

CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)



ADVICE ON HOME MOVING DURING THE CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19) OUTBREAK

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DfC

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www.communities-ni.gov.uk

Advice on home moving during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak

Applies to: Northern Ireland

The NI Executive has amended the **Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020** to remove the restriction on individuals moving home.

This guidance provides important public health information to ensure that the re-opening of the housing market and key activities around this, such as, viewing property, can happen safely.

Some of the guidance applies to the entire property market i.e. home selling, purchasing, letting and renting. Other parts of the guidance are (as detailed by headings) sector specific.

DfC has also produced guidance for the private and social rented sectors.

The Private Rented Sector guidance can be accessed using the following link:
COVID-19 Guidance for Private Sector Landlords and Tenants

The guidance for Social Sector Landlords and Tenants has now been published and can be accessed at the following link:
COVID-19 Social Sector Guidance

Business sectors will also have their own more specific guidance. Professions and tradespeople should contact their professional or representative bodies to access the guidance that is relevant to their business.

It is important that everyone continues to follow the current guidance on COVID 19:
<http://www.nidirect.gov.uk>.

We are all working hard, as a society to contain the virus and this has secured some success, allowing us to look towards recovery. We must proceed with the utmost care in the next phase, and avoid undoing what we have achieved. One of the simplest steps you can take at all times (when moving home) is to wash or sanitise your hands frequently and stay at least 2 metres apart from people who are not members of your household. It is crucial that health guidelines are followed at all times, as individuals can be asymptomatic and can pass on the virus without knowing that they have it.

This 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.

The process of finding and moving into another home will need to be different, given those involved in the process will have to adapt practices and procedures to ensure that the risk of spread of coronavirus is reduced as far as possible. This will include:

- Doing more of the process online, such as virtual initial viewings (See further detail in the viewing section)
- Vacating your current property whilst other people are shown around. If you remain on the grounds of your property i.e. garden or driveway, you should maintain social distancing. If it is not appropriate for you to vacate your current property, even for a short time, you should make efforts to minimise contact with those outside your household by, for example, being in a different room from these individuals. You should maintain social distancing at all times
- Using a common sense approach when interacting with/or entering people's homes and avoiding touching surfaces
- Ensuring your property is thoroughly cleaned before non-residents visit the

household (i.e. agents, viewers, surveyors, EPC assessors) or someone moves in. As noted in the body of the guidance, agreement should be sought from current tenants before any such activity proceeds.

It should be noted that the legal process attached to home moving will be slightly different to allow for social distancing and the need for flexibility.

We encourage all parties involved, to be as flexible as possible over this period and to be prepared to delay moves, for example if someone becomes ill with coronavirus during the moving process or has to self-isolate.

Additional guidance may either further open the housing market, or restrict movement in the housing market, responding to latest health advice. It may also become necessary to pause all home moves for a short period of time to manage the spread of the coronavirus. We will let you know if this has to happen.

You should not expect to move into any home where people have coronavirus or are self-isolating.

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1. Advice to the public

- 1.1. More detail on progressing the individual elements of the home buying and selling or rental process and how this applies to different groups is set out in the next section.

Vulnerable people or those shielding

- 1.2. We recognise people who are shielding or otherwise vulnerable may also have pressing needs to move home; however, this should be balanced with the increased risks presented by coronavirus.
- 1.3. In line with the government's advice, those who are shielding or otherwise clinically vulnerable should ensure they are aware of the **medical advice** on staying at home, avoiding unnecessary contacts and socially distancing over this period. All parties involved in home buying and selling should prioritise agreeing amicable arrangements to change move dates for individuals in this group, or where someone in a chain is in this group.
- 1.4. Clinically vulnerable and shielded individuals (including those who have received a letter advising they are in the clinically extremely vulnerable group) will need to carefully consider their personal situation and the circumstances of their own move and may wish to seek medical advice before deciding whether to commit to or go ahead with a move. Some moves are likely to be lower risk. For example,

if the home is empty, all travel can take place in their own transport and they can avoid contact with others.

- 1.5. We would encourage everyone in these categories who intends moving, to make clear their status to all of the professionals involved in the process. They may be able to implement additional precautionary measures to further protect you.

People self-isolating or having tested positive for coronavirus

- 1.6. Moving home is not appropriate whilst you pose a direct risk of transmitting coronavirus. People who have coronavirus, are self-isolating with their family member or are in quarantine, should not leave their home to either move home or undertake property viewings.
- 1.7. If you are contractually committed to moving home, you should delay your move until all members of your household have come to the end of their self-isolation period.
- 1.8. All parties involved in home buying and selling (including developers), renting and letting homes, should prioritise to agreeing amicable arrangements to change move dates for individuals, or where someone in a chain or their family member is self-isolating or has tested positive for coronavirus.

1.9. Should a move be essential for people in this category, for instance due to an urgent health and safety risk, please contact **the Public Health Agency** for advice.

Moves or purchases which are scheduled

1.10. People are free to move home; however, the process of finding and moving into a new home is likely to be different, as those involved in the process will need to adapt practices and procedures to ensure that the risk of spread of coronavirus is reduced as far as possible. It is vital that everyone continues to follow the current guidance on COVID 19:

www.nidirect.gov.uk.

- Initial viewings should be done virtually wherever this is possible and property agents should help you to do this (See further detail in the viewing section)
- All physical viewings should be limited to members of the same household and open house viewings should not take place. Viewings should be by appointment only
- Landlords should consult with existing tenants and come to an agreement around arrangements for viewings during a period of tenancy. They should not attempt to encourage or force existing tenants into facilitating viewings
- It is recommended that physical viewings are only appropriate in a rented property that is occupied where the tenant has served notice

and confirmed that they are able to move

- When physically viewing properties, where possible, you should avoid touching surfaces, wash your hands regularly, and bring your own hand sanitiser. When entering a property for a viewing you should consider covering your mouth and nose with a face covering
- The number of people on a viewing should be minimised to those from your household that absolutely have to be there. If you need to be accompanied by small children, you should try to keep them from touching surfaces and ensure they wash their hands regularly
- If people are being shown around your current home, you should open all internal doors and ensure surfaces, such as door handles, are cleaned with standard household cleaning products, after each viewing
- We recommend that you vacate your property whilst viewings are taking place, to minimise your contact with those not in your household. If you remain on the grounds of your property i.e. garden, you should maintain social distancing, whilst other people are shown around
- If it is not appropriate for you to vacate your current property, even for a short time, you should make efforts to minimise contact with those outside your household by, for example, being in a different room from these individuals. You should maintain social distancing at all times

- When handing over keys to an agent, surveyor or other property professional, ensure the keys are sanitised using hand sanitisers or by enclosing them in a disinfectant wipe
- Anyone involved in any aspect of the home moving process should practice social distancing in line with public health advice
- When a property is being viewed or assessed by a property professional, they will minimise the time spent in your property
- If you are particularly worried about the risk of infection you should speak to the professionals involved, your landlord, estate agent, solicitor or mortgage lender, or removers. They may be able to put in place extra measures
- Anyone coming to assess your home for a valuation, survey, assessment of energy performance, or for any other purpose, will ask many questions about your property and put direct questions to you prior to the visit, in the interests of minimising time spent in your property. Professionals will also confirm that those viewing/ visiting or inspecting your property do not have any symptoms/shielding etc
- Some more vulnerable visitors and occupants may ask you to wear non-surgical face coverings. Please read the advice for **vulnerable people or those shielding**
- Please be patient; it may take longer to secure a viewing or a service by

professionals involved in the home moving process. All these measures are in place to keep everyone as safe as possible

- When moving between properties, you and those in your household should try to do as much of the packing yourself as you can. Where this is not possible, you should speak to removal firms in advance. There is further advice about this later in the document

Preparing to buy or sell a home

- 1.11. You can continue to put your home on the market and start to look for properties you want to move into. If any member of the household of the property being viewed is showing symptoms or is self-isolating, then estate agents, potential purchasers or any other parties in the home buying process should not physically visit the property.
 - You can begin to market your home and estate agents, photographers, videographers and Energy Performance Assessors can visit in order to get the property on the market
 - To help prevent the spread of infection, we encourage you to do the majority of your property searching online; for example, only physically viewing those properties which you believe you are most likely to want to move into. (See viewings section for further detail)

- As usual, you can also start to bring together the documentation necessary to sell your property (more information on these documents is available in the government's [guidance on how to buy and sell homes](#)). If you instruct your solicitor early, they can assist you in getting the required documentation and information together
- If you wish to buy a new build property you should contact the developer in the usual way. You should be able to view the show home or visit the particular plot you are interested in purchasing, although there will be appointment systems in place

- 2) **'Guided online walkthrough' by property professional.** This process involves estate agents or the property owner hosting a 'guided online walkthrough' of the property. This is where the agent or the property owner holds a mobile device and walks around a property showing the viewers each of the rooms and attributes. It allows estate agents or property owners to offer their advice and conduct the viewing to a registered audience. The group of viewers are able to ask questions directly to the host at the time of walkthrough and the host may be able to provide additional information beyond what the photography provides. The host could facilitate the viewing either remotely or actually live in the property. This would allow any initial queries to be resolved and addressed in advance of a physical viewing. It would also eliminate a lot of initial appointments having to be done on a one to one basis, therefore reducing footfall in the property

Viewings

- 1.12. People should use virtual viewings before visiting properties in person, where possible, to minimise public health risks.
- 1.13. Virtual viewings include:
 - 1) **Standard viewings;** this is the most common option whereby people can view properties on agent's websites or property portals at their leisure using 360-degree views and walkthroughs of properties

1.14. If any member of the household of the property being viewed, or the household undertaking a viewing, is showing symptoms of coronavirus or is self-isolating, then a physical viewing should be delayed.

1.15. We encourage people to do their property searching online wherever possible. Initial viewings should be done virtually wherever possible and physical viewings should only be conducted where buyers or renters are seriously considering a move to the property.

- To support this, agents may ask home occupiers to conduct virtual viewings. This will help reduce the number of properties people need to visit before finding their future home. It should be noted that tenants of rental accommodation are not obliged to comply with this request
- Viewings should be conducted by appointment only and no open house viewings should take place
- If your property is being viewed, you should open all the internal doors prior to the viewing and allow access to handwashing facilities and ideally separate sanitiser and towels/paper towels. For rental properties the onus will be on the landlord and letting agent to make these arrangements
- We recommend that you vacate your property whilst viewings are taking place to minimise your contact with those not in your household.

If you remain on the grounds of your property i.e. garden, you should maintain social distancing, whilst other people are shown around the property

- If it is not appropriate for you to vacate your current property, even for a short time, you should make efforts to minimise contact with those outside your household by, for example, by being in a different room from these individuals. You should maintain social distancing at all times
- When viewing a property, all parties should wash their hands and avoid touching surfaces where possible. Agents will ask you to restrict the number of people who accompany you on a viewing so that social distancing can be practised, and only those in your immediate household should be there
- We expect agents to accompany clients on a viewing but to follow social distancing rules. Where viewings are unaccompanied, agents should make sure viewers and homeowners understand how they should conduct themselves
- Once the viewing has taken place, the homeowner should ensure surfaces, such as door handles, are cleaned with standard household cleaning products and towels are disposed of safely or washed as appropriate. For rental properties the onus will be on the landlord and letting agent to make these arrangements

Making offers or reservations

- 1.16. You are free to make or accept an offer or reserve a property as normal.
- There is a greater risk that parties may need to delay their move because someone is showing symptoms of coronavirus or self-isolating. Where needed, your solicitor should advise you and help make sure that any contracts or building agreements are as flexible as possible to accommodate this risk
 - Prospective purchasers may wish to visit a property again once they have agreed a sale, for example to measure up. Where this has been agreed to, the above advice on prioritising virtual visits, hygiene measures, maintaining social distancing at all times and mitigating contact where possible, should be followed
 - Purchasers may also want to send in tradespeople to carry out inspections. Where possible these should be scheduled with one person visiting the property at any time. (See section on tradespeople for further guidance)

Property searches and surveys

- 1.17. Your solicitor should be able to carry out some searches remotely including on-line on your property to progress your transaction and you can contact them to discuss likely timescales.

- 1.18. Your surveyor can undertake surveys of the property you wish to purchase. There are no restrictions on the types of survey that can be carried out and you should talk to your surveyor to understand the most appropriate type of survey for the home you intend to purchase.
- 1.19. On custom and self-build projects, surveyors can visit plots you wish to purchase and undertake valuations to support the release of staged payment mortgages.
- 1.20. 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. Surveyors should not enter a property where a member of the household is showing symptoms of coronavirus or is self-isolating.
- Surveyors should secure as much information as possible from the client and/or occupier prior to the visit and as part of the pre-inspection research. This would include, property use, occupancy, location, potential risk to occupants and any other relevant information required to minimise physical contact.
 - Inspections should take place by appointment only, with one person visiting the property at any time. Surveyors should follow the latest government guidance on social distancing and guidance provided by their professional or representative bodies.

- Surveyors should take all reasonable steps to ensure the client and property occupier is provided with as much information as possible about the visits and service in advance and ensure the inspection, service and arrangements are agreed by all parties prior to the physical inspection.
- If your home is being surveyed, you should ensure the surveyor has access to all the parts of the property they need to inspect, and make efforts to minimise contact with the surveyor.

Agreeing to move

- 1.21. Once you have agreed to move home by entering into a binding contract or signing a tenancy agreement, you have entered into a legal agreement to move.
- Home purchasers should seek advice from their solicitor. Organisations, such as, [Housing Rights](#) can provide advice on wide range of housing issues including tenancy agreements
 - We encourage all parties to be as flexible as possible over this period and be prepared to delay moves if needed; for example, if someone becomes ill with coronavirus during the moving process or has to self-isolate. You should not expect to move into any home where people are ill or self-isolating. It may also become necessary to pause all home moves for a short period of time to manage the spread of the coronavirus
- 1.22. Removal firms can operate, although they may need to adjust usual procedures in order to ensure moves happen as safely as possible. We encourage you to contact removal firms as early as possible in advance of your move. You and your household should also try and do as much of the packing yourself as possible. However, where you are using a removals firm you may wish to talk to them in advance to discuss packing and, the arrangements for packing fragile items. We ask that, where possible:
- You clean your belongings, with standard domestic cleaning products before they are handled by others, including removal firms
 - Whilst the removers are in your home, you should ensure any internal doors are open and seek to minimise your contact with the crew, maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres
 - All parties should wash their hands and avoid touching surfaces where possible, to reduce the risk of transmitting the coronavirus
 - You should not provide refreshments, but you should ensure that removers have access to hand washing facilities and use separate towels or paper towels. These should be washed or disposed of safely afterwards
- You may find that more flexibility will be required if there is a chain of transactions involved, because a Covid-19 event which delays completion might be further up or down the chain, yet it will affect you

Moving your belongings

1.22. Removal firms can operate, although they may need to adjust usual procedures in order to ensure moves happen as safely as possible. We encourage you to contact removal firms as early as possible in advance of your move. You and your household should also try and do as much of the packing yourself as possible. However, where you are using a removals firm you may wish to talk to them in advance to discuss packing and, the arrangements for packing fragile items. We ask that, where possible:

- You clean your belongings, with standard domestic cleaning products before they are handled by others, including removal firms
- Whilst the removers are in your home, you should ensure any internal doors are open and seek to minimise your contact with the crew, maintaining a distance of at least 2 metres
- All parties should wash their hands and avoid touching surfaces where possible, to reduce the risk of transmitting the coronavirus
- You should not provide refreshments, but you should ensure that removers have access to hand washing facilities and use separate towels or paper towels. These should be washed or disposed of safely afterwards

2. Advice to industry

2.1. All businesses should follow the government's latest **guidance for employers and businesses** on coronavirus and safer working practices.

2.2. As well as government guidance, we encourage all professionals and tradespeople to speak to their professional or representative bodies and familiarise themselves with the guidance that these bodies have prepared for their specific sectors.

2.3. It is important that all businesses work together to ensure we minimise the spread of infection and we expect all sectors to consider how they can operate in a way which minimises the need for face to face contact.

Estate agents

2.4. Estate agents can open for business but should consider how and when to reopen their premises given government guidance on **safer working**. Estate agents should inform customers and their own staff about their procedures, so that they are safe throughout the sales process.

- Agents should ask whether any party is showing symptoms or has been asked to self-isolate before going ahead with any viewing, or visits to offices

- Agents should operate using an appointment system for visits to their offices and when conducting viewings
- Agents should not carry out any open house viewings
- Agents should strongly encourage clients to view properties virtually in the first instance and then only physically inspect properties which they have a strong interest in
- Agents should accompany clients to physical viewings and should maintain a minimum of 2 metres distance from others
- Agents should not drive clients to appointments
- All parties viewing a property should wash their hands with soap and water (or hand sanitiser, if not available) immediately after entering the properties, with internal doors opened and surfaces having been wiped down before they enter. Separate towels or paper towels should be used and washed or disposed of safely after use
- Agents should do what they can to promote flexibility when arranging to move dates, for example advising clients to ensure contracts have explicit terms to manage the timing risks presented by coronavirus

- Agents should work with their clients and other agents to broker a new date to move where sales are due to complete and one of the parties falls ill with coronavirus or has to self-isolate, or if it becomes necessary to pause all home moves for a short period of time to manage the spread of the coronavirus
- Agents should ensure that any keys are appropriately cleaned before handover

Developers and new build sales

2.5. Developers can continue with sales during this period but should ensure that their sales teams follow the government's **safer working guidance**. Developers should inform customers and their own staff about their procedures, so that they are safe throughout the sales process.

- Where possible, developers should promote virtual viewings
- Where physical viewings do take place, including visits to show homes, these should be by appointment with one household visiting one property at a time
- Developers should clean surfaces between viewings
- For new reservations and contracts, developers should work with solicitors to ensure contracts take account of the risks posed by coronavirus, including building in flexibility in case dates need to change as a result of someone falling ill with coronavirus or needing to self-isolate

- Developers should do what they can to support anyone with coronavirus symptoms or self-isolating, and those they are in chain with, to agree a new date. They should also be flexible if it may become necessary to pause all home moves for a short period of time to manage the spread of the coronavirus

Tradespeople

2.6. Activities associated with house moves, include making improvements to the property that is offered for sale or rent.

- Tradespeople should follow the follow the government's **safer working guidance** and any other guidance relevant to their work, including that issued by their professional or representative body. Companies should ensure employees understand how to operate safely and communicate this to customers
- Tradespeople should contact the household in advance to check that no member of the household is showing symptoms of coronavirus or self-isolating. If they are, works should be delayed
- No work should be carried out by a person who has coronavirus symptoms, however mild. Tradespeople should wash their hands on entering the property using separate towels or paper towels which need to be washed or disposed of safely after use

- Tradespeople should seek to minimise contact with homeowners or tenants and maintain social distancing rules
- Tradespeople should implement a buddy system and ensure that the same people work together where this is needed
- Tradespeople should bring their own refreshments, but homeowners and landlords should ensure they have access to hand washing facilities, using separate towels or paper towels, which should be washed or disposed of safely afterwards

Solicitors involved in conveyancing

2.7. Solicitors can open for business and can take on new instructions. They should make sure their clients are aware of the difficulties in completing transactions during this period.

- Solicitors should aim to conduct as much as possible of their business remotely
- Where face to face client meetings need to take place (i.e. they cannot be conducted remotely), measures should be put in place to ensure appropriate social distancing and hygiene measures are maintained

- Solicitors should do what they can to promote flexibility making provisions for the risks presented by coronavirus, for example when advising their clients who are ready to move not to enter into contracts on an occupied property unless they have made explicit provision for the risks presented by the virus
- Solicitors should prioritise support for anyone who is clinically vulnerable or shielding, or with symptoms of coronavirus or self-isolating to agree a new date to move

New Build Home Warranty Assessments and claims against the warranty

2.8. Inspectors can carry out warranty assessments on new build properties including self and custom build. Inspectors should follow public health guidance on **social distancing** and guidance provided by their professional or representative body. Companies should ensure employees understand how to operate safely and communicate this to customers.

- New build warranty providers can continue to provide a normal service to homebuilders and consumers, including site visits and inspections
- No work should be carried out by a person who has coronavirus symptoms, however mild, or by anyone who has been asked to self-isolate

- Inspectors should contact the household in advance to check that no member of the household is showing symptoms of coronavirus or self-isolating. If they are, works should be delayed
- Where residents are making a claim against their new build warranty, in the first instance they should speak with the warranty provider. Where possible the warranty providers should investigate claims remotely using video or photo evidence. If this is not possible and an inspector needs to visit an occupied property, this should be done by appointment and measures put in place to ensure physical contact is minimised

Surveyors and Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) assessors

- 2.9. Surveyors and EPC assessors are free to visit properties to carry out surveys/valuations. Surveys/valuations could be in relation to any property transaction such as a sale, purchase, letting or renting or obtaining a mortgage or further advance or buying a further interest or share in a home or for any other purpose. Surveyors should follow the latest government guidance on **social distancing** and guidance provided by their professional or representative bodies. Companies should ensure employees understand how to operate safely and communicate this to customers.
- Surveyors should contact the owners of the property to be surveyed prior to the survey to make sure they understand which areas will

be surveyed and ensure that all doors and access panels are open and surfaces have been cleaned with standard household cleaning products in line with public health advice. If it is not appropriate for occupiers to vacate the property, measures should be put in place to ensure physical contact is minimised during the survey

- No work should be carried out by a person who has coronavirus symptoms, however mild or by anyone who has been asked to self-isolate
- Surveyors should wash their hands immediately upon entering the property, using separate towels or paper towels which need to be washed or disposed of safely after use
- Surveyors should be clear in any reports about areas which they were unable to inspect due to public health limitations

Removal firms

2.10. Removal firms are able to operate and should follow the latest government guidance on **safer working**. Where moves are carried out, **social distancing** guidelines should be followed. Companies should ensure employees understand how to operate safely and communicate this to customers.

- Removers should contact the household in advance to check that no member of the household is showing symptoms of coronavirus or self-isolating. If they are, works should be delayed

- They should also encourage households to ensure all internal doors are open and surfaces and possessions have been cleaned with standard household cleaning products prior to them entering the property
- No work should be carried out by a person who has coronavirus symptoms, however mild
- Removers should wash their hands on entering the property using separate towels or paper towels which need to be washed or disposed of safely after use
- Removers should seek to minimise contact with homeowners and remain 2 metres apart from householders at all times
- Removers should implement a buddy system and ensure that the same people work together when moving bulky items and furniture
- Removers should bring their own refreshments, but you should ensure they have access to hand washing facilities, using separate towels or paper towels if possible, which should be washed or disposed of safely afterwards

Letting agents and private landlords

- 2.11. Tenants' safety should be letting agents' and landlords' first priority. The government has put in place protections for tenants during the coronavirus outbreak, including legislation to delay when landlords are able to start proceedings to evict tenants.
- 2.12. Letting agents, landlords and tenants should also consider the Department's

general guidance for the private rented sector during the Covid-19 pandemic, available at <https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/covid-19-guidance-private-rented-sector-landlords-and-tenants>.

- 2.13. The **Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020**, came into law on 5th May 2020. The effect of this new legislation is to temporarily extend the amount of notice private rented landlords must give when ending a tenancy. Landlords will therefore now need to give all tenants 12 weeks' notice before ending a tenancy.
- 2.14. This guidance for landlords and letting agents is to help them safely rent out empty properties, or properties which tenants are voluntarily vacating. While broader measures to protect tenants during the coronavirus outbreak remain in place, letting agents and landlords should endeavour to avoid ending tenancies where the tenant wants and is able to stay.

Letting agents and landlords should be aware of, and follow government **guidance on coronavirus and renting**, which explains these protections in greater detail. They must also make sure tenants are aware of this guidance.

- Private landlords and letting agents should not conduct viewings in properties where tenants are symptomatic or self-isolating, or where it has been determined that they are clinically vulnerable and are shielding

- In other cases, where viewings can proceed, they should be conducted **in line with the guidance on viewings earlier in this document**
- Any visits to a property must be made in accordance with the latest government guidance on **social distancing** and guidance provided by any relevant professional or representative bodies
- If possible, necessary repairs should be conducted in the period between a property being vacated and a new tenant moving in. If this is not possible and visits are needed to an occupied property, this should be done by appointment. If it is not appropriate for occupiers to vacate the property while repair work is underway, then measures should be put in place to ensure physical contact between them and the person carrying out the repairs is minimised
- Landlords should make every effort to abide by gas and electrical safety requirements, which continue to be of great importance for tenants' safety. This may be more difficult due to restrictions associated with the coronavirus outbreak, for example where a tenant has coronavirus symptoms, is self-isolating or shielding
- See further **Health and Safety Executive guidance** on how to deal with specific circumstances. Letting

agents may also want to consider obtaining landlord and tenant consent for inventory clerk appointments to also occur prior to a tenant moving in or following a tenant moving out. These appointments should be carried out during vacant periods if possible

- Letting agents and landlords should take steps to ensure any properties are prepared ready for new tenants, this may include cleaning to minimise any potential spread of the virus in line with **government advice**
- Letting agents and landlords should consider how best to conduct tenancy check-ins for new tenancies agreed while broader measures remain in place, taking care to follow government advice on **social distancing** to minimise possible spread of coronavirus
- Lettings agents and landlords should consider areas where "in person" payments, referencing or checks can be conducted remotely instead.

2.16. Some tenants may be anxious about moving at this time. It will be important to ensure that they are not put under undue pressure to move if they are not ready or able to do so.

3. Social landlords

3.1. The Housing Executive and Housing Associations will continue to work with landlords, applicants and tenants regarding requests for transfers and exchanges and offers of new tenancies and agree new tenancy commencement dates. The date on which a new tenancy can commence may depend on when the landlord's contractors can carry out essential repairs to the property and / or when the new tenant can move in accordance with the legal requirements in the public health regulations.

3.2. Once tenants receive an offer of tenancy they should contact the landlord as soon as possible to discuss any difficulties which their household may have in moving into a new home at this time or to discuss the option of deferring offers of tenancy for an agreed time until the Coronavirus emergency has passed. Landlords should avoid or consider delaying moving tenants who are showing symptoms of coronavirus or self-isolating. There may be exceptions to this (e.g. safety reasons) and in these scenarios' landlords should speak to the local Public Health team about appropriate infection control measures before taking any action

3.3. Landlords should also avoid moving residents who are shielding because they have been notified they are in the clinically vulnerable group. If a home move is required, the landlord should speak to the local Public Health team for advice on appropriate measures to protect the resident.

3.4. It will be important to discuss with applicants and tenants their state of health, level of vulnerability and their arrangements for moving (including any assistance required) before proceeding with the move.

3.5. Landlords will need to consider how to carry out their activities in line with the government's advice on **social distancing in the workplace**. Practices should also be altered in line with this wider guidance, including:

- Property inspections for vacating tenants
- Collecting returned keys
- Conducting viewings
- Conducting tenancy sign-ups
- Preparing homes to be re-let

House Sales Scheme

3.6. Under the House Sales Scheme (formerly Right to Buy) eligible social tenants are allowed to purchase the home they currently rent and occupy from the Northern Ireland Housing Executive or the registered Housing Association who own it.

3.7. Due to government guidance on COVID-19 (Coronavirus) the Housing Executive had previously made the decision to suspend all non-critical business including house sales to sitting tenants carried out in-house by its Land and Regeneration staff under the Statutory House Sales Scheme (Right to Buy). This

measure was introduced on the 25 March 2020 for an initial period of eight (8) weeks. An extension of 4 weeks was announced on the 22 May. Following a recent review of the situation, the decision has now been made to reopen the NIHE House Sales Scheme from 17th June 2020.

3.8. Housing Associations Tenants who wish to purchase their home should contact their Housing Association. It is important to note that the measures put in place to combat coronavirus are likely to make it more difficult for the Housing Association to process their applications.

3.9. Housing Associations should consider

how best they can manage the application process to ensure tenants are able to avail of the House Sales Scheme within a reasonable timescale, while acting in accordance with government guidelines on social distancing.

3.10. This could include options around:

- Valuations of properties
- Fraud prevention measures
- The issuing of documentation
- Using the discretion provided to them within the legislation

3.11. 'The guidance for Social Sector Landlords and Tenants has now been published and can be accessed through the following link: [COVID19 - Social Sector Guidance](#).

Available in alternative formats



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