

LPA Planning in the time of Coronavirus

Christopher McKinney, Principal Policy Planner, Bolsover District Council

LPA Planning in the time of Coronavirus

This is my first year on the East Midlands Regional Activities Committee and what a year it is turning out to be. All of our plans for the East Midlands' CPD training programme having to be rethought as we entered the Covid-19 lockdown and then delayed and rescheduled as we move what we can online in the form of webinars.

Also, as a local authority planner on the Committee I am trying to put more of a local authority perspective across and as a result talked myself into preparing an article for this e-bulletin.

Given the impact that the Covid-19 lockdown has had on us personally and on the business of our organisations, I thought it topical and hopefully interesting to talk about how LPA planners are adjusting to lockdown; what is happening to application numbers and local plan progress; and a few examples of planners helping out in the community during the epidemic.

In doing this, I want to bring more LPA planner voices to the ears of RTPi members and so I've asked for contributions from around the region and I'm pleased to say the response level was good. So here are a few thoughts on LPA planning in the time of coronavirus from around the region.

Kick start to more agile and sustainable working

Paul Edwards, Assistant Director: Planning, East Lindsey District Council - one of the region's largest rural local planning authorities.

"Keeping business going has been a key element of my approach during the lockdown. Our Support Team and all of our DM case officers have been working at full speed from home and this has accelerated our efforts to go paperless. We have a small committed team who have been visiting the otherwise closed offices to keep the paper receipts going but we've stopped printing a lot of the application background documents with us all relying more on the online versions.

We have also kept decisions rolling and holding virtual Planning Committees to facilitate this. To support the construction industry through the disruption we have increased the default period to start a development to 4 years. I had wanted to see the Government change the rules but in the absence of national leadership we decided to make the change locally. Not only is this change part of our proactive approach to the construction industry, it also will reduce the need for permissions issued now to be resubmitted should they need a little more time and therefore also save the local planning authority all the costs associated with this.

I've tried to keep a regular dialogue with the main planning agents and developers in my district during the lockdown period, providing updates as and when on issues like how the authority will approach site working hours conditions, how the department is

Contact us
east.midlands@rtpi.org.uk

operating and how we can be contacted. This seems to be well received so far and it has helped ensure we are pulling in the same direction during this difficult time.

I am also pleased to say we have been able to contribute to the emergency work of the authority. Due to our reasonably up-to-date Local Plan, we've been able to let planning policy staff help out with the incredible volume of applications for Business Support Grants that the Council is receiving. Whilst this will have some impact on our service, at times like these it's been satisfying to see planning staff contribute to help the local economy, but in another way.

Finally, I find myself thinking about how the current situation could help us lead more sustainable lifestyles. For years we've told others to be sustainable whilst driving long distances as part of the work commute or to attend meetings with other authorities. Now we know that virtual meetings can work, shouldn't we practice what we preach?"

Time for a rethink?

Head of Planning at a rural local planning authority.

"Covid-19 has made us rethink some of the day-to-day activities from a different perspective and this has resulted in some interesting solutions not just to get through the pandemic but that could be here to stay.

For example, preparing for smooth and coherent remote Planning Committees through a lens. It became clear that we needed to deconstruct every element of the process and put it back together in a sequence that even the uninitiated member of the public viewing through an iPad and poor Wi-Fi might still have a realistic prospect of understanding what's happening. The exercise has made us realise that it would also ensure that if we ever get back to the old norm, this revised process would help them better understand when watching live in the chamber too.

To overcome problems of social distancing in committee site visits, having an officer narrated video of the relevant parts of the site circulated to Committee Members in advance of the meeting and put online was found to be the solution. It again created that "Why haven't we thought of this before?" moment. Half a day visiting three sites in different corners of the district, organising the coach, the times, "herding cats" etc., could be history. Yes, there will be sites where a fuller appreciation can only be achieved by a personal visit, but video site visits will certainly be one of the efficiencies we will draw on in future.



More innovative solutions come when you are forced to think differently when in a tight spot.

Contact us
East.midlands@rtpi.org.uk

More innovative solutions come when you are forced to think differently when in a tight spot.”

Impact on Plan Making

Principal Planner in a Local Plan team at an urban local planning authority.

“Our LP main mods consultation started before the lockdown, and was due to finish on 17th April. We asked our Inspectors for their view regarding any extension of consultation period. Our LP Inspectors agreed that the most appropriate course of action was to complete the current consultation as planned on 17 April. If the proposed main modifications were introducing an entirely new site or a new road etc. the Inspectors would have been more cautious about the restrictions on accessing libraries etc. However, as that wasn’t the case it was considered appropriate to continue the consultation in the circumstances. The Inspectors did point out that If anyone contacts the Council requesting additional time to comment this should be relayed to the Programme Officer and the Inspectors would make a judgement call on whether to grant any additional time. Given there has been a six week timeframe to comment on a relatively small number of main modifications, any extra time would be a matter of days, not weeks.”

Contributing to the local community

Principal Planner in a Local Plan team at a rural local planning authority.

“For the past 11 weeks I have been juggling the demands of the ‘normal’ day job as a town planner and working with a local pharmacy to deliver essential medical supplies to people in my local community. I volunteered for the role as I wanted to help the most vulnerable people local to me and keep their spirits up during these difficult times. It also gave me good reason to be out of the house and take a break from other duties such as home schooling!”

“

More innovative solutions come when you are forced to think differently when in a tight spot.

Contact us
East.midlands@rtpi.org.uk

Virtual meetings

***Beverley Alderton-Sambrook, Head of Regeneration Service,
Bassetlaw District Council.***

“Our Planning Committee Members embraced the idea of virtual meetings as we want to support the economic prosperity of the district and ensure that investment continues to flood into Bassetlaw. This began with an agreement to amend our scheme of delegation so that we could make an easy transition into the very ‘new to us’ virtual meetings and the uncertainty of what may pop up/take time to deliver.

Following a number of trial runs and the drafting of a member protocol and public participation advice we’ve published on the Councils website, we held our first virtual Planning Committee yesterday evening. Whilst there was a minor technical issue during the meeting, we had practiced for that eventuality and were therefore able to manage that appropriately. The meeting went swimmingly and we have already had positive feedback from some members of the public and the Leader of the Council who also viewed.

This evening we have held a virtual Cabinet that is following the same format as the training of Planning Committee Members and the protocols drafted and there are a number of other Council meetings scheduled now in the same livestreaming manner.

In terms of a background and a few stats for Bassetlaw, throughout lockdown whilst there has been a marginal dip in the numbers of applications submitted, income levels are high so those submitted are of a major nature and the decisions issued have been circa 20% over the same period last financial year. This is undoubtedly due to the expediency in the way that Bassetlaw reacted to the need for officers to be able to homework. It’s fair to say we hadn’t been the most progressive historically in this field and there needed to be a rapid turnaround to accommodate officers working remotely and securely. This was managed as part of the whole service area of Regeneration being enabled to work effectively (of those who could and weren’t shielding), within 2 weeks of lockdown.

In terms of the future for Bassetlaw, the Council is currently able to boast a 10.1 year housing land supply and is progressing with an emerging Local Plan including the exciting proposition of a new garden village and working alongside the TCPA in developing a healthy place-making agenda for this site and the wider district.

In summary Bassetlaw is an exceptionally busy and exciting place to work for a Planner at this time as there are lots of innovative workstreams and positive outputs. No-one is



More innovative solutions come when you are forced to think differently when in a tight spot.

Contact us
East.midlands@rtpi.org.uk

sat wondering when lockdown will lift here as it won't make much difference to existing high levels of performance and output.”

In conclusion

So, here we have a few stories from LPA planners on how they are planning in the time of coronavirus. Planners keeping business going; planners finding new ways of doing this work to navigate around the new challenges we are facing; planners responding to that vocational calling and helping out their local communities.

I'm sure this is just the tip of the iceberg and also very reflective of what is going on across the region in both the public and private sectors. Planning is a special skill and a remarkable profession and full of special people doing remarkable things. Sometimes we just need the opportunity to lift our heads and take a look at what is going on.

If you want to contribute to future articles or have something you think the Region should say more on, please let me or one of the Committee members know.

Best wishes,

Chris McKinney

Principal Planning Officer, Bolsover District Council and Regional Activities Committee member



More innovative solutions come when you are forced to think differently when in a tight spot.

Contact us
East.midlands@rtpi.org.uk