The planners' response to COVID-19

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When I took on the role of President of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) in January 2020, nothing had quite prepared me for the year that we were to experience. This short commentary was written at the end of June 2020 just as we were coming out of the first lockdown period. It captured my personal thoughts and reflections on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on planning and the planning profession, highlighting the learning that was emerging from our experiences.

Six months later, the challenges that we face as society as a result of the pandemic remain much the same. The main themes of this commentary provide a baseline against which we can explore and assess the impacts of learning and future change. Research continues apace and there is a growing body of literature from built environment academics and practitioners who have sought to put the COVID-19 pandemic and reactions to it into perspective, considering how events are changing our towns and cities and what this means for the future of planning (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020a, Town Planning Review, COVID-19 Viewpoint series 2020).

Although life as we knew it in 2019 will not return, the time has now come to think about, and plan for, the recovery. We need spatial plans, policies and actions that together will support a greener, place-based recovery that responds not only to the lessons learned from the pandemic, but also to the challenges that we were grappling with this time last year, most notably climate change and the housing crisis.

Whilst it is important that we act quickly to support the restoration of our economy, we also need to ensure that short-term 'quick fixes' do not prejudice longer term actions. So, it is vitally important to plan for the world that we want and that we need. The future that we have will be the future that we choose.

Informed by the results of a member survey (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020b) early in the lockdown period, the RTPI was able to work with governments and other stakeholders to identify temporary changes that were needed to ensure that the planning system continued to function effectively. These included the need to extend the life of planning permissions expiring in 2020, producing guidance on safe working practices, an extension of delegated decision making to ensure development could continue, greater use of technology to support virtual planning committees and community engagement, and resourcing planning to enable preparations for a sustainable economic recovery. It is pleasing to see that most of these have been put into effect and have enabled the planning system to continue to function in these unprecedented times.

The profession moved swiftly from a primarily office-based workforce to one where 96% of members were working from their homes (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020b). Cultural and technological obstacles were quickly overcome. Whilst some local planning authorities such as Manchester City Council (2020) initially cancelled their planning committees, delegating decisions on applications to Senior Officers and Leaders, most are now moving their planning committees online (Planning Advisory Services 2020a, b). Where this has already happened, there are consistent reports from across the UK of higher levels of 'attendance' by the public bringing greater transparency to the planning decision-making process. The success of virtual meetings has been such that East Suffolk Council now *"plan to continue hosting remote committee meetings. They generally have been working really well and are an opportunity to increase the attendance as interested parties do not have to give up so much of their precious time"* (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020b). It seems that virtual planning committees may be here to stay (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020c).

The greater use of technology has opened up real opportunities for better community engagement and debate in and about planning. More developers are looking to use virtual reality, drone footage and 3D modelling to enable

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Committee Members and local communities alike to visualise new development. Virtual consultation events have been designed to replicate a 'village hall' experience (Infrastructure Intelligence 2020); for example Oxfordshire County Council's consultation on the Didcot and Surrounding Area Infrastructure Improvements Update (Oxfordshire County Council 2020). These virtual events can include both traditional consultation materials and newer virtual reality and sound demonstrations. Feedback can be openly made and is transparent for all to read, with chat functions enabling responses to questions. Whilst social distancing limits 'in person' consultation events, there is much to be learned from the process of online engagement with local communities in terms of both its effectiveness and the diversity of those involved. It will add a valuable new tool into the toolkit of community engagement, but whilst there remain those in society who do not have access to the internet, it cannot be the only tool to be used.

However, not every local authority or organisation is at the same stage of technology 'readiness'. There is a major challenge in Northern Ireland, where the COVID-19 crisis has exposed the need for rapid change as planning applications cannot be submitted electronically, slowing processing and determination (Bryson 2020). Looking to the future, the need for agile technology to respond quickly to a sudden change in circumstances has become evident.

However, as we now start to move out of lockdown, we must not lose sight of the lessons that we have learned from this pandemic about the way we live, work and use our homes, our local places and spaces. Many of us have, over the past few months, experienced life in a very different way as we have spent more time in and around our homes and our local areas. As a result, the strengths and the weaknesses of each are becoming increasingly evident.

Experiences of the life under 'lockdown' have varied greatly, with many of the differences being a product of the place where people are living. The pandemic has been a story of inequality, with those living in our more disadvantaged areas suffering disproportionately. Analysis by the New Policy Institute, reported in the Guardian (Wall 2020), showed "*that even after allowing for the much higher infection rates in London, the top five most-crowded areas in the country have seen 70% more coronavirus cases than the five least-crowded, where better-off homeowners are likely to live in larger homes with spare bedrooms and more than one bathroom*".

The challenge of how to ensure that the right homes were delivered in the right places existed before COVID-19 arrived, but a key lesson from the pandemic is that these homes must also be of the right size and quality. Permitted Development Rights (PDR) which allow the conversion of commercial premises to residential uses, with resulting units as small as 13 sq. m in size, with no natural ventilation,

no windows and no outdoor space had no place in a pre-COVID-19 world and after our experiences of 'lockdown' cannot be allowed to remain in place (Levitt Bernstein 2020). We must push hard for this PDR to be withdrawn by government; homes must be fit to live in.

And what of our parks and open spaces? Their role in improving health has been well known since Victorian times. Indeed, it was the Victorians who planned many of our most valued urban parks. The quality of our spaces and places matters. Both the National Planning Policy Framework (2019) and the National Design Guide (2019) are clear about the importance of good design of our built environment, spaces and places and the positive affect that this can have on health and well-being, feelings of safety, security, inclusion and belonging, and community cohesion (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2019a, 2019b). Whilst the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted how high-quality, accessible green space/outdoor space can be good for mental and physical well-being, looking forward it also has a key role to play in mitigating the impacts of climate change.

The Building Better Building Beautiful Commission (2020) report, 'Living with Beauty. Promoting health, well-being and sustainable growth', advocates "*an integrated approach, in which all matters relevant to placemaking are considered from the outset and subjected to a democratic or co-design process*". In our rush to restart the economy, we should not lose sight of this message.

The pandemic has impacted our High Streets perhaps more than other places. Even as shops begin to open again, there are fewer people, less activity and a growing number of empty premises. Although our High Streets, town and city centres may have been through a dark time, history has shown how they can evolve to meet the needs of the communities they serve. So we need to look at ways that we can breathe new life back into our High Streets and shopping centres, making them once again places that people want to visit; it may be that this requires a different and more diverse role and function. It will be interesting to see how the temporary changes to exempt outdoor markets, pop-up car-boot sales and summer fairs from the planning process and for pubs and restaurants to use car parks and terraces as dining and drinking areas will change these places. Will these changes introduce a new culture and mix of activity creating the spark that is needed to bring people back to these areas? Similarly will the temporary wider pavements that provide for social distancing and 'pop-up' cycle lanes to encourage sustainable travel become permanent features of the High Street?

Changes to the way we work will have many implications. Will the growth in commercial office space in our town and city centres continue at the rate we had planned for in a pre-COVID-19 world? At the moment this seems

unlikely. As the Chief Executive of Barclays, Jes Staley, recently said *"There will be a long-term adjustment to our location strategy ... the notion of putting 7000 people in a building may be a thing of the past"* (BBC News 2020). We need to consider how this will impact on the need for, and size of, office space going forward? It may be that a more flexible approach to the use of these office spaces is needed, along with a rethink on home-working spaces.

How will our experiences of the crisis change our travel patterns—will we revert to a pre-COVID-19 world or are longer term, more significant changes likely? We should remember that much discussion was taking place before the pandemic regarding travel patterns and the need to limit emissions in order to respond to the challenges of climate change. At this point in time, we do not know how long the capacity restrictions on public transport will remain in place—the health risks associated with public transport are however having a profound impact on the way people move around. The reductions in travel by road, rail and air as a result of lockdown have however had positive benefits, with air quality improving and carbon emissions decreasing. People have changed the way they travel around; we have all witnessed how this can improve the health of many living in our cities. It has reinvigorated the debate around a greener future and shown that things can change for the better and that they can change very quickly.

The pandemic has also shown the strength that comes from being part of a community and the importance of community support networks. Neighbours have mobilised and come together, using local knowledge and local resources to respond to the crisis. As we plan for the future we need to listen to the local voice—local people know what works and what doesn't work in their areas. It is vital that local people are fully involved in planning their future.

Just as the very real threat of climate change has not gone away, nor has the crisis in housing supply or the threat to biodiversity. The difference between the COVID-19 crisis and other crises is that we have been given ample notice of their arrival. We have an opportunity to address these before they reach a tipping point.

The post-COVID-19 world must address the large and widening gaps in health and economic well-being and 'level up' life experiences across society. As we look forward, the stark reality of our economic situation is becoming more evident day by day. There is a desperate need to get the economy moving. But we need to show future generations that we learnt from our experiences and that we were bold enough and brave enough to be able to plan for the world that both we and they need. They will not forgive us if we do not take this opportunity.

To achieve this, we must adopt a place-based approach to decision making. Our approach must be both strategic

and holistic. It must be one which maximises investment in public and active transport, healthy placemaking, renewable energy and smart grid technology, resilient infrastructure, climate mitigation, investment in communities, a national programme of building-retrofit and delivering the right homes in the right places.

The Building Better Building Beautiful Commission (2020) report highlighted the need to raise *"the profile and role of planning both in political discussions and in the wider debate concerning how we wish to live and what kind of a country we want to pass on"*. As spatial planners it is our responsibility to lead a place-based recovery. Spatial planners have the skills and expertise to bring together and balance competing needs and demands and create resilient, sustainable places that support strong communities, both for those alive today and for generations to come.

This includes supporting the green industrial revolution, prioritising healthy and sustainable modes of travel, reducing pollution and co-ordinating the deployment of zero carbon infrastructure. The increased use of new technology will be key to this. Digital connectivity has been the golden thread that has kept society and families connected. But in places, especially rural areas, speeds are still slow and connections at best 'flaky'. Whilst we knew about the importance of digital connectivity pre COVID-19 and that *"Advanced, high quality and reliable communications infrastructure is essential for economic growth and social well-being"* (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2019a), its importance has been underlined by our experiences of the crisis. Going forward, there is a need to ensure that planning policies and decisions are sufficiently flexible and agile to enable them to keep pace with the rapid changes in technology.

Throughout history, pandemics have tended to prey on the more disadvantaged within society exposing social inequalities. COVID-19 is no different. Deprivation and health have always been linked. Whilst the pandemic has reinforced the legitimacy of public investment in health and social care, this needs to be extended to include the homes that we build and the spaces and places that we live in. If anything, the COVID-19 crisis has given added emphasis to the importance of investing in the future of our built and natural environment and being open to doing things differently. We cannot and must not allow the opportunity to learn from this experience, to pass us by.

So, what do planners and the planning system need to do as we take on this leadership role? First and foremost, we need to listen and engage with the diverse communities that make up our society. In the West Midlands, a Citizen's Panel has been commissioned by the West Midlands Recovery Co-ordination Group (WMRCG)—a collaboration of senior officials from the region's authorities, emergency services and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Its 36 members,

who represent the diverse make-up of the region, are spending June 2020 learning about the impact of the virus on communities. A deliberative process, this involves them sharing their experiences, considering evidence on impacts from expert witnesses and deliberating over challenging trade-offs, before then putting forward a set of recommendations for how the WMRCG should go about planning and delivering regional recovery (West Midlands Combined Authority 2020).

Tackling place-based social, economic, environmental and health inequalities must be at the heart of the recovery. We must ensure that all voices are represented around the decision-making table and all voices are equally heard. We must build on the remarkable work performed by communities during the pandemic as they have stepped up to support the vulnerable.

We are not alone in our vision for a better, greener world. Earlier this month, almost 200 top business leaders, from companies including HSBC, National Grid and Heathrow Airport, called on the Prime Minister to set out economic recovery plans that align with the UK's climate goals to help rebuild a resilient UK economy in the wake of the coronavirus crisis and to “*deliver a clean, just recovery*” (Ambrose 2020).

On 29 June 2020, the RTPI launched their campaign ‘Plan The World We Need’ (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020d). The accompanying report makes clear that “*To recover from Covid-19, we need to make plans. These must be holistic in nature, integrated in structure, and resourced for delivery. They need to accelerate progress to a zero carbon economy, increase resilience to risk, and create fair, healthy and prosperous communities.*” (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020e).

In delivering healthy and resilient places for the future, we need to ensure that we listen to a greater diversity of views; not everyone has a choice about where they can live and not everyone wants the same lifestyle. There is also a need for greater collaboration between public health and social care teams and the planning profession, exploring innovative partnerships and embedding the principles of healthy placemaking into practice (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020f).

Governments need to set the direction of travel, the objectives and metrics that society wants to see delivered in a post-COVID-19 world. Then, they need to provide the resources to achieve this. There is a new willingness for change, so long as that change is for the better. Change can happen if we want it to, and it can happen fast. But in our haste to return to a more ‘normal’ way of life, we have a responsibility to ensure that the changes that we put in place today are the right ones, and that they will bring about a better, healthier and resilient future.

There is much to reflect upon and debate in the coming months. The planning profession has the skills, and indeed the responsibility, to lead the debate. The role of planners will become central in helping to shape our future; it is vital that planners are at the ‘top table’ when this happens.

Postscript

Since this commentary was written at the end of June 2020, there have been changes to Permitted Development Rights and to the Town and Country Planning Use Classes Order, both of which will impact on placemaking. The Government is also proposing major changes to the planning system. A White Paper ‘Planning for the Future’ was published for consultation in August 2020 (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government 2020c). The RTPI responded to the White Paper (Royal Town Planning Institute 2020g, h).

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