

Accessibility, Visitability and Adaptability of Dwelling Units

Problem

Accessibility first appeared in the National Building Code of Canada (NBC) in 1965 as optional guidelines for public buildings. Over the past decades, these accessibility requirements slowly progressed until more significant contents were developed between 2010 and 2020. However, dwelling units are still exempted from these accessibility requirements, causing great difficulty and not meeting the basic needs of seniors, persons with disabilities, and other affected groups. In November 2022, the provinces and territories identified visitable and adaptable dwelling units as a priority and agreed to expand accessibility requirements to dwelling units.

Many Canadians have reported having a disability; the prevalence of disabilities increases with age: more than 20% of Canadians over 15 years old and nearly 40% of Canadians over 65 years old report having a disability (Statistics Canada, 2022). Where disabilities were reported, the severity (i.e., limitation on how frequently and effectively a person can perform the activities of daily living) varied; approximately 37% were reported as mild, 20% as moderate, 21% as severe and 22% as very severe (Statistics Canada, 2017).

Because the needs of people change over time, the features of a dwelling unit that were once suitable for an occupant may become inaccessible or present unnecessary hardship as the occupant ages. Strategies are needed to allow Canadians to easily and affordably retrofit their dwelling units to accommodate their changing health status and live at home for as long as possible.

Additionally, persons with disabilities encounter obstacles when visiting the homes of friends and family because they may not be able to access the living areas of the dwelling unit or use a washroom. Significant health risks have been associated with social isolation.

This package of proposed changes is a necessary step toward making dwelling units more accessible to a larger portion of the population in Canada (both to occupants and their visitors), especially as population demographics shift.

Justification

This package of proposed changes addresses basic adaptability and visitability features for dwelling units and also expands the application of the accessibility objective to dwelling units. In reviewing the package of PCFs, the following should be noted.

These PCFs should be reviewed holistically before providing comments on individual changes, as application requirements cannot function without technical provisions and technical requirements cannot be implemented without application provisions.

In the 2025 Code cycle, adaptability-related requirements focused on low-cost/no-cost changes in relation to the cost of renovations with broad application (i.e., to most dwelling units, including houses). Because of the broad application and cost considerations, the proposed changes have a similar application as the adaptability requirements in Nova Scotia, but differ from those in other provinces, where application is more restricted (including Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec) and where technical requirements are much more stringent.

A framework to include technical requirements for visitability and related application statements is also proposed in PCF 1881. Note that the specific technical requirements for visitability are planned for the Spring 2024 public review. These requirements focus on spaces where a barrier-free path of travel is already required to access the entrance of the dwelling unit (i.e., most units in multi-unit residential buildings, especially Part 3 buildings).

This package of PCFs is a starting point. It is not comprehensive, and work is expected to continue into the next Code cycle.

The Table 1 provides a brief overview of the individual PCFs in this package.

Table 1. Summary of Proposed Changes with the Subject Accessibility, Adaptability and Visitability of Dwelling Units

PCF #	Title	Purpose and notes
NBC Objectives (Division A)		
1880	Expanding the Application of the Accessibility Objective to All Dwelling Units	Provide a framework for technical requirements related to accessibility to apply to houses and other dwelling units currently exempted from the OA objectives.
NBC Framework (Division B, Part 3)		
1881	Application of Adaptability Requirements	Clarify the application of adaptability and visitability requirements to dwelling units. Note that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · adaptability requirements are to be applied to most dwelling units, and · visitability requirements apply to a subset of dwelling units (visitable dwelling units also comply with adaptability requirements).
2028	Expanding the Scope the Accessibility Requirements	Revise the scope of NBC Section 3.8. to include new Subsections for the adaptability and visitability of dwelling units (Subsections 3.8.4. and 3.8.5., respectively).
Adaptability of Dwelling Units (Division B, Part 3): new Subsection 3.8.4. that applies broadly to dwelling units with some exceptions		
1883	Adaptable Dwelling Entrances	Reduce the challenge and expense of increasing the entrance doorway width to accommodate the use of mobility aids by requiring a minimum door size for at least one entrance to a dwelling unit.
1957	Reachable Controls in Dwelling Units	Introduce requirements for the installation height of common controls in dwelling units to enhance their access for persons with disabilities related to balance, mobility or movement. This proposed change reduces the need for future burdensome renovations and electrical work.
1882 <i>(Planned for the Spring 2024 public review)</i>	Reinforcing Stud Walls in Water-Closet Rooms for the Future Installation of Grab Bars: Showers and Bathtubs	Require backing or blocking around the walls of the bathtub and shower for the present or future installation of grab bars in a range of locations that meet the NBC requirements for structural strength.
2031 <i>(Planned for the Spring 2024 public review)</i>	Reinforcing Stud Walls in Water-Closet Rooms for the Future Installation of Grab Bars: Water Closets	Require backing or blocking in the walls around a water closet for the present or future installation of grab bars in a range of locations that meet the NBC requirements for structural strength.
Visitability of Dwelling Units (Division B, Part 3): new Subsection 3.8.5. that also complies with Subsection 3.8.4.		
1884 <i>(Planned for the Spring 2024 public review)</i>	Paths of Travel in Visitable Dwelling Units	Introduce requirements for a path of travel in visitable dwelling units that provides basic amounts of space for maneuvering with a mobility aid.
1958 <i>(Planned for the Spring 2024)</i>	Water-Closet Rooms in Visitable Dwelling Units	Introduce basic requirements (e.g., clear floor space, suggested design considerations) for a water-closet room in visitable dwelling units.

<i>public review)</i>		
Adaptability of Dwelling Units (Division B, Part 9)		
2030 <i>(Planned for the Spring 2024 public review)</i>	Reinforcing Stud Walls in Washrooms for the Future Installation of Grab Bars: Structural Strength	Clarify that where reinforcement to stud walls in washrooms for grab bars is present, such grab bars are required to meet the NBC requirements for structural strength. Provides prescriptive compliance options for designers who wish to use them (with clarity that people can still use the performance requirement if they do not wish to use the prescriptive option).

Impact Analysis

This package of PCFs focuses on elements of dwelling units that have low or no costs when implemented at the time of initial design and construction, but would be burdensome to implement as part of a renovation to accommodate the changing needs of an occupant or their guests.

The PCFs aim to make dwelling units more accessible from the start and to make it easier for people to adapt their homes to meet their changing needs, and to receive visitors.

Several provinces already have similar requirements in their building codes. Therefore, the impact of these proposed changes would be the greatest in provinces and territories that do not currently have such provisions in their codes. As a starting point with these PCFs, provinces and territories noted that flexibility in determining the breadth of application of the technical requirements should be provided so that implementation can be based on each jurisdiction's level of need and readiness.

Specific impact analyses are included with each individual PCF.

Enforcement implications

The proposed changes can be enforced with common measurement tools and visual inspection.

Who is affected

The following are affected:

- Designers and architects, who would need to incorporate these features in their plans for dwelling units.
- Builders, who would need to be aware of these new requirements for dwelling units.
- Authorities having jurisdiction, who would need to determine the extent of application of the requirements in multi-unit residential buildings.
- Building officials, who would need to ensure that requirements are met.
- Building occupants and their friends and family, who would be able to adapt dwelling units more readily to suit their needs.

Attached Supporting Material

none