

Building Safety Competence Foundation

Guidance on
Examination Technique

Competence Validation Assessment

Guidance on Examination Technique

Exams are challenging and can be stressful for many candidates. Beyond college or university, it's unusual for people to sit further exams. However, that doesn't mean that you won't find yourself in a pressurised situation where you must produce or recall a lot of information and explain your understanding; this is particularly true in the case of a Building Control Surveyor.

Feeling a degree of stress about an exam is completely normal and is a positive sign that you are invested in your career. However, it is important to ensure that your stress levels feel manageable and don't impact negatively on your wellbeing. The more informed and better prepared you are, the more able you will be to cope with the stress of exams.

Just like any form of competence assessment, exams are designed to assess your ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve intended results; it does this by testing your knowledge, understanding, skills and behaviours.

However, when undertaking exams, the testing takes place in a relatively 'artificial' and controlled environment. There are techniques for approaching exams effectively, from general strategies such as developing an in-depth understanding of what the exam is designed to test (see scope for each surveyor band and competencies in the [Candidate Information Document](#)), to specific tactics to organise your time in the exam and minimise and cope with stress.

Exam Technique

Familiarise yourself with the exam paper

Don't race to start writing before you have checked through the paper. Read the instructions and all questions slowly and at least twice.

Make every minute count

Once you are clear about the questions, plan your time. Plan the time that you will spend on each section or question (you could jot this down on a work sheet if it helps). Plan to finish at least ten minutes before the end of the exam, so you have time to check your paper over.

Then, try to stick to your time plan. You are more likely to do well if you attempt all the questions than writing brilliant answers for some but not attempting others.

If any questions carry more marks, then spend more time on those. A lot of people find it helpful to begin with the questions that they find easiest and come back to those they find more challenging later.

Write in shorter sentences

Try and keep sentences short and focused. This will help with clarity and in making every point stand out for the assessor. It also makes it faster and easier for you to check your work and correct it. Using bullet points can also be helpful.

Answer the question

Check carefully what the question is about. Select the right information to answer it and do not include unnecessary information. Do not simply write down everything you know on the general topic, as that suggests you don't really understand the question. It also wastes valuable time.

Structure

For longer answers, organise your material clearly in sections. This helps the examiner to read your work easily and to follow your reasoning. REMEMBER TO PEE (see below).

Avoid the obvious mistakes

Many candidates lose marks unnecessarily for silly errors. For example, they forget to check whether there are questions on both sides of the exam paper. They misread questions. They answer too few – or too many – questions. They number their answers incorrectly, which means they have the wrong answer against the test question. This exam tip is important because when this sort of thing happens, so many marks can be lost.

Final checks

Check carefully through all of your answers, looking for any mistakes. Read through slowly to check for missing words and to see that your answers make sense. If you spot mistakes, change them, even if that makes hand-written papers look a bit untidy. Plan your time well so you are able to make these essential final checks.

What if I am running out of time?

If this happens, don't panic! Aim to write at least a brief overview of what you would have covered if you had time. Make a list of some of the details that you would have included.

Stay hydrated and drink plenty of water.

The Exam: Types of Questions and How to Answer

Situational, competency-based and behavioural questions

As a candidate, you are expected to answer questions on specific scenarios and ultimately relate your knowledge (theoretical or practical understanding of a subject matter) and experience (practical know-how and familiarity). This demonstrates that you are able to skilfully practice it rather than having a mere theoretical understanding of the subject matter.

Questions are usually open-ended with the goal of having the candidate demonstrate the relevant situational knowledge &/or experience by means of hypothetical scenarios where it is necessary to demonstrate your ability to solve problems independently

Question Type	Why they are asked
Situational	To give you the opportunity to demonstrate your approach to a specific scenario and how you would handle it.
Competency Based	To assess that you have the attributes, knowledge and behaviours expected of a Building Control Surveyor
Behavioural	To assess your character – specifically how you would approach a potentially challenging situation

It is important to bear in mind that not all questions will fall into these three distinct categories. There is often overlap in the way questions are asked, and therefore the way you should answer but the below examples will help you enter your assessment with confidence and assured that you can answer the most common types of questions.

Situational questions

Situational questions are based on specific scenarios that a Building Control Surveyor could conceivably be expected to encounter within their role.

Situational questions can be difficult to answer as you are required to think on the spot; this is, in itself, a skill for which you are being assessed. Answering these questions well can prove that you are willing to take the lead or ask for help, stay calm under pressure, and make positive choices that help to support compliance to building regulations.

Before answering a situational question, take a moment to fully understand what it is you are being asked. For example, is the assessment looking for evidence of your time management skills? Do they want to find out how you manage conflict?

Example situational question: “You notice a contravention and you believe that a colleague may have made an error during a previous inspection, but as far as you’re aware, only you have spotted it. What do you do?”

How to answer: One thing that your response definitely should not include (and this goes for any situational question) is an indication you would ‘pass the buck’ to someone else to attempt to absolve yourself of responsibility. Instead, you will be expected to show that you can take ownership of the situation and find a solution calmly and productively. This may include consultation with a competent expert (e.g. a fire or structural engineer) or to escalate the matter in an appropriate manner.

Example of a good answer: If you have real experience of a similar situation, you should draw on that. Something like the following would work:

‘I would first assess the situation, making sure that I am correct in my judgement. Then, I would follow any internal procedures for handling the situation, such as contacting my colleague directly, before taking it any further. Otherwise, I would calmly approach the subject with the contractor and let them know what I think has happened, what the impact could be, how it could be resolved, and what I could do to help. If the contractor was adamant that the work has been inspected and they will not correct it, I would caution the contractor that there may be a potential for the matter to escalate through formal stages of enforcement and I would then seek advice from a manager and raise my concern with them.’

Competency-based questions

Competency-based questions are used to assess specific attributes, knowledge and behaviours. The assessment will be looking for different ways that you use your analytical ability to solve a problem.

Alternatively, if it is your decision making that we are looking to assess, we may ask questions whereby you can demonstrate how you build strong professional relationships to make informed decisions.

While these questions may often seem to be situational, competency-based questions enable you to draw directly on real-life experience and be focused on specific competencies rather than a general approach to situations.

Again, as with situational questions, before answering, you should take a moment to think about what the question is really asking or looking for.

Typical competency-based question may pose a scenario whereby you are required to use your creativity to solve a problem.

How to answer: A Competent Surveyor is often able to think on their feet and come up with new solutions to problems that a surveyor with less experience would not have even thought of. Therefore, the assessment will be looking for you to demonstrate how you approach problems.

The PEE (Point. Evidence. Explain) technique will be useful in helping you to structure your answer and tell a story.

Another example may involve questions that will allow you to demonstrate how you would support those adversely affected by non-compliance.

How to answer: Again, using the PEE technique, your response should clearly demonstrate your empathy, and how you help those that are adversely affected.

Remember competencies are the knowledge and behaviours needed for a specific role so during your assessment preparation, check and double check the [competence requirements and scope of the assessment](#) (Domestic, General, and Specialist) for what the assessment is looking for and try to ensure that you can demonstrate these competencies in an exam.

Behavioural questions

Behavioural questions are intended to elicit information from you on how you would be likely to manage a range of real-world challenges. Whereas situational questions decipher how you would approach certain scenarios, and competency-based questions prove you have the skills required for the role, behavioural questions ascertain if you have the character traits one would expect of a professional and competent Building Control Surveyor.

These questions can touch on such aspects as your ability to work as part of a team, client-facing skills, adaptability, time management skills and more.

A behavioural question may, for example, require you to use your critical thinking skills to achieve compliance whilst supporting those you regulate.

How to answer: Demonstrate how you look for solutions for the greater good. Not just simplistic solutions that may not be of the greatest benefit to those you regulate.

All question types

Make sure you understand the question. Identify keywords and what it is asking you to do. Discuss? Evaluate? Compare? Outline?

Stick to the topic and answer the question that has been set. If you are asked specifically about one thing, do not go off naming everything else related to that just because you have revised it all.

During the assessment, always remember to PEE

Point. Evidence. Explanation.

The candidate must firstly make the **point**. The candidate should then develop and support it with specific **evidence** – like reference to clauses and tables within Approved Documents, reference to specific areas of the building regulations, etc. Finally, the candidate should tie the particular piece(s) of evidence to the initial point; for example, performing calculations based on the evidence identified in the Approved Documents in order to **explain** the suitability of your original point.

For instance, the assessment raises a question involving external air bricks to a suspended concrete ground floor. If you simply wrote “Guidance contained within Approved Document C paragraph 4.17 applies” that would be your point. The point that you want to convince someone of is that we need to apply the guidance contained within AD C.

Then you would need the evidence, you can draw your evidence from the case study and scenario as well as from the relevant Approved Documents. For example, you notice that airbricks are not visible around part of the perimeter of a dwelling because the ground level has been raised to create a ramped/level access to the entrance. Here we can see that there is a conflict between AD C and AD M4(1). What does M4(1) require to be provided for an accessible approach to the entrance and compare this to what has been mentioned in the question.

Finally, you tie back to the question by applying your point and evidence to the specific scenario. Indicate what options the contractor might have available to meet the guidance and satisfy either requirement C2 and/or M4(1). Can the path/ramp be altered to accommodate both access and floor ventilation? Can the guidance in AD C paragraph 4.19 be considered to determine if there remains sufficient air pathways? Can the path be altered to still provide access and free up any obstructed airbricks? Might the only option be to alter the airbricks by cutting out and reinstalling with telescopic ducting?

Finally...

Remember, you should only apply for an assessment against the competency band that best suits your current experience. The exam is only assessing you for the things that you do every day and is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your competence as a Building Control Surveyor.