has been discussed at length in the academic community as a way of balancing these strengths and weaknesses and improving the validity or/and depth of understanding (Denzin, 1978; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Flick, 2014). With this in mind, further research should look to generate new data in this field using other methods. To access richer data and a clearer understanding of ‘in-use’ relationships between the building control officer and designers, one may consider a series of ethnographic studies undertaken in key professional practices (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).
2. Sample selection. Whilst the study expanded the range of professional actors included in the three precedent studies, it was limited to four professional groups and ten in depth interviews. Further research should expand the sample of actors and rolesto consider whether they benefit from a ‘special relationship’ with the building control officer and how these relationships influence their perception of the building regulation process.

A further limitation of the sample concerns the focus on professionals with experience working in England rather than the UK more broadly. Further research should look to expand the sample to include professionals with experience working across other countries in the UK. Such work should ask whether different social, economic and political contexts affect the role of the building control officer and their relationship with members of the design team.

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