

Planning for the future



In recent weeks, the planning system and the property world has adapted relatively quickly to the new world we are living in with coronavirus. New legislation was brought in swiftly that enables planning committee meetings to be held remotely for the first time. Changes to permitted development rights have provided some flexibility for pubs and restaurants to deliver takeaways. Developers are adapting to operating construction sites in a socially distanced world. Much work still needs to be done, for example the Planning Inspectorate has not yet resolved how to progress planning inquiries and hearings remotely, although some site visits have been held remotely on written representation appeals.

Many further challenges lie ahead and further changes will perhaps be needed to adapt to a medium term which is a half-way house of not full lockdown but also not back to our previous normality. If we can dream to the future, and coronavirus “being defeated”, what are the likely impacts and changes that may be brought about as a result of coronavirus and how will this impact on the planning, development and property world? Here are my thoughts, looking into the crystal ball but no doubt you can foresee many others. I’d be delighted to hear people’s thoughts.

Many industries and professions have adapted very well and quickly to working from home. In my profession, the multi-party meetings with clients, sometimes with many miles travelled, have been replaced by Microsoft Teams or Zoom calls, apps I hadn’t heard of a few months ago! While face-to-face meetings may remain the preference in some cases, the likelihood is that many hours and costs will be saved with far more meetings being held remotely.



Impact on office space and infrastructure

As we adapt to working at home, it may well be that people will no longer work the standard five days working in the office, which was changing for many already. More people will break up their week with more working from home. This will not only save on congestion but also mean employers can use their office space more flexibly and there may well be a reduction in demand for traditional office space. That said, it may be that the same floorplates are required but that, in the interests of health and safety, people demand more space in their working environment. A multitude of desks and screens side by side may be seen less and less.

In terms of infrastructure, will people feel safe going back to crammed public transport, particularly in our urban centres? Will this see a rise in more car usage, off-setting the gains in congestion I referred to above? The coming months could be the time for real debate, given the worldwide necessity to reduce carbon emissions, to force through alternative solutions to our transportation network.

A refreshed focus on housing delivery?

Another sector of the property industry that will need to change and adapt is the house building industry. The planning regime will adapt to create change. Lockdown under coronavirus has shown us even more starkly, than perhaps before, that whilst higher density housing enables you to create more homes using less land are those homes suitable? Premiums for outdoor space, particularly garden areas, will increase. These factors all need to be included within the wider debate about the quality of housing that is being built and what the planning system will require.

The planning system will also need to adapt if we are facing very tough economic times ahead. Governments look to development, and house building in particular, to drive economic growth. It could well be that we see planning relaxations to ensure planning permissions are granted more readily to see a rise in housing delivery. In my area of planning, might we see a recalibration of the NPPF's tilted balance? The tilted balance, or presumption in favour of sustainable development, has been "levelled up" recently with appeal decisions and the Courts reducing the effectiveness of the presumption. Do we need to see policy or legislative changes to encourage more development?

Repercussions for retail

Perhaps the retail sector has seen the greatest changes over the shortest time. Far more food is being delivered as the supermarkets seek to increase their delivery capabilities. People are becoming used to not accessing physical shops. When we can access shops again, at least initially, this will be in a socially distanced setting. This may well impact retail unit design going forward. The concept of the retail-dominated high street was already struggling badly in many parts of the country. Recent events cannot have helped. With a fair number of retailers struggling before this crisis there may simply be less retailers around, certainly until new entrants enter the market in better economic times.

Distribution and logistics has been seen to be key in recent weeks. In the future this is only likely to increase. Apart from the clamour to be able to deal with such outbreaks more effectively in the future, changes to shopping habits and changes to supply lines, even more so in a post Brexit world, are likely to see warehousing and logistics as a growth area.

As we adapt to a world that changes by the day many new challenges lie ahead for the property industry but, as the industry has shown recently and before, such a vibrant industry can adapt surprisingly quickly when required.



How we can help

Our planning legal services simplify complex regulations and guide you through every stage of the planning process with confidence. If you need planning advice, please contact the [planning team](#).