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Chief Planning Officers in England

Public Rights of Way Leads in England

21 January 2022

Dear Chief Planning Officer or Public Rights of Way Lead,

Covid-19: Please take necessary steps to ensure that your organisation has the right plans in place for both in-person and virtual hearings and inquiries

I wrote to you on 9 December to explain we would be returning to mainly virtual hearings and inquiries following the Prime Minister's announcement of additional measures to restrict the spread of the virus. Thank you for helping to keep casework moving through this latest period of virus control measures.

The Prime Minister has now announced an end to the 'Plan B' additional measures to limit the spread of the virus.

Consequently, from today **newly organised hearings and inquiries** will be returning to the way of running events that worked very effectively from 13 September through to 12 December 2021. In summary:

- hearings and inquiries are arranged by local planning authorities and order making authorities (except for national infrastructure where the applicant is the organiser)
- hearings and inquiries are entirely in person, entirely virtual or a mix of the two
- where participants (including the Inspector) need to present their evidence or participate virtually this will need to be facilitated by the local planning authority, order making authority or national infrastructure applicant arranging the hearing or inquiry
- where in-person events or elements are planned, the local planning authority, order making authority or national infrastructure applicant arranging the event must be prepared for the hearing or inquiry to be held fully virtually at short notice and without postponement. That might be because pandemic restrictions change or the circumstances of key parties change such that they need to take part virtually, for example. All participants should be aware this might occur.

In practice this means some hearings and inquiries will be wholly in-person, some will be wholly virtual, and some will be a mixture of the two. Where a participant needs to take part virtually it is expected that the need is facilitated by the event arranger. That can mean an individual watching or giving evidence virtually, through to the whole event being virtual, as all events were during the lockdowns.

Where a hearing or inquiry is already organised as being fully virtual it will generally continue as planned to avoid unnecessary confusion and effort. However, there may be cases where the specific needs of a party or parties mean the Inspector decides it is appropriate to introduce in-person elements and that the importance of doing so outweighs the effort involved in making the necessary arrangements. Where this occurs, the hearing or inquiry should take place on the same days as currently programmed.

When you organise in-person hearings and inquiries thank you for taking the necessary steps to keep participants safe, undertaking them in accordance with the latest government guidance.

Our previously published additional guidance on hosting virtual hearings and inquiries is at the link below, but you will all also have your own significant experience of running virtual committees and what works for your own communities. Please remember that unnecessary adjournments or postponements can lead to additional costs for the parties as well as inconvenience.

[Guidance for Local Planning Authorities and others hosting virtual events for the Planning Inspectorate](#)

Our full guidance for hearings, inquiries and events is regularly updated and is available below. It was last updated in January 2022 to require a monitor for the Inspector, mainly to help them view large documents during the event:

[Setting up a venue for a public inquiry, hearing or examination](#)

Our regularly updated guidance in relation to our operations during the pandemic is at:

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) - Planning Inspectorate guidance](#)

Yours sincerely

Graham Stallwood
Director of Operations