

DHPLG Responses to queries received from the Irish Planning Institute on 1st April 2020 in relation to the operation of the S.251A Order of 29th March 2020

The Department has been working to make the necessary adaptations to the planning system during the Covid-19 Emergency period to comply with the public health advice aimed at limiting the impact of the virus on the health of citizens. This work has included producing the following:

- Regulations to facilitate urgent HSE Covid 19 related development where required,
- New legislation to protect the integrity of the planning system and
- Regulation and guidance to assist with planning-related matters arising from a range of sectors.

These emergency measures in the planning system were put into effect on Sunday 29th March last and will ensure access to public participation, at a time when there are significant restrictions on non-essential activity applicable to the entire population. Against this backdrop, the extension to all time periods in the Planning and Development and related Acts affected by the Section 251A measure, was considered critical.

The Department is continuing to engage with all users and operators of the planning system with the objective of ensuring that the planning service is well placed to play its vital role in supporting social and economic activity when this Covid-19 Emergency is past. Measures put in place for this purpose are being kept under review in light of public health guidelines and timescales for their duration.

The Department will also continue to engage with the Institute, as the professional body for all planners nationally, in the on-going process of formulating responses to the issues created by the Covid19 Emergency.

On 6th April 2020, updated FAQs were published by DHPLG which relate to several of the queries raised by Institute members. These FAQs are available at:

https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/faq_planning_timelines_covid-19_06_apr_2020.pdf

In addition to advices in the FAQs, the Department would like to respond as follows to the numbered concerns, queries and suggestions in the IPI submission:

Items 1, 2, 18, 19

The public health guidelines introduced by the Government to 12th April are required to enable a delayed impact of Covid-19 on the public and to assist the health system in providing capacity to deal with those suffering from the virus. The 23 day extension period mandated by the Order issued on 29th March facilitates an additional week following the current public health restrictions expiration to allow an orderly resumption of the planning system on 21st April.

The duration of further or additional public health guidelines issued by the Government on the planning system will be examined by the Department and in particular the impacts of any prolonged period where users and operators are restricted in movement to places of work and public offices.

Items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10

Updated FAQs were published by DHPLG in relation to these issues on 6th April.

Item 11

Planning authorities continue to operate the planning system and are accepting related payments for planning services. A number of payment methods are being employed including by cheque posted, cash offices, card payments and EFTs. The different methods available will vary and customers are advised to check with the relevant planning authority to confirm details of the options that are available.

Items 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17

The use of digital technology to assist the functioning of the planning system is an obvious response to the restrictions on personal movement and imposition of physical distancing activated to combat the spread of the virus. Many planning authorities have well developed systems for engaging the public digitally in planning consultation exercises while a majority have the means to accept submissions on individual planning applications electronically and display application details online.

Currently, our planning system does not have a sector-wide system that facilitates the electronic/on-line submission of planning applications. While work has been ongoing by the Local Government Sector, the Department and others to achieve this capability, unfortunately this multi-agency project is not at a stage of development sufficient to introduce the on-line submission of planning applications at present. All are agreed that this is a critical area of development for the planning system, in improving accessibility and customer service, and this has been underscored by the current Covid19 situation.

The Department is however engaging with planning authorities to expedite practical measures to currently assist in digital communications in the planning system in the context of the current situation including emailing of decision notifications, emailing of new application registration notifications, digital/card payment facilities, etc.

In the event that the current period of public health guidelines, which restrict personal movement and require physical distancing among other obligations, are necessarily significantly extended by Government the Department understands the continued operation of the development management function of the planning system will require further specific responses.