

Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Local Plan Examinations – 13 May 2020

The recent Written Ministerial Statement (WMS) sets out the Government's expectations for how the planning system should be operating under the Covid-19 restrictions. The WMS states that moving to digital events and processes will be critical to drive the planning process forward and that Government expects Inspectors to take decisions about whether and how virtual events should proceed and to consider the practical measures needed to ensure fair participation.

We are currently working with two local authorities to trial holding local plan hearing sessions as digital events (by video/telephone conference). We will look at phasing this in for other local plan examinations, building on the experience from digital pilots across the organisation and elsewhere.

We will be asking Inspectors to explore with local authorities and Programme Officers how each current examination can best move forward ensuring fair participation. For some examinations this may mean moving ahead with virtual hearings. For others, where the hearings are likely to be programmed for autumn, it may involve provisionally arranging hearing sessions and then reviewing how these would be best run in the light of any forthcoming changes in Government guidance on Covid-19.

For some current examinations, the hearings have been completed and the next stage will involve consultation on main modifications and, in some cases, on additional evidence. We request that local authorities discuss with the Inspector, through the Programme Officer, how these consultations can go ahead, taking any necessary measures to help ensure fairness.

We also have a number of current examinations where all the hearings have taken place and consultation on main modifications has concluded. In these cases, Inspectors will continue to work on, and issue, their final reports as usual.

The WMS states that Government expects everyone engaged in the planning process to engage proactively. We request that Programme Officers, local authorities and all participants use their best endeavours to work with the Inspector to help progress examinations, collectively putting in place the practical measures needed to ensure fair participation. Ultimately, decisions about how to move examinations forward are at the discretion of the Inspector appointed to hold the independent examination. It is also important for us all to appreciate that things may not always go smoothly and that progress may sometimes be delayed, despite collective best efforts.

Information about specific local plan examinations will be posted on the examination website of the relevant plan and any questions should be addressed to

the Programme Officer for the examination. However, please be aware that they may currently be receiving a high volume of requests for information.

This advice will be kept under review and could change at short notice to reflect Government's wider advice. Please also ensure that you check the relevant examination website regularly, if you are a participant in a particular examination.

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