

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and site visits, hearings and inquiries – 28 May 2020

This guidance updates that issued on 13 May following the Prime Minister's announcement on 10 May 2020 and the written statement of the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Our offices in Temple Quay House remain closed. Staff continue to work from home where possible. However, Inspectors have now re-started site visits where safe and appropriate to do so.

We are now progressing work as follows:

Site visits:

- We will be continuing to arrange site visits where it is safe to do so. Case officers will be in contact with individual parties and order making authorities as necessary in order to make any necessary arrangements. Given the limitations on travel and the reduced availability of some of the workforce this may take longer to arrange than normal and it may not be possible to schedule visits strictly in the order that cases were submitted.

Inquiries and hearings:

- Having explored the matter our current position is that physical events cannot be undertaken safely for both our staff and for participants. For the foreseeable future, therefore, we will not be arranging face-to-face inquiries or hearings. Wherever reasonable to do so we will seek to rearrange for site visits rather than events.
- The first fully virtual hearing took place on Monday 11 May as a pilot. Building on this successful trial we have started to make arrangements for at least 10 hearings to be held virtually in June. We are also working on re-arranging the vast majority of all postponed planning hearings in June to take place as soon as possible in the following months.
- On planning inquiries we have been and are holding numerous case conferences with a view for around 10 of these to turn into virtually held inquiries in June. We are expecting the remaining ones to be re-arranged at the earliest opportunity.
- The examinations of four nationally significant infrastructure projects are progressing to their final examination stages with some 15 hearings to be held virtually in June (and more in July). All of these are already notified on the respective project webpages for these schemes.

- One Local Plan hearing to take place via phone conference; one full local plan examination to be conducted virtually in July.
- We are progressing Defra casework following the best practice arising from the planning casework progression.

You can find the Government's advice here: <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus>