

Great expectations

MANY A DISPUTE HAS ARISEN ON SITE AS TO WHAT IS AN ACCEPTABLE FINISH. OFTEN THIS IS PURELY DOWN TO A DIFFERENCE IN EXPECTATIONS BETWEEN THE PARTIES INVOLVED. STEVE HALCROW OF BRUNEL CONSTRUCTION CONSULTANTS LTD EXPLAINS.



The most common issues I am asked about in relation to drylining and partitioning is that of snagging, of tolerance of the finished surface and of problems with clients rejecting work which the dryliner believes to be acceptable.

This can become a big issue and can lead to ill feeling between the trade contractor and its employer, as well as of course usually carrying financial implications. In my experience a large proportion of the instances that occur have their roots in a difference in expectation between the two parties, each with their own idea of what is 'right' and neither fully understanding what the other expects.

Surprisingly I find that many drylining companies, despite being the expert contractor in the process, do not know that there is a Code of Practice for Drylining & Partitioning, or in many cases are aware of it but are not familiar with its contents. Relatively few drylining companies own a copy of the Standard.

The Standard to which I refer is BS 8212 (and is also the same content as in part 8 of BS 8000: workmanship on building sites), and it lays out a number of rules and recommendations for the design and installation of plasterboard systems. The key section of the Standard in respect of this subject is the one covering tolerances. There are tolerances given for setting out, installation and finishing and these should ideally be known and understood so they can be referred to where necessary.

Here is a brief summary of the tolerances for finished surface:

- Setting out (from intended position): +/- 3mm
- Verticality (plumb): +/- 5mm
- Crown of a flat joint: +3mm (measured over 450mm)
- Build up to an external corner bead: +4mm (measured over 250mm)

- Build up to an internal corner bead: +5mm (measured over 125mm)
- Deviation in finished surface (flatness, high spot to low spot): 10mm.

Note that it is commonly believed that the flatness of drylining is measured as '3mm over 5m' or a similar figure, but in fact the Standard only dictates that it should be measured between the two ends of the wall in question.

Most people on learning these figures for the first time dismiss them as being too generous, and it is true they are a great deal larger than most clients would accept in finished work. But this is where the difficulty often lies: the vast majority of contract specifications will quote one of the Standards mentioned above (usually BS 8212), so technically by complying with these tolerances you will have fulfilled your obligation. Occasionally a written specification will include modified tolerances that differ from, and then contractually supersede, the ones from the Standard, but this is not very common.

Inevitably, when the client's representative comes to snag the work they are likely to reject anything that isn't significantly within the tolerances stated here, at which point you are faced with a choice: either you dig your heels in and insist that you are in the right because you are within the British Standard tolerances, or you accept their viewpoint and undertake any re-working necessary to meet their requirements. In practice of course the answer depends on the nature of your commercial relationship and the desire for repeat business, and for that reason the result is usually a compromise of some description. Along the way however, it has normally cost time and money and in many cases given rise to the aforementioned ill feeling.

For these reasons my advice would be to try to manage the expectation of all parties right

from day one in the contract relationship. From the outset you might consider making the client aware of the potential discrepancy between the British Standard and what they will be likely to expect, to inform them as to what is practical to achieve and some of the reasons it can fall short, and to arrive at an agreement as to what will be acceptable and, crucially, how it is to be assessed.

This last point is often pivotal to successful finishes, and I would urge contractors to discuss openly and early with clients the problems we all know exist regarding inspection methods, rather than wait until the advanced stages of works when such arguments usually take place, and when rectifying things is more onerous and costly.

Increasingly we are finding that inappropriate methods are being used for the inspection and acceptance of drylined and plastered finishes. Typically this includes the use of high energy lighting (usually halogen or bright LED) applied at a glancing angle to the surface under inspection. Alongside this the surface is often viewed from extremely close range (literally a few inches in many cases) and is scrutinised to levels almost equivalent to using magnifying instruments. These methods are not acceptable or appropriate to the element being inspected and will inevitably lead to the conclusion that there are defects in the surface, wrongly implying poor workmanship and the need for correction.

Under such onerous inspection conditions it is unlikely that any site produced finish could be pronounced satisfactory and the industry accepted inspection method using the 'two metre'

rule should always be employed.

This is summarised in BS EN 13914-2, the current European standard for plastering. This states that 'when inspecting plasterwork for acceptance, surfaces shall be viewed from positions normally used in the adjacent area'. In general, this would be from the entrance doorway and from the centre of the room in a normal domestic house and from about two metres away from the surface in larger areas.

It is becoming increasingly common for people to scrutinise these finishes using inappropriate methods, perhaps because of the fact that strong handheld halogen and LED lights are more readily available than ever. It is important therefore that clients understand why this is not a suitable or fair means of inspection and that the 'two metre rule' is adopted as the basis for any assessment of the drylined finish.

By managing the expectations of all parties from an early stage, the chances of a successful result and fewer disputes over acceptance of the finished work are greatly increased.

