

Why Insurers Require Marine Surveys

And What They Look For

Understanding the insurer's perspective can save you time, money, and the frustration of a declined policy or unexpected exclusions.

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If you've ever applied for marine insurance on a vessel of a certain age or value, you've almost certainly been asked to provide a survey report. For many boat owners — especially first-timers — this requirement comes as a surprise. Why should an insurer care about the physical condition of something they haven't seen?

The answer lies in how marine insurers assess risk. Unlike car insurance, where standard actuarial tables can reliably model probability, marine risk is highly individual. Two identical vessels of the same make and year can be in dramatically different condition depending on how they've been maintained, stored, and used. A survey closes that information gap.

01 Why insurers require surveys

Marine insurance is fundamentally a contract of utmost good faith — a legal principle known as *uberrimae fidei*. Both parties are expected to disclose all material facts. A survey is the insurer's mechanism for verifying the material facts relevant to the vessel's condition.








From the insurer's perspective, a survey serves three purposes: it establishes the vessel's insurable value, it identifies existing defects that could give rise to a claim, and it confirms the vessel is seaworthy enough to insure at all. Without a survey, the insurer is pricing risk blind — something underwriters are understandably reluctant to do on high-value assets like boats.

KEY PRINCIPLE

Insurers are not trying to find reasons to decline cover. They are trying to price risk accurately. A good survey helps them do that — and often results in better terms for owners of well-maintained vessels.

02 When a survey is required

Survey requirements vary between insurers, but the following thresholds are common triggers:

-  The vessel is over a certain age — commonly 10 or 15 years old
-  The agreed or market value exceeds a set threshold — often £15,000–£25,000
-  The vessel is to be used offshore or in specified cruising areas
-  The vessel has changed hands recently and no current survey exists
-  The vessel is of unusual construction — timber, ferro-cement, or cold-moulded
-  A previous survey report has expired — most insurers require one dated within 3–5 years
-  The insurer has concerns based on information already provided

Some policies also include periodic re-survey clauses, particularly for older or high-value vessels, requiring a fresh inspection every few years as a condition of continued cover.

03 Types of marine survey

Insurers typically specify which type of survey they require. The most common are:

<p>■</p> <p>Condition & valuation</p> <p>The most common type. Covers structural integrity, mechanical systems, safety equipment, and provides an insurable value. Required by most insurers.</p>	<p>■</p> <p>Out-of-water survey</p> <p>Focuses on the hull below the waterline. Often conducted during a haul-out. Frequently combined with a condition & valuation survey.</p>	<p>■</p> <p>Engine survey</p> <p>A specialist inspection of propulsion systems. May be required separately for high-power or high-value engine installations.</p>
<p>■</p> <p>Rig survey</p> <p>For sailing vessels, a specialist assessment of the mast, standing rigging, running rigging, and associated deck hardware.</p>	<p>■</p> <p>Specific defect survey</p> <p>Ordered when an insurer wants to investigate a particular reported issue — osmosis, structural damage, or a previous claim — more deeply.</p>	<p>■</p> <p>Sea trial</p> <p>A survey conducted while the vessel is underway. Assesses handling, propulsion, steering, and equipment performance under realistic conditions.</p>

04 What surveyors inspect

When an insurer reviews a survey, they are looking for a comprehensive assessment across several key categories. Here is what a thorough marine survey covers:

<p>HULL & STRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Hull plating or laminate integrity · Osmosis & moisture levels · Keel attachment & condition · Rudder stock & bearings · Stem & transom integrity · Through-hull fittings & seacocks 	<p>DECK & SUPERSTRUCTURE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Deck integrity & core condition · Hatches, ports & vents · Cleats, stanchions & chainplates · Cockpit drainage · Anchor & mooring arrangements · Guard rails & lifelines 	<p>MACHINERY & PROPULSION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Engine condition & hours · Cooling & exhaust systems · Fuel tanks, lines & filters · Shaft seals & P-brackets · Propeller condition · Gearbox & controls
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ELECTRICAL SYSTEMS	SAFETY EQUIPMENT	RIG & SAILS (SAILING)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Battery banks & charging · Shore power installation · Navigation lights · Bonding & corrosion protection · Bilge pump circuits · Electronics & VHF radio 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Life raft & service date · EPIRB registration & expiry · Flares & signalling · Fire extinguishers · Lifejackets & harnesses · First aid kit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · Mast step & partners · Shrouds, stays & toggles · Furling systems · Running rigging & blocks · Sail condition & UV damage · Boom vang & kicker

"An insurer reading a survey report is not looking for perfection — they are looking for honesty, completeness, and an absence of undisclosed material risk."

05 How findings affect your cover

The outcome of a survey influences your insurance policy in several ways. Understanding these outcomes helps you manage expectations and plan accordingly.

Favourable outcomes	Adverse outcomes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Full cover offered at applied-for value. Competitive premium reflecting low risk. Broad cruising area permissions. No special conditions or exclusions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cover conditional on specified repairs. Reduced insured value. Exclusions on particular systems. Elevated premium or declined cover.







The most common outcome is a set of conditions — repairs or upgrades the insurer requires before full cover is confirmed. These are typically based on Category 1 (safety-critical) findings and must usually be rectified within a specified timeframe, often 30–60 days of policy inception.

IMPORTANT

Failing to disclose known defects — even those not mentioned in a survey — can invalidate a claim under the principle of utmost good faith. Always be transparent with your insurer about the vessel's condition and history.

06 Preparing your vessel for an insurance survey

A well-prepared vessel is not just easier to survey — it signals to both the surveyor and the insurer that the boat has been properly maintained. Here's how to prepare:

-  Ensure the vessel is clean and uncluttered — the surveyor needs access to all areas, including bilges, lockers, and under-berth spaces
-  Gather all documentation: registration, previous surveys, engine service records, and equipment certificates
-  Check that safety equipment is present, accessible, and within date — flares, EPIRB, fire extinguishers, and life raft
-  Ensure the engine starts readily and all navigation lights function
-  Address any obvious minor defects you are already aware of — leaking seacocks, frayed wiring, corroded terminals
-  If a haul-out is required, arrange this in advance with the boatyard and confirm timing with the surveyor

SURVEYOR'S PERSPECTIVE

A surveyor who can access everything easily, with documentation to hand, is more likely to complete a thorough and positive report. Obstacles and missing records raise questions — even if nothing is actually wrong.

07 After the survey

Once the survey report is submitted to your insurer, the underwriter will review it and come back with one of several responses: full cover confirmation, conditional cover pending specified repairs, an amended offer at a different valuation or premium, or a decline.

If conditions are imposed, these will be listed in your policy schedule or an accompanying letter. It is essential that you arrange the specified work and provide evidence of completion — typically a receipt or written confirmation from the repairer — within the timeframe given. Failure to do so may mean your cover is suspended or voided.

For ongoing cover, keep a record of all maintenance work carried out following the survey. This demonstrates to your insurer that deficiencies were rectified and that the vessel continues to be properly maintained — which matters at renewal.

DO NOT IGNORE SURVEY CONDITIONS

If your insurer lists repair conditions and you do not complete them within the stated timeframe, any claim you make during that period — even on an apparently unrelated matter — may be declined. Always confirm completion in writing.

08 Common questions

Q Who pays for the survey — me or the insurer?

You do. The survey is your responsibility and cost, even when it is a requirement of the insurer. Some brokers can recommend accredited surveyors, but the fee is always payable by the vessel owner.

Q Can I use a survey I commissioned for a purchase?

Usually yes, provided it is recent enough — most insurers accept surveys dated within three to five years. The surveyor should be YBDSA or IIMS accredited, and the report must cover condition, valuation, and safety equipment. Check with your insurer before assuming a pre-purchase survey will be accepted.

Q What happens if the survey value differs from my asking price?

Insurers will typically insure to the lower of the agreed value and the surveyed value. If the survey comes in below what you paid or declared, your insurer may require you to reduce the insured value accordingly. Match the declared value to current market value rather than the original purchase price.

Q Does a passed survey guarantee my claim will be paid?

No. A survey establishes the condition at a point in time. If the vessel deteriorates after the survey and a loss occurs as a result — and you were aware of it — the insurer may still decline the claim. Ongoing maintenance and honest disclosure remain your responsibility throughout the policy period.

Q Can an insurer demand a survey mid-policy?

Yes, in some circumstances. If a vessel is involved in a significant incident, if you notify the insurer of a material change in the vessel's condition, or if a periodic re-survey clause is triggered, the insurer may require an updated survey as a condition of continued cover.

Q Are there vessels that cannot be insured regardless of survey?

Yes. Some vessels — particularly those with severe structural deterioration, unresolved osmosis, compromised fire safety systems, or histories of serious incidents — may be deemed uninsurable by mainstream underwriters. Specialist markets exist for difficult-to-place vessels, but premiums and conditions reflect the elevated risk.

Insure with confidence.

Commission your survey early, address any findings promptly, and keep documentation of all maintenance. A well-surveyed, well-maintained vessel is the best possible foundation for a straightforward insurance relationship.