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RTPI
Royal Town Planning Institute

Board of Trustees

ICN Annual Report

Report from the Head of Policy Practice & Research

FOR NOTING

1. Summary

The Board is asked to note the first annual report from the Chair of ICN.

2. Background

The "Independent Consultants Network" was formed approximately 20 years ago. It is one of the two RTPI Networks which reports directly to the Board, the other being the National Association of Planning Enforcement Network. Both of these have members defined by role rather than interest as in other networks.

3. Resource implications

ICN is resourced for 2019 within the normal budget. It has a Network Manager working roughly one day a week. It requires annual sponsorship to run the annual conference and this needs to be coordinated with the wider sponsorship programme of the RTPI.

4. Communications Implications

The ICN annual conference 2018 was held in York courtesy of Planning Portal/Terraquest and 39 Essex Chambers on 14 -15 November 2018 and heard excellent presentations from lawyers and planners working on planning law, the NPPF and planning appeals.

5. Legal implications

Operation of ICN conforms to the GDPR 2018.

6. Jurisdiction and devolution implications

ICN membership is open to all RTPI nations.

7. Equality and diversity implications

The role of independent consultant has provided a route to RTPI membership open to people from a wide variety of backgrounds including people starting a second career and people who did not attend university at age 18.

2018 ANNUAL REPORT ON ACTIVITY OF THE RTPI INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS NETWORK (ICN)

This is the first Annual report to the RTPI Board describing the activities of this Network prepared by the Chair of the Steering Group. A brief introduction is therefore provided.

The ICN has been in existence for around 20 years, but only became interactive when a private contact email system was set up around 15 years ago. Prior to that it was largely a passive group receiving information via monthly updates from an RTPI Network Coordinator. Until 2017 our only occasion to meet was our brief annual meeting in Bristol with senior PINS officers.

The email network fast became a very popular vehicle for regular exchanges between members on any issues where they sought guidance from the group on professional, case or business matters. As a virtual office for planners who generally work alone from small or home offices, it is also extremely valuable as a network of friendly peers who are generous in sharing diverse experience, skills and empathy, combating isolation.

The popularity of the email network continues to grow, and many see it as an essential aid to their professional life. Having joined, very few drop out and it is the principal means by which Members keep up to date on important CPD issues, as well as brainstorming problem resolutions.

The ICN currently has a membership of 800, with around 300 of these in regular email contact, and has grown steadily in recent years, with the email group increasing by 50% in the last 18 months. We take every opportunity to promote the Network to newcomers. All ICN members are Chartered Town Planners. Most have prior experience in LPAs or large consultancies, some at very senior levels.

In late 2015 the Network formalized governance by setting up a Steering Group and by refreshing the terms and conditions of membership prior to a relaunch of the email network. Consultation and testing had established that an online forum was not a suitable alternative. The current Steering Group is a team of 5 (Chris Kendall, John Lynch, Derek McKensie, Helen Prangley, and myself), supported by RTPI officers Richard Blyth and the newly appointed Merlin Tolley.

The Steering Group considered that the skills and experience resources of the ICN had not been recognized or utilised by the RTPI in the past and expressed enthusiasm for being used as a consultee or sounding board for consultations undertaken by government, agencies and the RTPI. Our membership comprises Chartered Town Planners who provide training packages, advise Local Authorities, undertake interim management roles in LPAs, act for Neighbourhood Planning Groups, Parish and Town Councils, act as PINS Inspectors as well as working for private clients of all kinds. We have an insight into what needs to change and what works well from the customer point of view. Some of us are specialists, most generalists. All find the ICN an invaluable source of CPD.

To date, we have had limited invitations to contribute to RTPI Policy development or to formal consultations, but are assured by Victoria Hills that this will improve.

To further improve learning and to stimulate active use of the Network, we arranged our first one day Conference in Oxford during November 2017. It was such a resounding success that it was decided to make it an Annual event.

In November 2018 around 100 of us met in York for a slightly longer event, with sponsors and expert speakers confirming they would be delighted to repeat the experience in 2019. Work has now started on planning for this. One of the advantages of our extensive list of contacts is that we have had no difficulty in finding sponsors and willing speakers. The organization, administration and logistics of organizing a Conference are tasks where we rely heavily on RTPI officers for help – Robbie Calvert was an absolute star in this regard, as well as in the substantial amount of behind the scenes correspondence with me throughout the year.

The Steering Group has expressed significant concerns in relation to both the quality and process of the current Appeals system, and a representative joined RTPI officers in contributing to discussions on improvements to the PI system in Autumn 2018. We feel that this was only scratching the surface of current problems and will continue to discuss and promote options to deliver further improvements with RTPI and PINS colleagues. We are also currently engaged in promoting consistency in LPA DM practice where possible.

We also engaged with the Planning Portal on the roll out of the refreshed online applications system, and I have established a useful conduit to the Managing Director as a result. Working collaboratively, members have secured discounted access for many to periodicals and online information. We also assist in price comparisons for PII and help each other on business management matters of fundamental concern to small practices. On occasion, we are able to match colleagues with clients searching for planning advice in other parts of the UK and we regularly share recommendations for specialist consultants.

As Independent Consultants who are largely self employed, ICN members have no back office support or salaried time other than that paid for by clients, so have limited resources for extra curricular work. However, we are very collegiate in sharing expertise, are exceptionally good at innovative thinking, are very forward looking and are keen to contribute to the science and practice of planning via the RTPI where we can. Currently we are encouraging Members to participate in the development of the new Corporate Strategy.

Being an Independent Consultant is attractive to those who are prepared to take on the responsibility of advising clients without the safety net (or possibly the irritations) of corporate employers. It requires a

constant commitment to CPD, provides wide experience and necessitates clear thinking, organisation and a strong personality. ICN members are active planners who deserve the support of the RTPI.

At present, all Members of the Steering Group are happy to continue in post, and those attending the recent Conference were content with our continuation. During 2019 I will issue an invitation to ICN Members to refresh Group membership.

I believe we are an unusual Network in being so active in sharing and helping rather than competing, and this genuinely both aids individual development and promotes an enthusiasm for Planning when life is difficult. I trust the Board supports our work and will use our skills in the future.

Deirdre Wells Dip TP MRTPI (Chair of ICN Steering Group)
January 2019