

# Planning Inspectorate casework continues as first pilot digital hearing to take place in May

With the UK into its sixth week of lockdown measures, the Planning Inspectorate's services continue to operate but the progress of some casework is affected. This update explains what you can expect from our service over the short and medium term.

## **What to expect from our service in England**

We are continuing to issue decisions where we can and 1,625 have been issued across all case types since lockdown restrictions started. Not being able to visit sites and hold public events has, however, clearly had an impact on our ability to process cases and the time it is taking to reach a decision.

As [explained in our guidance](#), to limit the spread of the Coronavirus we have postponed site visits up to the middle of May, as well as most hearing and inquiry physical events where these would otherwise have taken place in May. Our case officers have notified parties of event postponement until further notice. We will be issuing updated information on arrangements for postponed events as soon as practicable in line with latest government advice.

We have been able to progress cases where:

- the physical event was concluded prior to lockdown restrictions;
- no physical event is required to make a decision; or
- a physical event is still further in the future and preparatory activity can continue (e.g. via telephone case conferences).

New cases continue to arrive at normal levels and are being registered and processed as far as possible. As at 23 April, there were 9,591 open cases. In the last three weeks we have seen the number of open cases rise by 337. See our [latest statistical release for more data on casework performance](#).

## **Implementing digital events**

Ensuring we can continue to provide our service is important to the planning sector and economy – to provide certainty on planning decisions.

If you have [read our recent updates](#), you may be aware of the work taking place behind the scenes to implement digital events. These are hearings and inquiries held via telephone or video conferencing.

Whilst this had been planned for later in the year to build on the successes of the Rosewell review, we have prioritised implementing digital events to progress cases during this unprecedented time. The latest on this work includes:

- The first fully 'digital' hearing is due to take place on 11 May.
- We are preparing for additional cases to be heard by digital hearings/inquiries in May/early June with a view to scaling up digital events further over June/July.
- We are assessing postponed cases to establish whether they can proceed by digital, traditional or a 'hybrid' approach, in order to re-arrange these in due course accordingly.
- A trial of 'virtual site visits' is underway involving thirteen Inspectors.
- Five local advisory visits have taken place remotely (critical for helping Local Planning Authorities to progress local plans and reduce the length of examinations).

We must ensure this approach works and maintains the standards of fairness, public access and inclusion for the four main groups involved: the appellant/agent, the Local Planning Authority (LPA), the Inspector and any interested parties such as local communities. Getting this right will provide an improved model which works now and after the current crisis and ensures we continue to issue fair and robust decisions and recommendations.

Naturally, there are challenges to overcome such as access considerations and capacity among local planning authority staff who may be stretched during the COVID-19 outbreak. We are engaging with the Law Society, National Infrastructure Planning Association (NIPA), Planning and Environment Bar Association (PEBA), Planning Officer's Society and Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) on this work. We are also learning from the local government experiences of running public digital meetings.

Following the current trials our aim is to:

Three months: Roll out good practice widely both in terms of number of events as well as types of casework covered, with supporting training, templates and communications.

Six months: Develop the capability to conduct fully digital and hybrid events fairly and robustly across all casework areas and for most cases.

## **What to expect from our service in Wales**

Our [latest advice for casework arrangements in Wales is available on GOV.Wales](#).

## **Can I still submit an appeal?**

Yes, you can submit your appeal via the [Appeals Casework Portal](#). Whilst we can still receive hard copy post, we are presently experiencing substantial delays. We recommend to utilise electronic methods for sending any documents wherever possible to ensure timely receipt.