

New appointments and a fresh focus on hearings for the Planning Inspectorate

The Planning Inspectorate has made three appointments to senior leadership posts, with all successful candidates coming from within the organisation.

They are:

- Sean Canavan – Director of Strategy
- Rachel Graham – Chief Digital and Information Officer
- Richard Schofield – Head of Planning Inspector Profession

Sean will take over the role of Director of Strategy from Christine Thorby who leaves the Planning Inspectorate at the end of this month.

Rachel Graham's new leadership role for digital and information has been created to reflect the increasing importance that data and digital continues to have in all aspects of the Planning Inspectorate's work including contributions to the reforms of the planning system.

As Head of Planning Inspector Profession, Richard, a highly experienced inspector, will lead on all professional development of inspectors, and he will be the main liaison with Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and other key stakeholders.

Sarah Richards, Chief Executive of The Planning Inspectorate, said:

"I am pleased that these are all internal promotions. These appointments reflect the impressive skills and expertise of our staff and the benefits of nurturing and developing talent across the Planning Inspectorate. The knowledge and expertise of each will be invaluable in continuing the work of the Executive Team and delivering our priorities in future."

The appointments come at an exciting time as delivery of the revised [five-year strategic plan](#) continues and with important work taking place currently to improve key areas including the following:

Digital Improvements

Appeals Service

We are working on digital improvements to the planning appeal journey so that it is easier, faster and more cost effective to appeal a planning decision.

We have been piloting the service for householder appeals with three local planning authorities (see our [previous blog post](#)). This has provided useful data and we are now looking to expand the pilot from late April/early May when we will include further types of planning appeals with a selected group of Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and enable the service to be accessed

via GOV.UK

This is a big step forward as it enables us to increase the number of appeals being submitted via the new service meaning we learn quicker about what works and what needs improving. This is critical not only for improving the service we offer to customers but so that we can use that feedback when developing the appeal submission process for all our other types of appeals; work that is planned for the next 6 months.

Applications Service

The Applications Service covers any application dealt with by the Planning Inspectorate and the work to modernise our applications service has been progressing well. The majority of applications are National Infrastructure planning applications, with other applications including Common Land, Drought Orders and Permits, Compulsory Purchase Orders, and Necessary Wayleaves.

The National Infrastructure service is the first of our applications services being developed. We are planning to go live with a first public pilot in early April 2022 with a new 'Register to have your say' service. This will streamline the service to deliver value to users and bring us one step closer to our vision of "Making the National Infrastructure Consenting process inclusive, efficient and understandable for everyone."

Our performance: improving and a new focus on hearings

During the second half of 2021 we focused on proposals for national infrastructure, examining local plans and deciding more appeal cases requiring hearings or inquiries. This work is most likely to be of greatest community interest or greatest economic significance as the country rebuilds its economy after the pandemic.

- we recently submitted reports to the Secretary of State for a new power station at Sizewell and for improvements to the A47 between Blofield and North Burlingham in Norfolk
- we continue to receive new Local Plans for examination, including the plan for the Manchester Combined Authority area
- we have closed more than 700 cases through inquiry in the last year and reduced the number of cases awaiting an inquiry by nearly a quarter

Over the last few months, we have successfully held more site visits, hearings and inquiries than in previous months. We are now deciding more cases than we are receiving. Our decision speeds will improve as our overall caseload falls.

We are now implementing further improvements for planning appeals decided after a hearing. We know our decisions on appeals requiring hearings have, for quite some time, taken longer than our customers expect. Although we have made progress in reducing the overall number of live appeals needing hearings, the average time it takes to decide these cases is still around a

year.

From April 2022 we will be aiming to decide these appeals in an end-to-end time of no longer than 24 weeks, using many of the approaches we used to improve the inquiry process after the Rosewell Review. We will:

- validate hearing appeal casework within five working days of submission
- start the appeal and assign an inspector within a week of validation
- set out and require all parties to follow the timetable from the start
- have a stronger focus on the timely submission of evidence and documents by parties, including agreed statements of common ground and draft developer contribution/S106 agreements
- hold the hearing within 10 to 14 weeks of the start date
- engage with parties early in the programme. The inspector will identify if elements can be addressed through written representations and what elements require discussion in the hearing itself

We will continue to progress existing appeals on their current timetables. These improvements for new appeals will provide much needed certainty, with the appeal process being an essential part of a fair planning system.