



Beyond COVID-19:
Physical inspections for
the purpose of residential
valuations and condition-based
surveys during COVID-19
(Northern Ireland)



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Published by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS)
Parliament Square
London
SW1P 3AD
www.rics.org

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1 Introduction and general considerations

The purpose of this guidance is to enable RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms to deliver services to clients safely, consistently and in line with government guidelines.

It is critical that before any inspections are undertaken, RICS professionals and regulated firms delivering services to clients in Northern Ireland consider and assess the most up-to-date **government guidance** on COVID-19.

- The NI Executive has passed **The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021** and relaxed restrictions on individuals moving home.
- The Department for Communities (DfC) has published **Advice on Home Moving**, updated in February 2021.
- From 15 June 2020, home moves have been permitted in Northern Ireland and people, organisations and businesses involved in home moving can deliver key services as stated in the DfC **Advice on Home Moving**, which advises that the document 'does not represent a return to normality, rather it provides an indicative guideline of how everyone must adjust the respective processes to ensure a safe return to market activity'.
- RICS professionals and regulated firms must follow the government's latest **guidance for employers and businesses** on coronavirus and safer working practices.
- RICS, alongside UK residential property professional organisations and trade bodies, has been working collaboratively with government to support a safe reopening of the home moving market while ensuring the safety of everyone involved in it. On Wednesday 13 May 2020, RICS collectively published **pan-industry recommendations** for professionals and consumers.

This RICS document builds on government guidelines and focuses on physical inspections where RICS professionals need to come into contact with people and enter private residential properties to carry out physical inspections for the purpose of condition-based surveys and valuations in relation to any property transaction.

RICS professionals and staff in RICS regulated firms need to ensure they continue to provide the highest levels of service while the latest government guidance on **social distancing** and **face coverings**.

RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms must ensure that the risk assessment for the business addresses the risks around COVID-19. Businesses should keep all risk mitigation measures under regular review. Further information is available from the **Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland** (HSE) to support firms.

If it is not possible to inspect the property safely to the extent required to provide an opinion of value and/or condition on a restricted basis, it may be necessary to decline the instruction.

If the instruction is accepted, any restrictions to the inspection need to be recorded, agreed where appropriate and highlighted in the report. Where possible, a disclaimer should be included in both the terms and conditions and the report relating to any errors or omissions in the report caused by any inability to inspect relevant areas.

RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms should always consider their safety and the wellbeing of their employees in their decision-making process.

As the situation and guidance in this area is constantly evolving, RICS will update this information as required.

2 Recommendations before the inspection

RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms should:

- act in a transparent and professional manner with all parties involved
- be clear with the client/occupier about their service and any restrictions to the service as a result of COVID-19 and social distancing guidelines from the government
- ensure that the obligations in relation to client/consumer confidentiality and GDPR-compliant safe storage of client/consumer information continue to apply, even though some or all staff may be working remotely. RICS has produced guidance for RICS professionals on **Data protection and reopening the property market**; even though this guidance is for use in England, the same provisions have been included in advice published in Northern Ireland
- avoid physical contact with clients and instead contact clients/consumers by email, video conferencing platforms, or telephone
- when liaising with other property professionals avoid physical contact and adhere to social distancing measures at all times
- minimise physical contact during key handovers when possible and ensure keys are sanitised at each handover
- RICS professionals should not enter a property where a member of the household is showing symptoms of COVID-19 or self-isolating
- when surveyors are organising an inspection, they need to check with clients/occupiers whether anyone is either in an **at-risk category, vulnerable group, shielding**, has, or has previously had COVID-19 symptoms, has not yet completed the required period of household self-isolation, or is awaiting test results
- inspections should take place by appointment only, with one person visiting the property at any time
- RICS professionals must follow Northern Ireland executive guidance on **social distancing** and secure as much information as possible from the client and/or occupier prior to the visit. As part of the pre-inspection research, RICS professionals should ascertain property use, occupancy, location, potential risk to occupants and any other relevant information required for the subject property and instruction; this includes carrying out a pre-inspection risk assessment with the occupier/client
- take all reasonable steps to ensure the client and property occupier is provided with as much information as possible about the visits, service and areas of the property that will be inspected in advance and ensure the inspection, service and arrangements are agreed by all parties prior to the physical inspection
- sanitise equipment in line with current public health guidance, periodically and as often as practical

- ask occupiers to prepare for the inspection and share the following recommendations. Please note that this is not an exhaustive list:
 - occupiers should either vacate the property or seek to minimise physical contact with surveyor
 - pets to be contained in one room or, if not possible, to be kept at a distance of 2 metres
 - when people/families are in occupation, they should maintain social distancing in line with government guidelines
 - ask the client/occupier to ensure the surveyor has access to all the parts of the property needed to inspect and ensure all areas are open or easily accessible (e.g. cellars, lofts, doors and windows in the case of a home survey) to reduce contact with surfaces as much as possible
 - ask the occupier to ensure surfaces have been cleaned with household cleaning products in line with public health advice
 - ask the occupier to ensure that the property is well ventilated in advance of and during the inspection
 - advise client/occupier the property will be left as presented/found at arrival.
- examples of pre-inspection health-related questions for clients/occupiers are:
 - are you in an at-risk category as outlined by the government?
 - are you or is anyone in your household symptomatic?
 - have you or anyone in the household tested positive?
 - have you or anyone in your household been self-isolating in accordance with government guidelines?
 - are you able to leave the property for the duration of internal inspection?

More advice is contained within the pan-industry guidance on **safe home moving** and **Department for Communities guidance on home moving**.

It would also help to ask the occupier, when appropriate, to advise the RICS professional or RICS regulated firm on the following questions.

Access

- Where is the electric meter located in the property? The RICS professional will require access.
- Where is the gas meter located? The RICS professional will require access.
- Where is the water meter located? The RICS professional will require access.
- Where is the stopcock located?
- Where is the boiler located?
- Where is the cold-water storage tank located (if applicable)?
- Where is the hot water cylinder located (if applicable)?
- Are there any inaccessible areas?

Documentation

- Do you have any certification regarding gas and electricity safety?
- Do you have any guarantees or warranties for windows, boilers, historical damp treatment, extensions ?
- To minimise physical contact, can you share any relevant documents electronically?

General

- Is the property occupied?
- What is the current and future use of the property?
- Are you aware of any issues in the property? If yes, please specify where.
- What is the broadband service and where is the connection point (if applicable)?

3 Recommendations during the inspection

RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms should:

- consider health and safety aspects and any relevant current government advice in relation to travelling to the property, accessing the property, carrying out an inspection and delivering the service
- request that occupiers not be in the property if possible, in order to avoid physical contact and ensure compliance to existing social distancing measures. Consumer advice is highlighted in **Advice on Home Moving**
- adhere to guidelines on cleaning hands thoroughly prior to and upon leaving the property
- only take the equipment and tools actually required for the inspection to the property, according to the service delivered
- where the occupier has to be present, request that they follow the government **social distancing guidelines**
- comply with government requirements on face coverings when inspecting occupied properties
- aim for as minimal an amount of contact with surfaces when inspecting elements of the property as possible
- ensure you keep a record of inspection using appropriate recording equipment, including any limitations of the inspection as a result of restrictions
- ensure you take an adequate number of photographs/videos. These can be especially helpful for restricted/inaccessible areas.

4 Recommendations after the inspection

RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms should:

- wash/sanitise their hands thoroughly and sanitise their equipment
- appropriately dispose of any disposable Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) used during inspection
- communicate the outcome/findings of the inspection appropriately with the client as per the instruction and agreed terms of engagement
- deliver reports in line with current RICS standards and guidance
- ensure any restrictions of information/advice/areas that weren't inspected due to public health limitations are made clear and stated in the report(s)
- note any limitations to inspection/service delivered as a result of current social distancing measures and health and safety risks, and where possible, include a disclaimer relating to any errors or omissions arising from any limitations to the inspection or service delivered
- highlight any risks and hazards found during the inspection with the client, depending on the level of service.

5 Professional accountability and responsibility

RICS professionals and RICS regulated firms are expected to behave ethically and professionally, while taking adequate steps to consider health and safety at all times for all parties involved.

The government has set out enforcement measures to ensure compliance to social distancing measures. Professionals must adhere to government guidelines at all times.

RICS regulated firms should ensure employees understand how to operate safely and communicate this to customers.

No work should be carried out by a person who has COVID-19 symptoms, however mild, or by anyone who has been asked to self-isolate.

Please note, in line with **current government guidelines**, everyone in Northern Ireland with symptoms is eligible for testing, including children and infants.

Delivering confidence

We are RICS. Everything we do is designed to effect positive change in the built and natural environments. Through our respected global standards, leading professional progression and our trusted data and insight, we promote and enforce the highest professional standards in the development and management of land, real estate, construction and infrastructure. Our work with others provides a foundation for confident markets, pioneers better places to live and work and is a force for positive social impact.

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