

Virtual Hearings

Note for Participants from the Inspectors

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This note is to be read in conjunction with the Inspectors' Guidance Notes which set out the general arrangements and procedures for the examination. It provides specific advice on participating at the virtual hearing sessions.
- 1.2 Virtual hearing sessions will take place on Microsoft Teams. We recognise that participants may have varying levels of familiarity with this technology. However, the hearings will be conducted in a fair, open and impartial manner and we will ensure that all participants have an opportunity to be heard.
- 1.3 Please read this note carefully as it explains the procedures and expectations for participation in the virtual hearings. If you have any questions about how the virtual hearings will be conducted, please contact the Programme Officer.
- 1.4 The Programme Officer for the examination is Ian Kemp, who is independent of the Council and of all other parties. The Programme Officer manages the day-to-day running of the examination and is your point of contact for all procedural and technical matters. The Programme Officer can be contacted at ian@localplanservices.co.uk or on 07723 009166.
- 1.5 A hearing session is a structured discussion. The Inspectors will have read your written representation before the session begins, and you are not expected to repeat it or to make a formal presentation. You will not be cross-examined by anyone, and you do not need a solicitor, barrister or planning consultant in order to take part. The Inspectors are interested in what you have to say about the questions on the agenda, and not in how professionally you say it.
- 1.6 If you have any accessibility requirements, please tell the Programme Officer as early as possible so that arrangements can be made. Microsoft Teams can display live captions on screen during a session, and it is possible to join a session by telephone if you would prefer not to use, or do not have, a computer. Other adjustments, such as additional breaks, can also be arranged on request.

2. Watching a Hearing

- 2.1 If you have not registered to participate in the hearings you can still observe them online. Registration links for observers will be available on the Examination Website. Each hearing will have its own unique link.
- 2.2 Once you have registered, you will receive a confirmation email containing the joining link. We strongly recommend that you register to observe sessions

ahead of a hearing date to ensure that you are able to join the session at the correct time.

- 2.3 The joining link you receive is personal to you and should not be forwarded to anyone else. Any other person wishing to observe a session should register separately.
- 2.4 Observers take no part in the discussion. Your microphone and camera will remain switched off for the whole of the session and you will not be invited to speak. If you wish to speak at a hearing session you must first have registered to participate; the Inspectors' Guidance Notes explain how this is done.
- 2.5 You do not need to sign in or disclose your email address in order to observe a session. When the joining link opens, choose "Continue on this browser" and type the name you wish to be known by. Registering tells the Programme Officer where to send your joining link; your email address is not visible to any other attendee. Paragraphs 3.3 to 3.7 below explain this in more detail.

3. Participating in a Hearing

- 3.1 Participants will receive an invitation containing a Microsoft Teams joining link, sent to the email address provided to the Examination.
- 3.2 To join a hearing session, please follow these steps:
 - a) Between 20 and 30 minutes before the published start time, open the invitation you have been sent and select the joining link.
 - b) When the link opens, choose "Continue on this browser". Please use Google Chrome or Microsoft Edge on a desktop or laptop computer.
 - c) Type the name you wish to be known by when asked (see paragraphs 3.3 to 3.7 below).
 - d) Switch your microphone off. Switch your camera on if you are content for your image to be seen (paragraph 7.1 below explains that you may keep it off if you would prefer). Then select "Join now".
 - e) You will be held in a virtual lobby until the Programme Officer admits you to the session. Please wait; do not close the window or attempt to re-join.

Joining without Disclosing your Email Address

- 3.3 You do not need a Microsoft account, and you do not need to sign in, in order to join a hearing session. You may join without disclosing your email address to anyone. To do so, select "Continue on this browser" when the joining link opens, rather than signing in or opening the Microsoft Teams application. You will then be asked to type a display name. Please enter the name under which

you made your representation, so that the Inspectors and the Programme Officer can identify you. That name is the only information about you that other attendees will see. Your email address is not shown to any other attendee.

- 3.4 If you already use Microsoft Teams or Outlook on the same computer, your browser may sign you in automatically when you select the joining link, which would display your account name to other attendees. To avoid this, open a private browsing window before you select the link (this is called an “Incognito window” in Google Chrome and an “InPrivate window” in Microsoft Edge) and paste the joining link into it. Doing so does not affect the hearing in any way; it simply ensures that Teams asks you for a display name rather than using an account you already have open. For the same reason, please open the joining link on a desktop or laptop computer rather than on a mobile telephone or tablet, as these will normally open the Microsoft Teams application automatically.
- 3.5 If you sign in to Microsoft Teams instead, or join using the Teams application, the name held on your account will be shown to other attendees, and in some cases this is the email address associated with that account. Teams does not allow that name to be changed by you or by the Programme Officer once you have joined. If you do not wish your email address to be visible to others, please use the browser route described above.
- 3.6 You may be asked to complete a short verification check to confirm that you are not an automated system. This is a standard security measure and takes only a moment.
- 3.7 Participants using older devices or corporate devices with restrictions on software installation may experience technical difficulties. Where appropriate, please contact your organisation’s IT support team in advance of the hearings.
- 3.8 Participants are responsible for ensuring that their equipment, internet connection, camera and microphone are functioning correctly before a hearing session begins. If you experience electronic interference during the session, try moving your mobile phone away from the computer. If you experience connectivity issues, consider disconnecting other devices from your network, moving closer to the router, or using an alternative internet connection.
- 3.9 Please position your camera so that it gives a clear, front-facing view of your face, and avoid sitting with a bright light or a window directly behind you.
- 3.10 If you are unable to join, or lose connection during a hearing session, please use the original invitation link to reconnect. The hearing session may continue in your absence. As a contingency you may re-join by telephone, using the details in the invitation. Transferring from Wi-Fi to mobile data or making a Wi-Fi hotspot using a mobile phone are other contingencies that you may wish to use.
- 3.11 The principal controls you will need to use during a hearing session are:
 - “Camera on/off”

- “Microphone on/off”
- “Raise hand” – to indicate that you wish to speak; and
- “Leave meeting” – to leave the hearing when the session has concluded or if you need to exit the meeting.

4. Procedure for Virtual Hearings

- 4.1 As far as practicable, the virtual hearing sessions will follow the same format and procedures as an in-person hearing session. Participants should bear in mind that the purpose of the hearings is to assist the Inspectors gain the information needed to determine whether the Plan is sound and legally compliant.
- 4.2 At the start of each session the Inspectors will ask everyone taking part to give their name and to say who, if anyone, they are representing. This is simply so that there is a record of who took part. The Inspectors will lead the hearing sessions by introducing each topic and then asking specific questions based on an agenda that has been previously circulated.
- 4.3 If you wish to respond to a question, please use the “Raise Hand” function in Teams. The Inspectors will ensure that all participants who indicate a wish to speak are given an opportunity to contribute. Although all participants will be able to see and hear each other only one participant may speak at a time. When invited to speak, please ensure your microphone is unmuted.
- 4.4 As with physical hearing sessions, contributions should be concise, focussed and relevant to the agenda item under discussion. It is not necessary to restate your full case or make a formal presentation, as the Inspectors will already have read the submitted representations.
- 4.5 The Inspectors may ask questions about matters raised in either your written submissions or your oral contributions. The hearings will take the form of a structured discussion. Cross examination will not be permitted, and all responses should be directed through the Inspectors.
- 4.6 If you have already spoken on a particular topic but believe that you can assist further on the subject, please use the “Raise Hand” function in Teams and the Inspectors will invite you to contribute again if appropriate.
- 4.7 The Inspectors will seek to avoid any unnecessary repetition. It is not necessary to register agreement or disagreement with points already made by other participants. The Council will be invited to respond, where necessary, to matters raised during the discussion.
- 4.8 During any scheduled break, participants should remain connected to the meeting but ensure that their microphones and cameras are switched off unless otherwise advised. At the conclusion of a hearing session, participants should leave the meeting by using the “Leave” function.

5. Documents, Evidence and Presentation

- 5.1 All the relevant examination documents are available on the Examination Website and may be accessed by participants and stakeholders, including members of the public. The document sharing function within Microsoft Teams will not be used during the hearing sessions. Participants should not attempt to display documents by holding them in front of their camera.
- 5.2 New documents should only be submitted where specifically requested by the Inspectors. Where new material is requested from any party, for example a Statement of Common Ground, it should be emailed direct to the Programme Officer. The Programme Officer will then pass the document to the Inspectors and arrange for its publication on the Examination Website, where appropriate.

6. Conduct During the Hearings

- 6.1 All participants, their views and evidence must be treated with fairness and respect. Participants should not interrupt others and must always conduct themselves in a courteous and professional manner.
- 6.2 To ensure the efficient use of hearing time and minimise disruption, sessions will begin promptly at the times stated on the agenda.
- 6.3 Please participate in a quiet location that is free from unnecessary distractions and background noise. Mobile phones should be switched off or set to silent.
- 6.4 Unlike routine online meetings, examination hearings require participants to attend for the entirety of the session wherever possible. Leaving part way through may mean that you miss an opportunity to contribute, hear relevant discussion, or receive important announcements from the Inspectors.
- 6.5 If you need to leave early, please notify the Programme Officer at the earliest opportunity. Scheduled comfort breaks will be included in the published programme.
- 6.6 When adjournments are announced, please note the time at which the hearing will resume and ensure that you are ready to rejoin before that time.
- 6.7 The Microsoft Teams “Chat” and “Comment” functions must not be used during the hearings. Participants who may need to communicate privately with colleagues, agents or legal representatives should make alternative arrangements in advance, such as by telephone, email, SMS or other messaging services.

7. Privacy and Recording

- 7.1 Participants should read the privacy notice available on the hearing sessions page of the Examination Website. Participants may choose to turn off their camera if they do not wish their image to be visible, unless otherwise requested by the Inspectors.
- 7.2 Participants must not make their own audio or video recordings of the hearings and must not take photographs.
- 7.3 No other person should appear on camera unless this has been agreed in advance. Participants should ensure that personal information is not visible in the background. If preferred, Microsoft Teams provides a background blur function which may be used. Please do not use any of the other backgrounds that are available on Teams.
- 7.4 Participants should not disclose personal information about themselves or about any other individual beyond what is necessary for the discussion.

8. Conclusion

- 8.1 The Inspectors thank all participants for their co-operation and assistance in ensuring that the virtual hearings are conducted efficiently, fairly and effectively.

C Dillon, K Ford and J Glasin,

INSPECTORS

Dated 15 July 2026