

P-05-984 Stop discriminatory remote consultations for incinerator applications during the Covid-19 Pandemic, Correspondence – Petitioner to Committee, 09.07.20

Dear Committee,

Thank you for the email below together with its attachments. I would like to make the following additional comments and respond to some of the points in the Minister's letter to the Chair of the Petitions Committee.

1. Firstly, please note that I have been informed by some of my residents that they are aware of other residents/neighbours and family etc, who would have liked to have signed this petition, but who do not have internet access. Due to COVID-19, visiting them to obtain such a signature would have been against government guidance and handing over physical documentation could have put them at risk. This really goes to the heart of why I have brought forward this petition. The fact that many residents do not have access to remote internet systems and that an applicant has decided to hold a 'remote' consultation during this period, is felt by many residents to be extremely unfair.
2. It may be helpful to provide you with some further background which highlights why so many of my residents are concerned about their being a 'remote consultation'.

For a number of years, we have known that a developer is planning to submit a planning application for a large-scale incinerator in our area. Due to the scale of the development, this is considered a "Development of National Significance" and the application will be submitted directly to the Welsh Government Planning Inspectorate, rather than to the Local Planning Authority. The DNS reference for this matter is DNS/3214813. Under the relevant and recently amended legislation, the applicant is allowed to hold their statutory public consultation as a "remote consultation" and the applicant has since announced that it intends to proceed in this way and that they will be consulting using webinars, telephone surgeries and information packs sent out in the post.

If the consultation takes place within the timescales that the incinerator applicant has indicated, then due to the Covid-19 pandemic, neither the Community Council nor myself will be able to hold public meetings, nor have face-to-face meetings with our residents about this matter. Many elderly people in my area are digitally excluded, they may not use, nor have access to the Internet and they may not feel comfortable taking part in a telephone consultation. The nature of this incinerator is highly technical, especially the matters concerning air quality, waste management and the environmental impact. Both the Community Council and I had planned and previously communicated to our residents, that during any consultation we would hold public and face-to face meetings so that we could talk people through the complicated process and documents, and do everything we could to ensure that all residents understand the application and how to make their comments known. Indeed, the incinerator applicant had also previously indicated that they would hold a public meeting and that they would have 'drop-in' events so that people could ask questions and understand the nature of the application. The concern that residents will not be able to meet face-to-face with either their elected representatives nor the applicant to discuss the consultation, adds to the loneliness and isolation that many of them feel already. It leaves many people in my area feeling that they are without a voice.

3. I am grateful to the Minister for the time she has taken to consider this petition and for writing back to the Chair of the Petitions Committee. In the letter the Minister comments that “the DNS procedures enable the Welsh Minister to extend the timetables associated with any consultation or submission requirement” and that “The Planning Inspectorate shall exercise those powers appropriately upon request”. This incinerator application has been in the pipeline for a number of years now; extending the timetable by a period which would allow for public and face-to-face meetings during both the pre-application consultation and the following DNS statutory consultation, would be reasonable and highly appreciated by my residents. I request that the Minister exercises the powers referred to in her letter and that once notice for this consultation is given by the applicant, the Planning Inspectorate allows a rolling extension to the timetable until Welsh Government guidelines allow for public and face-to-face meetings to occur. This would be in the public interest and would ensure that elderly residents, those who may have disabilities and those shielding, would have fair access to feed into this and the subsequent DNS consultation should they wish to.

4. Myself and my residents would be hugely grateful if the Petitions Committee could consider this and highlight to the Minister my request in in paragraph 3 above.

Thank you for the time you have taken to consider this matter which is of such significance to my residents.

Kind regards,

Amanda

Councillor Amanda Jenner