

THE LEGACY OF COVID-19

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A lot has happened for businesses in the past month, on a global scale. It is no different here at Planning Insight.

The team had its last day in the office on 16th March, where we packed our bags and headed home for the foreseeable. Within a week, the entire country was in almost complete lock down, following the announcement from the Prime Minister, on the evening of 23rd March.

The day after the lockdown a letter from the Chief Planning Officer for England, Steve Quartermain, emphasised the need for councils to “provide the best service possible in these stretching times and prioritise decision-making, to ensure the planning system continues to function” – whilst also utilising technology where possible¹.

Some Councils have responded well. The London Borough of Waltham Forest held the first partially remote planning committee on the 30th March. At the meeting Managing Director, Peter Higginbottom, represented a client in securing consent for a 34-unit housing scheme. Whilst, The London Borough of Hounslow issued 87 decisions in the first week of lockdown, a high for the past five weeks².

Local Authorities and the Police and Crime Panels (Coronavirus), (Flexibility of Local Authority and Police and Crime Panel Meetings), (England and Wales) Regulations 2020, were introduced on 4th April allowing fully remote meetings³. A number of Council’s have held meetings in the past few weeks, although some are yet to hold any.

The Planning Insight team have successfully managed pre-application meetings with several councils, and have further meetings lined up with Barking and Croydon over the coming weeks. It is likely that such engagement will remain this way for a period after lockdown is eased.

With Councils operating as best they can during these times, doing their utmost to keep things moving, attention is turning to what will happen after lockdown and when the crisis has passed. An immediate concern for many, is the expiry of planning permissions. Lawyers have written a letter to the Secretary of State, setting out options including; through legislation or guidance – to grant automatic extensions or extensions of time⁴. While some may argue that the expiry of permissions will hamper important economic activity after the lockdown, we would question whether the reasons for stalled development will still be resolved.

There are also a number of discussions about what the world will look like in the future for the planning and property industries. The significant fiscal support from the government has certainly kept company's solvent, for now, but the removal of support will impact on a number of markets – both directly and indirectly. The commercial property sectors are facing pressure from existing challenges, such as; flexible office space. It has been reported that Workspace Group have rent collection rates of only circa 50%⁵.

Conversely, the residential market in terms of rental payments appears strong⁶. With pressure on the co-working model, the co-living model – with high quality communal spaces and facilities – could thrive.

Much like after the 2008/2009 financial crash, office-to-residential permitted development was introduced. We expect to see a further expansion of permitted development. Retail-to-residential permitted development may be amended, to allow larger schemes and more units. Whilst temporary changes to other use classes could become permanent.

The Crisis is likely to be an end for much of the high street. It is therefore important we ensure that town centres reinvent themselves to better serve their communities. It's our hope that Councils will support independent retailers, more community uses and quality housing. Permitted development can play its part in giving the market confidence, but delivering quality is critical.

Like the rest of the planning system, our team continue to work on existing projects whilst also advising and sourcing opportunities for our clients. The property and development landscapes are likely to change and creating a pipeline of projects will be crucial in delivering growth – both for developers, and the country as a whole.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/875045/Chief_Planners_Newsletter_-_March_2020.pdf

² http://planning.hounslow.gov.uk/planning_lists_main.aspx

³ <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2020/392/contents/made>

⁴ <https://www.theplanner.co.uk/news/lawyers-outline-measures-to-address-permission-expiry-deadlines>

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