

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.

Students in England encouraged to apply now for student finance

News story

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Students in England are being encouraged to apply for student finance as soon as possible to ensure their finances are in place for the new academic year.

That's the message from the Student Loans Company (SLC) which has ensured that the application service has remained open to students as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

From this week, SLC is contacting returning students to remind them to reapply for their next year's student finance before 19 June. New students are being asked to submit their applications before 22 May 2020. They don't need a confirmed place on a course to apply, they can use their first choice of course and update their application later if this changes.

The easiest way to apply is online at gov.uk/studentfinance and SLC has produced the following guide and a video to help with the process: [student finance quickguide](#)

[How to Apply](#)

There is also a dedicated resource for parents and partners who are supporting applications here <https://studentfinance.campaign.gov.uk/>

Derek Ross, SLC's Executive Director of Operations said: "We recognise that students will have much to consider at the moment. However, for those going to University this autumn, it is important that they make applying for student finance a priority. SLC has worked hard to ensure the continuity of the application service throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and the message is

still that students should get their applications in ASAP to ensure that their student finance is in place for the new academic year.”

Student Finance England has more information on the online student community forum, [the student room](#) and also on a dedicated area on the [UCAS website](#)

This information is designed to help new students and their parents find out everything they need to know about the application process. Students can also follow SFE at [facebook.comSFEEngland](#), [twitter.com/SF_England](#) or [youtube/SFEFILM](#) to keep up with all the latest news alerts.

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IOM in Italy to support UK nationals who want to regulate their status

Supporting UK Nationals with the necessary local procedures to obtain and maintain their right to be resident in Italy after the end of the transition period. This is the objective of a new programme launched by the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) with funding from the UK Government. The British Embassy in Rome will be supporting IOM as it carries out this important work. The programme is part of a wider initiative through which the UK government and IOM aim to reach and provide assistance to approximately 30,000 British citizens in Germany, France, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovakia and Spain.

Laurence Hart, Director for the IOM Mediterranean Coordination Office, said:

We are delighted to be able to take forward this extremely useful and valuable activity here in Italy.

IOM will facilitate access to the necessary information about residency requirements for UK Nationals in Italy. We will also provide direct support on completing paperwork for all those who might be having difficulties in taking forward the required procedures introduced here.

Information will be made available on dedicated webpages on both the IOM and British Embassy in Italy websites (see [Living in Guide](#)). IOM will also be offering help to individuals with specific issues, especially those with chronic disease, disability or those experiencing language or technical barriers.

This initiative” underlines Hart “will provide direct support to UK Nationals, to ensure they avoid finding themselves with an irregular status in Italy. It will also help key Italian institutions streamline the completion of the necessary paperwork.

In order to reach UK Nationals in Italy, it will be important to circulate relevant information at the local level, with the support of the network of town halls, as registry offices will play a fundamental role in the procedure for UK Nationals to regulate their status.

IOM’s work will complement the UK government’s strategy, which includes the allocation of £3 million in support of organisations helping UK Nationals across several European countries. This will assist UK Nationals with bureaucratic and administrative procedures that are required to regulate their status in Europe.

British Ambassador to Italy Jill Morris commended:

We welcome IOM’s new service for UK nationals to help them regulate their status here in Italy, so they can continue to enjoy their rights after the end of the transition period.

The new programme will be launched later this month and will run for 12 months, i.e. until 31 March 2021.

The measures Italy has put in place in response to the coronavirus means that UK nationals should not try to register their residency at this time. IOM stands ready to support UK nationals in registering with their local town hall when restrictions are lifted.

For more info:

[IOM](#): Flavio Di Giacomo, Press Office, tel: +39.347.0898996; email: fdigiaco@iom.int or iomrome@iom.int.

[New free online learning platform to boost workplace skills](#)

A new [online learning platform](#) to help boost the nation’s skills while people are staying at home, has been launched today (28 April) by Education Secretary Gavin Williamson.

Free courses are available through a new online platform hosted on the gov.uk website, called [The Skills Toolkit](#). The new platform gives people access to free, high-quality digital and numeracy courses to help build up their skills, progress in work and boost their job prospects.

These are the skills which are highly valued by employers and sought after in a wide range of jobs. With more people expected to be working and studying remotely in the coming months, the platform offers a great opportunity to learn new skills to help to get ahead online and gain the knowledge we'll all need for the future. The platform also offers employees who have been furloughed an opportunity to keep up their skills development while they are at home.

Courses on offer cover a range of levels, from everyday maths and tools for using email and social media more effectively at work to more advanced training. Individuals will be able to access courses helping them to create great online content developed by the University of Leeds and the Institute of Coding, to understand the Fundamentals of Digital Marketing from Google Digital Garage and to learn how to code for data analysis from the Open University. All courses are online and flexible, so people can work through them at their own pace.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

I know how difficult the recent months have been and the huge changes the coronavirus has brought on the daily lives of us all.

The high-quality and free to access courses on offer on our new online learning platform, The Skills Toolkit, will help those whose jobs have been affected by the outbreak, and people looking to boost their skills while they are staying at home, protecting the NHS and saving lives.

I want businesses to encourage their furloughed employees to use The Skills Toolkit to improve their knowledge, build their confidence and support their mental health so they have skills they need to succeed after the coronavirus outbreak.

Digital Secretary Oliver Dowden said:

The impact of Covid-19 has shown how important digital skills are – both for work and other aspects of our lives. Technology is going to play a hugely important role in our economic recovery and this new platform will help ensure everyone is able to improve their digital skills and take advantage of the opportunities ahead.

[The Skills Toolkit](#) is designed to help people gain new skills while they are staying at home and boost their confidence. The courses have been selected on the advice of experts and leading employers to make sure they meet the needs

of business, not just for today but in the future. This is just a first step towards assisting with the longer-term recovery to boost employability across the country, helping people to build up the skills employers need during time spent at home.

Employers are also encouraged to use [The Skills Toolkit](#) to help to support and develop furloughed employees who are interested in learning from home.

Matthew Fell, CBI Chief UK Policy Director said:

Online learning is a great way for people to upgrade their skills at any time, but never more so than during a lockdown.

The toolkit's heavy emphasis on the skills that businesses need are welcome.

Maths and digital skills are highly prized by employers, so for those who take the chance to upskill they can help improve their job prospects and career progression. I'd encourage all businesses to make their staff aware of this learning opportunity.

Julian David, CEO of techUK said:

techUK is pleased to see Government taking an active role in signposting and motivating the public to take advantage of the digital skills training industry offers, techUK has long advocated for a move in this direction. Digital skills will be crucial to the future of the UK economy and our recovery from the COVID crisis.

techUK is passionate about ensuring everyone has access resources to improve their skills and retrain at any age and at all skill levels and we expect this initiative to be a great start on the journey to upskilling Britain.

Simon Nelson, CEO of FutureLearn, said:

At FutureLearn our mission has always been to transform access to education and we are proud to be working with the Department for Education to deliver on that shared vision. We hope that the free digital skills courses included within the Skills Toolkit, which were built in partnership with Accenture, the Institute of Coding, and the University of Leeds, will bring practical and accessible support to people across the country, and ensure that individuals and businesses are able to access the skills and training opportunities they need to keep thriving and moving forward, not just during this challenging period, but beyond it.

Helen Milner, Chief Executive of Good Things Foundation said:

It's at times like this that people start to think about the skills they might want for the future.

With 11.9 million people in the UK still without the essential digital skills for life and work, from adding an email attachment to two-step security verification, we're delighted to be helping the nation learn and gain confidence through our free Learn My Way online courses and Make It Click directory.

David Meads, Chief Executive UK & Ireland, Cisco said:

The pandemic has escalated the need to challenge inequities and drive inclusivity, so the public sector, education providers, businesses, charities and communities can safely and securely embrace digital ways of working.

The Skills Tool Kit is a step towards providing equal access to opportunity and ensuring we develop diverse talent and skills that meet the needs of society today – and in the future.

Nick Williams, Transformation Director, Lloyds Banking Group said:

Now more than ever we're really happy to share our Lloyds Bank Academy digital skills as part of this important Government and industry collaboration. Providing practical support to help more people, small businesses and charities across Britain build the confidence they need to adapt their skills and aspirations has come into even sharper focus. We're all learning new ways of doing things during these challenging times, and whatever we can do to support others makes great sense to us.

Professor Tim Blackman, Vice-Chancellor of The Open University said:

Online learning with The Open University allows anyone, whatever their educational background, to gain new skills and improve their knowledge in a subject, ready for when they return to work. Our world leading expertise and capability in online teaching shapes our free, short courses on our OpenLearn platform. Learners can start at any time and study at their own convenience, balancing learning with other responsibilities, especially in these unprecedented times.

Rachid Hourizi, Director of the Institute of Coding said:

We are delighted to be part of government's Skills Toolkit. The Institute of Coding was created with support from the Department

for Education to make digital skills education available to a larger and more diverse group of people. To do this, we work with our partners to produce a variety of courses, including some that are short, online and free. Developed with input from industry, the Institute of Coding courses in The Skills Toolkit enable you to access learning when it suits you, gain the skills employers are looking for, and learn useful information for your life and career during this challenging period.

[New guarantee on death in service benefits for frontline health and care staff during pandemic](#)

- New life assurance scheme launched for eligible frontline health and care workers during the coronavirus pandemic
- Families of eligible workers who die from coronavirus in the course of their frontline essential work will receive a £60,000 payment
- Scheme will cover frontline NHS staff and social care workers in England
- Funding will also be provided to devolved administrations to support similar schemes in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

The families of health and care workers on the frontline in England will benefit from a new life assurance scheme during the pandemic, developed after discussions with health and social care unions.

The scheme recognises the increased risk faced by staff during the crisis and will cover coronavirus related deaths of workers in frontline health and adult and children's social care roles during the outbreak. It will cover staff who provide hands-on personal care for people who have contracted coronavirus or work in health or care settings where the virus is present.

Bereaved family members will receive a £60,000 lump sum worth roughly twice the average pensionable pay for NHS staff, with the cost met by the government.

This will cover full, part-time or locum NHS and public health workers, including GPs, dentists, retired staff and second and final year students taking up paid frontline roles.

Within social care, the scheme will cover employees of publicly funded care homes, home care, directly employed carers including personal assistants and frontline child and family social workers.

The scheme is aimed at those who die from coronavirus during the course of

their essential and lifesaving work. This includes those providing direct care as well as cleaners and porters who continue to carry out vital duties in these care environments.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

“Nothing can make up for the tragic loss of a loved one during this pandemic. We owe a huge debt to those who die in service to our nation and are doing everything we can to protect them.

“Financial worries should be the last thing on the minds of their families so in recognition of these unprecedented circumstances we are expanding financial protection to NHS and social care workers delivering publicly funded care on the frontline.

“We will continue to strive night and day to provide them with the support and protection they need and deserve to keep them safe as they work tirelessly to save lives.”

Employers will be asked to initiate claims on behalf of the individual’s families and claims will be verified and processed by the NHS Business Services Authority, who will work with employers to ensure claims are handled swiftly and sensitively.

- The scheme will cover frontline staff in England, but the devolved administrations will receive funding through the Barnett formula. Wales is implementing the same scheme and arrangements are being considered in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
 - The scheme is time-limited, providing cover for the duration of the pandemic. This is measured as the period for which the NHS workforce provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 are in force (which took effect on 25 March) but claims for deaths occurring before this will be considered. At the conclusion of the emergency response, the Secretary of State will give notice to close the scheme. The coverage of the scheme is broadly drawn across health and care sector employers given the variety of roles and locations, but eligibility is work-related.
1. For the NHS and public health, frontline staff employed by:
 - statutory NHS bodies: Trusts, Special Health Authorities, Clinical Commissioning Groups and NHS England/Improvement
 - GP and dental practices (including GP or dental contractors and GP locums)
 - Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) arm’s length bodies, including Public Health England
 - wider non-NHS organisations who provide NHS-funded services and functions including commissioned services and outsourced services
 - organisations delivering public health grant funded services
 2. For adult and children’s social care: all employees of local authorities, care home providers for children and adults, domiciliary care home providers and directly employed carers including personal assistants where some of the funding is public for the care of the service users.