



COVID-19 and consultations in planning and infrastructure

The COVID-19 pandemic has already had unprecedented impacts on communities everywhere, and what was normal is a distant memory. Schools are now closed. Employees who can are homeworking. Employees who can't are working in extraordinary circumstances as befit these extraordinary times.

People have three directives: **Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives.**

New advice and guidance is coming out every day as Government identifies the best course of action, and the most appropriate way to provide support for those who need it.

One area which remains unclear though, is how the coronavirus will change the way planning applications are dealt with, and what impact it currently has on how engagement and consultation should be carried out for proposals which are in train.

The Planning Inspectorate – PINS – has, however, issued guidance about site visits, hearings, inquiries and events. In summary:

- All previously arranged site visits are cancelled
- The PINS Cardiff and Bristol offices are unstaffed until further notice
- Documentation – appeal forms and evidence should not be sent by post
- New appeals should be lodged via the appeals casework portal
- Urgent enquiries should be emailed to your case officer – they will also be able to update you on the status of any appeal hearings you have scheduled.

Full details of advice from PINS is [here](#).

But what if you haven't yet got to appeal stage, and are deciding whether to press ahead with your application, or have no choice but to submit your application?

As a rule, Local Planning Authorities have updated

their websites advising planning applications will also only be accepted electronically – check your relevant council website for details of their specific advice, and if you have a case officer, contact them if you have any queries.

If you have launched your engagement and consultation activity, consider what has been done, what action should take in light of the pandemic and consider if your application is the most important issue to people – do you really have to consult or can you pause your activity?

If the answer is no, consider how you can change your planned activity to ensure you maintain the standards of consultation and review your consultation planning to ensure any necessary revisions are incorporated.

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If the answer is yes, ensure you are clear in your communications about why you are pausing your activity, who people can contact if they wish to, that you are still keen to hear from them and will be in touch with updates as soon as you can.

! Remember, a fundamental part of the consultation process is the relationships you have established through your engagement activity, so don't lose that momentum simply because you can no longer hold face-to-face events or meetings. Consider digital alternatives, but keep at the forefront of your mind that not everyone will be thinking about your proposals, and not everyone is capable or willing to turn to digital.

What to Do and What to Avoid

- **Review** your Consultation Plan; do you need to adjust it to address COVID-19? Can you shift to a period of 'listening' rather than actively consulting? Can you extend your engagement and push your consultation back?
- **Review** your Stakeholder Analysis and Engagement Plan; do you need to rethink how you communicate with groups and individuals?
- **Don't forget** your Equalities Impact Assessment – and for public sector organisations the Public Sector Equality Duty; is there anything missing, or do you have 'local' characteristics you also need to be bearing in mind when you can re-start your consultation?
- **Maintain** your engagement; stay in communication with your stakeholders and keep the dialogue moving – but on their terms. Don't just go silent
- **Do not** be tempted to just plough ahead if you have no justifiable reason (i.e a sound business case) for doing so
- At every stage you are considering a course of action, **pause and ask** yourself 'is this the right thing to do?'

I'll be keeping a watchful eye for updates, but let me know what you're doing to address the impact COVID-19 has had on your planning and infrastructure projects.

This piece was first used by The Consultation Institute on its wiki page, created to provide additional assistance and support to clients during COVID-19.

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