RTPI Northern Ireland
Royal Town Planning Institute

Plan The World We Need

The role of planning in a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery for Northern Ireland

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RTPI Northern Ireland believes that a confident and proactive approach is required by all stakeholders across all sectors, including Government, policy makers, decision makers and planners, in the recovery required following the COVID-19 pandemic.

The planning system has a vital role to play in the future development of the places in which we live, work and enjoy our leisure time. Particularly at this time of uncertainty, planners and the planning system are well placed to guide and encourage a positive, collaborative, and integrated approach, with the main focus on outcomes and delivery. Our emphasis needs to be on socially-equitable recovery, with positive outcomes for health and wellbeing, resilience and climate action in Northern Ireland.

We must recognise the significant change in behaviour and priorities that the pandemic has brought about, for example, the renewed importance of access to green space and active travel. We must not only learn from our experiences, recognise positive change and ensure that these positive behavioural changes are maintained, but also address the challenging trends which will need to be managed, such as the rise of online retail and decline in high street shopping.

A well-resourced, plan-led, positive and transparent planning service, which is proactive in engaging local communities, can bring together objectives across services and help achieve inclusive development and climate action goals. The planning system and planners have an important proactive role as a driver of change. A strong and engaged plan-led system is essential if developers and communities alike are to have confidence that development will be successful and sustainable.

Our response is centred on desired outcomes under three main themes: place, connections and governance. These can all be linked back to the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Outcome-focused planning is essential to ensure efficiency and sustainability and, in so doing, prove planning's worth.

Place

Equitable access to green space

Many people do not have private access to outdoor space. [Research](#) shows that spending just ten minutes in a natural setting can reduce the effects of physical and mental stress. Access to public green space is vital for the mental health of our population.

The planning system needs to protect natural assets whilst improving access to them and enjoyment of them. Planning (and planners) needs to bear in mind protection and enhancement of green space, and community open space projects need to be properly resourced. This is an opportunity for place-making for all; not just the privileged.

High quality urban design that is not an afterthought. More meaningful open spaces that properly cater for children's play

Urban design is important; we cannot operate on the principle that 'any investment is good investment' - something that Northern Ireland struggled with during The Troubles. This leaves a lasting negative legacy. Space around development needs more attention from planners and developers.

There is an opportunity to re-evaluate the principles behind planning: better access to blue / green infrastructure and high quality open spaces. Marmalade Lane in Cambridge, which won the RTPI's 2020 Jubilee Cup, is a good example. Can Northern Ireland take the lead and deliver similar high quality housing schemes?

Safeguard the vulnerable in planning and ensure good quality homes for all

The number of people in housing need / stress is likely to increase in Northern Ireland following COVID-19. Building regulations changed in response to tuberculosis and cholera research; there was more emphasis on access to light and fresh air, and waste pipes were buried underground. There has been a decoupling of health policy and planning as vaccines have allowed this, but in the absence of medicine, we return to physical measures such as social distancing. This shows how our physical environment is fundamental to our health.

The evidence base for Local Development Plans may need to be reflected on in the wake of COVID-19 and consideration given to measuring the health implications (physical and mental) of planning policy and development decisions. We would like to see health data play a bigger role in development decisions.

Vibrant town and city centres

People who can work from home, have been working from home during lockdown. This was already happening more, even pre-COVID-19. Post-COVID, it is likely that more firms will encourage flexible working practices, including working from home, in order to reduce time 'wasted' in commuting, reduce overhead costs, and reduce their carbon footprint.

COVID-19 will likely accelerate existing retail trends. There was already a growth in e-commerce. Online grocery shopping has seen massive growth during the pandemic. When lockdown is lifted, people may still be reluctant to shop in person, particularly for non-essentials, and may be hesitant to go to bars, cafes and restaurants in the short term.

There is also likely to be a slowing of mass international tourism for the short to medium term. This will have an impact on tourist attractions in Northern Ireland. Do we need to rethink how these places are promoted or used?

Town centres and high streets may need to be reconceptualised and repurposed, especially if social distancing becomes the established norm. Retail units and office space may need to be more flexible in future, so that they can be adapted for other uses.

Connections

Promote walking and cycling, and ensure that streets can accommodate more active travel, safely

We need to ensure that the high uptake in active travel which has occurred during lockdown continues and people do not just return to car dependency. There are significant health and wellbeing benefits, as well as positive climate impacts, of this shift to active travel.

The concept of Tactical Urbanism, which many cities have been taking forward, is to make temporary changes that can become permanent once tested out. Some see a silver lining to our current situation in that the large scale reduction in car travel and uptake in active travel allow for wider testing of interventions which would prevent car use rising to pre-COVID-19 levels.

Now could be the time for 'road diets' i.e. reducing road widths to allow for wider footways and cycle lanes. The reallocation of road space to walking and cycling has already occurred in several UK cities, for instance, Brighton has closed its main street to traffic. The Scottish Government has set up a £10 million 'Spaces for People' fund (administered by Sustrans) for pop-up cycle lanes and wider footways. Can the pop-up cycle lanes planned in Northern Ireland become permanent?

Supporting infrastructure is also essential: secure and convenient cycle parking, shower and locker facilities should be available (and if not, retrofitted) in places of work.

Restoring faith in public transport is key for socially equitable and green economic recovery

Public transport capacity will be reduced in the short to medium term to enable social distancing. There may also be a natural reduction in public transport demand as people worry about infection transmission, work from home and shop online more, and/or find alternative modes of transport.

Safe, affordable and convenient public transport is key to encourage people to use public transport instead of the car, bringing environmental benefits. In addition, many people rely on public transport if they do not have access to a car and/or have mobility difficulties which mean active travel is not an option for them.

Can businesses stagger business hours to encourage workers to use public transport safely and affordably? There is an opportunity for tech companies to work with Translink to provide real time arrival data, to minimise excess wait time for passengers at stops. Integrated ticketing for the Glider, bus services and train services would also be a step in the right direction to promote public transport usage through convenience and affordability. Joined up thinking between institutions and actors is essential, for example, between Translink, the Department for Infrastructure and developers.

Digital connectedness to reduce the need to travel

With more people working from home, broadband will need more investment. Digital connectivity is now more important than ever. If broadband connections are reliable and fast, we can reduce the need for overseas travel or long distance commutes, thereby reducing carbon emissions.

Digital infrastructure needs to be prioritised in investment decisions. Land use policy in Northern Ireland needs to provide the infrastructure required to support growing digital connectivity demand.

Governance

Improved business continuity for public sector planning services

Contingency planning needs attention in Northern Ireland. We need more resilient systems, IT infrastructure and the ability for public sector planners to work from home seamlessly during major incidents such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The planning application system needs to move away from being paper-based and towards being electronic-based. Digitised planning systems are able to offer more efficient processes, thereby enabling planners to focus on placemaking, and can facilitate wider access and increased participation in the planning process.

Planners to drive positive change and green recovery

Although you could argue planning application numbers will potentially be down (based on the experience of the last financial crash), downsizing planning departments post-COVID-19 will not improve the level of service, particularly as they were already under severe pressure.

It is essential that planners and planning departments have the resources they need to deliver quality outcomes for the recovery and to deliver long term goals.

An outcome-focused, engaged and locally-significant planning system

Public rhetoric has caught up with planning theory. We have seen an increase in public support and understanding for positive changes to place and connections, such as active travel, especially at the local scale, but we need to ensure these things are delivered.

A well-resourced, plan-led, positive planning service can deliver corporate objectives, which, if effectively organised, can help achieve local and regional sustainable development and climate action goals. Corporate management teams provide leadership, vision and priority setting for areas by shaping the strategic operational direction and investment decisions of councils and the Executive. The implications of these corporate decisions on new investment, infrastructure, development activity, local services and policy delivery are significant, particularly at this time. The RTPI believes that making the role of the Chief Planning Officers a more prominent and strategic position within councils would positively influence the outcomes of planning and support good growth and a balanced recovery.

Conclusion

We need recovery post-COVID-19, but not at any cost. Planning needs to be positive i.e. facilitate health and wellbeing, social equity and climate mitigation; not just growth at any cost. For this reason, we need a shift towards 'outcome-focused' planning that is rooted in sustainable development.

The desired outcomes listed in this paper under Place, Connections and Governance, can all be linked back to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Planning has a key role to play in health and wellbeing (SDG 3), economic growth (SDG 8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (SDG 9), reduced inequalities (SDG 10), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), climate action (SDG 13), peace, justice and strong institutions (SDG 16), and partnerships to achieve these goals (SDG 17).

Further Information

Further information on the RTPI's thoughts on how planning can contribute to calls for a sustainable, resilient and inclusive recovery from the current health and economic crisis can be found on our website, including our Research Paper: Plan the World We Need.

We would like to thank the members of the RTPI NI Policy and Research Forum who contributed to the ideas in this paper.

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

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The RTPI's Coronavirus hub is supporting members during the current pandemic www.rtpi.org.uk/news/coronavirus-hub/

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