

[News story: Improving service to customers: The recruitment drive and a better online service](#)

With the aim of meeting our customers' expectations in the time we take to process appeals, we are making improvements to ensure we provide our services in the most efficient way.

Whilst feedback from customers who use our service the most, predominantly appellants and local planning authorities (LPAs), shows that they highly rate our quality and rigor in deciding cases, 9 in 10 think we are not quick enough from submission to decision. The feedback also shows that progress of appeals is difficult to track with main parties needing more information about the progress of cases.

The [recent independent review by Bridget Rosewell CBE](#) says the average time to decide a planning appeal inquiry could be reduced from 47 to 26 weeks. The report made 22 recommendations. These range from a more proactive approach by the Planning Inspectorate to managing the inquiry process appointing inspectors earlier, through to more active case management and better technology solutions such as a new online portal. The recent recruitment effort should also allow more resources to be focused on processing important inquiry casework. We welcome the findings of the report. Bringing our performance on track is an absolute necessity and we wanted to share some of the work going on behind the scenes to improve our service.

What has caused performance issues?

There are several factors that have contributed to this. Demand has increased by around 5% each year across all areas of casework, exacerbated by 1350 'telephone kiosk' cases over the financial year 2017/18.

Demand for our more complex infrastructure and local plan work has also increased and will continue to do so this year. Supply, which is directly linked to the number of inspectors, has been impacted by budget restraints, coupled with difficulties in recruiting inspectors, and generally more complex casework.

Currently it is also difficult for us to accurately predict future demand effectively and therefore manage the number of people needed to carry out the work. The absence of more sophisticated management information has hindered our ability to understand the situation, make effective decisions and predict future performance.

The recruitment drive

One of the priorities in addressing the backlog is our recruitment drive to

employ more planning professionals.

As the UK's largest employer of planners, the Inspectorate handles a wide array of planning matters from section 78 planning appeals, enforcement appeals through to specialist case work such as rights of way orders, local plan examinations and applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIPs).

However, our most experienced inspectors are in high demand. Complex inquiries into large scale developments or local plan examinations can take many weeks to conclude. The same 'band' of inspectors are also appointed to panels to examine applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects.

With more appeals arriving daily requiring technical expertise, the demand for our services has outstripped the supply for some time resulting in both a backlog of cases awaiting the appointment of an inspector and elongated casework processing times.

Part of the solution is to employ more skilled inspectors. Since the start of 2018, we have recruited 53 new inspectors and this figure is due to rise following an extensive recruitment campaign at the end of last year. This intake represents 16% of our current pool of inspectors. New inspectors, who typically join at band 1, where they will decide all but the most complex cases, undergo intensive and on-going training. Working remotely in all regions of England and Wales, they are assigned to cases at the outset with mentoring and quality assurance provided by experienced inspectors.

Our latest external [recruitment drive](#) aims to bring over 60 inspectors at Band 1 and a further 15 inspectors at band 2. We are also promoting a large cohort of Band 1 inspectors to Band 2. Extending the pool of highly skilled inspectors whom we can appoint for NSIP applications is vital to ensure examinations are resourced adequately.

Training is fundamental to equip inspectors with the latest policy knowledge so they can develop and lead on more complex casework. We place great importance to ongoing training programmes which we provide through workshops, training events and digital based guidance.

Inspectors attend the Inspectorate's Annual Training Event

Our performance improvement strategy also includes contracting the services of non-salaried inspectors (NSIs) who provide an important and flexible on-demand service. Our latest procurement drive at the end of last year brought the team of NSIs up to 84 from around 40 and, having recently received training, are now working on cases.

Despite the steady stream of new recruits joining our organisation we have, in the past, struggled to recruit the number we need to stay on top of demand. One of the significant challenges we face is recruiting from a finite pool of qualified planners in the public and private sectors. Consequently, we need to think creatively and differently about how we can source our

inspectors of tomorrow. We have therefore embarked on a new model through appeals planning officers (APOs).

APOs, like inspectors, work remotely and perform a similar role but are assigned to the lower level more straight forward planning and enforcement appeals that follow the written representation procedure. Although they do not make the decision on the case (this is taken by an inspector, based on a recommendation) the role provides an excellent career development opportunity for less experienced planners and to benefit from the depth of experience in the organisation.

Like inspectors, APOs will receive an extensive training programme that will develop their skills and knowledge of the planning system to either become an inspector or to further their careers outside the Planning Inspectorate. Our recent recruitment efforts yielded 82 applications for 20 positions.

Better online service

An important aspect of providing a better service is the work to redevelop the Appeals Casework Portal.

The Portal is the primary way the various parties in an appeal submit information to the Planning Inspectorate but it has a number of key issues:

- **One in three appeals we receive have documents missing or are invalid.** This causes considerable delays while our staff follow up with appellants to obtain the missing files we need to start the appeal. The existing Portal needs updating to ensure we effectively capture all the information on submission and help people to "get it right first time".
- **Difficulty to track appeal progress.** One of the key issues appellants raise is the inability to find out where their appeal is in the process. Whilst the existing Portal provides an indication of key stages, we want to provide better notifications to give service users greater transparency on their appeals.
- **Digital service standards.** Whilst the current Portal has seen a number of developments over the years, the way government delivers services has moved on with greater emphasis on creating a better user experience through digital. The new Portal is being developed, and will operate, to the [digital service standards](#) outlined by the Government Digital Service to offer a better online experience for customers.

On top of this, there are aspects of the process that are completed outside the Portal which causes an administrative burden and frustrates users. An example is the questionnaire we ask LPAs to complete for each appeal.

The prototype website we are building is based on extensive user research and testing involving the input of planning agents, unrepresented appellants,

LPAs and interested parties. Our team work closely with these groups to ensure the prototype meets user needs and that we can move into a beta phase with a clear direction.

Feedback indicated that users want clearer guidance when submitting appeals and the new Portal will contain more succinct on-page guidance. Our team of content writers are testing it with the user groups to ensure it meets the need and users get it right first time.

Appellants – getting it right first time

The structure of the appeal submission form is crucial to helping users get it right first time. Inspired by the 'Task List' in other digital services across government, we received positive feedback from users on this method for collecting data. The new form makes it easier for users fill in different sections of the form in the order that they wish to.

As the appeals process is both lengthy and complex, users felt a timeline showcasing the progress of their appeal would benefit them. This applied to both one-time users (unrepresented appellants) to help them navigate the process, as well as LPAs who are likely to be managing multiple appeals at once.□

The eventual design of the timeline was inspired by the design patterns used in the HMRC Self Assessment Tax Return service□.

Local Planning Authorities – understanding my appeals

As we engaged with LPAs, who handle multiple appeals at any one time, we understood their need to be able to quickly understand the progress of appeals.

Introducing the timeline to the LPA 'case view', as well as clearly laying out key appeal information, enables LPAs to quickly see their available actions relating to this appeal.

The questionnaire is one of the most important evidence collecting devices the Inspectorate uses and as such it's vital it is easy to complete for LPAs.

By ensuring that evidence is clearly requested only when needed, as well as simplifying the language used, we can ensure the process is not overly complex for LPAs.

(Please note that the screenshots above show the prototypes in development and is indicative of the look and feel of the site. The live product may not look identical to this.)

Introducing the new service

We are aiming to launch a trial of this new service in Summer before rolling out to all planning appeals by the end of the year.

Investment to improve

Our recruitment and online service improvements are realistic and achievable but investment is critical in any upcoming projects and developments aiding improvement. In November, our sponsor department, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), brokered a principle investment subject to the 2019-20 budget being finalised. Whilst MHCLG has given us the go ahead to proceed, we still need to rely on the final investment agreement going through before committing to all our ambitions.

The investment is about improving our performance across all casework areas and then, when achieved, staying on top of it. Critically, it also allows us to invest in improved management information and a Strategic Workforce Planning capability. Put simply this will allow us to better predict and manage our future work as well as giving the public better access to the data we hold.

If you'd like to hear more about our service improvements and related news then sign up for GOV.UK notifications or follow us on Twitter and LinkedIn.