

London Assembly Planning and Regeneration Committee – 14 July 2020

Transcript of Agenda Item 10 – The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Local Planning Authorities

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Let us now get on to item 10, the main order of business. This discussion is about the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on local planning authorities. Can I welcome our guests? Those are Bethany Cullen, Head of Development Management at the London Borough of Camden; Peter Eversden, Chairman of the London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies; Victoria Hills, Chief Executive at the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI); and James Fennell, Chief Executive of Lichfields. Welcome to the meeting.

If I can start with the very first question of this session to Victoria Hills, can I ask how you expect planning approvals in London to be impacted by this crisis? For example, is there any evidence that there might be significant delays to approvals?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to come and speak today. It is great to have the opportunity to talk about planning at such a key time in this global pandemic.

At the RTPI, we have been keeping a very close eye on what is going on across the planning sector, both in the public and in the private sector. One thing that we have noticed is that planning cannot be accused of standing still. Planning has moved very quickly at a local level to address the changing circumstances, but also at national level there have been changes in legislation to enable some of those changed practices to happen. We have seen, rather than sit back and down tools, planning has worked very rapidly at a local level to keep pace with keeping the system going.

Clearly, there have been some national changes in legislation - primary legislation - which are absolutely ground-breaking to enable planning Committees to operate virtually. If you had started at the beginning of the year with that prediction, you may not have thought that that would be possible, but that literally happened in a matter of weeks. The legislation was there, and it enabled decisions to be made quickly.

We have seen an increased use in delegations for chief planning officers. Members of the Committee may be familiar with our campaign for chief planning officers, who have a key role at the top table within local government, being able to join dots, working collaboratively across the authority to ensure that we get maximum impact and benefits from some of these major planning schemes.

We have seen planning has been able to pivot very quickly through the adaptability and the resilience of our members. We know this through a survey we undertook in March and April [2020]. We heard from 1,000 of them and they gave us some really good examples within London but also nationally. I know today we are talking about London where we have moved at pace in Waltham Forest, Hackney, whom you have here today, Redbridge, Ealing, Haringey, Tower Hamlets and many other local authorities. Some of them were better prepared. If you look at Tower Hamlets, it had already moved all of its case systems digitally back in January [2020], and this meant they were able to move to a virtual operation.

We have been incredibly impressed with the adaptability and the ability of planning to keep up with pace and transform very quickly to ensure that the process of planning and everything that goes with that in the development sector does not dry up and that we keep the system going.

There has been a lot of change to practices and I am sure we will come on to some of that, but we have certainly noticed that planning has looked pretty solid during this period of time. The resilience of planners to respond to these extraordinary circumstances has been impressive. No one can say planning has sat still during this period. There are of course challenges and I am sure you will get onto some of those, but there is an opportunity to restate the importance of planning and address some of the issues that have come out, not least inequality.

We think there is there is an opportunity for a place-based recovery, a green industrial revolution, prioritising health and spatial wellbeing, and accelerating zero carbon. If planning can move that quickly during a pandemic to keep the system moving, now is the time to continue investing in that opportunity to help us recover from this pandemic and build a better future. We just launched our campaign, *Plan the World We Need*, and that sets out the approach that we think is needed now to move forward.

I can continue talking, Chair, but you will have to stop me if you want me to shut up.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): No, that is fine. You have covered the question extremely well. You have been quite optimistic about the changes that have taken place, but do you think there are further changes or flexibilities that are required in addition to those changes that you have praised?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Yes. We have applauded the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and the changes that it has made to enable things to carry on moving forward. We have lobbied heavily for extensions and planning permissions. It has done that now, albeit a little bit slower than perhaps Scotland was able to get that through, but that certainty now is there.

We think that is just the start. There is an opportunity to invest seriously in digital innovation that will support so many of the objectives, engaging authentically with communities. Many London boroughs are well placed and ahead of the pack, if you like, not just in London but in the United Kingdom (UK), but there is a disparity here. We have had a 40% cut in local authority planning department budgets over the last 10 years. This cannot continue.

Now is the opportunity to invest in that planning resource that is very much needed not just to deliver the green recovery but to address some of these social spatial inequalities that have come to the fore during this current pandemic. We have been making the case for resourcing and we have been making the case for investment in digital, but we also need to have a really clear strategy from the Government in terms of what it wants to do with planning. There is an uncertainty that is currently hovering over us. Is it a white paper? Is it a discussion paper? What is it that is coming out next week?

We need to harness the power of planning. We need to invest in this opportunity to deliver on addressing social inequality, deliver on zero carbon and deliver on the green recovery, the green industrial revolution we think is there to take, but we need to move that conversation forward quickly. What we do not want to see at this particular moment in time, is a major overhaul of the planning system that we feel will take many years to upstream and get right in the consultation and engagement that would have to happen. What I hear consistently from local authorities, from investors, from developers and from landowners is that the last thing anybody wants at this particular moment in time is a major overhaul of the planning system that provides greater uncertainty. We need to get behind the system we have now, we need to invest in it, and we need to work toward planning the world we need.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you. Assembly Member Devenish, would you like to ask the next question?

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you very much, Chair. Can I just agree with everything that has just been said? Planning is so important. There is one word that was missing. It is all about creating jobs. We need to have more jobs. I am very keen that we keep on pushing the planning that we need in London.

My question is to the boroughs. Are your councils experiencing or expecting delays in processing applications and how do you plan to address these, please? I think Bethany is going to answer that.

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): Thank you very much.

We have not so far experienced significant delays in processing of applications during this time. As a borough, we were well placed to adapt to the challenge of dealing with the pandemic. We already had officers remote working some of the time and we also moved to electronic working and processing of applications some time ago. When we went into lockdown, there was very little that we needed to adjust in order to continue to process applications at the same speed that we were doing in the office.

The biggest challenge for us was around our committee and getting that up and running. Once the legislation was in place, we moved forward with that quite quickly. The very clear message we had from the members at Camden was that, although they were keen to see us continue to process applications as quickly as possible and to support the recovery and support the economy by determining applications, they did not want to do so at the expense of either engagement or the level of scrutiny and transparency in the determination of applications that we have at the moment. Everything has been very much about replicating what we would normally do. We have so far had four planning committees, which we have held remotely, which means we have continued to determine applications, including strategic applications, throughout this period and will continue to do so.

Probably the biggest challenge for us in terms of getting through the numbers has been resources, more than technology or adapting processes. That, like for all other planning authorities, is because our staffing levels have been squeezed over the years. It has been challenging for some time and certainly over this period when we have had to face the fact that we have staff who are juggling childcare with doing their day jobs and also in the early part of the lockdown period more staff illness. It is trying to get through that with fewer people to do it in less time, but generally we have held up quite well. The number of decisions has remained pretty steady. The number of applications coming in has dropped off slightly and so that has assisted to a degree.

There is one thing we have been focusing on over the last month or so. When the lockdown happened, we decided that at that point members of the general public did not need to - and probably did not want to - be engaged on preapplication discussions on large strategic applications and so at that point we did pause things slightly. Once the relaxations happened and we have been approaching a new normal, we are realising that we are not going to be able to hold public events for some time and have recommenced work on engaging with communities on preapplication discussions. That is the start of a long journey for us. We are trying to recreate what we achieve in a public meeting to understand how communities feel about very large-scale development proposals in their areas. It is a really challenging thing to get that same feedback from them.

One of the positives that has come out of this is, as Victoria highlighted, we have shown ourselves to be a very resilient profession. One thing I have really enjoyed, I guess, over the last few months is the fact that everyone is open to experimentation and trying things and seeing what works. Rather than planning for six months to a year to make a big change in how we operate, we are just getting on and doing things quite quickly. This is a

really interesting time for us, and we could see some really big and positive changes to how the profession operates, both in terms of processing of applications and in terms of engagement with communities.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you very much. Moving on to Lichfields, what has been the experience, please, for you in engaging with the planning system in London during the crisis?

James Fennell (Chief Executive, Lichfields): Thank you. Our experience has been very positive in the circumstances. We anticipated at the start of lockdown that there would be some delays and that was a cause of concern to clients. There have been some delays, but those delays have been nowhere near as great as we thought they might be at the beginning. For example, what we might have expected to have gone to a committee in April [2020] may have been delayed to May or June and, in the circumstances, I too think the response has been very good indeed.

In terms of the development management mechanics, if you like, we found that applications are continuing to get validated. That is the key. We have found that all the authorities we have dealt with in London are doing pre-apps and doing them very effectively. If anything, we think there might be an improvement in pre-apps, possibly because there is slightly less work to do and also it has made meetings easier to convene.

One area of concern at the beginning was the ability to post site notices, which is something that was concerning many of the boroughs, but that has either been passed over to us to do on behalf of the clients and evidence that or enforcement officers or other officers have done it in the usual way.

Our experience is that the London boroughs have been very proactive and very positive at a time of stress and need. Whilst there have been some delays, as I say, those delays are manageable.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you very much. Back to you, Chair.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Assembly Member Gavron, would you like to ask the next question?

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you, Chair. My question is to Peter Eversden. Hello, Peter. With the introduction of virtual planning meetings and the introduction of online engagement methods being brought into planning, how do you think this has impacted on the ability of Londoners to have their voices heard?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): We were very concerned about that as soon as we read the regulations, and so we compiled six principles that we felt every local authority would have to achieve and adhere to. We sent those to the MHCLG and to London Councils for endorsement and then we asked the boroughs if they would commit to those principles. We had an amazingly good response.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): That is good to hear.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): We then asked all our 116 members to monitor what happened in each of the early online meetings. We also had our trustees and London Plan team looking at their own boroughs because they all represent a particular society. Some of them were looking at two or even three boroughs because of the stupid way that the division between boroughs is carried out, like the A5 dividing towns and communities completely.

We had a lot of feedback. When we got that feedback, we then looked at it against the six principles that we had issued. We found that the extending of delegated powers, which is one of our concerns, was not

happening. Where it was happening, we were very pleased to see that local authorities once a week indicated to the communities which decisions would be made under delegated powers and gave the communities the opportunity to ask their ward councillors to intervene and to bring something to the full committee if it was felt that the intended officer decision was not in line with the local plan and national and London Plan. That was not a problem.

The conduct of the meetings was a bit of an issue early on. We found that barring objectors from speaking was an issue. Some of the boroughs were prepared to read out in very flat voices whatever an objector wished to say and that was not working well. Croydon and Westminster started doing that, but then they decided that it was not a good thing. They had a lot of pressure.

Our other problem was too few councillors present. Using Microsoft Teams with four windows early on in the game, there were sometimes only three councillors, whereas a committee had previously had 10. We were very concerned about that. We urged the local authorities to do something about that. The numbers have increased. Also, you could not see the councillors. You could not determine that they were still there and had heard what was said.

Another problem was that they were asked to vote sequentially and, if there were eight or nine of them, by the time they got to the last one, we felt they might have been influenced by what an earlier person had said on party, friendship or other basis. We wanted them to continue to vote by raising hands. That is beginning to come in.

Lastly, the way in which the meetings were conducted has improved tremendously. The Richmond website was excellent. It gave a full indication of how things would run. The Brent website had a full equalities assessment of how this was going to impact people who were hard to reach and what they would do about it.

We were able to then write to all of the local authorities and say, "these are good practices, and these are issues." Again, we had a very good response from them. We feel that it is working so well. People, instead of having to trek in the rain halfway across a borough to a civic centre, are now online with these meetings. They are all much more aware of what their councillors are doing and how the decisions are being made. It is something that everyone says, "My goodness, this must continue."

We have never had 40 or 50 people in the Chamber and here you are. You are observing. You are being very disciplined in the way in which you use the time. That was really good.

The information on the websites has to improve still for most boroughs. That is a serious gap. You have to go through so many treks to find the agenda of the next meeting and so on. We had a suggested model for how websites of local authorities should look, and we issued it as a suggestion, and it has really come back very positively. A lot of them are now making it simpler to get through to all of the details required.

The final thing was estate regeneration. We sought that estate regeneration ballots and so on should not be abandoned. We have had very few responses on that and a lot of silence.

Overall, we are very pleased that we felt we were able to influence what was happening and to communicate the best to everybody. There seemed to be no hesitation in some local authorities in accepting criticism and adopting better practices. It is working so well. We had two Zoom conferences with all of their members. We had up to 60 of them on at a time telling us what was working and what was not. We now feel on top of it all.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): It is so heartening to hear what you are saying. It is really interesting. Well done to all of you for making it happen and for giving the feedback. When you said that some of the

objectors who would have been in the meeting had their statements read out, have the boroughs that were doing that now allowed them to speak themselves?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Yes, they all seem to have now allowed it because there is nothing better than someone pouring out their emotions or their arguments rather than it coming across in a very flat manner. Also, if someone is a participant, they are often asked by the chair of the committee if there are any more questions, they would like to ask the applicant. That opens up a far better dialogue and is more satisfying for people who feel the decision is being made on a sound basis.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Have you come across any boroughs that have said, "residents and stakeholders are allowed to come in on the consultation and so why should they be present at the meetings?"

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): No, but we have not found an increase in preapplication consultancy, which we have been seeking for the last couple of years. A lot of that happened at MIPIIM [International Property Conference] and was not brought back and explained. Some of it was happening in negotiations between a case officer and an applicant to the point where we felt that sometimes the case officer had little option but to approve because otherwise the applicant would say, "You have had all this money and time of us to sort everything out and so there can be nothing left to object to." If the community did not know anything about that dialogue, then it was felt to be unfair.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): I have one last thing. I know that a huge proportion are delegated these days. I do sometimes wonder on what criteria they are delegated as opposed to being heard in committee. I do wonder whether the right range of people who might be affected by an application are really told about it or whether it is left to them to read a bit of paper flopping about on a lamppost.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): A lot of the things that are delegated are delegated because they are within the guidelines that the boroughs have published to do with rear extensions, any building within a garden, upward extensions with dormer windows and so on. A lot of the areas are covered by article 4 directions and there are listed buildings that determine what views have to be protected. A lot of it is done on a fair basis.

It is just that it is felt that the case officer has not taken everything into consideration, then we want the communities advised that a decision is about to be made and on what basis it will be made so that they have the opportunity to say, "No, we would like the full planning committee to consider that because the case officer has failed to consider the following."

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): How are they supposed to know about that? Only through the website?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): No. The boroughs that are doing it well issue every Friday a notification to all people on the statement of community involvement registered as amenity resident and civil civic groups. That is the method that works well. Otherwise, yes, you are right. They would have to find it out and that is not always easy, but we are trying to help the boroughs improve their websites for those who do not publish them.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): I understand. Thank you.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you, Assembly Member Gavron. Peter Eversden, it is a shame that it took a pandemic to increase the participation, but it sounds quite positive.

Navin Shah AM: Thank you, Chair. Yes, good morning. My question is to all four of our guests. It is about delegation schemes. Councils have the option to increase delegation to help progress applications during the crisis. To your knowledge, are any local planning authorities in London using increased delegation powers and are there any risks with this approach?

Can we start with Victoria? I believe the RTPI has conducted a survey of both private and public sector practitioners, which has come out overwhelmingly in support of this in terms of increasing delegation powers to officers, which is an expected outcome. Would you like to say more about this from your experience of the survey and what you think about it?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Thank you very much for the question, Assembly Member Shah. It is nice to see you.

My starting point to answer this question is that the vast majority of decisions, as we have heard from Peter, are all about very straightforward applications that relate to whether something is in conformity with a local plan. On behalf of a professional body that puts probity and ethics as one of our core competencies for membership, I have every faith that chief planning officers who have delegated authority to take decisions on matters of planning are not just competent and able to do so but very experienced and doing so in accordance with their professional code of conduct. Where we have seen some authorities increase that level of delegation, initially it was just on a temporary basis for helping to get through whilst the arrangements for committees were being set up, but in other areas it has stuck around longer.

We think that if a planner and a chief planning officer are professionally qualified, they are subject to that code of conduct, they are subject to the code of property and they are taking decisions in accordance with a local plan that has had upstream intensive engagement with the community over a number of years to get to a position of certainty. We have found that that is a position we would support.

However, clearly, where you get into major applications that are sensitive and that see a lot of opinions and discussion with the local community, rightly so, they need to come through the democratic process that is a planning committee. We have made this point very clear in our previous campaign work on permitted development, for example, where there is no conversation with the community because there is no opportunity.

You have asked for very specific examples. If I may, I will not take the time now by listing out, but we can come back to you with some detail not just in London but outside. However, what I would say is that with the opportunity for streamlining and having increased delegation for non-contentious applications that are in accordance with a local plan that has already had intensive upstream engagement with the community, then we can see no reason why this could not help if it frees up capacity in the planning committees to get involved with the more strategic applications and those ones that perhaps need a bit more time considering important subjects, like delivering on climate action, net zero, affordable housing, etc.

Our experience has been a positive one, but we do appreciate that there are mixed views on this. As somebody who is running the professional body for chartered planners, I would say that chartered planners are well positioned at a chief planning officer level to take decisions, small, medium and large, if they are in accordance with the local plan, that local plan has already been extensively engaged and it is taken in a professional way. Notwithstanding some of the comments we were just hearing from Peter there, I would say that our members have the highest level of probity in Western Europe if not beyond. It is a high bar and we take professional competencies extremely seriously. We have a whole process associated with that.

That would be my starting point, but I am more than happy to get some more detailed examples back to you, Assembly Member Shah, if that would help.

Navin Shah AM: Thank you for a very comprehensive response. My concern is that whilst we have absolutely 100% faith in the capacity and professionalism of town planners, the question is whether you are in a danger, particularly with controversial applications, of shutting out democracy. This is the ability of local communities and stakeholders to have their say. This is a big issue. I can see why there could be a move towards increasing delegation during the crisis that we have.

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Yes. At this particular moment in time, more so than ever, communities want to be engaged in the future destiny of the environments they are living in, not least because the way that they live locally has changed very significantly in the last four months or so. People are walking around, cycling around and seeing their community in different ways. They want that public participation.

We have been very clear in our recently launched campaign, *Plan the World We Need*, that putting community engagement at the heart of that is key. We are absolutely not advocating to take those sensitive or contentious applications away. In fact, we are saying quite the opposite. Go too far down the delegation and permitted development route at your peril.

We have four red lines and I would just like to take the opportunity to say what they are so that we are clear. Our red lines relate to any delegation or any changes to the planning system.

Our red lines are, one, you must be able to deliver on authentic engagement. This is a huge opportunity to broaden out that engagement. We have heard it from Peter. There have been some teething problems at the start but think about what we could do with some real investment in digital technology consistently across the London boroughs. I know the Greater London Authority (GLA) is doing some fabulous work on plan-tech and open access data and we are staying very close to that. There is a potential there for London to be a real market leader in this.

Number two is design quality. We hear a lot of rhetoric about the need for good design quality and we now need to see that baked in genuinely through design guides and through requirements. Where there have been changes to legislation and statutory instruments recently for things to get built quicker, how can we be sure that there is going to be the design quality that we need? I am happy to take further questions on that.

Number three is infrastructure. By that I am not just talking about hard engineering. I am talking about communities being able to see the benefits that development brings with it to improve that infrastructure, whether it is green infrastructure, access to parks, access to schools, access to health, etc.

Number four is delivering on net zero and that is really important.

Those four red lines are not things that can always be dealt with quickly under delegation or through permitted development. They absolutely need to come through the democratic process, and we are really clear on that with planning committees.

My final point would be, because of this digital way that we are working, there is an opportunity to broaden the diversity of those planning committees and indeed the diversity of councillors because, if you are not required to come and sit in a council chamber in the evenings - and we hear stories of planning committees that can go on very late into the night - and if you could do that from the comfort of your own home when you may have some caring responsibilities, then it may be more attractive for you to think about putting

yourself forward to have an active role in your local community, to be a councillor and to get on that planning committee.

We can see some benefits here. We can see benefits of delegation but absolutely in a proportionate approach that frees up capacity for planning committees to deal with those really important matters that I just set out.

Navin Shah AM: OK. Thank you. Can I bring in Bethany Cullen? From your perspective in Camden, have you sought to increase delegation schemes or are you planning to? What is your take on such a situation, please?

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): Thank you. We have not expanded our scheme of delegation and we do not intend to. It was very important to our members right from the outset of the pandemic that we would not be taking away from the role of the planning committee and agreeing more applications at officer level. In Camden at the moment, we strike the right balance between ensuring we have that political oversight of the largest and most controversial schemes and still with a significant proportion of applications coming to officer level, which we need to be able to do because otherwise our planning committee would be so bogged down with applications and it would take so long to get through the process.

We have a member panel that reviews applications that have objections to them but would not normally go to planning committee. It reviews applications on a weekly basis. The list is sent to them on a Friday and they will let us know on the Monday whether or not there are any applications they feel should be referred to the committee. That allows us as an authority to make sure that we probably have more political oversight of many of our applications because the vast majority of them will go through that member panel and have the opportunity for a call-in.

For me, the scheme of delegation is not the biggest threat to the democratic process. As Victoria has hinted at, the extension of permitted development rights (PDRs) is probably far more worrying in terms of the ability of local communities to be engaged and to shape their areas. The community involvement in the planning process, both at preapplication and application, is so important in terms of getting schemes that respond to the community's needs. Yes, for me, the scheme of delegation is not the most significant issue.

Navin Shah AM: Thank you. Before I bring in Peter, can I ask James Fennell to talk about his view on this particular topic? I believe somewhere in the document I see that you mentioned Merton and Newham, which I believe have increased their delegation powers. Do you want to talk about it from your perspective as to what you think is the right balance in terms of delegation?

James Fennell (Chief Executive, Lichfields): Yes. Thank you. We were anticipating that delegated powers would be extended but our experience is that the applications we were expecting to go to the committee are going to the committee and the smaller applications we deal with are being dealt with via delegated powers in the usual way. Overall, we are not seeing much change.

There is one example I can bring to your attention because it is quite an extreme one. I am an independent member of the planning decisions committee at the London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC). There, the powers of the Coronavirus Act do not apply or there are reasons why we cannot have virtual planning committees and so they have had to invoke urgency powers to vest all decision-making powers with the chair of the planning decisions committee and the committee has essentially become an advisory board to the chair.

It is rather an extreme example and it has come through an oversight by the Government and we are hoping that there might have been an amendment in the [House of] Lords yesterday to resolve the situation, but I

raise it now because all the committee members, including me, are not happy with that. It was first raised by the councillors on the committee - but we are in full support of them - that we really need to have our right to vote. The chair is not happy, either. Whilst in this COVID-19 situation, a time of need, we can be pragmatic, we would like for the committee to operate in the usual way for all the reasons that have been discussed. We want powers vested and the right to vote vested in the committee members rather than that responsibility being taken by the chair.

It is a rather extreme example and Old Oak [and Park Royal Development Corporation] (OPDC) is probably the same. It was an oversight on the part of the Government and is hopefully something that can be resolved and resolved soon.

Navin Shah AM: Thank you. Peter, what are your views on delegated powers and what you have heard as well? Would you like to comment on that?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Yes, thank you, Assembly Member Shah. I have already commented fully that we have no concerns. We hoped it would not happen in an excessive way and it has not. I was very encouraged by what Bethany Cullen said about her borough, but the intent to decide under delegation is being looked at closely. I would encourage more boroughs to notify not just the councillors but the affected communities so that call-in is appropriate, but we do not really have any concerns.

What we do have, perhaps to add to what I said earlier, are concerns about the risk of delegated decisions being applied to minor alterations. We were very encouraged to see that two boroughs, Enfield and Haringey, had forced minor alterations to the full committee because they were not minor at all. The definition is very vague if they are affecting the design, as one of them did. It increased the heights of buildings, which is hardly a minor alteration, and another tried to escape from approved obligations, again not minor at all. We are very pleased that boroughs are catching those and not letting them go through under delegated powers.

The other thing is that we want the applications to be as good as they can be. The Landscape Institute changed its rules last September [2019] on verified views. All these applications we have seen for years with verified views taken with a 28-millimetre lens so that a tall bulky building looks quite tiny have now been banned, but some of them are still coming through that way. They are supposed to be taken with a 50-millimetre lens so that the planning officers and the communities can really know what is going to happen.

Navin Shah AM: Thank you. If we can move on to my next question, we have heard nothing but absolutely solid approval of the use of technology, but then the question is whether this prevents certain residents who are less able to participate in the planning system now and how this varies across different demographics. For example, have you seen new groups of people participating now that things have moved on to a virtual environment and a virtual mode of meetings? Can we start with Bethany? From your experience, does this help people of certain demographics and discriminate against others?

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): It is a really interesting question and perhaps we do not know the answer fully to it at the moment. I guess the suspicion is that the use of more technology potentially widens the number of people who may engage with the planning process. People who perhaps did not turn up to public events to hear about preapplication discussions may feel quite happy to go online and have a look at a proposal and participate in an online event, but then there are those people who would attend a public event and who may be less comfortable or less familiar with using technology.

Certainly, in terms of our applications, we are consulting in exactly the same way as we always have done. We use site notices and press notices, which means that those people who perhaps are not as able to use the technology can still find out about applications.

We also have an e-alert system, which means you can sign up and find out about any applications that come forward in your area. We introduced that a number of years ago, and that has broadened the type of people and the range of people who perhaps get involved in planning. We do have a lot of local groups in Camden that are really engaged with the process and we will hear from on most applications. What is interesting is that over time it has widened out and we are getting new people involved and hearing different views. That is really important.

Going forward, certainly in terms of preapplications, we have done one virtual development management forum now. That has worked for us. A developer presents their scheme to a community and as a borough we are there to facilitate. We do not offer an opinion about the scheme, but we are there to listen so that we can hear first-hand from residents what they think.

In a public meeting, you sense a lot not just from what people are saying but how they are saying it, the tone of their voice, the body language and the number of people in the room. When you are doing that in a virtual setting and the questions are coming in written down online rather than being spoken out and they have to be read by a chair, it can often be quite difficult to capture the feeling of local communities. That is something we need to experiment with further to see if there is a better way perhaps of fully understanding how people feel about schemes.

We do need to be aware that not everyone is either able or willing to participate online and so it is great that we move forward and use new technology and see if we can use that to engage more widely, but we also need to make sure that we are not at risk of digital exclusion and that we are thinking about how we include those people who cannot participate in that way.

There are lots of challenges for us, but it is exciting times and I hope that going forward we will see that more people are involved in the planning process rather than fewer.

Navin Shah AM: Yes. I just wonder whether the technology has got more of the younger generation involved because social media and everything comes so easily. Therefore, that could be one very positive outcome of the technology.

I wonder whether, both from a council or local authority level as well as from the perspective of the RTPI, there is any way you can monitor the kind of participation you have in terms of not only age groups but even ethnicity in that respect. It is something worth looking at, in my view. Victoria, do you want to say anything from your experience on this particular aspect?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Yes, on behalf of the RTPI, I would start answering that question by looking at who was engaging in the planning process pre-pandemic. That varies from borough to borough and around the country. We cover the devolved nations as well and so we get a good feel for the sorts of groups that were engaging in the process pre-pandemic. What the pandemic has done is to force digital engagement, which provides an opportunity to broaden out the engagement with other people in addition to those who would have already been engaged. For example, they are on the radar because they are signed up through the statement of community involvement.

Lots of people who were not on the radar and who perhaps were not engaged at all in planning have now seen lots more talk of planning and are aware of planning. A couple of weeks ago, it was in the national media

daily. It was mentioned earlier. They are thinking about jobs and they are thinking about homes and they are thinking about their future and they are thinking about what the future holds for them post-pandemic. There is an opportunity to engage some of those people in planning through digital.

Where we will get to is a blended approach that seeks to engage everybody because, clearly, it does not suit everybody to be engaged in a digital way and we all have ways of processing and engaging with information. Some of us are introverts and some of us are extroverts and we all have different ways of processing information. We need that blended approach going forward. What the pandemic has given us is this opportunity now to explore what that blended approach looks like with the in-person engagement.

I have stood and done plenty of in-person sessions on a Saturday afternoon engaging around a display and that is, as Bethany says, the time when you really get under the bonnet of what is going on in a local area. You would not get that perhaps in a digital exhibition, but that does not suit everybody because anybody perhaps with a busy working life or caring life may not have the time to drop in physically at a meeting on a Saturday afternoon or a Wednesday evening. There is an opportunity to ensure that we broaden the engagement across a greater diversity of groups.

At the RTPI we have made a personal pledge that the planning profession needs to be as representative as the communities it represents. That means involving everybody in the conversation about homes, about jobs, about energy and about tackling climate change. Has everybody been engaged in a representative way to date? If the demographics of the planning profession are anything to go by, I would say, no, we are not as representative as the communities we represent, but my goodness we are putting in an action plan now to ensure that we address that. We are moving forward with that blended approach and taking the tech tools that are there.

I loved Peter's reference to the lens size because it is really important. There are future opportunities with authentic visualisation, not just a virtual reality but augmented reality, and being able to bring that augmented reality into your living room and think, "Hang on a moment. That is how the building is going to look and feel next door or over the road." You would be able to walk around it and be able to visualise permissions. It is a really important opportunity. We have said very clearly to the Government, "You have to help local authorities invest in this. They have done a fantastic job with the limited resources they have, but we really need to open access to this data now. We need to make it available to everybody so that they can be engaged."

There is no silver bullet here, but we should not go back to exactly how we were before. We take the best of what we have learned, we blend it in the future going forward and we invest in it. That is what we need to do.

Navin Shah AM: Yes. I am mindful about time. For the next question, if everyone can write in your response, we would be very much grateful. The question is simply sweeping up the conversation we have had and is asking you what more can be done to modify the approach for greater and better community engagement during the crisis. Thank you, Chair.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you very much, Assembly Member Shah. Of course, if any of the guests do want to write to us afterwards with any other points that they would like to have raised and perhaps did not have the opportunity, we would welcome that. Assembly Member Devenish, if you could ask the next question?

Tony Devenish AM: I was going to do the same, Chair. I am mindful of time and it is a very important question that perhaps we could reflect and ask for detailed written answers on, particularly from Peter but also from the rest.

What do you think developers and councils could do to ensure that people with less access to technology can contribute? I am referring to a lot of my residents who are my mother's generation and who remember World War Two but also to other people. Not everybody younger has an iPhone. It is a bit of a myth that everybody younger has an iPhone. How can we use less access to technology to contribute to planning consultation as the process shifts to relying more on virtual engagement?

Perhaps if the Chair wants, we could ask for written answers on that. We have covered quite a lot of it during this discussion, but I would love a detailed written answer that we can reflect on, please, and I will be quiet.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): That is so uncharacteristic of you, Assembly Member Devenish.

Tony Devenish AM: Is that OK, Peter, for you to write to us?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Yes, certainly. The curiosity during the lockdown of people at home about what is going on has improved the situation because our societies are getting residents saying to them, "We have not heard anything. What happened?" "There is a new method." "Teach me. Show me how. I have never done this stuff, but I am locked at home with people who do know how to use a thing called a computer. Let me get online." These are some of the people who used to go to the library in order to have a technician put them online and it was the only chance they had. Now of course that has not been available, but they will go back to that. They will learn from their peers and their family in their homes. More and more people will become capable.

I did say earlier that the Brent equalities assessment was very important, and I hope other boroughs do that very well.

Tony Devenish AM: Thank you. Thank you, Chair.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you, Assembly Member Devenish. I must admit I have never talked to my family so much as since the pandemic. That is one of the downsides of the pandemic. Anyway, Assembly Member Gavron, would you like to ask the next question, please?

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Yes. To be fair, Chair, a great amount of this question has been answered because it is about what kind of improvements have arisen. Some of the improvements that we have been hearing about, would people like to see them carried through into the longer term? We have heard, and there have been many examples of people's experiences of, improvements in the way people are.

I do recognise the digital divide and I am not quite as optimistic as Peter. COVID-19 has really highlighted the digital divide in a very big way. I hope Peter is right and that we can somehow reach out and that more and more people can be included.

The best way of dealing with this question, Chair, is just briefly to ask each member of the panel to give just one example of what they would like to take forward in the long term that they have learned from this whole experience of planning being more virtual and having online engagement.

I just want to add one myself. The other day, I was asked to put in an objection to an application around the corner, a very large application, and it was on the last day. I could not go around the site. It was all boarded up. I would have loved to have been able to go home and have augmented reality and someone explain what it was all going to look like and so on. It would be so much better because it is hard for people to find the plans and so on. That is what I would like to see.

Can we go around the panel? Give us just one thing you would like to take forward. Should we start with Victoria?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Thank you, Assembly Member Gavron. It is very nice to see you. In addition to that investment in digital, which I have made the point about very clearly, my one thing out of all of this is the recognition of the continued investment in planning to deliver on the green recovery and the societal outcomes that we now need to move forward and for local authorities to not lose their nerve and make cuts in planning departments, but to work and press the Government for support for resource planning now to deliver the sustainable green recovery that will be so important to tackle the health inequalities and so many of the other challenges we have seen come to the fore as the bonnet has been lifted on some of these spatial inequalities within London. Invest in planning. Now is the time to do it.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Good answer. Thank you. Bethany?

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): I would like to see investment in planning as well, but I guess what has been really welcome from my perspective during this time is the early recognition of just how important planning is and how planning will be, in support and recovery, a vehicle to provide new jobs and new homes and a strong vehicle for addressing some of the significant issues of inequality that we have in the country.

Again, yes, it is about investment in planning, but I feel like the last few months have made us focus a lot more on that being driven by communities and on how to have effective community participation in planning. I would like to see some of the experimentation we have done so far continue and for us to think much further about how we can reach a wider audience and get people involved in shaping their futures.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you for that. James, would you like to make a point?

James Fennell (Chief Executive, Lichfields): I would. Thank you very much.

On a similar vein, planning has been a really easy target of criticism by the Government, going back to it being referred to as the 'drag anchor' in 2010, something that has annoyed me greatly ever since. We have a bit of that rhetoric again about dragging things back.

What COVID-19 has shown is how planners and planning has mobilised at a time of need. It has, to be honest with you, been absolutely fantastic. We are laughing and joking with officers again. We are all working hard. We all have a common purpose. Planning cannot be criticised in the way that it continues to be because it is an integral part of the answer.

I would like the Government and all of us to grab hold of that positivity and take it forward as we embark on planning reform, which I suspect we are going to talk about in a minute. That is my takeaway.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you. Peter?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): It is very difficult to pick out one thing, but the thing that I like out of these online meetings is that our members are beginning to understand more about planning because they are seeing it happen. Many more people are watching it. Also, they are looking at their councillors and they are then thinking, "I am going to take something up with them afterwards about this," or, "Why did anyone vote for that person?" The understanding between communities and their representatives is going to be improved by this online process because it has awakened people's

attention to how it all works, what these planners are all about and how they can help them to plan better locally to get what they want rather than what the developers push at them.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you. Can I ask one follow-up to that? Are the meetings that you have experienced webcast as the GLA's are? You can go back and watch a GLA meeting. Can you go back and watch a planning committee if you are not watching it in real time?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): About half of them are putting them on YouTube and so they are there.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Would you advise that for all of them?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): I do not quite know which is the best way of doing it. YouTube has become popular and younger people would be more likely to dial in and have a look. Also, you can skip all the bits that you could not be bothered to sit through if you saw it originally because that particular application is not in your patch. People could be much more efficient in their use of time by catching up afterwards, but they would see what happened in the area they live in.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Can I ask? Sorry for my ignorance. Does that mean the other half are done in some other technical method or are they not done at all and you cannot go back and watch them?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): I would have to go back to our last Zoom conference and pull out bits and answer that later.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): It is a good question and one of the things you might put to the other planning committees and councils.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Yes.

Nicky Gavron AM (Deputy Chair): Thank you very much. Thank you, panel.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you for that, Assembly Member Gavron. In response to Peter Eversden as to why they voted for this person, often they did not know they had and so that is that.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): I would like to say that too often people have never known who they are voting for. Now they are beginning to see who it is, how they behave, how they link with their colleagues and what their whole attitude is to the professionalism they should be carrying forward.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Yes. It is rather frightening if you are an elected member. Can I ask one thing? Perhaps you did touch on it and I may have missed it. Have site visits been possible over this period and how difficult have those been to organise?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Is that a question to me?

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Yes, Peter. Let us start with you. Somebody might want to come in. I do not know. Perhaps Bethany.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): We have offered to do site visits where local authorities would like us to take photographs and to make it clear what we think are the local

protected views or things to be taken into consideration or where there are known deficiencies in the infrastructure like how you cannot get an appointment in a doctor's surgery in under 10 weeks and things like that. A site visit is important from the point of view of the visual impact of a development, but communities will include not only photographs of things they think must go right but their views on how that development would impact locally.

The move towards VU.CITY three-dimensional (3D) modelling is so important and the City of London is doing it very well. It means that the councillors and the officers have the right technology to look at these things and decide whether they are going to be acceptable.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Does anybody else have experience of these site visits during the lockdown?

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): I can come in there. We were not able to do site visits during lockdown and that did present a challenge for all our officers because it is an important element of assessing applications. We have sought to rely on technology, and it is amazing what you can do with street view and aerial photos. Applicants and objectors have been really good at sending in photographs to help us better understand sites. We have also done live walkarounds via Zoom so that people can see the site on a video.

We have started going back onto sites very recently, but it is very challenging. It is about protecting not just staff but our residents as well and we would not want to be putting anyone at risk. We do have to do a risk assessment for each site visit that is happening to make sure that it is appropriate for the officers to attend, but we are doing them only where they are essential.

The biggest struggle has been with listed buildings because that is where we really do need to be able to walk around and feel the fabric. It has been particularly challenging for our planners who work in that specialist area.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): OK. There are some controversial planning applications going through at the moment. I am thinking particularly of Transport for London's (TfL) plan to build on station car parks at Stanmore, Canons Park, Rayners Lane, Cockfosters and High Barnet. These are very controversial applications. Do you think the boroughs have the capacity to engage with local communities to respond to these applications at the moment?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): I could come in and say that we have seen a lot of innovation across the boroughs and lots of different approaches have been used. We have just heard from Bethany about Zoom and some videoconferencing. Of course, there is a lot of collateral out there already that exists. Some of it is photographs. Some of it will be through drone films. Some of it will be this augmented reality that Peter was alluding to. There is quite a good model building up of London already that can show very realistically what these applications mean for local residents and can give a much stronger level of engagement perhaps than people who were not so au fait with looking at plans or drawings or were always worrying about the accuracy of said drawings. We have seen a lot of innovation there. Whilst it has been challenging, we have not heard that this has been a big blocker to things moving forward. As things start to ease off a bit, there may well be opportunities to do some socially distanced site visits, but we would urge you to use the technology that is there. Actually, in the round, it may be more sustainable than everybody trooping off to a site and being driven around in a minibus looking at all of this in the old-fashioned way that planning committees would have operated if you could do it far more effectively via a digital platform. It is early days but let us learn from what is working. I am sure Peter and his colleagues will be keeping a very close eye as things progress.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Absolutely.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Chair, you mentioned TfL there. TfL is going to have to do a lot of development on its own land. It has put in an application to use the land all the way along from Chiswick Park Station to Acton Town Station with 20 blocks going up to 26 storeys. The concern there is whether we are going to get the kind of housing that we need or whether we are going to get the kind of housing that funds TfL's budget, which has been badly hit.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): That is probably for another meeting and you probably know my views on that. Let us move on. Assembly Member Qureshi, if you could ask the next two questions?

Murad Qureshi AM: Thank you, Chair. I am going to move the meeting into the whole area of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and section 106 payments. Can I begin by asking a question to our panellist from Lichfields, James Fennell? The Government proposed to make changes to allow deferrals of CIL payments for small and medium-sized developers and is encouraging local planning authorities also to allow deferment of section 106 payments. If these options are taken up, do you think it will make a significant difference to those developers, allowing them to possibly contribute by bringing new sites forward?

James Fennell (Chief Executive, Lichfields): Yes, it will make a significant difference to those who do take it up. I am aware in our business in London of two such examples, one in Camden, funnily enough. It will not necessarily be taken up as widely as the Government might think, but in the circumstances that it is, it could be very helpful, and it is welcomed by the development industry.

Murad Qureshi AM: OK. I hear that loud and clear. How are we defining what is a small or medium-sized developer as opposed to one of the big players? Is that an issue of contention amongst developers?

James Fennell (Chief Executive, Lichfields): We had not anticipated that it would be limited to small and medium-scale enterprises. A lot of our clients had hoped that it would be more widely available, but clearly that is how the Government has placed it and you have to meet its criteria. That is why it will be of more limited applicability than it might otherwise have been if it appeared across the market as a whole.

In terms of the section 106 side of things, the Government there is relying on the fact that variations can be negotiated between local planning authorities and developers and that sense will prevail in that respect where flexibility is needed. Looking at it from a developer's perspective, local planning authorities normally are amenable to such discussions but Bethany [Cullen] may be in a better position to give the local planning authority response than me.

We are at a time of great need and personally I do not think that there is a divide between the public and private sectors on these things. There is a strong desire to work together for the most part. Of course, there are exceptions but there is a strong desire to work together to try to find solutions and understand the problems, whatever they might be. That is one of the key lessons that is coming out of COVID-19 that it is not them and us. We are all in this together and, where the Government is allowing flexibility, we need to work together to see how we can use those flexibilities in the best way for all concerned, including developers, including the local planning authority and including the wider community.

Murad Qureshi AM: Thank you, James, and undoubtedly, whatever size the developers are, it will help their cashflows on construction, on the sites or what have you. As you have drawn attention, we need to hear the boroughs' perspective. Bethany Cullen, from Camden, would you consider allowing these deferrals as suggested by Government? What impact would deferrals on section 106 agreements have on your council budgets and your ability to deliver affordable housing?

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): As James has suggested, the flexibility has probably always been there. Boroughs work on a common-sense basis. If we have schemes stalling, for whatever reason, we will want to work with the developer to try to resolve that. It is important for us for schemes to come forward.

We have had limited requests, I would say, to have increased flexibility around section 106 payments, as a result of COVID-19. Where they are coming forward, we are looking at them on a case by case basis. I know some boroughs have potentially been trying to set out a clear position on what they will do. That they will apply this flexibility, or they will not do this. You have to look at each case on its own merits, of the individual circumstances of the scheme, why it is stalls, if there are other things that can be done to help it move forward.

Section 106 payments on the CIL are the payments that are needed to support the scheme. They deliver the infrastructure that is needed for the borough to support growth and so any reduction or delays in those payments has significant impact in terms of us moving forward potentially with delivery of the affordable housing fund or for infrastructure improvements to the public realm. They are important things and they do need to come forward and so I would not want to take a position where I would say it is absolutely fine for those payments to be delayed and we would accept it on every scheme because that certainly would not be the case, but we as a borough open to applying flexibility where it is needed in order to facilitate a scheme coming forward. That is probably all I have to say.

Murad Qureshi AM: It is important to emphasise the section 106 payments, for example. Most contributors are 50% of affordable housing in England in 2018/19 and so it is critical. Can you tell me whether, in the case of Camden, when you had these section 106 agreements do you already have a schedule of payments where you say when the section 106 is required, at the beginning of a development, in the middle or is it paid monthly? I do not know.

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): With the majority of the section 106 payments they will be payable upon implementation. That is to minimise the risks to the local authority that the payments do not come forward until after the developer has benefited from implementing the permission and having an extant permission because, once you implement, that mission is alive and the developer benefits from the value of that and so, yes, we take a very strong position on this. We ask for the money up front and I am sure a lot of other boroughs do the same.

Murad Qureshi AM: With CIL payments, you mentioned the ones that you may get to help in the public realm. There are others, for example, Crossrail 1 and 2, my understanding is it is the boroughs that bring that money in and then move it to the Mayor [Sadiq Khan]. Is that done on an annual basis or is that quarterly? Again, it is like managing the finances with a cash flow during COVID-19 and I do not know if you know what happens there as well.

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): It is probably not a question I am able to answer but I can certainly find out for you and come back to you on.

Murad Qureshi AM: OK. We have the different perspectives there, Chair, on how these deferred payments work to the advantage of all developers, and both our panels are saying it is touch and go, depends on the case and they are willing to work with the developers and the boroughs to see what is best for the developments.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Absolutely. Thank you very much for that questioning Assembly Member Qureshi. Can I move on to the last topic in this section, which is given the recent

announcement made during the Prime Minister's [The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP] *build, build, build* speech, what do you expect to be the impact on London or your borough of the newly proposed PDRs? One, two, three, go. Who wants to start? Mr Eversden?

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): The Government commissioned a study of the impact of permitted development conversion of office blocks to hovels. That study, even though the Government commissioned it, has never been published and the author issued a huge protest last week. We fully support that, because I have photographs and there is a lot of evidence of these office blocks being converted to something that is totally unfit for human habitation.

Also, that has to be understood by the Government because it has to do impact assessments on its policies, and it has not been doing that. Limited development takes away the right of a local authority and its communities to decide what will happen where and extending it to useful assets where a retail shop that everyone has depended upon in lockdown becomes a tattoo parlour tomorrow morning because the owner wishes and nothing can stop it. This is madness. I do not understand why the Government thinks that the top down dictating is a reasonable thing to do when the essence with planning is that the planners in the boroughs, in the local authorities, have to decide what will happen where in conjunction with their communities and make that successful.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Mr Fennell, what would your -- yes, we will go with Mr Fennell first.

James Fennell (Chief Executive, Lichfields): Thank you, Chair. The language used by the Prime Minister talked about - he used these words or similar - "faster, better, greener." It is difficult to argue with that but the key thing with PDRs is: what is the price you pay as a result of going faster or by apparently simplifying the system? Often it is the office-to-residential that is the one where we have the benefit in the aftermath. The interesting thing about office-to-residential is that that was something that was pushed by the Treasury, not by the MHCLG. When it pushed that initiative, Treasury knew that there would be consequences, but it was determined to deliver more new homes. The result is that some of those homes are OK but a lot of them are not.

Therefore, in simplifying the system, there have been consequences, and so in thinking through what the Government announced last week, it is what those consequences are likely to be. I would say, Chair, that the devil is in the detail and there is, some very carefully scripted words that we used last week. For example, the freeing up of retail to be used for café and offices, which is one thing that the Prime Minister mentioned, there the Government clearly - the words it used - is seeking to take away the prior approval process. That prior approval process, among other things, seeks to protect residential amenity. If that is taken away, is the licensing process or some other process going to fall into line to protect residential amenity impacts from odours or noise?

In relation to the wider use of commercial buildings, the Prime Minister mentioned the flexibilities and he refers to without the need for planning permission and so that suggests to me that there is going to be a prior approval process inserted into that process. Therefore, the principle of development will be allowed subject to prior approval of certain technical matters.

When you get to, for example, the ability to increase the height of self-contained flats, you get into a situation where there is going to be a prior approval process that is going to occur and there are eight technical issues that are required to be overcome before prior approval will be granted, or up to eight. What you get is a situation whereby: why is that any simpler than submitting a planning application? It may be that I am getting too old but there is a simplicity to submitting a planning application. We all know where we stand and I do wonder that if the planning system is becoming so complex and so difficult for people to engage with it - it is

difficult as a consultant to engage with it - so difficult that, even though the *raison d'être* for making these changes is one of simplifying the planning system, I personally think that the Government is doing the opposite of what it is seeking to do. I would be interested in hearing Bethany and Victoria's views because it may be that my old-fashioned way of doing things is not the right way and what the Government is proposing is the right thing.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): We shall hear from them. Victoria Hills, can you comment?

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): Yes, thank you, Chair. Our position has been stated very clearly in our campaign *Plan the World We Need*: if you are going to build, build, build you need to plan, plan, plan.

I mentioned some redlines earlier that we have stated very clearly, which we will continue to state. They relate to engagement. They relate to design quality. They relate to infrastructure and they relate to delivering on carbon net zero. If you are introducing a quicker permitted development route that can deliver on those four really important topics what is not to like? Our worry is that it will not deliver on those and - perhaps as James [Fennell] has alluded to - it might overcomplicate the whole thing that you end up disenfranchising communities even more, because they are not even able to be involved in a process of these prior approvals that may create more bureaucracy and the devil will be in the detail.

We have been campaigning for an improved standard of design quality. We are delighted that when it made the announcement last week the Government included the requirement for - wait for it - windows in homes. Is that not a wonderful thing? You will now be able to have some fresh light in your new home. Perhaps I do not need to say anymore but has it got to that level where we need to celebrate that success? Celebrate it we did because we have been campaigning for it. That can only be a wonderful thing that some of these people who - joking apart - four months of lockdown, some of them are still locked down because of inequalities, health issues, living in permitted development homes without windows. We really need to have a serious think about this.

On delivering on placed based recovery and delivering a green industrial revolution, there is an opportunity here to deliver net zero, and delivering priorities for health, healthy and sustainable travel, and delivering an acceleration towards zero carbon, these are the priorities that we need to plan, plan, plan for. We need to understand how permitted development is going to deliver on those priorities because they are not just our priorities, as the professional planning body and our 25,500 members, they are community priorities and living in quality spaces with access to infrastructure, green parks, access to windows, an ability to engage in the future, those are really important that we bake that in post-pandemic.

It is not just communities. Developers get that too and so we need to have a serious look at whether permitted development can deliver that. My concern is that we get even more tied up in knots and the resources will not be there in local authorities to make that simpler. Invest in planning, now is the time to take a serious look at championing the power of planning, as you can see the evidence from my RTPI banner behind me.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Yes.

Victoria Hills (Chief Executive, Royal Town Planning Institute): It is really serious because it is not about nice-to-haves. This is about tackling health inequalities and access to decent quality homes and jobs. I will finish on that point but thank you for being so generous with the time.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): You are very welcome. Finally, Ms Cullen.

Bethany Cullen (Head of Development Management, London Borough of Camden): Thanks very much. James [Fennell], I do agree with you. Simplification of the planning system involves making it more complicated than it used to be. When I first started in the profession, I probably could have told you all the different PDRs that exist. Quite honestly, today I would have to look something up to be able to tell you, and the reality of the situation is that many applicants do not rely on the PDRs even when they do exist. They make a full planning application because it is probably easier to navigate your way through that than it is through the general permitted development order.

As you said, the devil is in the detail and we are quite used to fairly dramatic statements from the Government only to find that, when the PDRs come out, there are so many caveats in them that the scope of their application has been reduced significantly. Where they do apply, from my perspective some of the more recent PDRs that have come in have prior approval processes and they seem to assess so many of the planning issues that we would normally look at, you wonder what the benefit is of them. There is none for us. As far as I can tell, we do all the work, but we do not get to add value that we would normally through schemes and so for us certainly smaller-scale schemes. We have a small-size policy. We would get affordable housing contributions on schemes for under 10 units.

Any PDRs that come in that allow for those types of applications to go through this process will be at the expense of money that would come forward for affordable housing and for many of the other benefits that we secure through the planning process, including things like employment and training packages in schemes. It is disappointing. It misses the point of what planning is about and what we can deliver. I do not think it delivers better or fast enough because the process itself through the PDRs is normally the same length of time as a full application.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you very much.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Could I give one more comment?

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Yes, Peter Eversden.

Peter Eversden (Chairman, London Forum of Amenity and Civic Societies): Conversion of a high street outlet to a home, it is not generally realised that when you walk along the pavement about half of the pavement are glass blocks and they are the light down into the basement that that shop had, which extends right under the pavement. I have photographs where those have been converted into a home and the wheelie bins and other paraphernalia of the householder are parked on those glass blocks because they own that land. It destroys the appearance of the rest of the shopping parade and it is something that we ought not to be allowing at all. We have a big problem to regenerate our high street and we must not let anything step in the way of the boroughs doing it in the right way.

Andrew Boff AM (Chair): Thank you very much. Thank you to everybody. You have been astonishingly well behaved, even you Peter Eversden, including Members, and so I can thank you all for your contributions. It has been genuinely fascinating, and it has been good because it has contained some optimism about the future of planning in London. Thank you to all our guests for your contributions.