



Wednesday 27 May 2020

Our ref: 200527.PAC

Andrea Kells
Chief Commissioner
Planning Appeals Commission
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Sent by Email: info@pacni.gov.uk

Dear Commissioner

On behalf of our Members, we write to express grave concern that the Planning Appeals Commission has not introduced virtual hearings to allow our planning system to cope adequately with the current Covid 19 crisis and to allow the construction and development industry to start to recover. It is now over two months since the Commission suspended hearings, and we have yet to see any concrete proposals for restarting hearings.

That is particularly hard to understand in a context where the Planning Inspectorate in England and Wales has, according to its website, fully embraced virtual hearings and conducted its first hearing on 11th May, and is planning "at least a further 20" hearings of various kinds in May and June, aiming to "scale up" these events to include high profile and contentious cases "in the following months", and where the Inspectorate is already working with two local authorities to trial holding local plan hearing sessions digitally, with a view to making that available for all current local development plan examinations where possible. We also note that on 13th May the Housing & Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick told the Downing Street briefing: "I welcome the Planning Inspectorate now undertaking its first ever virtual hearings. I'm asking them to make all hearings virtual within weeks, so the planning system can resume".

Plainly, then, Northern Ireland's planning system is lagging badly behind the progress being made in England and Wales, from which we understand Scotland is taking its lead. The NI economy can only suffer even more from that state of affairs than it has already suffered, with jobs and businesses in increasing jeopardy.



We see from social media that on 1st June you are engaging in a video conference with stakeholders to explore how virtual hearings may be delivered. We urge you to do everything possible to secure the introduction of virtual hearings without further delay, and certainly this side of the Summer. It would be simply unacceptable for the Commission not to respond to the current crisis as the Inspectorate has. Northern Ireland deserves better.

Yours sincerely

Association for Consultancy and Engineering
Construction Employers Federation
Construction Industry Council NI
Federation of Master Builders
Institute of Civil Engineers
Mineral Products Association NI
Royal Society of Ulster Architects
Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors
Specialist Engineering Contractors' Group