



RTPI

Royal Town Planning Institute

WIDER INSIGHTS PART II

The planning profession's rapid
response to Covid-19

**RTPI
Research
Paper**

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

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

This paper

The RTPI has been continuing to collect experiences of the immediate response to Covid-19 by planners from across every sector and part of the UK and Ireland for a part 2 to this Wider Insights report. The contributors to this paper have particular expertise in various areas of the response and have kindly provided us with their views and analysis on this evolving situation.

The publication of these views does not imply RTPI endorsement for the positions described.

Front and back cover image

Beckenham Place Park - Ariel of Lake, Mansion and Stables - Lewisham Council. Taken from [a submission to the RTPI 2020 Awards](#) under the category of Excellence in Planning for Heritage and Culture. Following a £5m Heritage Lottery Fund and additional funding from the Council, Beckenham Place Park and its historic buildings have been fully restored to its original 18th century parkland landscape

Contents

Dr Riëtte Oosthuizen MRTPI, Planning Partner at HTA Design LLP	4
Patsy Dell MRTPI, Director Hertfordshire Growth, Hertfordshire Growth Board...5	5
Nissa Shahid MRTPI, Senior Urbanist at the Connected Places Catapult	6
Caroline Harper MRTPI Chief Planning Director at Be First Regeneration Limited <i>working on behalf of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham</i>	7
Philip Barnes FRTPI, Group Land and Planning Director at Barratt Homes	8
Wendy Lane (BSc Hons, MSc, MA, MRTPI), Assistant Director (Planning), Gravesham Borough Council	9
Olafiyin Taiwo, Planner at London Borough of Ealing	9
Emma Williamson (nee Joy), Assistant Director Planning at London Borough of Haringey.....	10
Dr Kirsten Ward MRTPI, Associate Planner at DLP Planning	11
Tim Burden MRTPI, Director (Reading Office) at Turley	12
Sara Parkinson MRTPI, Associate Director, Head of Planning at Vistry Partnerships	13

Insights from the wider profession

Dr Riëtte Oosthuizen MRTPI, Planning Partner at HTA Design LLP

“As planning professionals, like most people, we might find ourselves somewhat scarred from living intensely with others within restricted spaces since the onset of lockdown. Internal space dimensions have certainly been tested for ability to multifunction, as we vied for it whilst conducting home life, work, and home schooling.

This pandemic has shone a very bright light on the possible shortcomings with the spaces in which we live. They have become very constrained. Whilst current circumstances might be unusual, this is a good time to reflect on housing and place quality and its very direct impact on wellbeing. The role planners can and should play in this is critical. We should not leave it to others. Our voice in this debate is necessary.

Housing has crept up the political agenda in recent years. We need to take a closer look at what is being built and at how the planning profession can be better equipped to confidently negotiate higher quality housing outcomes. It is not the domain of design professionals alone.

Planners are key to the negotiations taking place in determining housing quality during the planning application process. I have seen recent planning application feedback and appeal decisions taking a stronger position on internal daylight distribution, skepticism about height, the general outlook of homes and the ability to access private and public amenity space. Some of this is of course valid, bearing in mind context, but some is driven by local politics.

We need to get to the bottom of what matters to people in relation to housing. And, what matters to ensure long term well-being. Appearance is important, but as the past three months have taught us other things are even more important: having a place to be able to work; flexibility in housing layout so as to have choice in how to use spaces in times of crisis; noise insulation for when we are all in all the time; access to green space, and; close proximity of opportunities to cycle and walk and buy/grow food. Many more local authorities are now commissioning design guides – this is the opportunity to think about the type of housing necessary to serve the future well.

Thinking about ways to deliver good quality homes and places has been integral to HTA Design’s work for over 50 years. We live and breathe housing. As a planning consultancy imbedded within a design practice, we have been particularly encouraged to see how local planning authorities have adapted their ways of working during the pandemic to continue processing planning applications. However, the pandemic is having a definite impact on messages coming through in terms of design changes required – some of it justified in policy terms; whilst others require careful thought that they are not knee-jerk decisions steered by local politics. Density should not be a scapegoat – layout of homes needs a finessed approach if it is to cope with intense living, and quality should always be the objective. Sustainable densities are better in dealing with the long terms issue of climate change.

Aside from the more immediate impact of the pandemic regarding feedback on housing development, we have been really encouraged with how local authority planning functions have

adapted to cope with virtual pre-application meetings, committee meetings and community engagement. Despite shortage of resources, which requires urgent attention especially with the expected drastic changes to the planning system expected to be announced, we have been able to keep good momentum with projects.”

Patsy Dell MRTPI, Director Hertfordshire Growth, Hertfordshire Growth Board

“There is a lot of talk about creating a “new normal” as businesses and organisations across the UK, both in the public and private sectors, plan resilience and recovery phases brought about and made necessary by Covid-19.

However, in Hertfordshire, for more than two years we’ve been carefully developing a new, collaborative approach for the county and building the foundations for place-based and economic success for residents and businesses now, and for generations to come.

Throughout the last 12 months, we’ve done that by adopting a comprehensive, long-term place-based approach to the county’s strategic planning, infrastructure and economic needs. Collaborating effectively by developing a vision and a range of programmes on issues including climate change and housing affordability - and this already-established joined-up working model in a two-tier system has certainly helped us so far in working through the current crisis.

Covid-19 has provided clear early evidence of the importance and benefits of strong joint-working and playing to our local strengths as an overarching approach. This pandemic has just emphasised, in a manner we could not have envisaged, the importance of continually striving to innovate and create positive change, together.

The Hertfordshire Growth Board – its members are the County Council, 10 district and borough councils, and the Hertfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) - is the fulcrum of this local collaboration, and has played a significant role in the economic resilience and recovery work as part of a wider strategic response to Covid-19. The Hertfordshire LEP is, naturally, leading on immediate economic impact support countywide while the Growth Board’s focus is more ubiquitous, looking at place-based responses and project acceleration but we are clear where that mutually supporting approach to recovery needs to be driven from.

Putting in place the most effective response to Covid-19 right now, including providing reassurance to our business community, and devising the right strategy for the future aren’t mutually exclusive – and work on supporting our growth and place ambitions has continued during this time.

Yet, it is also fundamental and entirely appropriate to assess what was already happening in the months before the outbreak of the pandemic, so we’re reviewing the previous economic and place-based vision, provided by the Local Industrial Strategy, as well as ongoing Growth Board commitments and associated intervention programmes – such as joint spatial plans, new communities and town centre regeneration - to make sure they support our Covid-proof ambitions.

We reacted swiftly to take stock of current priorities, putting a ‘Covid-19 recovery and economic restart’ lens over each element of our work programmes to see how they could support mitigating immediate economic shocks. And, of course, the need to support the recovery of our key sectors

and the creation of new jobs remains far more acute than it was at the start of 2020.

The Growth Board's member councils have kept planning and other construction-related services going throughout the crisis, running as close to business-as-usual as possible, and we've been in regular contact with our partners in the construction industry and sector. That means understanding how we can help them through these extremely challenging times including for example being flexible with Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) contributions where possible.

The Growth Board exists to provide effective place leadership and governance while also being the single point of contact around the delivery of our place ambitions with central Government – and, through our ethos of collaboration, we're confident that Hertfordshire is doing everything it can to emerge from this crisis in a strong position.”

Nissa Shahid MRTPI, Senior Urbanist at the Connected Places Catapult

“Despite slow progress towards the digital transformation of the planning system, planning professionals have performed well in adapting to remote working. Covid-19 has proven beyond any doubt that the profession must embrace new technologies and innovation. Pre-lockdown, attempts to push forward the digitisation of the planning sector met challenges of it being a low priority, considered too difficult, and insufficiently resourced. Covid-19, and specifically the necessity to work remotely has shown that digitisation is a clear and pressing priority and requires resourcing and direction.

What has been uplifting to see and is a key part of this shift and conversation around digitisation is the realisation that the digitisation of planning is not about 'replacing the human' from the process, but instead how digital tools can help planners to do their job more effectively. From being able to model developments in real-time on digital platforms, through to opening up engagement channels remotely (and therefore capturing previously excluded audiences) down to the conversation around which parts of the process are actually necessary in person.

While our ways of working in the sector are changing, we must also realise that our concept of place and space is also changing, and with it how we plan for a post-pandemic world. The technologies and methods being used in planning economic recovery on high streets (thermal imaging to see where people are congregating, or carriage data to see how many people are using public transport) could be repurposed to plan our cities.

We could be using more live-data modelling to plan for extreme scenarios such as climate change, or even better, use real time data to model how to plan our cities to reduce our carbon footprints (such as measuring the cumulative impact of tall buildings on micro climate or the impact of placing homes so far out of the city that we have to use public transport).

We are going to see these changes in place and priorities become increasingly evident as we realise that a lot of our work can be done remotely. The need for office space could change dramatically, while the need for homes with extra space for working may increase.

Professions that intersect heavily with planning are all experiencing radical shifts in digitisation

which will impact upon the planning sector. For example, within the Construction industry there is talk about pushing for further increasing off-site 3D printing and modular construction to avoid having builders in close proximity means that the planning sector will need to take that into account in decisions (i.e. planning conditions to do with construction or delivery of materials).

Either way, the digital transformation of the sector has been expedited faster than it would have if the world hadn't changed so dramatically. As a profession we need to embrace digital as part of our post-covid world and we need to make it work for us, not replace us.”

Caroline Harper MRTPI Chief Planning Director at Be First Regeneration Limited *working on behalf of the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham*

“I forget which week we are in of ‘lockdown’ but it is in the teens, and it is fair to say that the enforced remote working it has brought with it is now well embedded. At Be First there has been no disruption to planning services, for which credit goes to my team and to the London Borough of Barking & Dagenham.

I am interested in the challenges ahead now, notably what prolonged home working means for how we operate as a team, and on a wider scale, how planning and development flexes and adapts to encourage and accommodate the changes that coronavirus has prompted and accelerated for the built environment.

Within the team, this means examining how we work. To date, we have effectively transplanted how we worked in the office to the home. And while that has brought success, we need to think proactively about better ways of working that reduce the number of hours on MS Teams and ensure people do not feel isolated from the lack of face-to-face contact. We also need to think about how we can make remote pre-application meetings (etc.) permanent, support the continuation of the very wonderful concept of remote Planning Committee and think further about how we meaningfully engage virtually with our communities.

Within the planning system, coronavirus has further cemented my belief that good planning requires flex to facilitate good development, good places and commercial creativity. And that good planners are critical thinkers who successfully navigate the practicalities of turning policy words into real, high quality places. The economic fallout of COVID-19 is going to make this even more important and I am interested to see if the Government amends its forthcoming White Paper to reflect what has happened during the last few months.

Priorities have been shaken up, and things previously lower down the scale of importance have been catapulted higher such as Broadband connectivity, doorstep amenity space, and green spaces generally. It has also affected how we use the spaces within our homes and neighbourhoods, and potentially has quite significant implications for town and local centres.

It really is a time for planning to become much more agile. It cannot be 5 years behind or we will have missed so many opportunities to build better, more inclusive places, leaving no-one behind.”

Philip Barnes FRTPI, Group Land and Planning Director at Barratt Homes

“The brief was for a here-and-now view on how Barratt’s planners are coping with the challenges posed by the pandemic. The context is obviously provided by considering the impact of the pandemic on Barratt as a whole.

The first point is that Mid-June now feels like a very different place from Mid-April when the business was in hibernation and a huge proportion of our planners were on furlough. A time when the business had no income and had little need for new land or planning permissions. In other words a distinctly uncomfortable time, not least for our planners.

Roll forward to Mid-June. Other than in Scotland we are now building and selling homes again. The initial market response has been positive and for every plot sold means we need to buy another one, if we are to maintain a land pipeline.

Confidence, and our colleagues, have returned to the business.

But things are very different, especially for our planners. Their role is twofold. Firstly to ensure all our sites in pipeline are fully consented, with conditions discharged, at the time our build teams are ready to start. And secondly to provide planning advice on planning prospects where a proposed land investment is subject to securing a local plan allocation and consent.

Our 50 or so planners have responded incredibly well, not least because local authority planners have really stepped up. So huge numbers of Teams meetings, both internal and external, more digital planning submissions and much screen sharing to explain site constraints and solutions. The results being a steady flow of submissions, condition discharges and consents.

Other work also feels very different to before. Public engagement exercises have gone digital. Presentations to planning committee are via Zoom. And engagement with professional and industry bodies is different, albeit perhaps with better coffee.

Like most large businesses, Barratt has had to deal first hand with the costs and personal tragedy wrought by the pandemic, which will never be forgotten. Throughout, our priority above all else, has been the safety of our workforce, suppliers and customers. That continues to drive our day to day decisions and therefore whilst we are back to building and selling homes, it is at rate which ensures safe working conditions for all those on our sites and within our offices.

But what will the future look like, when the pandemic is hopefully a bad memory?

Who knows? Perhaps the new normal may be different from the old one. With more virtual interaction and engagement and less travel time and face to face meetings. Whilst that undoubtedly brings its advantages we will need to find a way which also guarantees the social interactions which are so vital to creativity, productivity and mental well-being.

We shall see. At least we face the future with more confidence than only 8 weeks ago.”

Wendy Lane (BSc Hons, MSc, MA, MRTPI), Assistant Director (Planning), Gravesham Borough Council

“Whilst I don’t trivialise the impact that the coronavirus pandemic has had on society, businesses and individuals, after fear, my overall emotion is pride. I have always been proud of being a planner but this terrible situation has made me so proud of my Council and my colleagues.

Whilst the majority of the staff in our planning service are home working, a few staff have been coming into the office from day one to ensure that we can continue to give a quality service. We are unusual in this as we were aware that many Councils, at least initially, closed their Civic buildings. In those early days, lots of time was spent agreeing processes so staff could work at home (especially those who were vulnerable or extremely vulnerable), telephones in the office be answered, planning applications validated including paper ones, site notices posted and potential breaches investigated. Staff who were able to help just did what was needed, across all grade and all services. For example, I was printing letters and site notices in the office for our validation team who were home working. Staff on leave worked until colleagues had the set up needed. We also had staff who had cold-like symptoms and these needed to self-isolate with their families.

Our service pressures were interspaced with urgent demands to assist with residents and their families who had received a shielded letter and needed urgent food or medication or just someone to talk to. These demands often came in out of hours and over weekends and staff were working hard to pull together and disseminate emergency food parcels. We were receiving new lists every day of people we needed to contact to see if they had support or whether they needed help. It didn’t help that the data from Government was inconsistently formatted, often incomplete and had no regard to whether this person had already been identified.

Responsive and accurate information is important too and this was only possible because of investments that the Council had already made in IT infrastructure, which it was continually building upon, and its approach to business continuity with communications at its heart.

We have a new strapline “one community” and that is what it feels like.

For the last few weeks our focus has been on recovery with frequent new policy directions coming from Government. Again, we aim to be as agile as possible to change in line with the new guidance. Looking forward, I am hopeful that the many positive aspects that have come out of this pandemic will be not forgotten, such as increased value of space, local and community network and business, importance of key and essential workers, and more climate friendly work arrangements.”

Olafiyin Taiwo, Planner at London Borough of Ealing

“The Covid pandemic infiltrated all sectors and areas of life in the society including every component of the Planning System. Business Continuance during this pandemic demanded a thorough resilient approach from Local Planning Authorities.

Despite the pre-existing pressure on Local Planning Authorities, planning departments are displaying their commitment and competence through innovative approaches to ensuring continuous service delivery. Prior to this pandemic, many Local Planning Authorities had made

provision for remote working and flexible hours. Therefore, the infrastructure to transition to absolute remote working during the lockdown is relatively available for such authorities.

The pandemic is affecting how Local Planning Authorities engage with residents and stakeholders. The traditional methods of consultation and engagement gave way to the rapid adoption of digital communication to enable continued transparency in the planning process. Applicants for prior approval and householder applications are being encouraged to notify their neighbours when the applications have been submitted. In some Local Planning Authorities, there has been no alteration to the 21 days consultation process on Prior Approval applications for large extensions to houses. Consultation period for comments on minor applications has been extended from the statutory minimum 21 days to 42 days. The importance of resident associations and area groups to the planning application process has not been overlooked. Consultation letters are being sent to these groups including requests to ensure that the information be shared with residents in their local communities.

Planning officers have been working with major developers to ensure effective stakeholder engagement. Developers are encouraged to maximise the opportunities provided by digital technology such as using 3D and computer modelled images, virtual platforms and software to inform, engage and consult the widest range of residents and groups possible. The introduction of the *Local Authorities and Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus) (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings) (England and Wales) Regulations 2020* helped ensure that the dedication of planning officers to ensuring service delivery during this crisis is productive.

Prior to the pandemic, complainants provided minimal information regarding breaches of planning control. Given the inability to carry out standard site visits to investigate breaches, residents' participation in Planning Enforcement investigation increased significantly. Complainants were encouraged to provide photographs and detailed information without putting themselves at risks. When sufficient information has been provided, some cases were investigated promptly and determined without site visits. Site visits were carried out in cases that required no human contact, severely impacted on the amenities of occupiers /neighbours or at risk of immunity. The period of compliance and effective dates of Planning Enforcement notices were extended to provide parties with ample time to either submit an appeal or comply with the requirements of the notice.

There is always room for improvement and greater heights to attain. The notable success achieved in the Planning system this period has been made possible by the collaborative effort of planners, developers, residents and local communities. Despite previous criticism, the critical role played by planners in the public sector during this pandemic cannot be overstated.”

Emma Williamson (nee Joy), Assistant Director Planning at London Borough of Haringey

“We encouraged staff to work at home from the week before lockdown because, as a Council, we thought it was the right thing to do. We didn't think it was right that we put staff at risk by expecting them to continue to come to the office to send consultation letters and prepare site notices. If any managers have had to visit the office for any reason (mainly to get IT issues resolved) then we have also checked the post to ensure that we don't miss any prior approval applications.

Work did start to slow down for officers, given that we couldn't issue decisions as we weren't sending consultation letters. We encouraged officers to resolve and determine any older applications in order to ensure we didn't build up a backlog.

I don't think any of us thought that lockdown would last so long and it's probably better we didn't to be honest!

We didn't send consultation letters for five weeks, but as time went on we felt that we couldn't put planning on hold much longer. We entered into a contract with a company to send our consultation letters remotely at a cost less than our previous arrangement. About half of the borough is a conservation area and, as such, a number of applications need a site notice. We set up a network of staff who live locally to put up site notices and ordered them a laminator and printer each. We are now back fully up and running on the application side.

I am proud to say that we have received 545 applications and determined 542 applications in lockdown so far and have held 33 pre-applications virtually. In terms of applications submitted we are at around 50% less than pre-covid levels but this is rising.

We held our first virtual planning committee on MS Teams on June 8th and granted permission for ten new council homes at social rent, including the Council's first zero carbon homes and a zero-carbon industrial intensification scheme.

During lockdown we stopped all Planning Enforcement site visits aside from those relating to Listed Buildings or TPO trees. We have recently taken a decision to start up site visits again for those sites that do not need an internal visit.

On the Planning Policy side, we had just been to cabinet for approval prior to lockdown to consult on the implementation of an article 4 direction to limit office to residential PD rights in town centres and on changes to Neighbourhood CIL. However, we decided not to consult on these at the beginning of lockdown. We are now looking into online consultation tools and will be consulting on these shortly.

Our team is very social and it has been hard for everyone not to have regular interaction. We have tried to keep the camaraderie going with regular team meetings and 'virtual kebab' on a Friday lunchtime. Our challenge going forward is to keep this camaraderie going and to find a way to ensure that collaboration with other parts of the Council can continue despite the lack of physical contact. In addition, levels of income, and therefore resourcing, will be a challenge going forward. Additionally, we will need to get a full Planning Enforcement Service up and running before the number of cases build up too much further."

Dr Kirsten Ward MRTPI, Associate Planner at DLP Planning

"As we approach three months since the 'lockdown' was first introduced, for many of us in the planning profession, the new ways of working we were initially forced to embrace out of necessity for ensuring safe working and social distancing have now become more firmly embedded. Reflecting on what this means for developing our working relationships with clients and colleagues, we have moved from a culture of connecting with people face-to-face to one in which virtual

meeting rooms and online collaborative spaces form our main methods of engagement and communication.

I work in the Strategic Planning Research Unit (SPRU) of DLP Planning Ltd, with a team based across our Sheffield, Bristol and Bedford offices. Before lockdown we would meet with colleagues in person perhaps once every couple of months. Now we are benefiting from daily virtual team meetings. Instead of being a 'faceless' voice at the end of a phone I've found there are many advantages in connecting with colleagues in other offices via a video call. I also recognise the mental health benefits that can be derived from seeing other people, albeit virtually, when working from home.

I have also found video calls to be a great way to communicate with clients, avoiding the need for time-consuming and costly travel that was often associated with in-person meetings.

At DLP Planning we have started running a series of online CPD events, at first for staff but now we are using this as part of a positive engagement programme with clients/client groups. We have for example organised webinars on Neighbourhood Planning and we are preparing a series looking at the practicalities of planning during Covid-19.

The virtual webinars have been a great way to share knowledge and understanding, open up debates and connect with clients, both new and existing. The benefit of such events is that we are not restricted by location as we are able to 'attend' events hosted by professionals across the country at the touch of a button. Perhaps there is more to be gained by looking beyond our regional bubbles for insights and opportunities.

Whilst in some ways there is no substitute for a social networking event or traditional face-to-face meetings, the forced introduction of video conferencing in all its forms as the main means of communication, has worked and is in many respects a practicable way forward in the future. We are yet to fully test whether other aspects of the planning system such as local plan examinations or public inquiries can be as effectively held in a virtual format. However, my experience of the past few months has shown me the value of digital technologies for collaborating and making connections with others. Embracing these and other new forms of communication as part of our everyday planning practice is something that we as a company, and we as planners, will likely wish to continue into the future.”

Tim Burden MRTPI, Director (Reading Office) at Turley

“The last 3 months have seen exceptional and no doubt long lasting changes to the functioning of our planning system, and how we all operate within it. The resilience of all parties and particularly those who have driven positive change and flexibility should be commended.

As lockdown begins to ease, now is a sensible time to look ahead at what we want as both a society and a system of enabling growth. Planning will be on the centre stage as the facilitator of our recovery, as it was during the last recession. There have been many examples of positive planning from local authorities – but all need to be positive, forward looking, and 'open for business'.

But let's not use this critical time of recovery to once again repeat the political rhetoric of "speeding up and simplifying" the system. At this time the development industry needs clear leadership, investment, support, confidence and certainty; not wholesale change to the planning system for no good reason

Yes, we need to see a continuation of Plan-making and other changes to the system to facilitate it, but MHCLG and PINS have listened to concerns and have made a raft of changes to keep things moving and more can be done.

We should address common frustrations with plan-making by moving on from Duty to Cooperate, being clearer on 'above local' planning, and being brave about the Green Belt. We should hold firm on housing land supply and Housing Delivery Test requirements in order to quickly recover the momentum that has been lost in delivering the homes needed to address the national housing crisis. The proposals for plans to be in place by 2023 should be adopted and given teeth.

With changes to travel patterns and consumer demand, we need to recognise the vital role that movement / accessibility has to play in our transition to a net zero economy. More than a third of our carbon emissions come from the transport sector and it is critical to our goals that we invest in the infrastructure to facilitate our transition. Talk of a 'green' recovery is a once in a generation opportunity to marry new thinking with recovery to stimulate a revolution in how we meet our societal needs.

The Chancellor announced in the Spring Budget in March 2020 a promise of a 30-year national infrastructure plan recognising that infrastructure development delivers significant wider benefits. Government should get on and deliver on this promise, including finally taking the Oxford to Cambridge Arc forward in a formal capacity. Supporting high tech and innovation hubs is essential, and an area we can and do lead on the world stage.

Changes in our approaches to shopping will result in further legacy changes to our town centres, and the need to support our new found reliance on home deliveries will require a more proactive approach to logistics development. People will expect more from their homes – better quality design, outdoor space, room to study and work will increase in importance.

Whatever the 'new normal' looks like, we should all take the chance to change the landscape and shape our future new sustainable economy. We cannot waste it.

Finally, on a personal level, through Turley, I am grateful to work for an employee owned business that has long supported its co-owners in working flexibility and effectively from home. Work is of course only one part of our lives, and the current crisis has reinforced the importance of our mental and physical health. We all face our own individual challenges at this time – lets be kind to each other. We will come out of this stronger."

Sara Parkinson MRTPI, Associate Director – Head of Planning at Vistry Partnerships

Vistry Partnerships is a hybrid business fusing contracting and housebuilding delivering truly mixed use developments across the UK in partnership with local authorities, the GLA, Housing Associations, build to rent providers, landowners and investors. The current Covid-19 health pandemic and restrictions have had an unprecedented impact on the housebuilding industry with

sales offices and construction sites shut down for a period. This has had the impact of slowing down progress on delivery of new developments and impacting on face to face sales and exchange/completion on new homes for a period. Vistry are not alone in this, housebuilders across the UK are having to consider the impact of the current lockdown on how they work to deliver new homes.

Vistry have a committed pipeline of significant regeneration projects at various stages of delivery across the capital with planning applications under preparation, sites nearing completion and sites with planning permission that are about to commence development.

Whilst I am fortunate enough that my work can be done remotely with a laptop and a phone, my colleagues have undergone significant changes in working practices. Vistry's building sites shut down for a period whilst government guidance was reviewed and safe working practices for all sites developed with health and safety of staff and community paramount. Progress on building has recommenced, numbers of staff on site has reduced, Vistry welcomed the ministerial statement (13th May) enabling temporary extension to working hours on construction sites which should help in improving productivity.

On an extremely positive note, we have seen no change in the service delivery and responsiveness of the local authorities we are working with. We have had pre-application meetings with London Boroughs and the GLA, Design Review Panel presentations and briefings with Council leaders and elected members virtually. If anything, the pandemic has increased effective communication with Local Authorities perhaps due to participants all being in one location, their homes.

As Vistry have a number of schemes in design development and applications shortly to be submitted, we have taken additional steps to engage residents and stakeholders by sending out letters and leaflets containing information on our application proposals with details of how to respond. We are also engaging with community groups virtually using Microsoft Teams and Zoom. We have welcomed the government's swift response to community consultation. Local authorities are also adapting, one London Borough has extended the consultation period beyond the statutory 21 days to 42.

Government have now extended planning permissions that would expire between the start of lockdown and the end of this year until 1 April 2021. Whilst Vistry continue to deliver permissions, it is likely that some developers may want to delay implementation whilst they take stock of the full impact of Covid 19 on their business plans, greater flexibility to extend timeframes is therefore required for more recently approved applications and those expiring within the next two years so that planning permissions are not lost.

The lack of guidance to local planning authorities on CIL payments is also disappointing, while CIL payments can be phased, this is only where there is a policy in place. LPAs can prepare new phasing policies, however, where this doesn't happen there is no flexibility and limited discretion within the regulations around deferral of CIL payments. Although there is some LPA discretion around enforcement and late payment interest charges, this still carries a risk for developers and their cashflow. Greater flexibility and clarity from government should be provided, if we are to bolster the economy and build more homes.

For more information about this paper, visit:

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

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