

ANNUAL REPORT TO BOARD 2020:

RTPI INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS NETWORK

The Network has been an extremely valuable resource in a very difficult year. Unlike other Networks, it comprises planners who all habitually work individually either from home offices or from small local offices, who do not have the background support of professional colleagues, in house specialist advice, admin and IT support which are available to most in the Public sector or in large consultancies. Instead, to a large extent, we are used to relying on a virtual 'hive mind' to support each other or to managing in isolation. Some might also say we have the advantage of making our own rapid decisions without need for referral to others.

This means that we were better prepared than others in many respects to continue working without disruption – we had many established resilience techniques that were essential to managing through the pandemic.

Central to this has been our daily access to each other via our group email system, which has been established for more than 10 years and which is seen by most as a primary benefit of Membership. The system threatened to fail in early 2020 as changes in the multiple e-host systems used by members starting to conflict with the dedicated RTPI server. RTPI staff came up with a solution which in fact has enhanced the flexibility of use, and we transitioned seamlessly to a new system in August 2020 without disruption. Our thanks are due to all who helped.

The importance of this networking/self-help channel to members during 2020 cannot be over emphasised, covering exchanges on professional matters, working practices, grant aid and emotional support. A typical comment:

This network has been and is currently the best resource for COVID-19 specific information pertaining to carrying out our business, as well as the necessary quasi-office type of networking around the virtual coffee or cooler hub for picking up incidental CPD and specific problem solving. By far the best value for money for my membership fee.

A major disappointment was the cancellation of our Annual Conference. However, due to the huge expansion in online webinars, in particular by leading Planning Chambers, members report a broadening and increase in learning/CPD opportunities. Access to learning in (usually unaffordable) geographically distant locations was much enhanced, much valued and hopefully will continue.

The Board will be interested to hear how Covid has affected ICN members. A full survey of all 808 members has not been undertaken, but feedback to me has indicated the trends below.

Those set up as Directors of Limited Companies have received little or no government financial support, and a significant dip in income in the early part of the pandemic. All are continuing in business with changed expectations but confident of being able to continue to use their expertise.

Many self-employed consultants have had to take advantage of grant aid to offset reductions in business through spring to autumn.

Our client base is diverse, those advising major developers have seen a very cautious approach and mothballed projects, but others report a big upsurge in homeowner projects and those related to leisure and tourism, rural, business and town centre diversification. We have seen interest in extravagant new rural homes following the trend of embracing home/work away from urban centres by those able to do so.

Possibly as a result of greater surveillance through homeworking /local walking, complaints by the public have led to much increased enforcement activity in some locations, and ICN members are extremely busy with responses.

Neighbourhood and Local Plan work stumbled initially, but has since recovered, albeit with less satisfactory (in our experience) online events and Examinations.

Experience of interfaces with LPAs have also been varied. Tasks which would previously have been easy within a shared office, such as internal consultations, have suffered major delays. Validation has almost universally slowed – again possibly because of the inability for a quick word with managers. Successful transitions to officer homeworking have taken place where active management exists, but huge delays are being experienced elsewhere, and are likely to result in many appeals. It is difficult to relay to clients desperate to revive the economy why this is happening, and complaints are increasing. Informal contacts with our LPA colleagues suggest that many are struggling to make up lost ground.

Members report continued dissatisfaction with the Appeals system – in particular the recorded increase in dismissal rates of numerous smaller developments, which are viewed as unduly negative decisions, as well as delays in starts and decisions – which impact on clients' business planning and planned delivery. The ICN has established discussion routes with senior PINS staff and will continue to engage wherever possible to bring forward improvements.

Members have had lengthy discussions on the interpretation of the numerous changes introduced to Development Orders and other legislation during the year, and many participated in responding to consultation on the White Paper in October via both RTPI regional events and other networks. Our clients generally have been confused by press items on putative changes, and we have done all we can to clarify those matters that concern them. An example is policy advice on Affordable Housing delivery – should one advise that the threshold of 10 as in the current NPPF will remain, expect it to alter to 50 as in the White Paper (with increased CIL) or be triggered by a single unit as currently in many Development Plans? As always, the uncertainty created has inhibited investment. Again we have found webinars from leading Chambers have been helpful in rapid learning.

On a positive note, we have found the level of innovative thinking during 2020 necessitated by the pandemic (in addition to the urgent need for housing and economic delivery and improving environmental outcomes) has been stimulating. Working closely with clients places us in a position of influence where we can encourage creative thinking without the delays

inherent in production of lengthy policy documents, and this is one of the joys in our professional life.

We have also found time to refresh our Steering Group membership via an invitation to all and assessment of written submissions, bidding goodbye and thankyou to two members and welcoming three new. Our Network Coordinator Jenny Divine has been a huge help and always accessible.

In summary, ICN members have remained dedicated to their professional purpose, extremely self- motivated and creative and - through support for each other - have adapted to meet an environment changing rapidly on many fronts.

***Deirdre Wells Dip TP MRTPI
Chair of ICN Steering Group
January 2021***