

# Virtual events continue to deliver for customers

Our [average handling times for August have now been published](#) and today we have published [updated guidance on site visits, hearings, inquiries and events](#), reflecting the latest advice issued by UK Government for England in response to the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19). We are continuing to conduct site visits with precautions in place and are running our events virtually. We have increased the number of virtual events across all casework areas which includes Inquiries and Hearings for appeals, local plans and Nationally Significant Infrastructure Project Examinations.

## Virtual Events

Keeping casework moving is our priority. Holding Examinations, Hearings and Inquiries (which would previously have been held face-to-face) virtually has allowed us to continue with running these events whilst making it possible for all interested parties to participate.

We stopped carrying out physical events in March in response to Coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions, running our first virtual Hearing on 11 May.

Between June and August 2020, we had 71 cases that involved virtual events, and by the end of this month (September) we expect 64 further cases will have been delivered via virtual events. We anticipate to be scheduling even more cases for virtual delivery per month from October onwards.

Hearings for local plan examinations have now been held virtually, mostly hosted by the Local Planning Authority (LPA) to whom we are most grateful. This includes the South Oxfordshire local plan examination where it is said over 4,600 people viewed the proceedings, streamed online. It is also hoped that the first trial of blended (part face-to-face and part virtual) local plan hearings and inquiries will take place in the next few weeks, once again hosted by the relevant Local Planning Authorities (LPAs).

We are ensuring virtual events are run in as fair and robust a way as possible and have been working with our stakeholders, including Planning and Environmental Bar Association (PEBA), National Infrastructure Planning Association (NIPA), Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and The Law Society to identify and test the process. Our Inspectors have also been making use of the flexibilities brought in as part of the new Business and Planning Act. Restrictions are likely to continue for some time while the pandemic continues. Holding virtual events will continue as our standard practice in England for now, as it allows us to plan events both safely and reliably. Face-to-face Hearings and Inquiries will continue to be part of our future, and the forthcoming trials will inform how 'blended' virtual and face-to-face events develop, subject of course to the public health situation permitting them.

A new explanatory video guide to participating in Planning Inspectorate hosted virtual events is now available on our [virtual events guidance page](#).

## Keeping appeal casework moving

Over the last few months we have been issuing between 1150-1400 decisions a month which we anticipate could rise in October. For comparison, pre-pandemic we were issuing typically 1500-1750 decisions a month. [See the latest Planning Inspectorate Statistics](#).

Shortly after the lockdown in March, we removed the average appeal times on our 'appeals: how long they take' web page. As site visits and other events were postponed during March, April and part of May 2020, publishing average times would not have provided much meaningful information to our customers on how long a case can take to be decided.

However, as we've continued to progress our casework through the summer, we have now started publishing average times for delivering decisions again. These are the [average times from the previous month \(August\)](#) measured from the time we have received all the information we need from a customer to begin the appeal process ('valid') to the time a decision is issued. The appeal will 'start' later when an inspector is allocated, but all our performance information explains the total time we take, including the period before an inspector is allocated.

The average times are higher in comparison to previous months prior to the CV-19 pandemic, as we had postponed site visits and events, despite progressing as much casework via Written Representations as possible.

That said, we recognise that our customers need the answer to 'how long does an appeal take?' and that publishing average times, while offering an approximation, isn't ideal.

As a result, we're currently reviewing our approach to presenting statistics – including the use of average times for appeals – to ensure they are open, accurate and meet our customers' needs. When this is completed, we will produce official statistics which accurately reflect the Inspectorate's performance, including the length of time cases take to reach conclusion.

## Responding to local restrictions

We continue to monitor and respond to the latest government advice on keeping safe and reducing the spread of Coronavirus (COVID-19). Safety of our customers and staff is our highest priority. Today we have published a further update to our guidance for customers (dated 28 September) reflecting the latest advice from UK government.

Our casework covers the whole of England and Wales and as such we recognise that our customers may be subject to local restrictions to reduce the spread of the virus. In these situations, our Inspectors will adhere to local regulations and restrictions, rescheduling site visits if required.

For the latest information on casework arrangements in Wales please visit [GOV.WALES](http://GOV.WALES).

## **Use our online service to submit an appeal**

Customers wishing to submit an appeal should use our online service, the [Appeals Casework Portal](#), in the first instance.

All appeal and other documents should be submitted online or by email. This ensures that appeals are processed quickly. We have made provision for a limited number of staff to collect post sent to our offices. Documents sent to us by post must be scanned and then sent to the relevant casework team causing significant delay. We hope our customers understand the need to keep our staff safe and support us by using our online services.