



**RTPI**

Royal Town Planning Institute

# PRAGMATIC AND PREPARED FOR THE RECOVERY

The planning profession's rapid  
response to Covid-19

**RTPI  
Research  
Paper**

**MAY 2020**

## 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

This report provides a snapshot of practice amongst the profession across the UK and Ireland as of May 2020 in response to the immediate challenges presented by Covid-19. By sharing this information we are highlighting various different innovative approaches which have been adopted, rather than best practice *per se*. We hope this can help share learning amongst the profession. It is being published alongside [a series of short essays](#) from experts in the wider profession.

### Front and back cover image

The Green Heart – The University of Birmingham. Taken from a submission by Churchman Thornhill Finch to the 2020 RTPI Planning 2020, under the category of Excellence in Planning for Health and Wellbeing, It shows a project that redefines the value of outdoor learning spaces within a new landscape at the heart of The University of Birmingham.

# Contents

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
<b>2. Government responses</b> .....	<b>13</b>
2.1. England .....	13
2.2. Ireland .....	15
2.3. Northern Ireland.....	15
2.4. Scotland .....	15
2.5. Wales .....	16
<b>3. Development management in LPAs</b> .....	<b>17</b>
3.1. Decision making .....	17
3.2. Delegating to officers.....	17
3.3. Delegating to Executive in collaboration with senior committee members .....	18
3.4. Virtual planning committees .....	18
<b>4. Planning applications</b> .....	<b>22</b>
4.1. Extending timescales .....	22
4.2. Site visits and site notices .....	23
4.3. Surveys .....	25
<b>5. Developer contributions</b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b>6. Working practices</b> .....	<b>27</b>
6.1. Home working .....	27
6.2. Technology .....	28
6.3. Health and wellbeing .....	29
6.4. Redeployment .....	30
<b>7. Community engagement</b> .....	<b>31</b>
7.1. Public consultation.....	31
<b>8. Plan making</b> .....	<b>32</b>
8.1. Evidence base .....	33
<b>9. Monitoring and enforcement</b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b>10. Economic impact</b> .....	<b>35</b>
10.1. Economic recovery.....	36
<b>11. Conclusion</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>Further Information</b> .....	<b>39</b>

# Executive Summary

This report provides a snapshot of practice amongst the profession across the UK and Ireland as of May 2020 in response to the immediate challenges presented by Covid-19. By sharing this information we are highlighting various different innovative approaches which have been adopted rather than highlighting best practice *per se*. We hope this can help share learning amongst the profession.

Between 24 March and 8 April 2020 more than 1,000 members responded to the RTPI's online survey about the impacts of Covid-19 on the planning system. A summary of those findings follows this summary. We supplemented these findings with wider desk research and expert interviews, and we are also publishing a paper providing **wider industry insights** alongside this report. Another forthcoming RTPI report will explore the roles of planning in supporting a sustainable economic recovery from Covid-19<sup>1</sup>.

Following the introduction of social distancing measures in the UK and Ireland in March 2020, planning departments were confronted with the unprecedented task of maintaining decision making without the usual face to face planning committee meetings. We have seen a multitude of responses and heard a range of suggested approaches to take through the RTPI survey such as delegating to officers or holding virtual planning committees.

The responses by Governments to Covid-19 are clearly fast moving and the overarching approach to relaxing lockdown restrictions was announced for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales and Ireland in early May 2020. The various National governments that make up the RTPI Nations of UK and Ireland have taken varying actions affecting the planning system in response to the crisis.

Concerns raised by RTPI members related to the expiration of planning permissions, the barriers preventing officers progressing an application in the usual ways and the difficulties of processing new applications during the sustained period of remote working.

The protocol around how or indeed whether to conduct site visits and uncertainty on how to deal with statutory publicity procedures through the posting of site notices for planning applications were questions that came up time and again in the survey.

Fascinating insights were provided about working from home, the use of technology and health and wellbeing, with a mix of views on how the profession has been coping with these matters. Major themes to emerge were the productivity challenges when working from home alongside the opportunities it provided, an appetite to review the problems and capture the benefits of the accelerated use of technology in planning during the crisis. The importance of access to green/outdoor spaces for both exercise and general wellbeing was seen to have taken on even greater importance during the crisis. The difficulties of maintaining a 'business as usual' approach where redeployment of planners was also raised with the potential delays this could cause to the planning system.

The opportunities for communities to have their say in the planning process was paramount. There is a growing body of wider research on how digital engagement has been working during

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<sup>1</sup> RTPI research paper (forthcoming) [Planning for the recovery from Covid-19](#)

lockdown. There was a desire to maintain momentum on the local plan making process alongside the aim to achieve compliance and avoid penalties for not meeting government targets.

Our analysis of enforcement and monitoring activity found that people spending more time at home during the lockdown, has resulted in higher numbers of complaints being received about neighbouring householder developments. However, a pragmatic approach has been needed to ensure that site visits are only undertaken to sites which are considered a high priority.

There were clear economic worries both immediately and in the longer term with specific points made about redundancies, pre-emptively laying off employees, loss of income, not qualifying for government support schemes and the viability of developments. Looking to the future, self-isolation and being cooped up at home has thrown into sharp relief just how important personal space, fast reliable broadband and direct access to green spaces is.

The recommendations on the next page outline the RTPI's immediate asks to allow the planning system to support a sustainable economic recovery:

## Recommendations

Recommendation	Purpose	Audience
<p>Automatically extend those permissions expiring between now and the end of December in England, so they expire instead on 31 December 2020.</p> <p>Ensure that the period of time for submitting reserved matters on outline applications is extended such that those expiring between now and the end of December expire on 31 December 2020 instead<sup>2</sup>.</p>	<p>To deal with situations highlighted by our survey where applicants are in receipt of permissions that are due to expire shortly, although not able to implement them within the 3 years originally granted.</p>	<p>Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.</p> <p>Primary legislation appears to be required to provide automatic extensions to the permissions (Town and Country Planning Act 1990, Planning act 2008)</p>
<p>Produce guidance on safe working practices for daily practices such as site visits, site notices, communication with stakeholders and transparent decision-making.</p> <p>Trust professionals on delegated decision making to ensure that development can continue.</p> <p>Recognising the vital importance of community engagement and political input on major and controversial projects.</p> <p>Review the use of technology and capture the benefits.</p> <p>Resource planning departments in preparation to promote a sustainable economic recovery and to allow for the ongoing delivery of the planning system.</p>	<p>To support the efficient functioning of the planning system.</p> <p>Ensure planning departments have the resources and capacity to support the economic recovery.</p> <p>Harness technological innovation to foster more efficient and inclusive planning, building upon the innovations by planners under the Covid-19 lockdown.</p>	<p>Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government</p> <p>Welsh Government</p> <p>Northern Ireland</p> <p>Department for Infrastructure</p> <p>Scottish Government's Local Government and Communities Directorate</p> <p>Irish Government's Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government</p>

<sup>2</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI renews calls on government to extend planning permissions](#)

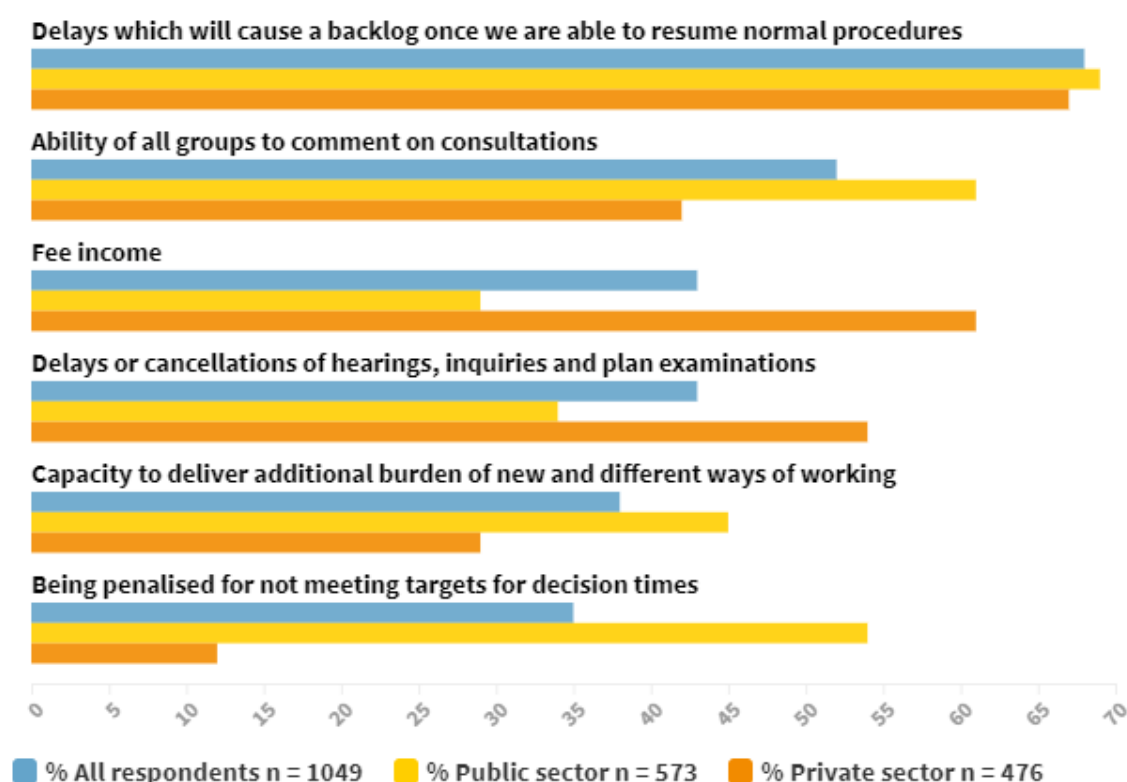
## Summary of survey statistics

Between 24 March and April 8 2020 more than 1,000 members responded to the RTPI's online survey about the impacts of Covid-19 on the planning system. The statistics from this survey and the written feedback are integrated throughout this report. The breakdowns of survey respondents was broadly in line with the proportionate split of RTPI membership and the wider profession<sup>3</sup>, with 55% from the public sector (including 47% from local authorities). 80% were from England, 10% Scotland, 5% Wales, 4% Northern Ireland, and 1% outside the UK. Below are some of the key statistics from the survey. [A full set of tables is available here.](#)

### Main concerns

Nearly 70% of respondents said delays creating a backlog was one of their main concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on the efficient functioning of the planning system. This was equally an issue with both public and private sector planners. Public sector planners were relatively more likely to list main concerns as the ability of all groups to comment on consultations (61% compared to 42%), being penalised for not meeting targets for decision times (54% compared to 12%) and capacity to deliver new ways of working (45% compared to 29%). Private sector planners were relatively more concerned about delays leading to cancellations of hearings, inquiries and plan examinations (54% compared to 34%) and drops in fee income (61% compared to 29%).

**Chart 1: What are your main concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on the efficient functioning of the planning system? (select all that apply)**



Source: RTPI online survey of planners March to April 2020. [View on Flourish](#)

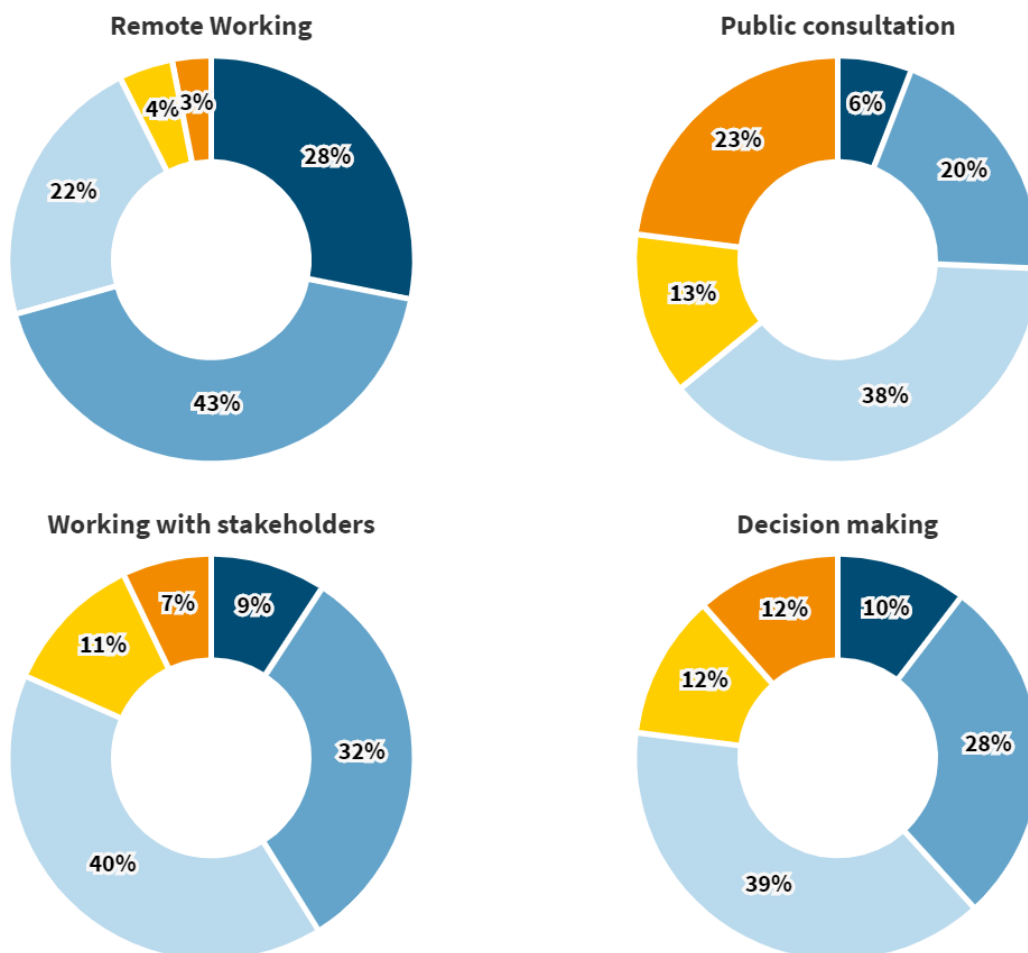
<sup>3</sup> RTPI (2020) [The UK Planning Profession in 2019](#)

## Remote working and digital planning

More than 96% of respondents said they had moved to remote working, while 65% said their offices had been completely closed. Despite this rapid transition, more than nine in ten (93%) felt their IT systems were at least moderately effective for remote working, with 82% reporting they were at least moderately effective for working with stakeholders and 77% for decision making. Perhaps unsurprisingly, only two-thirds (64%) reported that IT systems were at least moderately effective for public consultation. A greater proportion of private sector respondents reported that IT systems were adapting *very or extremely well* to remote working (83% to 61%) and to working with stakeholders (47% to 36%).

**Chart 2: How well are IT systems working for different tasks?**

Extremely effective   Very effective   Moderately effective   Slightly effective   Not effective



Source: RTPI online survey of planners March to April 2020 (n=1049). [View on Flourish](#)

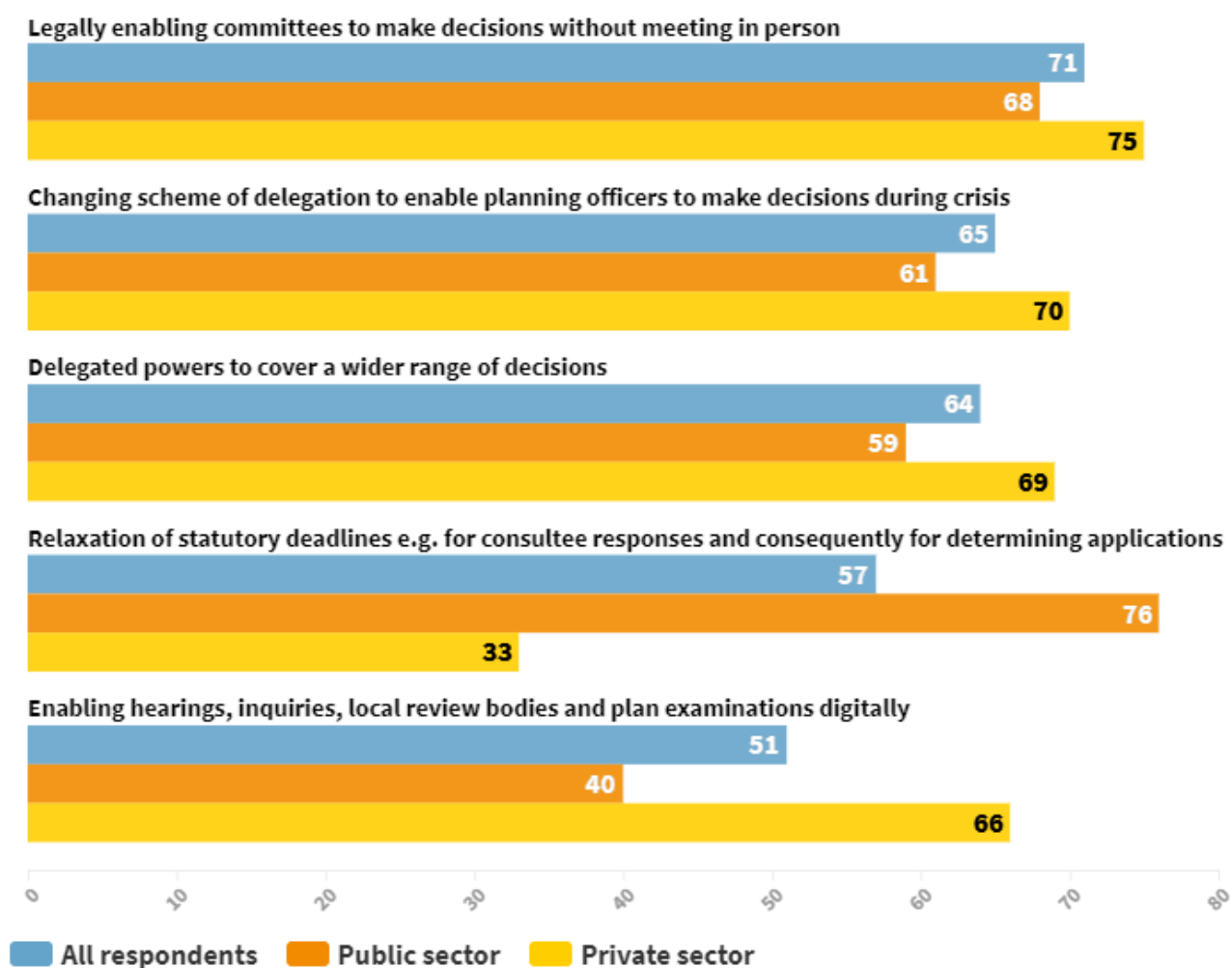
More than half of respondents (52%) favoured digital hearings, inquiries, local review bodies and plan examinations. A greater proportion of private sector respondents favoured this compared to public sector respondents (66% compared to 40%).



## Changes to the application process

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63%) said schemes of delegation should be changed to enable planning officers to make decisions during the crisis. Private sector respondents were slightly more likely to favour this delegation (70% to 61%). Half of all respondents (49%) said rules should be relaxed relating to public access to hard copy documents. 40% of all respondents said requirements around pre-application consultation in person should be relaxed.

**Chart 3: Five most supported measures to help planning system adapt to Covid-19**



Source: RTPI online survey of planners March to April 2020 (n=1049). [View on Flourish](#)

While there was broad agreement on most of the questions in this survey, there were some differences between public and private sector respondents when it came to views on how the system should respond in some areas. As described above, there was also variation between public and private sector members in terms of main concerns. This makes it even clearer that an analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on the planning profession must consider particular impacts on different sectors.

- More than three quarters (76%) of public sector respondents favoured relaxation of statutory deadlines, while only a third (33%) of private sector respondents agreed.

- More than half (52%) of public sector respondents said housing delivery targets for 2020 should be relaxed, compared to sixth (16%) of private sector respondents.
- Over a third (36%) of public sector respondents favoured relaxation of local plan deadlines, compared to less than a sixth (14%) of private sector respondents.
- Two-fifths (40%) of public sector respondents favoured enabling hearings, inquiries, and plan examinations to proceed digitally, compared to two-thirds (66%) of the private sector

## Priorities for the RTPI

We also asked about what members felt the RTPI should be concentrating on. The most popular responses were raising key issues with the Government (85%) and regular updates on guidance relating to coronavirus (80%). More than half (56%) argue that online CPD should be a priority for the RTPI. Finally, there was also strong support for more forward looking work, with 56% suggesting the RTPI should prioritise developing thinking on how planning can support climate action, stimulate economic growth and tackle inequalities after the crisis. Each of these priorities was identified equally by public and private sector respondents. For more information on RTPI's work in these areas, see:

- **Latest updates** on immediate responses of the planning system to Covid-19
- **RTPI Learn and Online Events**, from webinars, to online training, through to regular updates, discussions between professional planners and live events we've got a fantastic and exciting programme of online CPD.
- **Planning for the recovery from Covid-19**, a forward looking report exploring the role of planning in a sustainable recovery, due to be published in early-Summer.

## Other responses from the survey

The survey also provided a few opportunities for respondents to provide written feedback on their priorities, concerns and ideas. Topics that came up frequently in our survey responses included:

- The reduction of pollution and cleaner air seen during the lockdown should be seen as an opportunity to adopt better practices in order to achieve net zero targets.
- The delays to the planning process that could be caused by planning staff being redeployed to front line services concerned several members.
- Some members wanted to review the problems and capture the benefits from the use of technology following an acceleration in its use during the crisis.
- Planning for the recovery to include reconsidering the impact of Permitted Development Rights with increased time at home exacerbating poor living conditions especially in office to residential conversions.
- The importance of effective and regular communication both internally and externally in keeping all parties updated on the organisation's response to Covid-19.

# 1. Introduction

More than 1000 RTPI members responded to the online survey on Covid-19 that was undertaken in March and April 2020. This paper gives the survey findings on how planning departments have been responding to this extraordinary situation. The report aims to contribute to the immediate need for guidance on how to maintain effective planning services in a much changed environment and will inform RTPI's continuing work with governments across the UK and Ireland. It reviews early lessons and starts to assess how the profession can prepare to support the delivery of a sustainable economic recovery. We supplemented the findings with wider desk research and expert interviews, and we are also publishing a paper providing [wider industry insights](#) alongside this report. Another forthcoming RTPI report will explore the roles of planning in supporting a sustainable economic recovery from Covid-19<sup>4</sup>

We have been inspired to see planners rising to the challenges they have faced in the past few weeks in responding to the impacts of Covid-19 on the planning system. The RTPI has been recording videos to share the latest views<sup>5</sup> and this report captures further insights on how the profession has been coping during this unparalleled period. Our survey and wider research highlights how digitisation of the planning system has been fast-tracked. We have been talking about resourcing for planning for many years. Now is the time to make the case for the right type of resourcing and the right type of change and we have provided further details on this in our recently published priorities for planning reform in England<sup>6</sup> and have set out key ideas for the next Scottish National Planning Framework<sup>7</sup>.

The challenges of progressing the decision making process has been difficult as planning departments were confronted with the unprecedented task of maintaining decision making without the usual face to face planning committee meetings. The RTPI recognises that in these challenging times, local authorities have needed to make decisions about ways of progressing planning applications to ensure that development can continue, including by using virtual planning committees and by delegating some temporary powers to senior officers. This report highlights a range of responses from LPAs to maintaining business continuity.

One of the survey questions asked 'How can the RTPI best provide support for members' provided the following results:

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<sup>4</sup> RTPI research paper (forthcoming) [Planning for the recovery from Covid-19](#)

<sup>5</sup> RTPI YouTube Channel (2020) [RTPI experts discuss how planning has responded to the Covid-19 crisis](#)

RTPI YouTube Channel (2020) [Heads of Planning: Delivering in a Different Way During Covid 19](#)

RTPI YouTube Channel (2020) [Heads of Planning in Wales: responding to Covid-19](#)

RTPI YouTube Channel (2020) [Covid-19: How planners in Scotland have responded](#)

YouTube [#PlanTalk - Connecting and Learning with Victoria Hills](#)

<sup>6</sup> RTPI (2020) [Priorities for Planning in England](#)

<sup>7</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI Scotland response to the Scottish Government call for ideas](#)

RTPI members said	RTPI are doing
Raising key issues with the Government (85%)	The RTPI is working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure the appropriate guidance is given to English planners. RTPI directors in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and Ireland are having similar conversations with their governments. The survey findings will also continue to inform the Institute's efforts to support the profession through these challenging times and look ahead to the recovery.
Regular updates on governments' and other agencies' advice on planning systems and policies in relation to response to the coronavirus (80%)	A <a href="#">Coronavirus hub</a> has been established on the RTPI website
Developing thinking on how planning can support climate action, stimulate economic growth or tackle inequalities after the crisis (55%)	A forthcoming separate RTPI report will explore the roles of planning in supporting a sustainable economic recovery from Covid-19 <sup>8</sup>
Online CPD training (55%)	During this unprecedented situation, we are working hard to bring you the best of our events and training programmes online. From webinars, to online training, through to regular updates, discussions between professional planners and live events we have a fantastic and exciting programme <sup>9</sup> .

Immediately following the closing of the member survey, the RTPI called on the Westminster government to issue further planning guidance to prevent development delays on planning permission durations, site visits, site notices, communication with stakeholders and transparent decision-making.

**“Planning cannot be accused of standing still. Despite a rapidly fast changing landscape, we have seen primary legislation and new guidance. The priority for now is to keep the system moving and minimise the backlog. In the longer term, we want to embed new ways of doing things into business as usual as and when we ever return to that. Planning has a big role to play in green recovery, but we need to ensure it’s resourced to do this.**

<sup>8</sup> RTPI research paper (forthcoming) [Planning for the recovery from Covid-19](#)

<sup>9</sup> RTPI (2020) [Online events](#)

**The great response to this survey shows the adaptability of planners and how this crisis has brought out the best in the profession”** (Victoria Hills, RTPI Chief Executive, May 2020)

This report first summarises the National governments’ responses to the impacts of Covid-19 on the planning system, before analysing how practice has adapted in various areas of the planning system. It then provides a snapshot of practice amongst the profession across the UK and Ireland as of May 2020 in response to the immediate challenges presented by Covid-19. By sharing this information we are highlighting various different innovative approaches which have been adopted rather than highlighting best practice *per se*. We hope this can help share learning amongst the profession.

## 2. Government responses

Responses are clearly fast moving and the overarching approach to relaxing lockdown restrictions was announced for England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and Ireland in early May 2020<sup>10</sup>. The various National governments that make up the RTPI Nations of UK and Ireland have taken varying actions affecting the planning system in response to the crisis. Below are some of the most important for each, as of 15 May 2020.

### 2.1. England

The Coronavirus Act (2020) received Royal Assent on March 25 2020. Importantly, as of 4 April 2020 following two sets of regulations made under the Coronavirus Act 2020 Local authorities were provided with the powers to hold public meetings including planning committees virtually<sup>11</sup> by using video or telephone conferencing technology during Covid-19. The profession has been asked to take an innovative approach to maintaining momentum in the system<sup>12</sup> which was further outlined by the Housing Minister:

**“It is important that local planning authorities continue to provide the best service possible in these stretching times and prioritise decision-making to ensure the planning system continues to function, especially where this will support the local economy.**

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<sup>10</sup> Government of Ireland (3 May 2020) [Roadmap for reopening society and business](#)

Northern Ireland Executive (7 May 2020) [Executive Daily Update: Initiatives to deal with Coronavirus \(7 May 2020\)](#)

Northern Ireland Executive (12 May 2020) [publishes Coronavirus recovery strategy](#)

Scottish Government (7 May 2020) [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) update: First Minister's speech \(08 May 2020\)](#)

UK Government (10 May 2020) [PM address to the nation on coronavirus \(10 May 2020\)](#)

UK Government (11 May 2020) [Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy](#)

Welsh Government (8 May 2020) [Wales extends coronavirus lockdown](#)

<sup>11</sup> MHCLG (2020) [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): letter to councils about local authority meetings and postponement of elections](#)

<sup>12</sup> MHCLG (March 2020) [Chief Planner for England Newsletter](#)

**We are asking local planning authorities to take an innovative approach and explore every opportunity to use technology to ensure that discussions and consultations can go ahead. We would encourage councils to consider delegating committee decisions where appropriate. The Government has introduced legislation to allow council committee meetings to be held virtually for a temporary period which we expect will allow planning committees to continue.”** (Housing Minister, Rt Hon Christopher Pincher MP, in response to a written question, 25 March 2020)

The Planning Inspectorate (PINS) published guidance<sup>13</sup> on how it would continue to carry out its duties. While some site visits, hearings, inquiries and events have been cancelled or postponed, PINS have been considering alternative arrangements where possible and are keeping its guidance under review. More than 2000 decisions have been issued since the lockdown and 13 Local Plan letters have been issued as of 4 May 2020, casework is continuing and all of the work on national infrastructure is still progressing. Inspectors are trialling making decisions where they are satisfied from the evidence that they can reach a robust decision without a site visit and cases have been changed to written representation where inspectors are satisfied they have the evidence to make a decision through that route. A few partial digital hearings have taken place and the first fully digital hearing took place in the week commencing 11 May 2020 with 20 digital enquiries, hearings and examinations programmed for June.

In terms of staffing of the MHCLG Planning Directorate, we understand that as of April 2020, 40% had been deployed to other priority areas. A Planning update from MHCLG dated 13 May 2020<sup>14</sup> provided the latest update from the government affecting the profession in England.

The updates included that:

- LPAs (and applicants of Environmental Impact Assessment development under the Town and Country Planning Act) would be allowed to temporarily publicise planning applications through social media instead of having to rely on site notices if they cannot discharge the specific requirements for site notices, neighbour notifications or newspaper publicity.
- The government proposes to amend the CIL regulations in due course to give authorities more discretion to defer payment for developers that have an annual turnover of less than £45 million. In the meantime LPAs asked to "use their enforcement powers with discretion and provide some comfort to developers".
- On s106 planning obligations, the Government outlined that where the delivery of a planning obligation, such as a financial contribution, is triggered during this period, LPAs are encouraged to consider whether it would be appropriate to allow the developer to defer delivery.

The RTPI welcomed the announcements<sup>15</sup>; however, we called for the government to go further by

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<sup>13</sup> Planning Inspectorate (2020) [Planning Inspectorate guidance](#)

<sup>14</sup> MHCLG (13 May 2020) [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) – Planning update - GOV.UK](#)

<sup>15</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI welcomes latest government announcements to help planning sector](#)

also issuing guidance on site visits and addressing the need for extended planning permissions.

## 2.2. Ireland

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (DHPLG) have outlined the changes to the planning system in Ireland during Covid-19<sup>16</sup>. This includes extended timescales specified for any statutory process related to planning by 3 weeks and 2 days. In practice, this means that a planning authority will have the normal period of eight weeks to decide a planning application, together with an additional period of up to three weeks and two days<sup>17</sup>.

DHPLG has published FAQs - Extension of Orders originally made on 29 March 2020 under Section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000<sup>18</sup> and An Bord Pleanála has also published advice and guidance<sup>19</sup>.

## 2.3. Northern Ireland

The Chief Planner and Director of Regional Planning, Angus Kerr outlined the approach of planning in Northern Ireland to Covid 19<sup>20</sup>.

On plan making with Councils at different stages of the process, there was encouragement to work proactively with communities and stakeholders to progress their plans and an acknowledgement that adjustments to timescales are likely to be necessary. Regarding decision making local authorities were asked to adopt innovative approaches to continuing discussions and consultations remotely. The Planning Appeals Commission also wrote to the RTPI<sup>21</sup> outlining the steps they are taking to keep the planning system working during the pandemic<sup>2223</sup>.

## 2.4. Scotland

An announcement on 3 April 2020 of emergency legislation ensuring planning permissions due to lapse during the six-month 'emergency period' would be extended for a further year was welcomed by RTPI Scotland<sup>24</sup>. The overall approach of the Scottish Government to planning procedures for Covid-19 were outlined in letter from the Government on the same day and a quote from that is copied below:

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<sup>16</sup> Department of Planning, Housing and Local Government (2020) [Clarification on the Operation of the Planning System During the Current COVID-19 Emergency](#)

<sup>17</sup> Department of Planning, Housing and Local Government (2020) [FAQ - Extension of Orders originally made on 29 March 2020 under Section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000 \(as amended\)](#)

<sup>18</sup> Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (2020) [FAQ - Extension of Orders originally made on 29 March 2020 under Section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000 \(as amended\), on 8 May 2020](#)

<sup>19</sup> An Bord Pleanála (2020) [Pleanála: COVID-19 and An Bord Pleanála: Information](#)

<sup>20</sup> March 2020 [Department for Infrastructure, Chief Planner's update and Chief Planner's Update May 2020 \(No.6\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> Planning Appeals Commission (2020) [COVID-19 TEMPORARY MEASURES](#)

<sup>22</sup> [CORONAVIRUS \(COVID-19\) PACWAC APPROACH](#)

<sup>23</sup> [CORONAVIRUS \(COVID-19\) PACWAC UPDATE - OFFICE CLOSURE](#)

<sup>24</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI Scotland welcomes emergency planning legislation](#)

**“Planning has a crucial part to play within and beyond the immediate emergency. A high performing planning system will have a critical role in supporting our future economic and societal recovery, and our future health and wellbeing. Those of us involved in planning, across sectors, must do what we can to keep plans and proposals moving through the system, throughout this period of uncertainty and in the months and years ahead. That might mean being prepared to adopt some new approaches; measuring risk and taking a pragmatic view of how we can best continue to plan and make the decisions vital to the recovery of our communities and businesses.”** (John McNairney, Chief Planner for Scotland and Kevin Stewart Minister for Local Government, Housing and Planning, Scottish Government, 3 April 2020)

Provisions were made in the Coronavirus (Scotland) Bill<sup>25</sup> which came into force on 7 April 2020 to extend the duration of all planning permissions due to expire during an ‘emergency period’ of 6 months, so that the relevant permission or time limit shall not lapse for a period of 12 months from the date those provisions come into force. The Scottish Government have produced answers to frequently asked questions<sup>26</sup> on a range of issues for the planning system as a direct result of the current need for social distancing.

## 2.5. Wales

The Welsh Government published the Local Authorities (Coronavirus) (Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2020<sup>27</sup> on 22 April 2020 accompanied by the following statement:<sup>28</sup>

**“The regulations which come into effect today make temporary provision in relation to local authority meetings and for public and press access to these meetings during the COVID-19 pandemic. I do not expect local authority meetings to return to normal for some months and therefore Councils will need to be flexible to provide for urgent business relating to COVID-19.**

**They provide flexibility to enable local authorities to operate safely, effectively and lawfully, while retaining the principles of openness and accountability to the public. This includes enabling meetings to be conducted on the basis of full or partial remote attendance and by making provision about the electronic publishing of certain documents”.** (Julie James AM, Minister for Housing and Local Government, 22 April 2020)

The latest Covid-19 guidance for planning authorities from the Welsh Chief Planner at the time of publishing this report was provided on 29 April 2020<sup>29</sup>. This included advice regarding site visits and that where remote assessment is not possible, the person responsible for the site visit will

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<sup>25</sup> The Scottish Parliament (2020) [Coronavirus Scotland Bill – Bills \(proposed laws\) – Scottish Parliament](#)

<sup>26</sup> Scottish Government (2020) [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): development management - frequently asked questions](#)

<sup>27</sup> Welsh Statutory Instruments (2020) [The Local Authorities \(Coronavirus\) \(Meetings\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2020](#)

<sup>28</sup> Welsh Government (2020) [Written Statement: Local Authorities \(Coronavirus\) \(Meetings\) \(Wales\) Regulations 2020](#)

<sup>29</sup> Welsh Government, [Chief Planner update](#)



need to ensure compliance with the duty to take all reasonable measures to maintain a 2 metre distance between people on any land or buildings where the site visit is to take place.

## 3. Development management in LPAs

### 3.1. Decision making

Following the introduction of social distancing measures in the United Kingdom on 23 March 2020 and Ireland on 27 March 2020, planning departments were confronted with the extraordinary task of maintaining decision making without the usual face to face planning committee meetings. The desire to safely keep the planning system going particularly related to decision making was a fundamental issue for the profession. Another theme to emerge was the need to robustly and legally run a planning committee relating to contentious decisions whilst minimising the risk of judicial review and legal action from parties. We have seen a multitude of responses and heard a range of suggested approaches to take through the RTPI survey. PAS have also highlighted the decision making used by Cornwall Council<sup>30</sup> and Ipswich Borough Council<sup>31</sup>.

**“Keep communication channels open with customers, particularly developers and agents - keep them regularly informed of any changes to service delivery and key messages (for example that we are still open for business and able to process all planning applications)”** (Stephen Hunt MRTPI, Head of Planning and Development Management, East Riding of Yorkshire Council)

### 3.2. Delegating to officers

One response to the need to maintain business continuity and keep the system moving has been to increase the amount of delegations to planning officers. Nearly two-thirds of respondents to our survey (63%) said schemes of delegation should be changed to enable planning officers to make decisions during the crisis, while 64% said delegated powers should be introduced to cover a wide range of decisions. Private sector respondents were more likely than public sector respondents to favour delegation to officers (70% to 61%).

This has allowed some planning applications that ordinarily would have gone to a planning committee to be determined according to the professional judgement of planning officers. The RTPI supports this approach as a way to keep development moving with the necessary checks and balances in place:

**“In these challenging times, local authorities have needed to make decisions about ways of progressing planning applications to ensure that development can continue, including by using virtual planning committees and by delegating some temporary powers to senior officers.**

**The RTPI supports the continued ability of Chartered, professional planners to make key decisions. Chief Planning Officers must follow the Local Plan which is**

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<sup>30</sup> Cornwall Council (2020) [Procedure for Emergency Decision Making for Planning During Covid-19 Pandemic](#)

<sup>31</sup> Ipswich Borough Council (2020) [Coronavirus Impact - Planning Applications](#)

**based on public consultation in making decisions the RTPI recognises the vital importance of community engagement as a key stage in an effective planning process”** (Richard Blyth, Head of Policy, Practice and Research, RTPI)

For example, at the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, on 18 March 2020, at an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Council, Members determined to cancel all forthcoming Planning Committees, and through the Managing Director to the authority’s Chief Planner, constituted full delegated powers. Applications that had been scheduled to go to the Planning Committee in the coming months would be determined under these delegated powers, under a new model of engagement with Members on the decisions the authority intended to take.

### 3.3. Delegating to Executive in collaboration with senior committee members

Some LPAs are delegating decision making powers to senior officers to decide on planning applications jointly with senior committee members. For example:

- Manchester City Council has delegated major planning decisions to its Chief Executive in collaboration with the chair and deputy chair of the planning committee<sup>32</sup>

### 3.4. Virtual planning committees

The majority of respondents the RTPI surveyed (71%) called for legislation to legally enable planning committees to make decisions without meeting in person. Legislation has now been passed and provisions are at various stages of preparedness to allow for virtual planning committees to take place in England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales<sup>33</sup>.

**“I think you need to be innovative around Committees. The democratic process needs to be still in place. Use of video conferencing, teleconferencing etc.”**  
(Local Authority Planning Officer in Scotland, Covid-19 member survey)

**“Being able to robustly operate complex and potentially contentious planning committees for major site developments through technology that is very new to Councils for running meetings of this nature and the potential legal risks to robust decision making and also managing the perception that the community have not been able to participate fully in the process of the committee.”**(Local Authority Planning Officer in England, Covid-19 member survey)

Guidance from the Planning Advisory Service<sup>34</sup> and Planning Officers Society<sup>35</sup> provides suggestions on how to deliver effective digital sittings of planning committees in England. The

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<sup>32</sup>The RTPI Planner (2020) [Manchester chief exec to decide planning applications](#)

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/asp/2020/7/schedule/6/enacted>

Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (2020) [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): letter to councils about local authority meetings and postponement of elections](#)

<sup>34</sup> Local Government Association, Planning Advisory Service (2020) [Planning and Covid-19](#)

<sup>35</sup> Planning Officers Society (2020) [DM Decision Making + COVID-19: How to manage committee decisions during the Coronavirus Emergency](#)

necessity of clearly explaining the process and managing expectations in advance of a committee meeting is essential to supporting planners and promoting public confidence in the planning system. RTPI practice advice<sup>36</sup> (written during pre-pandemic times but perhaps of greater relevance with growing use of virtual planning committee), suggested setting out the following in advance of the committee can assist in the smooth running of meetings:

- Managing the public's expectations and experience of the committee. If people know how long they will be allowed to speak, for example, and who gets to ask questions of whom, then there's less chance that surprise at the meeting will turn into frustration;
- To provide details in advance to increase public confidence in the system, committee reports prepared by planning officers could detail the following:
  - Whether the applicants had participated and engaged in pre-application discussions;
  - Whether Councillors were also invited to take part in the process; and
  - The advice that was given at the pre-application stage.

Ensuring fairness, transparency and consistency were understandably factors at the forefront of the decision making process. Issues on the limitations of virtual planning committees such as the accessibility and transparency of decisions made for the public and agents and potential issues regarding the effective use of the technology were raised by three members as a concern related to the efficient functioning of the planning system.

As the profession has moved quickly and efficiently to progress virtual planning committees, there have been almost daily updates of a new LPA running a virtual planning committee.

Simon Gallagher, Director of Planning, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government noted that in England as of the end of April 2020, approximately 1/3 of LPAs in England have held or were looking to hold virtual planning committees. Where committees have been run through video conferencing, it raises a question whether people want to stick with them post lockdown. This has the potential to open up membership of committees and participation in meetings.

Heads of Planning Scotland have reported that approximately 33% of Planning Committees and 20% of Local Review Bodies are being held online<sup>37</sup>, with many authorities looking to review the position at a future date.

It would not be practical to list details of all virtual planning committees that are taking place, as such research exists elsewhere<sup>38</sup>. Instead, we have drawn out some examples and included insights from planners involved in running these meetings to understand how they have gone.

## Virtual committee meetings

**“We plan to continue hosting remote committee meetings. They generally have been working really well and are an opportunity to increase the**

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<sup>36</sup> RTPI (2020) [Probity and the Professional Planner](#)

<sup>37</sup> Heads of Planning Scotland (2020) [COVID-19 and the Planning System](#)

<sup>38</sup> Lichields (2020) [Business as \(un\)usual, How are local authorities responding?](#)

**attendance as interested parties do not have to give up so much of their precious time”** (Philip Ridley, BSc(Hons) MRTPI, Head of Planning and Coastal Management, East Suffolk Council)

Planning Committee meetings of the **Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority** are being held virtually and on live webcast so that the public can watch.

- Those in support and in objection to cases can summarise their representation as they could normally in a hearing format.
- Various testing was completed before going live, including dress rehearsals so that members knew what to expect and guidance on the do's and don'ts of virtual meetings. This was built in to uphold professional standards and overall build confidence for all involved.
- The Authority reports that through these virtual meetings, decision-making has been more accessible for people. For example, without much promotion of it taking place, the first virtual meeting gained twelve external viewers despite a relatively light agenda.

**"Hackney's first virtual planning sub committee was held on 23rd April through Google Meet with deputations from applicants and objectors. The Planning Service has received positive feedback on the process from applicants, members, and members of the public. The Council has also held successful virtual design review panel meetings, again with positive feedback from participants."** (Natalie Broughton, Head of Planning and Building Control, London Borough of Hackney)

**Hull City Council's** Planning Committee sat the day before the virtual committee regulations were laid. The Council Chamber is very large and allows for social distancing with a small number of councillors and officers. Others joined remotely. This approach was taken because of the risks that technology would fail and therefore by having a core group of councillors in the committee room this allowed decision making to continue regardless.

**The London Borough of Ealing** explains<sup>39</sup> that the workload of the planning committee represents approximately 2% of all planning applications submitted to the council and that the Covid-19 crisis is not likely to see any change in this figure as the planning committee tends to deal with major planning applications.

- The council considers it important that decisions continue to be made and therefore it will be conducting some meetings as virtual online meetings, including its planning committee.
- Enhanced digital information on major applications that may be produced by the applicant team will add to the depth of information normally produced by Officers in their presentations to Committee. Officers will also explore the use of Google Maps and Google World during their presentations and in 'question and answer' sessions with councillors.

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<sup>39</sup> London Borough of Ealing (2020) [Planning Position Statement \(Consultation and Engagement\) April 2020](#)

**Edinburgh City Council**<sup>40</sup> are introducing an online Development Management Sub-Committee, starting on 20 May 2020, and have temporarily extended their scheme of delegation to help decisions be made, enabling a pipeline of development consents to be ready for when construction starts up again.

**“How can the Planning Committee operate? We quickly provided officers with delegated powers to determine all planning applications so our first 'Committee' in lockdown consisted of a consultation teleconference with Committee Members with the decision made by the Director. Our next Committee reverted to Members making the decisions again through a teleconference. By our third Committee we had established arrangements for it to be held via Zoom.”** (Stephen Hunt MRTPI, Head of Planning and Development Management, East Riding of Yorkshire Council)

In the **London Borough of Redbridge**, Member briefings are taking place via Microsoft Teams and the planning committee will be taking place via Microsoft Teams.

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<sup>40</sup> Edinburgh City Council (2020) [Planning and building standards - Coronavirus update](#)

## 4. Planning applications

The full impact of Covid-19 on the planning system and the flow of planning applications can only be fully assessed in the future, however the immediate threat to the system has been stark. A survey undertaken by Heads of Planning Scotland has shown that at this moment there has been no significant drop in planning application numbers although they “will inevitably decrease over the next few months there will be a knock on effect in fee income”. Concerns raised by RTPI members related to the expiration of planning permissions, the barriers preventing officers progressing an application in the usual ways and the difficulties of processing new applications during the sustained period of remote working. Nearly 70% of respondents to our survey said delays to the system were one of their main concerns about the impact of Covid-19 on the efficient functioning of the planning system.

### 4.1. Extending timescales

The potential expiry of planning permission was a strong concern in our survey with clear calls for extensions in England. Provisions had already been made to extend permissions in the devolved nations. The fear that years of hard work in some cases to achieve planning permissions, could be lost due to factors outside of their control came across clearly. 54% of public sector RTPI member respondents called for an extension of permissions by notice not application

**“We agree that the deadline for implementing planning permissions, which expire during or shortly before this crisis, should be extended. Developers should not be required to incur the time and cost of seeking a new consent as a result of current events. We consider that a similar approach should be adopted as has taken place in Scotland. (Private Sector (PAYE) Planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey)**

We received a mix of suggestions on exactly how timescales could be extended. The main debate has been about how long planning permissions should be extended for, which applications should be eligible for extension, and how the process for extending should work. One idea is extending the life of all current planning permissions by one year to avoid the need to seek pre commencement condition discharge was suggested in a similar way to the extension granted to those with an MOT due in the six months after 30 March 2020<sup>41</sup>. Another was extending all planning permissions by at least 2 years without the need for further applications, to take into account the uncertainty regarding the duration of social distancing restrictions and the implications likely to be felt for some time. Longer and broader extensions were justified so as to allow the development industry to catch-up on the sale of sites and development of sites which may have stalled due to the current crisis. And to allow LPAs to concentrate on new developments and delivering much needed growth rather than dealing with a back-log of renewal applications caused by the current crisis.

On delivery, the survey found a desire to avoid penalties for not meeting targets for decision time in England with 54% of public sector survey respondents concerned about not meeting

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<sup>41</sup> [Coronavirus: MOTs due from 30 March 2020](#)

government targets on policies such as the Housing Delivery Test and the New Homes Bonus.

The survey found situations have arisen where applicants are in receipt of permissions that due to expire shortly, although not able to implement them within the 3 years originally granted. Where local authorities have received requests to be flexible, they have had to say no, as the time to implement permissions is governed by legislation. At the RTPI, we have suggested that MHCLG look at primary legislation to automatically extend those permissions expiring between now and the end of December, so they expire instead on 31 December. This would also ensure that the period of time for submitting reserved matters on outline applications is also extended such that those expiring between now and the end of December expire on 31 December instead<sup>42</sup>.

## 4.2. Site visits and site notices

The protocol around how or indeed whether to conduct site visits and uncertainty on how to deal with statutory publicity procedures through the posting of site notices for planning applications were questions that came up time and again in the survey. It was announced on 12 May 2020<sup>43</sup> that in England LPAs and developers will be able to publicise planning applications through social media instead of having to rely on site notices and leaflets.

**“My team could continue to process planning applications but we are held up by our inability to carry out statutory public procedures in putting up site notices or print neighbour letters whilst our offices are closed”** (Local Authority Planner, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

Members were acutely conscious that social distancing measures hindered their ability to visit sites for assessment and to put site notices up. Equally concerns were expressed that by not carrying out these tasks, they would slow the decision making process down

Cornwall Council are as of 5 May 2020, focusing on determining applications<sup>44</sup> where site visits have previously taken place with all site visits currently suspended. They outline that not all applications will require a site visit as they may have sufficient knowledge or can access information on their systems to allow proper consideration of the proposal. Should a site visit prove necessary the authority will work with the applicant to agree a suitable extension of time for the application. East Riding of Yorkshire Council explain that in relation to undertaking site visits, case officers have been asked to look at whether safe arrangements can be made to view or access a site. They have also asked applicants to consider how they could assist with this for example whether unaccompanied site visits can take place, or whether additional photos or videos of the site can be provided.

Uncertainty as to whether a site visit classed as an essential journey inspired several alternative responses such as:

- Videoing site visits requested by committee instead of them attending

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<sup>42</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI renews calls on government to extend planning permissions](#)

<sup>43</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2020) [Housing Secretary sets out plan to re-start housing market](#)

<sup>44</sup> Cornwall Council (2020) [Covid-19 impact on planning processes](#)

- Relying on photos rather than site visits
- Maximum usage of other data, such as council tax records
- Any site which cannot be viewed without leaving a vehicle is off limits
- Greater use of previous photos or Google Streetview or, if the applicant lives on site, asking them to provide photos
- Virtual site visits for Officers/Members/Inspectors, i.e. using video conferencing facilities

The guidance on site visits does not provide a definitive position and relies upon the member assessing the situation for themselves. From an Institute perspective, the RTPI has been asked about how it fits with the Code of Professional Conduct. The following is the advice we have been providing:

- RTPI does not have guidance on site visits but members should use their professional judgement, use due care and diligence, and recognise that the current circumstances will have a bearing on their actions
- It is recommended that organisations set out clear guidelines about the use of video, photographs and so on for their RTPI members. If the member retains the ability to exercise his or her professional judgement as to whether a physical site visit is necessary then, provided that the member can demonstrate these issues, were a complaint to be submitted to the Institute it would be unlikely that a breach of the Code would be found.
- The key issue would be whether the member had discharged their duty with due care and diligence. Clearly the impact of the coronavirus, the need to retain social/ physical distancing and only undertake journeys which are absolutely necessary would be circumstances that the Panel would take into account.
- All decisions on whether a breach of the Code has occurred are made by the RTPI Conduct and Discipline Panel and they will look at the individual circumstances of the matter. So whilst there was a previous decision made on this matter, it is important to look at the individual situation. Their decision was not a blanket mandate.

Regarding site notices, some survey respondents suggested this as an opportunity for the profession to further adopt the digital revolution by removing the need for site notices, neighbour letters (hard copy) and validation processes. It was observed that physical copies of site notices were much less likely to be seen at the height of lockdown measures with far fewer people outside. One practical idea put forward concerned publishing site notices online and providing guidance to members of the public on how to comment.

**I saw an idea to email applicants their site notice and asking them to print and put them up and email photos to prove it. Great idea and I have borrowed it.**

(Local authority planning officer in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

**“Please impress whether site visits are essential, or just wait until the embargo is lifted. Our managers have said no site visits, but are currently decanting bottles of hand gel. Is it really essential we go out on site right now, or only when embargo is lifted. No-one can work on sites, so why should we prioritise site**



**visits RIGHT now. Concern - contracting Covid or passing it on if we are not showing symptoms but have it”** (Local authority planning officer in Scotland, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

**Site visits is probably the biggest constraint to determining applications. If the situation evolves, could the progression of site visits recommence, whilst respecting social distancing requirements? Perhaps some national advice on this.** (Local authority planning officer in Wales, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

As with many of the barriers presented by Covid-19 and the need for social distancing, site visits raise many practical issues and the range of responses such as maximising the use of technology from our member survey demonstrates real innovation. However this did not negate the need for clear guidance on whether site visits should take place or how to proceed on site notices.

### 4.3. Surveys

The difficulties with carrying out surveys such as ecological and traffic assessments were picked up in responses to our survey. A theme here was the impact this was having on the progression of planning applications.

**“Delays caused by cancellation of on-site survey work eg ecological, hydrological and archaeology that mean either significant delay to planning application or require agreement that work will take place as a condition”** (Local Authority Planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

**Delays due to not being able to carry out seasonal survey work such as ecology and transport (traffic counts etc)** (Private sector (PAYE) Planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

We know that lockdown has also affected the ability to undertake the necessary biodiversity surveys/assessments as part of the planning applications this year as these normally need to be conducted during the spring or summer season. One member raised the issue of delays in re-starting application preparation due to evidence hold ups such as the need to carry out civil surveys and ecology surveys.

Kent County Council made a statement to say that they will not accept as robust any survey data collected from 16 March 2020<sup>45</sup>. Transport consultants and developers are being encouraged to speak with the authority to discuss potential alternative solutions.

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<sup>45</sup> Kent County Council (2020), [Coronavirus service updates](#)

## 5. Developer contributions

Members through our survey raised the need to consider again the issue of development viability to reflect the changing economic situation. In East Suffolk, the Authority have set out the following actions they will take in regards to CIL income<sup>46</sup> noting that this is subject to change as and when any other information is published by the government.

- Where development has already commenced, upon written request and where an instalment is due to be paid, CIL demand notices are being re-issued to allow for a 3 month extension to the next instalment due date and to subsequent outstanding instalments. This position will be reviewed towards the end of June 2020.
- An individual, case by case review of late payment interest and surcharges will be made and a pragmatic approach adopted to support customers in these circumstances.
- CIL debt recovery will largely be paused for 3 months and will be reviewed towards the end of June 2020 with a view to extending this position if required.

It was announced on 12 May 2020<sup>47</sup> that in England LPAs will be provided with more flexibility to support smaller developers by allowing them to defer CIL payments.

The possible implications of the crisis on the viability was neatly summarised by one member:

**“I anticipate that many developers will need to re-visit consents to address viability issues or to make them more developable. This will not only require the resources to be in place within local authorities but require officers to adopt a positive attitude to decision making”** (Private sector (PAYE) Planner in England)

One member explained that their LPA was taking the following approach:

**“We are currently renegotiating CIL instalment plans for those development sites that have asked for more flexibility where they have halted due to the current crisis. We are not issuing a change to our current regime overall, because many sites are not stalled, and once the situation gets back to normal we will need the CIL to deliver the infrastructure.”**(Local authority planning officer in England, RTPi Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

Cornwall Council has adopted the following position regarding CIL payments as of 5 May 2020: **“We will be continuing to process CIL matters and issuing Liability Notices as development is granted permission. Payment of CIL is triggered by commencement of development, so if development commences, CIL becomes payable. However, we are currently reviewing our Instalment Policy to try and assist during this difficult time. In the meantime, anyone who has been issued with a CIL Demand Notice and thinks they may struggle to make their payments due to the Covid-19 outbreak, please contact the Infrastructure Team”**

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<sup>46</sup> East Suffolk Council (2020) [Coronavirus: Actions for CIL](#)

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2020) [Housing Secretary sets out plan to re-start housing market](#)

# 6. Working practices

## 6.1. Home working

The switch to remote working during lockdown for planners along with millions of others came at an unsettling speed for some with others more used to the practice much more at ease. A near universal 96% of survey respondents had switched to remote working and 65% of offices had been closed during the height of the lockdown during March and April 2020. Our survey results suggest that this worked quite well for most planners, though those in the public sector were slightly more likely to report issues with remote working. For those new to home working, the novel experience may show that for at least part of the week, that it is good for the environment, reduces pollution and could lead to increased productivity.

**“Every home should be connected to broadband. Imagine if there was not the ability to work from home - the country would have ground to a complete stop. However it needs to be improved, made faster and made available for all”**(Local authority officer England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

Regardless of how experienced people have been, the productivity challenges of balancing professional duties with childcare, maintaining comfortable working environments, building in breaks and getting fresh air frequently came up in our survey. Roisin Willmott RTPI Director for Wales and Northern Ireland provided some tips on how to adjust to homeworking during lockdown<sup>48</sup> and Russell Hughes-Pickering of Ceredigion County Council offers some suggestions for working as normally as possible<sup>49</sup> and for seizing opportunities to improve process during time away from the office<sup>50</sup>.

**“View this situation as a potential glimpse of the future, particularly in respect to home working and digital engagement, and test strategies accordingly - in a positive spirit - in order to develop strategies for a 'new normal'”** (Local authority officer England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

**“An entire social shift could come out of this pandemic. Working from home could become more commonplace or shared working spaces in cities, towns and communities could be more prevalent offering the division between work and home but still offering people the chance to travel less. There is a chance to really rethink how society functions and what society wants places to live, work and experience to be!”** (Local Authority Officer in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

However making such a huge shift so quickly has thrown many into uncomfortable positions with challenging working circumstances impacting on productivity and wellbeing with one example provided from a member in Northern Ireland:

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<sup>48</sup> RTPI (2020) [Top tips on how to adjust to homeworking during lockdown](#)

<sup>49</sup> Russell-Hughes Pickering, Ceredigion County Council (2020), [Working as normally as possible](#)

<sup>50</sup> Russell-Hughes Pickering, Ceredigion County Council (2020), [Opportunities in the face of adversity](#)

**“Planning Officers working from home where possible; however there is serious strain on Planning Officers whose partners are key workers; those with children and those with vulnerable family members living within the household. Serious concerns regarding the mental and physical welfare of staff, including admin officers who still must go into the office albeit on a rota basis”** (Local Planning Authority in Northern Ireland, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

Looking to the future, there is a question mark over how embedded changes such as increased home working could become with 38% of members expressing uncertainty over the capacity to deliver the additional burden of new and different ways of working.

## 6.2. Technology

The insights provided on the matter of technology use were fascinating with a mix of views on how the profession has been adapting to working from home. There was an overwhelming appetite to review the problems and capture the benefits of the accelerated use of technology in the planning system during the crisis. Specific requests to emerge beyond the survey results have included that all planning documents should be machine readable, terminology and processes across government standardised and the development of common evidence and analytical capabilities in addition to investing in open source tools which can be used across the development sector.

The following were the main types of software being used to communicate, process documentation and progress development management functions. The RTPI does not promote any particular product and the below list does not imply any endorsement from the Institute:

- Microsoft/Outlook - The modal answer. Programs such as Outlook, Teams and Office. Teams seen as a primary way of in team discussion
- Whatsapp - Also a discussion platform
- Zoom and WebEx - Primarily for internal and external meetings
- AdobePro - For signing documents when a physical signature is required
- Citrix & iGels - For remote access
- Idox, Exacom and Acolaid - For viewing and managing planning applications
- DropBox - Accessing files and sharing information
- Salesforce - Development management process
- GIS application - Digital Mapping Tool

We encountered a relaxed approach among those used to working from home and those with IT support which could easily adapt to all employees working from home. However, there was a clear undercurrent of frustration regarding inadequate resourcing and observations that IT software and hardware was not, in too many cases, fit for purpose.

**“The fact that planning departments were already under resourced and local authorities have not been able to fully invest in technology to support remote working is now showing. There needs to be a renewed campaign for better**

**resourcing of planning departments to ensure that we can come out of this in a stronger position.”** (Local Planning Authority Officer in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

**The capacity of the IT systems needs to be updated within Local Government as a priority to accommodate home working and those interested in the planning system to be able to adequately interact with it.** (Private Sector (PAYE) Planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey)

The RTPI will continue to work with the Connected Places Catapult (CPC) and others to understand how some of the recent innovations adopted by LPAs could help accelerate the move to a more digital planning system. In 2019, the RTPI and CPC published a shared vision for a digital planning system in England, which was updated in April 2020 following further stakeholder engagement<sup>51</sup>. This sets out the key principles for a digital planning system, and recommendations for how they can be achieved.

## 6.3. Health and wellbeing

The health and wellbeing of the profession and wider society is of paramount concern to the RTPI, and planning has a crucial role in creating places which support good health and wellbeing.

### Wellbeing for planners

RTPI Members cited concerns about mental health as one of the main impacts of Covid-19 on the efficient functioning of the planning system. The survey drew out unease at the effect that social distancing measures could have on mental health with the uncertainty of job security and finances and the struggle of balancing childcare duties with working. One member called for hints and tips on the best ways to communicate electronically and how to conduct effective meetings by video call. One member called for the RTPI to consider the effect on efficiency/productivity for business management - has it taught us to work in better ways by forcing them on us?

**"I think this crisis has really brought to light the importance of access to green/outdoor spaces for both exercise and general wellbeing. This is something that could be explored more"** (Local Authority Officer in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

### Public health issues for planning

Looking to the future, self-isolation and being cooped up at home has thrown into sharp relief just how important personal space and fast reliable broadband is. Concerns were raised that the quality of our surroundings will affect the mental health of many during this period with space standards as well as private amenity space being so important. The creation of a PDR for changing the use of offices into dwellings in England has had largely negative consequences in terms of dwelling quality, even if it has had a positive impact on the crude numbers<sup>52</sup>.

**"RTPI must advocate for a people first approach to dealing with the aftermath in**

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<sup>51</sup> RTPI and Connected Places Catapult (2020) [Plantech Principles](#)

<sup>52</sup> RTPI (2020) [Priorities for Planning Reform in England](#)

**all areas of Planning. Societal change is needed, planners and planning must be part of that change, lack of open private space, gardens, inadequate space within homes and direct access to outside space has become clear, open outside space must be a requirement for each resident, each person. The indifference to the health and well-being of future residents, people, families, children and older people must not continue. Each and every person has a right to live, work and socialise in homes, spaces and places of work which are focused on the personal health and mental well-being of the people who use them.**

**Residents must be provided with adequate private open space, outside space, gardens, access to nature, interconnected greenways / blueways, sustainable modes of movement within and across towns, villages and small settlements - connected together by cycle paths, pedestrian routes, buses NOT a car first approach but a PEOPLE FIRST approach”** (Local Authority Planner in Northern Ireland, RTPI Covid-19 member survey response, 2020)

## 6.4. Redeployment

The survey found members were concerned about the impacts of redeployment. It was suggested that deployment happening in LPAs to help with emergency front line services made delays in the planning process inevitable with four survey respondents making this point.

**“The Service has supported redeployment requests to respond to our communities and residents' needs during these unprecedented times. Nonetheless, in terms of the Development Management team I have sought to keep the team together to maintain business as usual given the awareness and necessity to support the recovery by assessing and determining planning applications. For example in March when this crisis was ramping up and in full-swing (in London) the DM team were all home working still determining about 111 planning applications per week with a validation time of 48 hours and an average turnaround time of 5 weeks. Incredible effort by them”** (Brett Leahy, Head of Planning and Building Control, London Borough of Redbridge)

**“Whilst I recognise that the Government and RTPI wish to see the planning function maintaining 'business as usual' as far as possible, it does need to be recognised that many planning authorities are seeing Planners and those involved in the planning processes being redeployed to more critical Council services (e.g. Emergency Planning, Registrations, Adult Social Care, etc)”** (Local Authority Planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

Research by Lichfields<sup>53</sup> covering England, Scotland and Wales found that in most Councils, all or the vast majority of planning staff were remaining in their roles. Over half of Councils have not yet redeployed any planning staff, but in a small number of areas this was under review. One third of Councils have redeployed 25% or less of their planning staff, and others have redeployed some staff on a voluntary and/or part-time basis. Heads of Planning Scotland have reported some redeployment of planning staff, usually around specialist functions such as GIS staff, who have

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<sup>53</sup> Lichfields (2020) [Business as \(un\)usual – how is the planning system holding up?](#)

been called upon to assist front line workers.

One member supported greater deployment making the point that:

**“It would be good if planners skills could be utilised in a more pressing role. We have many transferable skills that could be good use elsewhere at the present time.”** (Private Sector, self employed Planner in England , RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

## 7. Community engagement

Developments regarding planning committees and public engagement were analysed earlier in this report; this section provides details from our member survey on the role of public consultation during the pandemic.

### 7.1. Public consultation

The opportunities for communities to have their say in the planning process was paramount with 52% of all survey respondents reporting one of their main concerns was the ability of all groups to comment on consultations, rising to 61% for public sector planners. 36% of all respondents felt their IT systems were ineffective for conducting public consultations. There is a growing body of wider research on how digital engagement has been working during lockdown<sup>54</sup>. The RTPI Learn module on engaging with the media<sup>55</sup> provides advice about engaging with local press, delivering effective social media campaigns and videos to improve engagement.

**“We need to somehow address the issue of not excluding those without access to the internet, they would have relied on libraries which are closed or friends and family who are unlikely to be able to offer in person support under the current restrictions”** (Local Authority Planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

20% of members stated that being sued for non-compliance of planning procedures was one of their concerns related to the efficient functioning of the planning system. Two members raised the issue of the expensive requirement to publish planning application notices in local newspapers with a suggestion that these notices were increasingly read online which made the hard copy newspaper requirement difficult to justify.

One member suggested a good practice was to make more use of virtual engagement in the long term. Another member made the point that virtual tours of individual sites and presentational boards could be undertaken to replace formal community consultation events. Feedback forms could be filled out online. For example, please refer to the virtual consultation work Arup undertook

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<sup>54</sup> Built Environment Communications Group blog (2020) [Press on with planning](#)

<sup>55</sup> RTPI Learn [Telling the planning story: how to champion the planning profession through press and social media](#)

for the A2 Buncrana Road upgrade<sup>56</sup>.

### Case study in online engagement: Angus Council

Angus Council uses an online engagement hub called Shaping Angus<sup>57</sup>.

It provides opportunities for members of the community to give input and engage with Council projects and initiatives in their area.

They use Social Pinpoint services/technology to do this – it is a self-service platform which gives users flexibility and reduces cost. The hub has interactive maps for each of their projects that community members can virtually contribute to, for example the Turn the Plastic Tide initiative, the Tayside Amphibians & Drains Project and Roadside Wildflower Hotspots. Contribution from the community is relatively easy to gather on the hub as there are various engagement tools/widgets available to put on to the site e.g. surveys, forums, ideas walls etc.

Members of the community can also help contribute to and see the progress of the Angus Local Development Plan review as well as view the existing one. They also have a section for participatory budgeting, which allows the community to help decide how the area's public budget is spent. Votes for projects were done online and at venues across Angus (pre-COVID-19).

## 8. Plan making

Our analysis highlights two main factors underpinning many of the responses to our survey regarding local plans. Firstly, a desire to maintain momentum on the local plan making process. Secondly, a desire to achieve compliance and avoid penalties for not meeting UK government targets on policies such as the Housing Delivery Test and the New Homes Bonus. 54% of public sector survey respondents were concerned about being penalised for not meeting targets for decision times.

Equally, there was a recognition that the impact on communities following Covid-19 is likely to remain uncertain for some time to come and the evidence base for local plans should reflect the new landscape, when it emerges, and a pause would therefore be appropriate. Some survey respondents suggested that local plan consultations should be temporarily suspended due to concerns with safely consulting in person. There were also concerns that it would not be possible to provide physical reference materials for people who have questions or are not IT literate.

**“Local plans set the vision and development ambitions for places for 30 years and have long term impacts for long term crises such as affordable housing, climate change, flood resilience etc. Government should provide clarity and allow a 6-12 month delay in the plan making process to ensure that local plans are both fit for purpose and have the confidence of the whole of the communities they serve”** (Academic planner in England , RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

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<sup>56</sup> Department for Infrastructure [A2 - 360 Public Consultation](#)

<sup>57</sup> Angus Council [Social Pinpoint | Angus Council Engagement Hub](#)



Only a quarter (26%) of respondents identified extending local plan delivery targets as a priority, rising to just over a third (36%) in public sector respondents. However, it might be reasonable to assume that the proportion of those with upcoming targets would be higher.

Other practical points to emerge included:

- How Examinations in Public / Hearings of local plans could work remotely and the potential for this to cause significant delay in plan making. RTPI Practice Advice outlines how planners can improve their effectiveness at planning inquiries and hearings<sup>58</sup>, a matter that becomes even more important during virtual engagements.
- Ability to engage with relevant partners, stakeholders, colleagues and members including local plan workshops in order to progress the start of local plan production.

## 8.1. Evidence base

The need for evidence bases to remain up to date and the potential of having to undertake costly reassessments of evidence bases to reflect a Post Covid-19 world was raised in our survey.

**“The recalibration of workloads away from some more responsive work does present opportunities for some to focus more on strategic planning, such as work on urban design frameworks or conservation area appraisals and management plans”** (Interview with Senior Building Conservation Officer, Local Authority in England)

Concerns related to the evidence base focused on:

- Delays in re-starting application preparation due to evidence hold ups (civils surveys, ecology, etc). The ability to complete technical work such as five year housing land supply assessments due to the inability to gather evidence from stakeholders.
- Implications of the Housing Delivery Test/5YHLS (in England) if housing completions stall for a period of time<sup>59</sup>.
- As yet unclear how early 2020 evidence supporting Local Plan reviews will be assessed such as on viability, economic growth assessments and transport modelling

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<sup>58</sup> RTPI (2018) Practice Advice Note [Planners as Expert witnesses: How planners can improve their effectiveness at planning inquiries and hearings](#)

<sup>59</sup> DLP (2020) [Annual Position Statements and Potential impact of Covid-19 to land supply](#)

## 9. Monitoring and enforcement

One member observed that despite anticipating that the period of lockdown would result in a drop of new investigations being reported. However, the opposite happened and they have been receiving enquiries about the new permitted development rights for A3/A4 uses for the provision of hot takeaway food, and the new rights for the NHS and 'health bodies'. At the same time, with people spending more time at home during the lockdown, this has resulted in higher numbers of complaints being received about neighbouring householder developments.

There have been practical challenges to enforcement because of the Covid-19 restrictions on movements and these have included the service of notices and sending of correspondence by post, although there is a limited office-based administration support function that facilitates this.

**“There are also issues about the availability of specialised council officers such as Highways officers and Tree officers that impact on decision making in investigations. For example, normally you could go to the office next door to speak to a Conservation Officer. Now that person may be caring for relatives, be ill themselves or live in the middle of the Fens and have bad wi-fi reception”.**

(Local authority enforcement officer in England)

Discretion on enforcement cases has been the main advised approach so far as of May 2020 and one LPA explained their overall strategy:

**“A 'tramline approach' is being looked at. Every application is first being risk assessed. The same approach is being taken for enforcement”**(Local Authority Planner in England , RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

We received several suggestions on the most appropriate approaches to take on planning enforcement during the Covid-19 social distancing measures. These included:

- The compliance periods on Enforcement Notices that are either not appealed or going through the appeal process should be extended by 3 months automatically or for as long as COVID 19 measures on work etc are in place. This would provide those who have to comply with the Notice with clarity on what will happen - rather than leave it to each Council to decide whether or not to prosecute a noncompliance and possibly tie up court time.
- Caution regarding any relaxation of the need for an application through changes to the General Permitted Development Order.
- Instead, a pragmatic approach was suggested for example, if a hospital needed to be constructed on an agricultural field in open countryside the LPA wouldn't issue a Stop Notice to wait for planning permission, so there is no need to relax the rules. Any temporary relaxation of the rules runs the risk that an already overwhelmed enforcement team is then trying to deal with an unnecessary workload post relaxation.

One Planning Enforcement Officer explained how their LPA had adapted their activity in response to Covid-19:

**“Following the majority of the Country being put on lockdown which included Planning Enforcement Officers, however with people working from home or**

**undertaking their daily exercise complainants were still flooding into Councils of various breaches of planning control. However, a pragmatic approach has been taken to ensure that site visits are only undertaken to sites that are considered a high priority to where the natural or built environment is to be affected.**

**Furthermore, in tandem with the Government's advice no enforcement notices have been served and various conditions on premises have been relaxed in terms of taking enforcement action as Councils continue to be flexible when determining if it is expedient to take enforcement action".** (Senior Planning Enforcement Officer in England)

## 10. Economic impact

A theme to emerge from the survey was summarised succinctly by one respondent to our survey who outlined the need to deal with the economic repercussions for all planners in response to our call for good practice suggestions. Another respondent highlighted the clear economic worries both immediately and in the longer term with specific points made about redundancies, pre-emptively laying off employees, loss of income or not qualifying for government support schemes.

Members raised many important points and these are outlined below:

- The longer-term economic and social impacts on many of the areas where they work.
- A general slowdown in the economy following Covid-19 is likely to have severe consequences for planning, economic development and regeneration
- Need for the system to continue to ensure a swift economic recovery. This must not be an excuse for decision making to cease. To the contrary, the situation should encourage those that can come forward to deliver development to do so.
- Projects are being shut down and likelihood of new ones coming forward looks bleak (private sector). Queries as well whether some clients will pay
- General slowdown in the economy following Covid-19 is likely to have severe consequences for planning, economic development and regeneration
- Mothballing of housing development sites and greater pessimism about housing delivery rates on the basis of longer term challenging economic conditions. This could seriously affect LPA's ability to demonstrate a 5YHLS of deliverable housing land. Communities should not be faced with further unplanned, speculative development proposals promoted on the basis of the tilted balance being engaged because of a now different set of economic conditions.
  - A pragmatic approach is needed so that LPAs are not penalised, perhaps through a ministerial statement that could be given weight as a material consideration.
- There will need to be planning policies put in place that give significant weight to economic development and the Government should look to relax the planning rules where appropriate to help kick-start the economy.

One member in our survey suggested that LPA decisions would not be tailored to meet new economic necessities to get clients businesses working again and staving off bankruptcy. They emphasised a need for more flexibility in LPA decision making and allowance for temporary permissions where necessary and where appropriate, an exit strategy provided by the business.

The RTPI welcomed the Chancellor's announcement of a support package for self-employed workers but urged the government to bring forward the help earlier. The Government's Self-Employed Income Support Scheme offered a taxable grant of up to 80 percent of income, based on tax returns over the past three years, capped at £2,500 a month<sup>60</sup>. However, Victoria Hills argued that it was disappointing that some of those most in need would not be able to access any financial support until June

One member called for action when noting that many independent consultants are not classed as self-employed as they are limited companies. As such, they do not benefit from the PAYE assistance nor do they benefit from the self-employed assistance. There was additionally the issue of company directors or similar, finding they are excluded from any of the assistance that's available to the 95% of the rest of the country. One member summarised the seriousness of the situation for them:

**“Fee Income is far too simplistic a category - it's my very financial survival that is at stake. Neither myself, or fellow director can tap into any government assistance beyond Universal Credit”** (Independent Planning Consultant in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

## 10.1. Economic recovery

Another respondent raised an interesting proposal as a good practice suggestion in the survey regarding the resourcing of LPAs as attentions turns to promoting the economic recovery:

**“In times of economic difficulties the private sector is always hit first, then local authorities in a delayed period. Suggest ensuring that a special fund is put in place now so that LPAs can recruit now, during this crisis, when many may not want to commit the resources. This means that when we exit this period and the private sector is gearing up and working faster, LPAs are already sufficiently resourced, rather than in the position of having to lose staff etc due to reduced planning fee income, etc..... ready to deal with increased application loads, condition discharges etc, as well as hopefully having cleared any backlogs (which many advise me they still have), and can get development moving quicker”** (Private Sector PAYE planner in England, RTPI Covid-19 survey 2020 response)

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<sup>60</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI welcomes support package for self-employed but says help should come sooner](#)

# 11. Conclusion

More than 1000 RTPI members responded to the online survey on COVID-19 that was conducted in March and April 2020. This report aims to contribute to the immediate need for guidance on how to maintain effective planning services in a much-changed environment, it will also inform the RTPI's continuing work with governments across the UK and Ireland. The [wider industry insights report](#) provides a collection of valuable viewpoints as the profession works together where possible.

Our survey and wider research highlights how digitisation of the planning system has been fast-tracked. We have been talking about resourcing for planning for many years. Now is the time to make the case for the right type of resourcing and the right type of change and we have provided further details on this in our recently published [Priorities for Planning Reform in England](#)<sup>61</sup> and have set out key ideas for the next [Scottish National Planning Framework](#)<sup>62</sup>.

The responses from governments across the UK and Ireland are clearly fast moving and the advice is likely to continue to evolve over the coming weeks and months directly affecting the planning system. Following the introduction of social distancing measures in the United Kingdom and Ireland in March 2020, planning departments were confronted with the unprecedented task of maintaining decision making without the usual face-to-face planning committee meetings. We received a multitude of responses such as delegated decision-making and virtual committees, and heard a range of suggested approaches to take through the RTPI survey.

The full impact of Covid-19 on the planning system and the flow of planning applications can only be fully assessed in the future however the immediate threat to the system has been stark. Concerns raised by RTPI members related to the expiration of planning permissions, the barriers preventing officers progressing an application in the usual ways and the difficulties of processing new applications during the sustained period of remote working. The potential expiry of planning permission was a strong concern in our survey with clear calls for an extension in England as the only country in our report yet to see an extension introduced as of 15 May 2020. The protocol around how or indeed whether to conduct site visits and uncertainty on how to deal with statutory publicity procedures through the posting of site notices for planning applications were questions that came up time and again in the survey.

The difficulties with carrying out surveys such as ecological and traffic assessments were raised in our survey. The need to consider again the issue of viability for development was highlighted in the survey as a direct response to the changing economic situation.

Regardless of how experienced people have been, the productivity challenges of working from home and balancing professional duties with childcare, maintaining comfortable working environments, building in breaks and getting fresh air frequently came up in our survey. There was an overwhelming appetite to review the problems and capture the benefits of the accelerated use of technology in the planning during the crisis. The health and wellbeing of the profession and wider society is of paramount concern to the RTPI, and planning has a crucial role in creating

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<sup>61</sup> RTPI (2020) [Priorities for Planning in England](#)

<sup>62</sup> RTPI (2020) [RTPI Scotland response to the Scottish Government call for ideas](#)

places which support good health and wellbeing.

The challenges to maintaining 'business as usual' when planners were being redeployed to more critical Council services was raised in our survey. The opportunities to expand the role of virtual engagement in public consultation such as virtual tours of individual sites to replace community consultation events during social distancing measures, was raised in our survey.

On the plan making process there was a desire to maintain momentum on the local plan making process and to achieve compliance and avoid penalties for not meeting government targets. Although this was tempered by a recognition that the impact on communities following Covid-19 is likely to remain uncertain for some time to come and the evidence base for local plans should reflect the new landscape, when it emerges. On enforcement, we heard that a pragmatic approach has been taken to ensure that site visits are only undertaken to sites, which are considered a high priority to where the natural or built environment is to be affected.

A theme to emerge from the survey was summarised succinctly by one respondent to our survey who outlined the need to deal with the economic repercussions for all planners in response to our call for good practice suggestions. Another respondent highlighted the clear economic worries both immediately and in the longer term with specific points made about redundancies, pre-emptively laying off employees, loss of income or not qualifying for government support schemes.

Looking to the future, self-isolation and being cooped up at home has thrown into sharp relief just how important personal space, fast reliable broadband and direct access to green spaces is. A separate forthcoming RTPI report will explore the roles of planning in supporting a sustainable economic recovery from Covid-19<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> RTPI (forthcoming) [Planning for the recovery from Covid-19](#)

# Further Information

## RTPI Coronavirus hub

### 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, [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.
- Landmark Chambers [Have We Got Planning News for You](#) reviews the week's latest developments by five barristers from across the Planning Bar



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