



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute

WIDER INSIGHTS

The planning profession's rapid response to Covid-19

**RTPI
Research
Paper**

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The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

RTPI champions the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities. We have over 25,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors.

Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates. We set the standards of planning education and professional behaviour that give our members, wherever they work in the world, a unique ability to meet complex economic, social and environmental challenges. We are the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors.

This paper

The RTPI has been collecting experiences of the immediate response to Covid-19 by planners from across every sector and part of the UK and Ireland. In addition to publishing [findings from our survey and other analysis](#), we are using this paper to amplify some of the leading voices in the private and third sectors. The contributors to this paper have particular expertise in various areas of the response and have kindly provided us their views and analysis on this evolving situation. The publication of these views does not imply RTPI endorsement for the positions described.

Front and back cover image

SKYHouse, Waverley, Rotherham. Taken from a submission to the 2020 RTPI Planning 2020 submitted by CODA Planning Ltd, under the category of Excellence in Planning for Homes (Small schemes up to 50 homes). It shows a project which is a new-build scheme which delivers a high-density solution to housing need in Rotherham as part of the new Waverley community.

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Foreword

It is my huge privilege to introduce this wider insights report with expert analysis of the planning profession's rapid response to Covid-19. The views here complement [another paper](#) we are publishing today with findings from a survey of over a thousand planners.

Between these two papers I am delighted we are able to communicate a diverse set of experiences of the immediate response to Covid-19 by planners from across every sector and part of the UK and Ireland.

We have been inspired to see planners rising to the challenges they have faced in the past few months.

During these exceptional times the RTPI has a key role in promoting innovation and best practice and the main way we do that is by collecting the expertise in our membership. Thank you to all those members who gave us their views on the impact of the pandemic on planning in our member survey at the start of the lockdown in March and April 2020. No-one can say planning is standing still, and we are delighted to have brought together some of the leading voices in the private and third sectors for this report. I would like to extend my thanks to them for sharing their expertise and insights in these extraordinary times.

As we turn our attention towards recovery, we will continue to update our [Coronavirus hub](#). The learning the profession is gathering now will help respond to the immediate impacts of Covid-19 and prepare for a sustainable economic recovery. However, we also believe it can put the profession in a better position to respond to the future challenges it will face.

Victoria Hills MRTPI FICE
RTPI Chief Executive

You can follow Victoria on Twitter [@VictoriaRTPI](#)



Insights from the wider profession

Matthew Spry, Senior Director at Lichfields

“It is trite to say that we are working through unprecedented times, but the COVID-19 pandemic is a perfect storm: a crisis in public health, acute economic change, in parallel with barriers to maintaining the normal way of life and doing business.

Lichfields is a planning and development consultancy with a network of nine offices. Our immediate response has revolved around the wellbeing of our staff (we are an employee-owned business and thus direct our organisation in the interests of its people) and ensuring our agile working systems were resilient for when the whole business is operating remotely (testament to our great technology team, they are).

But like any consultancy, we have a symbiotic relationship with our clients, and our ultimate focus is on them, helping navigate through this crisis and providing a strong platform for the recovery. We have done this in three ways:

First, keeping the wheels turning: progressing planning applications, lodging appeals, working with local authorities on local plan preparation, and advising on strategy for projects. Our day-to-day work has been largely unaffected even if we are executing it differently and some clients have taken some time to evaluate and adjust their operations. Consultations have been successfully carried out and applications submitted for major schemes up and down the country, ranging from the well-publicised conference centre at Gateshead Quays through to new housing on a former Green Belt site in Cambridge.

Secondly, we have been closely monitoring how the operation of the planning system is affected, including how local government adapts itself to delivering planning services. We formulated our COVID-19 **Business as (un)usual** tool: an online repository for our guidance, research and thought leadership, it includes a live tracker of how local authorities are delivering planning services. We partnered with the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) so that both organisations use our networks to track change as it happens, and PAS can direct support to where it is needed. Some of the innovations on development management have been welcome and will sustain; delays to plan-making is emerging as a concern.

Finally, we know COVID-19 will have lasting impacts on planning and development: an accelerant to some existing trends; a ‘stop-and-think’ moment for others. Our people are active participants in debates (internally and externally) on what the pandemic means for the future, developing tools and insights to help our clients respond positively to what lies ahead. We are currently working with a number of LEPs and Councils to shape local responses to the economic crisis, applying our **Economic Recovery Framework**. We have used our role within REVO – the retail property network – to develop practical solutions for the future of the high street. And we are engaging with those in the residential sector about how the increased prominence of public health consideration will influence what future local plans will say about the location and form of new communities.

Whilst recognising the pandemic means awful personal costs for many, our perspective is that - working in a fantastic business with great clients – planning has a central role in society’s response. That is simultaneously exciting even as it is challenging.”

Craig Alsbury, Principal, Planning, Development and Regeneration at Avison Young

“The limitations on movement that have been imposed by the Government, so as to limit the spread of Covid-19, have had far-reaching implications for many of our Clients and have touched almost every aspect of the planning system. The Government’s early move to enable Local Authority Planning Committees to take decisions remotely was a significant positive step taken to guard against unnecessary delays to major planning applications but we are yet to see the full effects of this. Some Authorities have responded positively to the opportunity that this has created, and have held very successful meetings already, and some have struggled to put in place the infrastructure and systems needed to make it happen.

We now need to see the best practice trailered by Planning Committees deployed in respect of Plan-making and, more specifically, EiP Hearing Sessions if we are not to see very significant delays re-introduced to Local Plan processes. At Officer level, we have again seen mixed responses to new ways of working but, generally speaking, a real willingness to embrace technology, to find solutions to problems and a keenness to be more pragmatic – something that has enabled positive decisions to be taken even in challenging circumstances. I hope that we see these positives flow through into practice post-lockdown. Of course, we still need greater flexibility in the system, including when land owners or developers need to extend the life of planning permissions. A reversal of the changes previously made to s73 would deliver significant benefits in this regard. Ultimately, we will need to work together across the profession to ensure that the planning system is the facilitator of the recovery and not an inhibitor. And I think that it has proven itself well capable of being just that by delivering positive, pragmatic outcomes in very difficult circumstances.”

Simon Ricketts, Partner at Town Legal LLP

Brief reaction to how the industry has responded, with a particular focus on England

“It has been revelatory to see how quickly working methods have been able to adapt so as to seek to keep the planning system moving. Particular credit is due to local authority officers who have shown real flexibility and pragmatism.

Committee decision making is not the main issue now. Rather it is the need for the Government to make changes to publicity requirements, which should disadvantage no-one in practice and should in fact serve to open up engagement with many more people. And the need, in the meantime, for local planning authorities to show pragmatism in the application of those existing requirements, rather than take an overly “safety first” approach of delaying processes that require, for instance, physical notices or the availability of hard copy documents for inspection.

The job of the Planning Inspectorate in finding virtual ways of holding hearings and inquiries, whilst maintaining principles of openness, fairness and transparency is not as simple as some imagine but it has still taken far too long.

There is much to learn from this period and many pointers to ways in which the system can be modernised and made more accessible - for the benefit of all.”

Sarah James MRTPI, Policy & Membership Development Officer at Civic Voice

Going from the physical to the digital

“The findings of the RTPI survey show that despite progress on digital engagement during Covid-19, challenges clearly still remain and we would therefore like to see a renewed focus on resourcing IT systems that allow widespread public participation via digital methods.

So, how can we carry out consultations when we cannot meet face-to-face?

For practical reasons, the impacts of coronavirus have necessitated local authorities, developers, and communities to innovate, and shift processes online via more digital methods of communication. Many consultations have been postponed and some local authorities have resorted to delegating decisions to officers. Traditional methods of consultation, engagement and committee decision making are undergoing fundamental change.

Some community groups are concerned that there will be a lack of proper scrutiny of planning applications and that resources for planning will be squeezed even further in future. This is understandable and reinforces the lack of trust that people have in the planning system.

Nevertheless, these shifts are likely to become permanent. This was highlighted by Councillor Clare Coghill, Leader of Waltham Forest Council when she discussed the council’s approach to planning during the coronavirus pandemic, recently saying, “The genie is out of the bottle, we will not be going back to the traditional ways of working.” This view was also supported by a Comres survey of UK councillors which found that virtual public exhibitions, webinar consultations and social media will be effective ways for developers to conduct planning consultations. Clearly, more digital methods of engagement are here to stay, and this could facilitate more permanent change to consultation practices.

Traditional and digital will go hand in hand. With this in mind, whilst digital access is widespread, there is a need to cater for those who do not have access, the skills, or desire to engage digitally. Equally, it is also likely that many people may not want to, or may be unable to, attend public events for many months after restrictions are eased. Both factors are likely to adversely affect the older population or other at-risk groups, who are often the greatest participants in the planning system. Traditional methods will continue to be needed and used.

On the flip side, hopefully the move towards the digital will bring in new audiences. Early evidence suggests that this might be the case. Both Somerset Council and Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea reported a significant increase in the number of people registering to participate in ‘virtual planning meetings’. This is positive. The more people that participate, the more transparent and accountable councils will become. This can only be a good thing for the planning system, as we look to re-build trust in it.

We have challenges, but they can be overcome. We are ready to support councils. Councils need to drastically increase their use of ‘Plantech’ to engage with communities. Utilising IT can make the system more accessible, balanced, collaborative, and democratic.

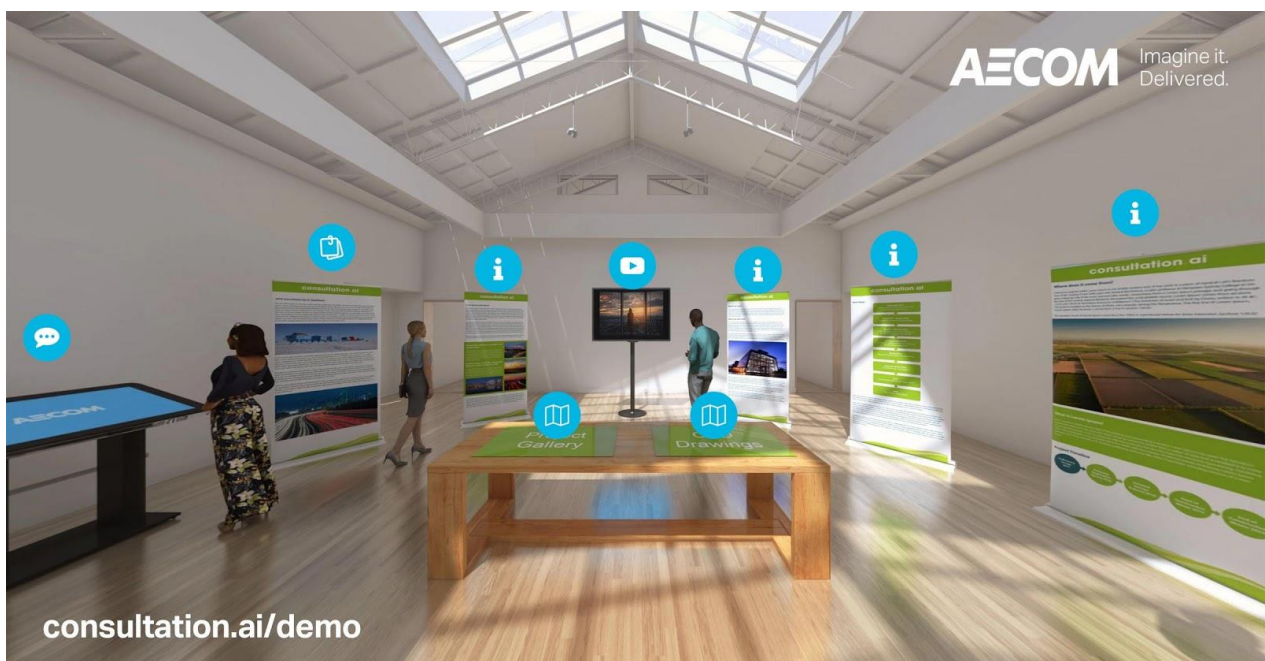
To quote Cllr Coghill again, “The genie is out of the bottle, we will not be going back to the traditional ways of working.” ”

James Sachon, Technical Director, Stakeholder Engagement Team at AECOM

Is it time to re-think how we engage and consult communities on developments?

“Engaging and consulting with communities digitally has been possible for some time, but on development projects, progress in using the technology has been slow. Concerns are often raised that it will stop people engaging and limit the valuable feedback you get from face to face conversations. This is compounded by digital engagement rarely being mentioned in LPA Statements of Community Involvement.

The current COVID-19 crisis has led developers and local planning authorities to rethink their approach to engagement. Many are starting to embrace digital engagement in numbers not seen before. At AECOM our **virtual public consultation**, with its live chat function, is helping projects continue even in these challenging times. We’ve also been holding virtual workshops with local communities that have enabled the conversation between our clients and the community to continue. It’s great to see how these tools enable projects to continue during these challenging times. However, when lockdown lifts, it’s vital that we continue our digital transformation rather than reverting to our old habits. People expect to be able to engage online and the current move to digital engagement will raise expectations further. People will still want to engage in person as you can’t beat direct feedback via a face to face conversation, but many people (including those identified by government at most risk) won’t want to attend public events for a prolonged period and they need to be given a voice. Digital engagement isn’t the only way to talk to the community, but it should become an expected part of the process. It might be time for local councils to update their own Statement of Community Involvements to reflect this.”



Zack Simons, Barrister at Landmark Chambers

Analysis which specifically referring to the situation in England in May 2020

“I think the response of this industry to lockdown, and particularly that of LPA planning officers who were already under unprecedented pressures, has been truly remarkable. Only days after new regulations came into force in early April 2020 which opened up brave new possibilities for how committee decision-making could be run, many, many Councils – and indeed the number is increasing every day – have already moved to the virtual decision-making, amending statements of community involvement to make them compatible with lock-down. Moving to this new regime and doing it so quickly has taken focus, coordination and graft at a time when local authorities are more stretched than ever.

There is still much to do – still around 2/3rds of Councils in England have not yet embraced virtual decision-making (and indeed a minority of LPAs appear to have closed up shop altogether). But overall, the scale and pace of change which has been made possible by a large number of planners in the public sector has – I think – met the urgency of this moment, and deserves our praise and gratitude.”

Luke Hillson, Design Director at Barton Willmore

“The current COVID-19 pandemic has hit the planning profession and the country as a whole in an unprecedented way. Never before have we been ‘locked-down’ for an indefinite period of time; it has been a testament to people how they have adapted and evolved already during this short timescale.

At Barton Willmore we were already prepared for many of the changes necessitated by the home working measures. We were already set up for home working, as we already practiced agile working measures across the business. Everyone was set up to access work emails and servers from another office, from a motorway services station, from a coffee shop or from their home. The change wasn’t as dramatic, the biggest change for most was that they would now just be spending longer than they would normally working from their study or kitchen table.

Our staff were already used to using video-conferencing software, including Microsoft Teams, to communicate and collaborate with colleagues from our multi-disciplinary team across the UK. We often host remote review/crits or virtual workshops. I think that many other consultancies were on their way to achieving this agile working approach, but the COVID-19 pandemic has sped up that approach.

Clients were quick to adapt to the new working environment. Travelling many miles and hours to attend a meeting was no longer permitted, nor was it required. By utilising video conferencing technology, no longer was it necessary to all sit in the same room for a meeting, instead I could present, communicate and collaborate virtually with my clients. We’ve evolved a number of virtual communication tools which allows for clients to add to plans, marking them up virtually in real time like they would stood around a paper plan with a felt tip marker.

In fairness, Local Authorities were also very quick to change and adapt to the new measures. Many authorities were already equipped for hot-desking and occasionally home-working, so the change required was no too significant. Authorities were also quick to include remote/virtual

planning committees and council meetings.

From my perspective this experience shown that we were right to invest in evolving technologies to enhance agile/remote working. This provides a much more flexible and efficient way of working. I'm also developing virtual design review panels with a number of authorities. This will enable design review to continue during the current lockdown. However, I also want to see this rolled out to other events, including community engagement events. Not only will it allow for these to continue but for some it will increase the accessibility of these events. For those with barriers to participation at these events, whether or not it's a communication disability or a mobility issue, more people should be able to participate in more engagement events.

Similarly, this is a change to make a real step-change in the planning system and the built environment. We're starting to see it with Tactical Urbanism initiatives within our streets. The informal reclamation of highway space to create wider pavements and the installation of pop-up cycle lanes. The Government has relaxed some of the legislation on delivering some of these initiatives but more can be done. This really is a once in a lifetime opportunity to maximise the potential, we can create a 'green bounce-back' from it, enhancing green infrastructure and improving pedestrian and cycle connectivity. The perception of agile working has changed, the perception of how we use the streets has changed and the value placed on our homes and public spaces has changed, we need to embrace this change and continue to plan for the future.”

John McLarty, Head of National Development and Planning at Strutt & Parker

Analysis provided in April 2020

“At Strutt & Parker our immediate interest after ensuring that staff and clients were safe was to understand how any planning processes and planning applications in the system were being managed and to discuss with planning officers directly. In the majority of cases this was straightforward and we were pleased to see a genuine effort by the majority of planning officers to respond and confirm how they expect to proceed.

We were encouraged by those authorities that moved quickly, particularly those that moved to use executive powers or to alter their schemes of delegation in order to keep decisions flowing. There was some irony that we received a high number of positive decisions for minor and major applications in the first few weeks after lockdown, possibly indicating how effective delegated decisions can be.

It was also inevitable that planning departments were looking at the legislation and the requirements of their constitutions to ensure applications are validated, consulted upon, and determined in the right way that would not open themselves to obvious challenge. Major applications are more difficult as many Constitutions have very low and strict requirements on when these must be determined by Committee (for example, when 2 or more comments are received). Councils were therefore seeking advice on how to run Planning Committees in the current situation and this has delayed certain applications. Many authorities have now got procedures in place, or are trialling them with other functions, but we are yet to see a remote planning committee in action. This is something we are keen to see happen soon now.

Knowing how applications will be determined and how we will be able to participate in the debate remains a key matter for us. We therefore support Councils seeking advice on how to proceed. We are, however, more encouraged by those authorities that trust Officers and have altered their procedures to meet the immediate demands.

Whether an authority was (and is) set up for remote working has been a determining factor, alongside the attitudes of individual officers and managers to keep communications open. This has meant in some circumstances using personal equipment for certain discussions. Where officers are still waiting for a direction from their employer as to how to work, things have been less effective and occasionally frustrating with, for example, pre-application meetings either postponed indefinitely or offered to be cancelled and the fees returned rather than find an alternative to meeting in person. Another frustration has been whether Officers are able to put up site notices. Where they have been reluctant to do so, we were unclear why the Agent for an application could not do this instead, as happens already with Appeals. Given the lockdown, it is an interesting point as to who would read a Site Notice but as this is a requirement for some applications, some pragmatism as to how this is met would be welcome.

It is interesting to see the findings in the initial RTPI survey. It is clear that much of the profession are able to work remotely and that as a whole Planning is technically very well prepared.

In preparing applications our main concern has been the ability for surveys to be undertaken. It is good to see the advice from DEFRA that these can proceed.

A positive outcome of the situation is that a much greater range of individuals are becoming familiar with some of the technology that the profession has taken for granted for a long time. This may alter the approach to consultation in particular, taking online consultations more seriously and as being robust. As one recent example, a Local Authority insisting that a public event is still necessary for an application to be submitted is clearly counter to current advice and will delay an application being submitted. Such expectations should not be seriously suggested in these times and we welcome the more pragmatic, rational advice from Officers that we have also seen from many authorities.”

Darren Parker, Operational Director for Planning in the South West and Wales, RPS

Business will not be the same, and we do not have to be

“Although there is no escaping the impact of COVID-19, at RPS we were as ready as we could be to adapt our ways of working to ensure we kept our people safe and kept delivering for our clients.

From the outset we followed the spirit and letter of relevant public health advice. While a skeleton, socially distanced, team kept our Cardiff office open, our other colleagues immediately worked from home.

Significant technology investment over the last two years meant that on day one, 95% of our team were able to access our systems and work from home. They were also able to connect with each other and clients through our digital collaboration platforms and video conferencing.

As a result, service for our clients has been uninterrupted. Since lockdown began, planning appraisals, reports, fee proposals, applications and appeals have all been completed. We’ve also secured our first approval virtual planning committee, for a business park in Worcestershire. In Wales it was made possible for committee meetings to be conducted on the basis of full or partial remote attendance on the 22nd April.

We have been able to adapt the way we work to deliver virtually and digitally. Our [new virtual public consultation service](#) is an example of how we have removed the need for face-to-face interactions to allow planning applications to continue without disruption. Public and stakeholders have been able to access proposals, interact with visualisations, share their comments and dive into detail from home. What is perhaps most valuable of all is the ability to capture feedback instantly, engage with the public in real-time through live chat and access collated responses at the push of a button. With such a cost-effective and efficient alternative, I expect we may not see a complete return to the traditional approach even once restrictions are lifted.



Because of social distancing and the reliance on technology to interact with each other, relationships and meaningful connectivity are more important than ever. Our concern first and foremost is for the health and wellbeing of colleagues, clients and the communities we serve, and we have consciously sought to consider how people may be feeling in these uncertain times.

Collaboration is at the heart of what we want to do and instinctively we have been working to ensure we remain connected.

Regular communication from Welsh Government has been helpful, and has set the basis for how we have responded to COVID-19. One of the biggest challenges we have faced is the requirement in Wales to only conduct pre-application public and stakeholder consultation prior to the submission of a major planning application. A copy of the application must be available to view in a public building for 28 days. Due to the closure of public buildings, amendments to the Development Management Procedure (Wales) Order are necessary.

The rate of change we have witnessed during this period has been unprecedented. Given the tools and technology we have available now, as an industry we've been able to respond with a lot more agility than would have been possible not so long ago.

One of the other realisations is that everyone is experiencing COVID-19 differently and that there is no one size fits all answer to the challenges we are facing. Whether it's the size of the Local Authority or whether its predominately urban or rural – each warrants its own perspective”.

Further Information

RTPI Learn [Covid-19: working remotely and mental well-being](#)

The Planner's Coronavirus Coverage

The following sources of information may be of interest, however this does not imply RTPI support for their content:

- [Planning Inspectorate Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Guidance](#)
- [LGA PAS Coronavirus page](#)
- Planning Officers Society, [GOOD PRACTICE GUIDANCE NOTE DM Decision Making + COVID-19, How to manage committee decisions during the Coronavirus Emergency](#)
- London Office of Technology and Innovation: [How to hold online committee meetings that are accessible to the public](#)
- Sam Stafford's 50 Shades of Planning Podcast, [Planning & Coronavirus](#).
- Simon Rickett's [Simonicity Blog](#)
- Zack Simons [#planoraks](#) is a series of posts on UK planning law, litigation, appeals, and plan examinations.

For more information about this paper, visit:

www.rtpi.org.uk/rtpi.org.uk/covid-insights

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