

Site visits to recommence and more digital case events planned

With the UK government now refining plans to move the country out of lockdown, we are scaling up our capacity to progress a greater number of cases.

In this update, we outline plans to restart site visits and an update on the work to implement digital events.

Continuing to decide planning appeals in a timely manner is crucial to the nation's economic recovery. Our teams have been working hard to keep casework moving during this challenging period. Since mid-March, we have issued more than 2000 appeal and other case decisions, published 13 local plan letters and continued to process nationally significant infrastructure project applications.

Despite having put a halt to site visits and public events that would contravene social distancing regulations, inspectors continue to make fair and robust decisions where they are satisfied they have the evidence necessary to do so. They are, and have been, deciding appeals:

- through written representations without face to face evidence;
- on a pilot basis, without visiting the site; and
- where possible progressing cases through holding telephone case conferences.

However, there are still many complex live cases that require a hearing or inquiry to gather evidence and it is our priority to ensure we can progress these as soon as possible.

Not being able to visit sites and hold public events has clearly had an impact on our ability to deliver at our normal capacity and, consequently, is impacting our ability to produce average appeal handling times. We are currently reviewing how we present these statistics to accurately reflect the Inspectorate's performance in terms of length of time for cases to reach conclusion.

Site visits

As confirmed in the written ministerial statement laid in parliament today, we will begin to visit sites providing:

- 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.

If possible, inspectors will undertake site visits alone. If this is not

possible, and access needs to be provided by the appellant, we will contact the parties directly on how to conduct the site visit safely and adhere to government guidance on physical distancing.

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.

Around 60 cases are currently proceeding in a pilot which uses photograph or video evidence instead of a site visit. This is subject to the Inspector being satisfied that she or he has sufficient information to properly determine the appeal.

Digital events

In [our previous update](#), we outlined the work to implement digital events. These are hearings and inquiries for different types of casework (e.g. planning appeals, national infrastructure, local plans etc) held via telephone or video conferencing.

This work, originally planned for implementation later in the year, has been accelerated in response to the urgent need to progress cases where:

- the Inspector may need to ask questions or hear cross examination for complex issues;
- there is high level of public interest and a public event needs to be held; and
- where the legislation governing particular casework requires such an event to be held in given circumstances (e.g. national infrastructure and local plan examinations).

The first fully digital hearing took place on Monday 11 May as a pilot. We hope that at least a further 20 examinations, hearings and inquiries will follow during May and June. By learning from preceding cases, we aim to scale up digital events to include high profile and contentious cases in the following months.

We are currently working with two local authorities to trial holding the local plan hearing sessions as digital events (by video/telephone conference) and, if the pilot is successful, our aim is to be able to offer this, where possible, for all current examinations.

We recognise the importance of continuing to hold public events, it is clearly also vital that we ensure all parties can have confidence in the process. Any changes we implement in terms of how we run events during this public health emergency need to be sustainable once the emergency has passed.

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