

RTPI ICN – 2019 ANNUAL REPORT TO BOARD BY CHAIR OF STEERING GROUP

During 2019 membership of the ICN has increased to 805 members, despite the retirement of some members and others transferring into full time employment in the public sector. I consider this continued growth is down to the active promotion of the advantages of membership by existing members to other professionals, as well as promotion by RTPI staff.

The Network is not large enough to warrant subdivision into national or regional groups, and there is a huge diversity in specialisms which we consider is best served by maintaining a single group for the whole of the RTPI. However, we have introduced protocols to enable contacts between those who wish to debate the finer details of topics such as Neighbourhood Planning and CIL which might not be relevant to the daily work of all. By keeping a single Network group we maximise the opportunity for all members to learn new skills.

Network members who are also participants in the subsidiary email forum (ICF) are keen supporters of each other, rapidly circulating learning and advice and taking on the tasks of coordinating access to professional support services. In 2019 we again negotiated significant discounts for group membership of Planning Resource. Retiring members offered their libraries to others, and in many cases passed on personal recommendations to clients to ensure they continued to receive high quality professional advice.

Discussions on PII also enabled members to access best prices from providers, while newcomers were assisted in setting up businesses on topics ranging from fee rates to debt recovery and IT systems.

The generosity of members in providing recommendations for related specialist professionals has been much appreciated- no shout for a recommendation for a landscape architect, drainage expert, planning solicitor or viability advisor has gone unanswered, and as a result the overall quality of advice provided to clients has been maintained.

The Annual Conference has now become a popular fixture in the calendar, enabling ICN members to reinforce their online contacts with an opportunity to meet and develop genuine professional friendships. The content of the Conference is tailored to the interests of members, but also aims to stimulate thought and action on emerging bigger issues, to refresh a commitment to positive planning for the future. As the Network is composed of individuals confident enough to work alone, we are fortunate in having a lot of opinions and original thinkers as well as wide experience.

Our Conference, held in Bristol in October, was voted a success both by those attending and our external speakers. We also made best use of our regular expert contributors by providing them with workshop opportunities- feedback indicated that these were particularly popular. Sharing knowledge is a core value we both embrace and promote. RTPI headquarters staff, and in particular our Network Manager, have been extremely helpful in arranging the Conference to suit our specific requirements, and I hope we have made our appreciation clear. An innovation this year was that I arranged for a collection during Conference to help a small local charity helping the homeless, and this was well supported by delegates and much appreciated by the Charity.

We have started work on arranging a Conference for October 2020 in a location in the northwest. Unlike planners in larger organisations, ICN members have to bear all their own costs including downtime out of the office, so we aim to spread the load by changing location each year as membership is so widely dispersed. We also see it as an opportunity for many to explore development issues in an unfamiliar area.

Issues for concern which have been raised by ICN members are considered by the Steering Group at three annual meetings but are discussed throughout the year on the ICF. We have as a result established a direct communication route with senior PINS officers, where our suggestions for improvements in the appeals system seem to be well received, although as yet members continue to be concerned over continued delays and poor quality decisions. The liaison with PINS continues.

Members are very keen to see practical rather than academic leadership from the Institute on addressing climate change.

During 2019 I have endeavoured to address the issue of inconsistent website information by LPAs by seeking the publication of standardised advice from PAS. The value of this has been accepted by PAS. Guidance continues to be delayed but will be pursued.

Having established a Steering Group for the first time in 2016, we are now embarking on refreshing its membership by inviting new SG members and setting up a process for the future. While continuity is valuable, we want to make space for positive change.

A new initiative we have started work on is to investigate ways to provide support for the sole workers who make up most of our Network. While large organisations have strategies and resources to support staff through times of stress, illness, bereavement and other life changes we have identified a lack of such support tailored for ICN members. Our work involves taking on a great deal of individual responsibility without any backup when things outside our control go wrong, and the SG feel this could be helped by advice which anticipates and where possible avoids a crisis. Our ICF exchange is highly valued as a way to combat isolation, but we feel needs supplementing. As a start, we are working with headquarters staff to revise and republish by mid 2020 the Practice Advice Note 'Starting your own private consultancy' to include relevant advice gathered from experience and to address ongoing rather than just start up matters.

As Chair of the ICN, I consider that we are a vigorous and positive group, continually striving to improve our knowledge and experience in a way which provides encouragement to all members and improved outcomes for the wider community. I ask again that our skills are called on whenever possible by the RTPI to do the following:

- ensure that the Institute is genuinely representative of its members views
- promote the importance of Planning to the public, to media and to government
- contribute to achieving a positive response to climate change by supporting the development industry through a period of essential radical change.

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