

RTPI INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS NETWORK (ICN) – CHAIRMANS ANNUAL REPORT TO BOARD 2021

I am pleased to report that the ICN continues to be active and to thrive, notwithstanding the difficulties of working during the various restrictions of the Covid Emergency. We currently have increased our membership to 855, despite turnover through retirements, and aim to stimulate greater active membership in the future.

As reported last year, ICN members have long been accustomed to working alone and from home or from small offices, so the impact of the pandemic on working patterns has not been felt to the same degree. Against that must be set the unavoidable effects of illness and compliance with isolation advice, with our self-employed members having no access to sick pay. I am constantly impressed by the resilience and commitment of our members, who display a tremendous ability to remain committed to their profession and their clients. We are greatly assisted by our online and email Forum, which is a source of easy contact with peers and which provides both professional debate and social contacts across the UK. Not a day goes by without collaborative working.

CPD has increased substantially due to the significantly enhanced availability of free online events. Forum Members pass on recommendations and learning to each other, and we often feel ahead of the formal press in sharing alerts to legislative changes. Previously, the high cost of many conferences had been outside the reach of many sole traders.

After major disruptions to work flows and income during 2020, Members reported an influx of work across the board in 2021 as they dealt with planning applications, appeals, local and neighbourhood plans and enforcement. The latter in particular has seen significant growth, and the Forum has been a valuable tool for knowledge sharing.

One issue which has had a major impact on our work lives has been the poor performance of LPAs and other organisations critical to professional planning. The lack of public resourcing combined with the adverse effects of the pandemic on training, mentorship and communication has delayed project delivery and resulted in the inefficient use of time. Feedback indicates that many ICN members have experienced falling confidence in the system, and consequently lower job satisfaction, together with difficulty in managing the expectations of clients.

This has been exacerbated by the uncertainty caused by Government announcements of forthcoming change, followed by delays in implementation. Members have expressed concern that in both applications and appeals the augmented use of standardised approaches minimises the role of professional judgement and excludes valuable creativity. We have all had to call on a range of new specialist consultants to satisfy additional validation and policy requirements.

In terms of influence as a group, this year has seen less dialogue with the Planning Inspectorate than we would have hoped, and we aim to revitalize this in 2022. In preparation we have recently surveyed members on their experiences and views. We are delighted when asked to comment on RTPI initiatives and policy inputs and welcome invitations to participate.

One project which has long engaged us is the release of an online schedule of all current Chartered Town Planners that could be easily accessed by both RTPI members and the general public. As this would give prospective clients the confidence that individual consultants are chartered, and help to confirm authenticity, we are keen for this to be delivered as soon as possible.

A major disappointment has been the absence of our annual conference as a result of Covid restrictions. This event is highly valued by our members. We are currently making arrangements to hold this year's conference in Chester in September, and tailoring content to stimulate and support our needs. We are serious thinkers and visionaries as well as practical planners and the Steering Group plans to encourage both skill sets.

Turning to the Steering Group, we have been ably supported by our Network Manager Jenny Divine and wish her well in her new RTPI Policy Officer post. The Steering Group has recently seen some changes as two much valued people have stepped down (John Lynch and Helen Prangley) and two new ones have joined (Jacqueline Veater and Brian Waters), bringing fresh experience and skills.

After 6 years as Chair of the Steering Group I have this month stepped down and have confidently passed the baton on to Pete Lloyd, who will write future reports to you. I have been delighted by the support and recognition for my work from my colleagues over the years, and am proud to have played my part in the promotion of a culture of professionalism and generosity among such an excellent group.

**Deirdre Wells Dip TP MRTPI
2021 Chair of ICN Steering Group**