

Ken Robertson tells us what's happening on the housing market

It certainly seems that there will be some relaxation in the rules around house viewings from the end of June onwards.

How will this affect buyers and sellers? We spoke to Ken Robertson, Head of residential property at Balfour+Manson to find out what is happening for those of you who want to move home.

Ken explained that after the initial lockdown everything froze, primarily because the mechanism set up for registration of documents, The Registers of Scotland, had effectively closed their doors.

He continued: "There was such an outcry against that it took them a wee while to come up with a sort of interim plan which extended the periods of advance notice – effectively the purchasers' protection against court orders interfering with registration for their title."

Then, rather surprisingly, the Registers allowed electronic scanning of documents and that has worked quite well.

Ken said: "Once that was sorted out the market moved on because there were certain people who were desperate to move. They did move although the general advice from the government was you

should not move house unless you have to.”

Now in the second phase, there is a relaxation of the rules against moving house. There will be more in the way of detail shortly.

Paul Hilton, CEO of ESPC has allowed certain information to come out about how the exact arrangements and protocols which will be put in place to allow effectively people to view properties.

Surveyors may now go out to value properties again. If a property is vacant there's no problem but if a property is occupied, then for the time being they are still waiting for some detail on this.

Ken suggested that rather than having an open viewing, the arrangements will be viewing by appointment. These will have to allow sufficient time for viewers to see round the property with all doors left open. If the owner of the property is there then they will have to stand in the garden or the street or just maintain physical distancing to allow prospective purchasers to view.

He also suggested it might be that only two people are allowed to view at any one time.

Virtual viewings have been encouraged recently and Ken confirmed that purchasers will not get to view in person until they have viewed the property on video.

But he admitted that virtual viewing is a bit of a mixed bag. Some properties have a full video which can cost around £250 -300 depending on the size of the house. Ken's view is: "Generally speaking, prior to the lockdown these did not prove to be overly popular.

"Having said that, our property manager has taken new instructions from a few of clients and they have opted to do

it. So we're waiting to see whether that is actually going to be compulsory for new properties coming on the market that rather than just photographs you have actually a full video."

Ken is a self-confessed Luddite but has recently discovered that WhatsApp is invaluable 'for a number of things I never used it for before'.

He said: "It's been great to certify documents and that type of thing. So that is another possibility – clients may prefer to do live WhatsApp and speak to the prospective owners and answer any questions around the house and show them what needs to be shown."

Has this had any kind of effect on the price of houses in Edinburgh or not?

Ken replied:"No. In our discussions with surveyors they are very much taking the view that they are sticking to past values.

"The way they value a property is historic, it's not what happened last month. It's really what is the trend over the last couple of years. So it's a slow moving ship in terms of adjusting the value. So, at the moment, basically, we can pretty much assume that the surveyors are going to adhere to the pre lockdown valuation.

"Now, whether that's going to be the same in a year's time is another matter, I would take the view that we have not begun to see the full financial fallout in terms of employment, and that that is not going to happen until the furlough schemes begin to get cut back."

But with so many people employed in the public sector and in the financial services sector Ken believes that 'Edinburgh is quite an insulated market to that extent'. Certainly it is not anticipated that the financial services companies here will have the significant redundancies that the airline industry

and others expect to face. But with Edinburgh reliant to such an extent on tourism it is clear that sector will be quite badly hit, and some property owners with buy to let mortgages will perhaps struggle to finance those on the basis of current demand.

All of this said and done, Ken's best advice is that if purchasers have confidence in their own finances or employment then there may be no time like the present



Ken Robertson

He concluded: "I think there's a bit of pent up demand at the moment, which means that prices won't immediately drop, and if they are going to be dropping in the longer term. Well it will depend just how serious the hit on the economy is, but that will not just be in the UK."

The ESPC are likely to produce guidelines about what's required, which is likely to be a questionnaire protecting the viewer. You might be asked to give information about whether you or any members of your family had symptoms. It might be like a due diligence process. Then purchasers will be given a time to turn up and actually view the property.

ESPC are also producing a cleaning protocol for self-catering properties which will go into details about virus survival and how to clean.