MHCLG - FAQs on changes to neighbourhood planning in response to Coronavirus (Covid-19)

How does Covid-19 affect neighbourhood planning?

- The Coronavirus pandemic our country is facing requires us to do everything we can to protect the public especially the most vulnerable in society.
- We understand there are concerns about delays in the neighbourhood planning process at this time.
- Neighbourhood planning groups may continue to prepare their plans but should heed official Government guidance on staying at home and away from others. We have published updated planning guidance highlighting the postponement of referendums and the weight to be given to plans awaiting referendum.
- The neighbourhood planning support programme will continue to offer grants and advice to support groups as far as possible. The 2020-21 support programme will re-open shortly.

How are Neighbourhood Planning referendums affected?

- Regulations linked to the Coronavirus Act 2020 mean that no elections or referendums can take place until 6 May 2021. This includes neighbourhood planning referendums. These provisions will be kept under review and may be amended or revoked in response to changing circumstances.
- The measures will mean that some neighbourhood plans will come into force later than they would have done.
- We understand this will be frustrating for communities that have dedicated significant time and effort to the neighbourhood planning process and naturally want their plans to come into force as soon as possible.
- With this in mind, we have updated current planning guidance to set out that neighbourhood plans awaiting referendums can be given significant weight in decision-making.

Is there any advice about conducting public consultation and notification under Regulations 14 and 16 of the neighbourhood planning regulations?

- Neighbourhood planning groups or local planning authorities intending to undertake public consultation and notification (as set out under Regulation 14 and Regulation 16 respectively of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012) should consider the Government's current guidance on staying at home and away from others, or any superseding guidance.
- We recognise that meeting regulatory requirements on consultation and publicity would be more difficult in these circumstances. MHCLG will keep the situation under review.
- Locality have provided helpful suggestions as to how best to make progress on plans without face to face meetings and engagement.

While we do not have an upcoming referendum, we do have a neighbourhood plan which has just been submitted to an examiner. Will examinations also be affected by Covid-19 measures?

- The general rule remains that examinations should be conducted by written representations. If an examiner considers that oral representations are necessary, these should not take place in person. Where feasible, oral representations may still take place using video conferencing or other suitable technologies.

What changes are you making to neighbourhood planning new burdens funding?

- In order to minimise the financial impact of delays to neighbourhood planning referendums, we will allow local planning authorities in 2020/21 to submit claims for new burdens grants at an earlier point in the neighbourhood planning process.
- A claim will be able to be made at the point when the local planning authority issues a decision statement (as set out under Regulation 25 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012) detailing its intention to send the plan to referendum (rather than when a referendum date has been set).

Can our local planning authority still claim for a referendum that was set but has now been postponed?

- The latest claims window for 2019/20 closed on 31 March 2020. MHCLG will pay claims that have been submitted for scheduled referendums that have been postponed. We will also make provision for local planning authorities to claim for costs incurred due to postponement of scheduled referendums in the next claims window.