

Moving house might be possible sometime soon

How the Scottish property market might move forward after lockdown

With the publication of the Scottish Government's Covid-19 routemap detailing a phased approach to easing lockdown, and some general estate agency activity resuming in England, many are wondering when and how types of activity such as in person property viewings and house moves might resume in Scotland.

We asked the Edinburgh Solicitors Property Centre to tell us what they think.

In recent weeks, [ESPC](#) and our agents have noticed increases in key buyer interest metrics, such as web traffic, Home Report downloads and viewing requests. This uplift in activity suggests demand to move home is after lockdown is on the rise, particularly after the news of the English market activity resuming, and it may continue to grow after the Scottish Government announcing their phased approach to easing lockdown.

Robert Carroll, Managing Director of [MOV8 Real Estate](#), said: "We have seen a huge increase in the number of online buyer enquiries since the announcement of the relaxation of the lockdown in England. The day after that announcement, the number of buyer enquiries doubled. This continued for the next week and, since then, the number has tripled compared to the position prior to the relaxation of the lockdown in England.

"It will be interesting to see how the Scottish Government's

announcement of its own Route Map affects the level of enquiries. Based on the example of the English announcement, I would expect that we will see a further increase in buyer enquiries in anticipation of buyers once again being able to view properties. Of course, at this stage, we do not know exactly when that will be.”

In this article, we examine how activity in the Scottish property market might go ahead as lockdown restrictions are eased, with reference to how the English market has adapted.

Please note that this article does not offer any definite answers as to how certain property market activities will resume in the future – we will provide full details on official guidance as and when it is released.

The Scottish Government’s COVID-19 Route Map

The Scottish Government’s COVID-19 Route Map published on 21 May 2020 outlines a phased approach to the easing of lockdown measures. Phase 1 is set to begin on 28th May, subject to certain requirements being met. This phase includes “preparing for the safe reopening of the housing market”.

For Phase 2, the route map document mentions the “relaxation of restrictions on housing moves”. There are certain criteria that must be met before Phase 2 can begin.

While we await further details from the Scottish Government on what “preparing for the safe reopening of the housing market” entails, it seems likely it will include issuing guidance around how property market activities such as physical viewings and house moves can be done safely in the near future.

Virtual first approach

Over the lockdown period, ESPC agents have adapted to offer [virtual viewings](#) and [valuations](#), allowing people to make

a start on their property buying or selling journey.

Even as lockdown restrictions are eased and activities such as physical viewings are permitted, we expect that the use of this technology in the buying and selling process will still be prominent.

It is likely that buyers will still be advised to view a property virtually in the first instance and to only request an in person viewing after a successful virtual viewing.

Similarly, virtual valuations allow someone to get an initial estimate of their home's worth and find out more about the selling process without engaging in unnecessary contact, so we expect many of our agents to continue offering this service to those that require it.

Furthermore, we imagine many solicitor estate agents, mortgage advisers and lenders will continue to encourage buyers and sellers to get in touch over phone and email in the first instance, rather than arranging face-to-face appointments.

Viewing properties safely

As mentioned above, it is likely buyers will be encouraged to view properties virtually in the first instance. However, when physical viewings are allowed, there will need to be measures put in place to protect the health and safety of the buyer and the seller.

Last week, the English Government published an advice document detailing how physical viewings should take place with social distancing, and Scotland will likely look to adopt some of the same practices.

With regards to viewings, it seems almost certain that only pre-booked appointments will be offered rather than open viewings to reduce contact, enable social distancing to be practised and mitigate risk.

Those attending viewings, as well as likely being qualified (to confirm they or anyone in their household doesn't have symptoms of COVID-19 and their status as a buyer) before the appointment is made, will also likely be encouraged or instructed to wear appropriate protection such as a mask and gloves and advised to avoid touching surfaces unnecessarily.

Moving home guidelines

Once current restrictions on moving home are eased, a safe moving procedure will need to be established advising on aspects such as how key handovers and removals can be done in the safest possible way.

The [British Association of Removers](#) has recommended that removal firms adapt their measures so that they can help people move safely. These recommendations include performing more detailed risk assessments, staggering the start times of crew to minimise the number of staff present at any one time, wellness checks for staff and PPE equipment for staff.

Ian Studd, Director of the British Association of Removers, said: "The fact is that this 'new normal' will require all parties to adopt a more flexible approach and to show a little patience as the processes will inevitably add some time and resource into the transaction.

"One of the biggest challenges we see is the increasing number of same day exchanges and completions as they, from the movers' point of view, always lead to issues in getting access to the new property and we will very likely see wholesale delays to entire moving chains as a consequence. It may be the case that movers might plan any such move over two days rather than one, to avoid potential conflict with the consumer by managing expectations."

The Scottish property market

Jill Andrew, Chair of the [Edinburgh Conveyancers Forum](#), said: “The announcement from the First Minister confirming that moving home will be one of the earlier sectors to come out of lockdown is welcome news to both conveyancing solicitors, and to the buyers, sellers, housebuilders, landlords and tenants who have been unable to proceed with residential property transactions during that time.

“The new arrangements for moving home being readied in Phase 1 to enable the sector to reopen and operate in Phase 2 is a positive step by the Scottish Government and will hopefully avoid further delays to settlement dates, allow delayed transactions to settle safely and, equally as important, give confidence back to the Scottish residential property market.

Paul Hilton, CEO of ESPC, said: “Life under lockdown has been very different for most of us. Even as restrictions are eased, public health and safety is of the utmost importance and it is likely property market activity in Scotland won’t go exactly back to the way it was.

“Our agents have adapted well in recent weeks, using technology to continue providing key services to buyers and sellers during lockdown. We expect virtual viewing and valuations to remain a part of services provided by agents in Scotland, even as lockdown restrictions are eased.

“In order to get the Scottish property market moving again, we of course need to establish safe procedures for how things like physical viewings and house moves can be done while practising social distancing.”