

# B07.2

## Opening up access to planning appeals

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### Summary

This paper describes the Planning Inspectorate's new Planning Casework Service (PCS) and its relationship to the Planning Portal.

### About the Planning Inspectorate

The Planning Inspectorate works for the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Welsh Assembly Government on a range of casework under planning and environmental legislation, including deciding planning appeals. We employ about 800 staff, of which about 350 are professionally qualified Planning Inspectors.

We deal with about 220 different types of casework although the bulk of our work is in connection with planning and enforcement appeals, and development plan inquiries.

More information about the Planning Inspectorate can be found on our web site [www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk](http://www.planning-inspectorate.gov.uk).

### How We Currently Deal with Casework

The Planning Inspectorate has been in being in one form or another since 1910. The Inspectorate is justifiably proud of its reputation for openness, fairness and impartiality. However, up until recently the way that we deal with our casework from an administration point of view has been little changed in the subsequent 90 years.

The start of the change was in 1998 when we introduced an internal computerised casework tracking and standard letter system called CASE. This enabled us to collect reliable statistics on our performance in dealing with appeals and ensure a more consistent approach to the administrative aspects of processing casework.

In 2000 we relaunched our web site to include downloadable copies of all of our appeal and other forms. This service is widely used but our customers have to submit their forms by post.

In 2002 we computerised the way that we scheduled the work of our Inspectors. This was previously a huge card index system covering about 90 yards of wall space.

All of the information relating to an appeal, including the appeal form and representations is held on paper files. If a member of the public wants to view the case file they have to either visit the Inspectorate's offices or view copies of the key papers at their relevant local planning authority's offices.

## Planning Portal Programme

The Planning Portal Programme consisted of a number of projects including the development of the Planning Portal and the PCS. The origins of the Planning Portal Programme was a bid to the Treasury's Capital Modernisation Fund in January 2000 to extend the Inspectorate's CASE system to enable people to track the progress of appeals over the internet. At the time we envisaged relatively simple links from our existing CASE system to the internet.

As part of the process of working up a detailed business case, the Inspectorate held a workshop with our main stakeholders. They identified a number of additional features which, coupled with extending the casework system to the Internet, could deliver real benefits to the appeals system. These include linking the casework tracking system with the relevant guidance online, so ensuring better-informed appeals and a reduction in the number of badly-made cases; access to the local development plan; and making the whole process between applicant, local authority, objectors, appellant and statutory consultees more seamless. The concept of the Planning Portal was born.

## The Planning Portal

The Planning Portal ([www.planningportal.gov.uk](http://www.planningportal.gov.uk)) was launched in May 2002. It is operated by a specialist unit within the Planning Inspectorate. Its goal is to become the first port of call for all members and users of the planning system, from seasoned professionals to the general public.

The Planning Portal provides a broad range of Government guidance for householders as well as extensive research facilities for professionals, including links to hundreds of third party organisations and resources.

The Portal's introductory guide to planning offers users an introduction to the concepts behind planning legislation and offers advice on the most common questions asked by householders and small businesses.

The Portal's research and policy pages offer planning professionals a single point of reference for all planning legislation, with quick links to circulars, PPGs, best practice guides and a host of other reference materials.

Foremost among the Portal's services is the online planning application, which lets users submit applications electronically and return the completed forms directly to the back end IT systems of local planning authorities. The applications service was designed, developed and tested with strong involvement from a broad range of partners and stakeholders to ensure that it met the range of needs the general public as well as professional planners. The service uses non-technical language and every question is supported by extensive help text to guide users through the frequently confusing terminology of the planning system. It also features automatic error checking to cut down on the number of incorrectly completed applications rejected by planning authorities.

Another key service is development plans. Development plans are documents that set out in writing, maps and diagrams the policies and proposals for the development and use of land and buildings in a local authority's area. Development plans are a fundamental part of the planning system but also one of the parts which non-professional users finds most difficult to understand. The Planning Portal offers development plans as interactive electronic documents that users can access and refer to quickly. By using GIS technology from ESRI, data from the local authority and maps from Ordnance Survey's Mastermap, users can view policies graphically, removing the need to refer to paper maps.

The concept behind the Portal is that people making planning applications will do so in the full knowledge of both the national and local guidance. In this way it is hoped that applicants will stand a better chance of getting it right first time and being successful with the application. Similarly, if an application is turned down by the local planning authority and the applicant decides to appeal to the Secretary of State, the appellant can do so with the full knowledge of how the planning system is intended to operate.

## What is the Planning Casework Service?

The PCS will enable the online submission and tracking of appeals and other cases handled by the Planning Inspectorate. It will provide direct access to case documents – including appeal forms, plans and drawings, statements of case and letters of objection – and information on the progress of an appeal.

The PCS will also enable everybody involved in the appeals process to meet deadlines more readily, by making the system more efficient, for example by reducing postage and handling costs. Templates will be developed to aid the submission of statements, proofs of evidence and other representations, and everybody will be encouraged to use them.

The other aim of the service is to improve access to the planning appeals system and all other casework handled by the Planning Inspectorate for everybody, including citizens, business, local authorities, Government Offices, planning agents, ODPM and the Welsh Assembly Government, interested parties and staff within the Planning Inspectorate.

A paper based service will continue to be available for those people and organisations who are unable to use the electronic service, or prefer not to. However, we are to make the electronic service sufficiently attractive to persuade customers to use it, and to continue to use it, in preference to the paper based service. All documents which are submitted in paper format will be scanned and held on the PCS electronically.

In addition to increased accessibility, the PCS aims to:

- improve the ability of the citizen to use the planning system as an appellant or in another role, such as an interested third party;
- deliver a set of integrated functions that will support electronic service delivery via the Planning Portal;
- improve the efficiency and quality of casework administration and processing;
- provide improved support to local planning authority planning officers and planning agents and Inspectors in the fulfilment of their professional duties.

The scope of the PCS covers:-

- implementing a workflow system that covers the entirety of casework handled by the Planning Inspectorate. External users will be able to view a simplified version of the workflows (fig 1) and thereby be able to see at a glance what stage the appeal has reached and what the next stages are;
- introducing electronic storage, distribution and management of casework records. As part of this external users will be able to search for appeals by address, appellant, local authority and any component of the address. They will be able to view the location of the appeal on a map (fig 2).
- integrating with the Planning Portal for the electronic receipt and delivery of information. This should help make the Planning Portal a one stop shop for planning related information and services ranging from planning applications to development plan and planning appeals. An appellant will be able to attach a copy of their original planning application and the local authority's decision to the planning appeal. A true end to end one stop shop;
- transforming the way the Inspectorate conducts its business, to enable it to take full benefit from its investment in technology. This includes electronic links with home based Inspectors and the automatic population of appeal data into Inspector's decisions;

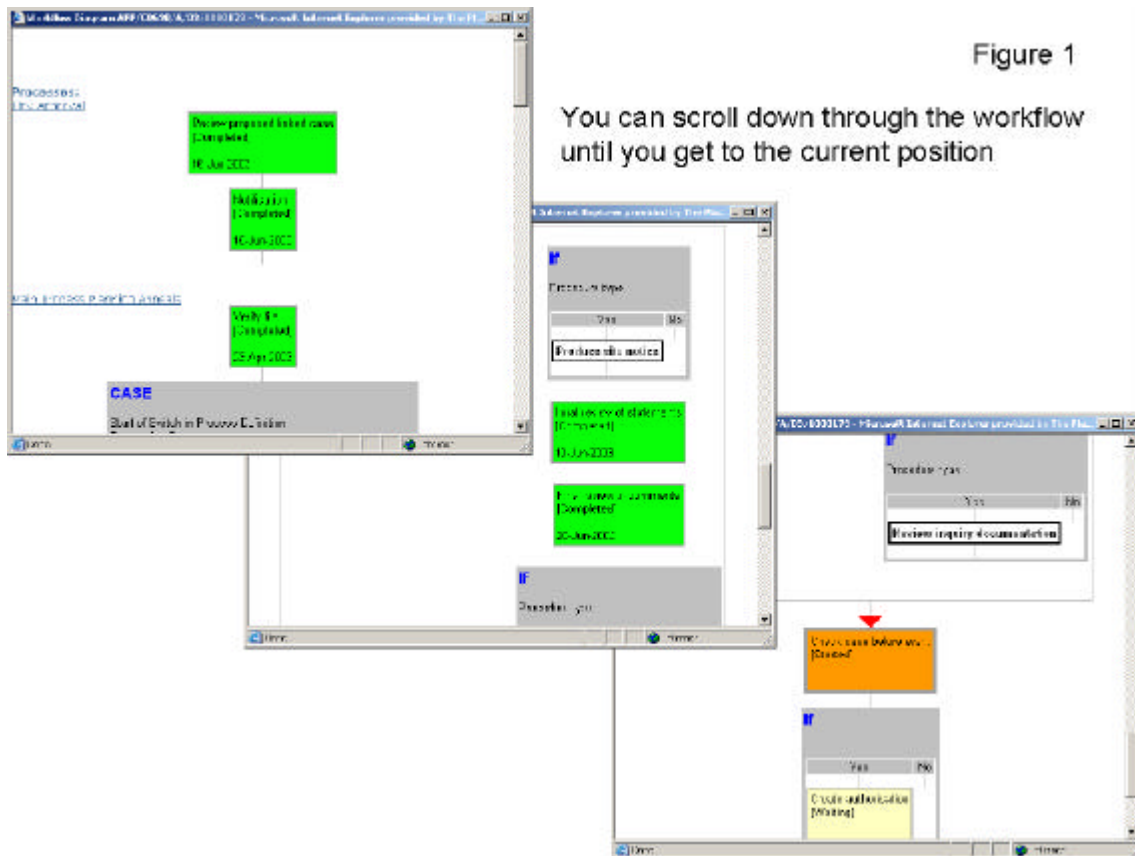


Figure 1

You can scroll down through the workflow until you get to the current position

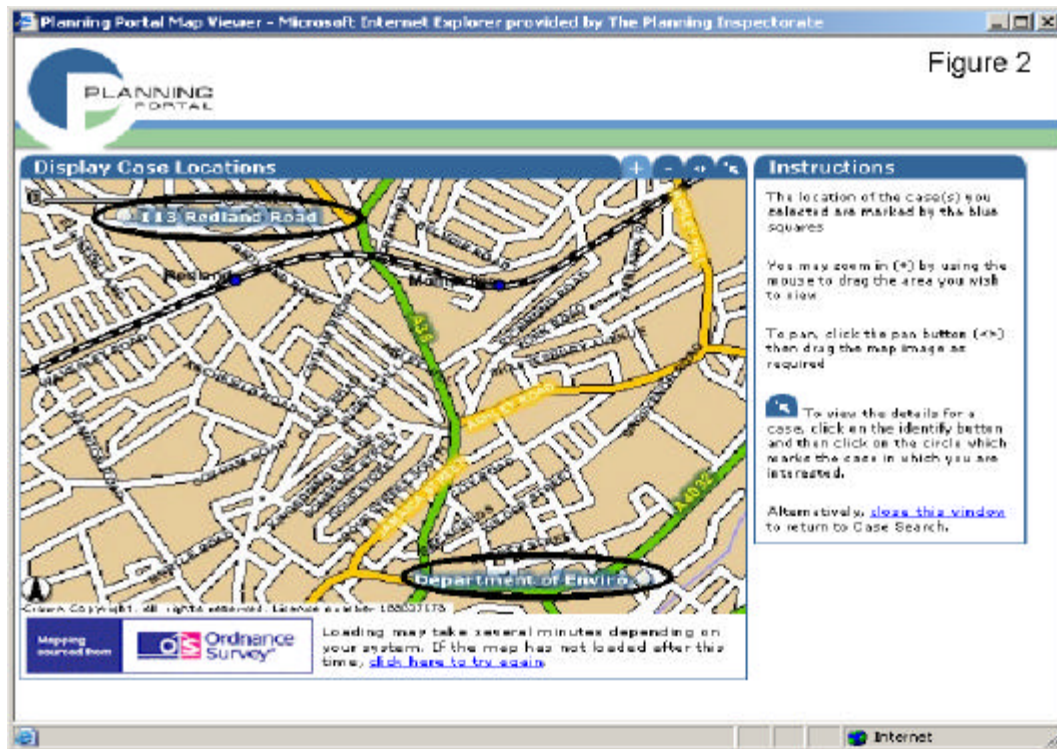


Figure 2

You can display the location of selected appeal sites on a map.

### What Happens Next?

The PCS system was accepted from the developers in May 2003. It will be subject to a trial with selected local planning authorities and agents during the autumn 2003 and if all goes well will be rolled out in phases from February 2004. It will enable the Inspectorate to phase out the use of its existing casework tracking system in 2004.