

More inquiries and hearings to be held virtually in June

Continuing to decide planning appeals in a timely manner is crucial in supporting the nation's economic recovery. The recent [Written Ministerial Statement](#) laid in Parliament on 13 May outlined the planning system's vital role in delivering housing and economic growth. Our Inspectors and Casework teams have been working hard to continue to progress cases and issue decisions while our office is closed.

We have delivered decisions on just under 2500 cases since lockdown began. We have also been accelerating the work to implement virtual hearings and inquiries across all of our casework types. Further to our successful first virtual hearing on 11 May, and decision issued 27 May, we are now planning to hold at least another 20 hearings and inquiries and an additional 15 hearings for National Infrastructure projects in June.

Since 13 May when the restrictions were eased, we have restarted site visits where:

- the Inspector can visit the site safely under current physical distancing guidance; and
- the case requires the Inspector to visit the site in person in order to progress the case.

This has meant over 600 site visits programmed for May. Not being able to visit sites and hold public events until this time has clearly had an impact on our ability to deliver at our normal capacity and, consequently, is still impacting our ability to provide meaningful average appeal handling times to our customers. It will take some time for our service to return to normal and customers are likely to experience a slower service than we would like to provide.

Applying new technology to our work

We already have a programme of work in place to make better use of technology in how we work, including running events (hearings, examinations, inquiries) in a virtual way, using digital methods. The COVID-19 pandemic has substantially accelerated our work to do this.

There are two strands to our work. Firstly, cases where site visits may not be necessary and secondly, moving face to face events into a virtual environment.

Site visits

In our last update we highlighted that we are trialling how in some instances we can progress cases without a site visit. This might include prior approval

cases where the issue in dispute relates to the interpretation of the General Permitted Development Order or some enforcement appeals depending on the specific grounds lodged and the nature of the evidence.

To date 20 decisions have been issued following this process, and others to follow. However the choice to go down a 'no site visit required' route remains with the Inspector being satisfied that she or he has sufficient information to properly determine the appeal.

Virtual events

We have been scaling up the work to implement virtual events using digital tools in place of face to face events. We have prioritised case that we had postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We are learning from each event with the aim of making virtual events our standard option for the majority of events in future. This approach covers all hearings and inquiries for our different types of casework (including planning appeals, national infrastructure, local plans) that are currently held face to face. Our working definition of virtual includes the use of video technology and phone where necessary.

While social distancing measures remain in place, we will seek to run hearings and inquiries virtually in the first instance to keep our customers and employees safe and to minimise the potential for spreading the virus; and ensure that we keep our hearings and inquiries casework moving.

The implications of running virtual hearings and inquiries have been rigorously considered. As with face to face events, it can take several weeks to arrange and we must liaise with parties and others to agree dates and ensure everyone is able to participate. We are confident that we can maintain professional standards and the Franks Principles while running virtual hearings and inquiries.

The inspector will run the event in the normal way, but with participants invited to join via Microsoft Teams or by phone. Participants will receive details of any requirements, guidance and support, taking into account any representations received.

See our [latest detailed guidance for more information](#).

Next month we anticipate:

- 10 planning appeal hearings in June. We are also working on re-arranging the vast majority of all postponed planning hearings in June to take place as soon as possible in the following months.
- 8 postponed inquiries virtually in June, with the remaining ones to be re-arranged at the earliest opportunity
- 15 hearings being held across four [Nationally Significant Infrastructure projects](#) in June (and more in July). All of these are already notified on the respective project webpages for these schemes.
- One Local Plan hearing to take place via phone conference; one full

Local Plan examination to be conducted virtually in July.

Whilst we are progressing virtual events, this is not the end of face-to-face hearings and inquiries. Face-to-face events will continue to be part of our future once the current situation has passed.

For the latest information on casework arrangements in Wales please visit GOV.WALES.