

<i>Reference</i>	ICN20/Apr/0
<i>Date</i>	17 April 2020



ROYAL TOWN PLANNING INSTITU

INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS NETWORK

ICN Steering Group Meeting

17 April 2020, 12.00pm to 14.00pm

Remotely via Go To Meeting

1. Welcome, Introductions, Apologies for Absence

- In attendance: Deirdre Wells (Chair), John Lynch, Derek McKenzie, Chris Kendell, Jenny Divine (RTPI Network Manager), Max Tolley (RTPI England Policy Officer)
- Apologies from Helen Prangley

2. Update on ICN membership

- The Network currently has 801 active members
- 336 members have registered for the ICN email discussion forum

3. Minutes of the last meeting held on 20/11/2019 and matters arising

PAPER 1 Minutes 20/11/2019 ICN Steering Group Meeting

Planning Advisory Service

- DW commented that she has tracked the PAS work program and there is no longer any reference to a practice advice, so they seem to have moved onto other things.

Member list

- JD advised she has undertaken research into what other organisations have available, but needs to follow-up with colleagues to see if the RTPI could set something up.
- DW confirmed that this would help both clients and businesses and is still something that the network would like actioned.

Actions

- DW to write letter to PAS regarding a practice advice on consistency of LPA services
- JD to follow-up on possibility of creating a member list

4. Covid-19 impact on ICN members

Planners as key workers

- DW commented that forum members have mostly stopped talking about Covid-19. However, there was a comment on the forum recently asking why Council planners are viewed as 'key workers', but not private planners.
- JL commented that many Council officers are being re-allocated to frontline functions (e.g. finding space for mortuaries, emergency accommodation etc.). It would, therefore, be inappropriate to start casting aspersions on local authorities on this issue.
- DM agreed, commenting that some Councils are not making their planning function a priority, and have stopped validating applications and have redeployed staff.

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Actions by councils

- DM commented that, despite the above remark, there are councils (including Sefton Council) that are putting a lot of resources into planning in order to continue to deliver the service safely; recognising that planning will play a part in the recovery process (creating jobs and investment). Sefton planning officers are still carrying out site visits, but no face-to-face interactions, and are using google maps as best they can. However, these efforts will only work if consultants continue to lodge applications – we should be doing more to encourage this within the network.
- DW commented that in her experience there are authorities making different decisions – some advising applicants to hold back lodging applications as nothing will be actioned.
- CK commented that officers of East Riding Council are continuing to work from home, with decisions still coming out. He received a letter from Allerdale Council instructing the applicant to post the site notice (which is not usual practice) with no explanation. Only after querying did the Council advise this was due to Covid-19.
- DM commented that the biggest problem in asking applicants to put up site notices, is getting evidence that it has been done properly. Sefton are in the process of implementing measures to keep the planning system up and running and provide relief for applications which will tackle issues around Covid-19, but are awaiting confirmation from their barrister that these measures will not open them up to challenge.
- MT commented that once Sefton's actions have been confirmed, it would be good to include them in the RTPI's sharing experiences work.
- DW commented that Scotland has prepared legislation and there is pressure on England to do the same.
- DM commented that there are ways that councils can work around this and implement their own measures.

Impact on ICN Members

- DW commented that the impact varies if members are self-employed or directors of limited companies. If self-employed you cannot apply for the assistance until at least June – so there is no cash forthcoming. Although the assistance process is in place, there is no evidence of it working as yet.
- DM commented that if members have a premises they can get business rate relief. You can apply to Council for this straight away and receive a grant of between £10,000 to £20,000.
- DW commented that many developers have put all work on hold, and there are projects that are only half-way through, which cannot be completed without (for example) an ecological survey, which clients are unable to pay for at the moment. Authorities should assist by freezing applications or providing extensions of time.

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- DM agreed that this is an important point and commented that Sefton Council is granting permissions with much longer timeframes. He has noticed a steady decline in applications, but will need to see how the trend continues. Although many big developers have shut down, there are still a lot of people out there who are speculatively trying to get things through. There is a role for consultants to try and educate and reassure clients that shutting shop is not the best solution. The real problem is if the relevant authority isn't open for business.
- DW commented that there is a lot that is outside our control, but it is useful to share with the network the variety of experiences, and provide encouragement so that we can get things ready for the future.

Actions

- DM to spread work around the network about the business rate relief some members may have available to them.

5. 2020 ICN Conference

Date and Location

- JD confirmed that plans for the ICN Conference are still underway – with venue bookings confirmed for September. JD will continue to monitor the situation, suggesting that if events are still not permitted by September then we could arrange a virtual conference instead.
- DW commented that the conference is the highlight of the year, so if people can attend they will.
- JL commented that if there is any doubt about members' ability to attend in September then we could reschedule to Spring of next year rather than organising a virtual event – as meeting in person is what makes the conference a highlight.
- DM suggested that we continue to plan for September. If we are on the other side of Covid-19 by this point then it will be a good chance for members to come together and celebrate, but we should have a backup date for next year in case it becomes clear that events are still not feasible in September.

Action

- JD to contact venues to establish if we can organise a back-up date for spring next year.

Conference Programme

- DW advised the morning should include a Q&A with the planning inspectorate, a legal update, and a key note presentation on the topic of how clients can design for climate change and a sustainable future.
- DW commented that we should decide on the afternoon workshop sessions. They should be provocative and a bit out there to ensure members get a lot out of them.
- Workshop One – agreed the topic should be practical advice for sole practitioners.

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- DM commented that this workshop should be about lessons learned, pitfalls you can fall into, and some of the things you can do to avoid them. We should not repeat anything the RTPI already has out there.
- Workshop Two – agreed that this workshop should be based on enforcement. Agreed also that we should try and confirm Graham Gover as the speaker.
- DW suggested that the Chair of NAPE may also be able to assist.
- Workshop Three – Agreed that this workshop be based on neighbourhood planning.
- DM commented that many members are having to consider neighbourhood plans and development orders, and there have been many changes to the meaning and interpretation of how neighbourhood plans relate to local plans. This is therefore a significant topic.
- DW commented that there are members of the network we could call on to lead this workshop
- DW suggested that the final presentation should embrace the design agenda of delivering sustainable beauty.
- DM suggested that Richard Hawkes could be called upon to deliver this final presentation.

Sponsorship

- JD confirmed Planning Portal have agreed to sponsor this year, but still awaiting confirmation from Six Pump Court. 39 Essex Chambers has declined. Will also try Kings Chambers, as they have officers close to Chester.

Actions

- DW to contact environmental consultant she knows about delivering presentation on sustainable design
- DW to contact Graham Stallwood and ask that PINS be involved in the conference again this year.
- DW to contact Graham Gover and NAPE Chair about Workshop 2
- DW to contact network members about Workshop 3
- DM to contact Richard Hawkes about delivering final presentation of the Conference
- JD to contact Kings Chambers re sponsorship

6. Update re Steering Group liaison with PINS

- DW commented that she and JL received a message from Graham Stallwood advising that he wishes to keep in contact and arrange a virtual meeting with the ICN Steering Group.
- It was suggested that a member of the network outside of the Steering Group should also attend.
- JL commented that the Steering Group has not yet met Graham's counterpart and this could be a good opportunity. It may also be beneficial to have a series of meetings (rather than just one).

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- JL suggested that a pre-meeting be arranged before the meeting with PINS.

Actions

- DW to respond to Graham Stallwood's email and set up a meeting.

7. Starting your own private practice PAN update

- DW commented that this advice note is very relevant in the current circumstances – coping with stress, money etc.
- DW queried if there is anyone in the RTPI who is responsible for looking after the welfare of members

Actions

- DW to flesh out ideas for the practice advice note and forward to JD
- JD to follow-up DW's welfare query with RTPI membership team

8. Steering Group elections

- DW advised that she drafted and circulated to the Steering Group, a letter to network members to see what interest there is joining the Steering Group.
- JL commented that he has been in this role for five years and doesn't want to prevent someone new from taking the position.
- DW commented that the ICN SG is different from other RTPI networks and committees as they don't have regional reps, so shouldn't be treated in the same way.

Actions

- DW to send draft letter to JD with a view to circulating it to network members

9. AOB (due notice having been given)

Annual Report

- DW commented that the SG has never received feedback on the annual report after it has been considered at the Board meeting.

RTPI misquoting DW

- JL queried if there had been any further exchanges regarding the misquoting of DW and altering her words.
- DW explained there have been three instances, including the December Planner article and the more recent misquote surrounding the Covid-19 issue, which was very irritating. Although now corrected on the RTPI website, DW expressed concern that the misquoted statement has been included in the RTPI's correspondence to the Government.
- JD expressed regret and apologised for the misunderstanding which had occurred, advising that it had not been the RTPI's intention to misquote DW.

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Member Survey

- DW commented that it would be good to have a link to the survey information on the ICN webpage.

Actions

- JD to follow-up on annual report with a view to obtaining feedback
- JD to link the member survey results to the ICN webpage