Resilience & Renewal: How is COVID-19 changing public planning?
Public Practice is a not-for-profit social enterprise with a mission to improve the quality and equality of everyday places by building the public sector’s capacity for proactive planning.
How is COVID-19 changing public planning?

Over the last two months we have witnessed local government’s critical role in the response to COVID-19 through Public Practice’s network of Associates and Authorities. We have seen local authorities show extraordinary agility, resourcefulness and commitment to react to the immediate public health crisis. At the same time, it has become clear that local government - and public planning in particular - will need to play an increasingly important role to tackle the wider social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

“Pick a public service, any service, and COVID-19 will change it. It impacts on everything from an individual to a societal level. COVID-19 has reprogrammed the world as we know it.”

The situation for local government is changing rapidly - and all we know for sure is that it won’t go back to being the same. There are plenty of predictions about what COVID-19 might mean over the longer term, but many of these simply reinforce or restate existing opinions. Instead, we wanted to understand how COVID-19 is changing public planning and how we could best support the vital work of local authorities by listening to the people who know best.

We asked individuals we have worked with across local government to answer a few pressing questions: How is it affecting the work of planning, housing and regeneration departments right now? How could it change how we plan in the future? And what might that mean for the way authorities are resourced? We heard from 26 people through 15 online interviews and 11 survey responses, representing 22 authorities. This report summarises what we learned during a snapshot in time, in late April 2020. It does not claim to be comprehensive or make conclusive recommendations - it is simply a record of what we heard. The respondents are listed at the back, and quoted anonymously throughout.
“There is such an opportunity to learn from this period, and rethink what hasn’t worked as well as protect what’s been good. But there’s also a risk that as the world returns to a ‘new normal’ we miss these opportunities for change.”

Faced with change on an unprecedented scale, the decisions local authorities make now about working with or against these new circumstances will have long-lasting effects on the lives of the people who live and work in their areas, as well as their built environment. Authorities are asking themselves what should be restored to how it was before? What needs to be reinvented, whether by necessity or choice? And is there anything that is worth retaining from the lockdown period?

These decisions have significant implications for the job description of the public planner, even the purpose of public planning. Authorities are only at the beginning of a long and challenging process to tackle deep-seated inequalities rebuild the resilience of local communities and economies. But there is an opening here for local government to take a proactive role in leading the process of recovery and transformation. Public Practice is committed to supporting Authorities to develop the capacities and capabilities they will need for the task ahead.
RESPONSE & PRE-RECOVERY
How is COVID-19 changing public planning in the short-term?
1. Authorities are proving they can be agile, resourceful and collaborative.
2. Remote working has been adopted quickly, if unevenly.
3. Authorities are facing a significant loss of income, but planning fees are generally holding up so far.
4. Existing recruitment is progressing, but there is a temporary hold on advertising new posts.
5. Decisions are being delayed, more as a result of prioritisation than technical barriers.

RECOVERY & TRANSFORMATION
How might COVID-19 change public planning over the longer-term?
1. Local government is taking a more prominent role in society.
2. Austerity might be over, but the funding challenges will continue.
3. COVID-19 is restructuring the construction industry.
4. The public sector will need to proactively drive development.
5. Authorities are prioritising new cross-cutting approaches to support the most vulnerable.
6. High streets and town centres need support to find a purpose beyond retail.
7. Local plans will need to be reworked in response to demographic and economic changes.
8. Streets and open spaces need to adapt to shifts in travel patterns and the use of public realm.
9. COVID-19 is likely to recalibrate housing standards and densities.
10. Workspace could be more dispersed and localised.
11. Authorities need to reintegrate public health and public planning.
12. The recovery from COVID-19 could help build the resilience needed for the climate emergency.
CAPACITIES & CAPABILITIES
How might COVID-19 change the resourcing of public planning?
1. New challenges for Authorities will demand new ways of working, and new capacities and capabilities.
2. Authorities will need more flexible and collaborative models of resourcing and recruitment.
3. Local government needs more ways to rapidly share emerging knowledge and practice.
4. Now is the time for the public sector to draw on a wider pool of talent.
5. Authorities are looking for new ways of bringing spare capacity from the private sector into public service.
1. AUTHORITIES ARE PROVING THEY CAN BE AGILE, RESOURCEFUL AND COLLABORATIVE

The redeployment of officers within Authorities to support the front-line effort has generally been carried out on a voluntary basis until now, and has initially been oversubscribed. A large number of officers are willing to support the response remotely, but there is still a need for support with work on-the-ground, for example staffing community hubs, coordinating and packing food deliveries and deputising for social workers. More redeployment may be carried out on a non-voluntary basis in the future.

“My experience over the last month and a half has been one of absolute inspiration. People have adopted not only different ways of working but embraced totally different jobs. They have volunteered for frontline activities that put their own health at risk. They have progressed things in a matter of days or hours that would otherwise have taken months or years. And they have been inordinately flexible and committed in what are incredibly difficult circumstances.”
Planning Departments are putting forward some staff for redeployment to aid the frontline response, for example making calls to vulnerable tenants, but report that they remain at between 60%-100% capacity and continue to be extremely busy with existing workloads. Regeneration, Economic Development and some Housing Delivery teams are making the case for protecting staff from redeployment as these services will be critical for the recovery.

Authorities are already dedicating significant resources to business support, grant administration, and planning for economic recovery. One respondent described growing their capacity for business support from one officer to 25. Authorities have also been delivering new Health / Community / Response Hubs within days by drawing on existing in house project management and delivery skills.

“We used our delivery expertise to set up a Health Hub from a standing start on a Friday afternoon, to having a beta version going by the Tuesday night, and a full sustainable version by the end of the week.”

The speed and resourcefulness of the emergency response debunks common misconceptions that local government is slow, siloed and bureaucratic. Cross-departmental collaboration around the immediate response has given Authorities a sense of pride in how agile their organisation can be, and what it’s possible to achieve in short timescales.

“It’s been revelatory to see, when needs must, how quickly we’ve been able to respond and how adaptable we are as an organisation.”

Collaboration and mutual support between Authorities has also been strong, and contributed to a collective sense of purpose.

“Something to come out of the work we’ve done with London Councils is what a phenomenal resource Local Authorities are in this city, and how capable we can be in an emergency.”
2. REMOTE WORKING HAS BEEN ADOPTED QUICKLY IF UNEVENLY

Remote working practices have generally been adopted quickly and without significant impacts on work. Desk-based work on planning applications and policy is progressing more productively than pre-lockdown in some areas, with less time spent on travel or in meetings. A number of Authorities reported that they are determining applications more efficiently, and using the period to clear backlogs in their caseload.

Some technical issues were reported over the adoption of new technologies and platforms, remote collaboration with external partners, and the provision of hardware for home working, but generally IT departments have shown flexibility. Managers are typically using MS Teams, Zoom and WhatsApp to regularly touch base with staff, and provide emotional support to help people adapt to different circumstances.

Authorities are also needing to show flexibility to accommodate a diverse range of challenges faced by staff - from health concerns to the logistics of home working. The most common challenge has been combining home working with childcare and caring responsibilities. A large number of respondents identified this as a significant issue, particularly where staff have younger children.

“We’ve got a whole spectrum of staff now: some wanting to work at home, some wanting to come in to work but unable to, some with underlying health issues. Our workforce has been hugely segmented.”

Planning services are facing some specific challenges in adopting remote working, including carrying out public consultation, managing hard copies of documentation, design review, site visits, committee decision-making, enforcement, and making the duty-to-cooperate work, but few suggested these issues were insurmountable.

Authorities are already thinking through how they can retain and embed positive aspects of remote working, including paperless working and potential financial savings from reduced office space.
requirements. There is an acceptance amongst most Authorities that remote working and physical distancing will continue on and off in some form for the foreseeable future, so new ways of working will need to be established on a sustainable basis. No one expects things to go back to exactly how they were pre-COVID-19.

“In 10 days, we’ve undergone cultural change around remote working that might have otherwise taken 10 years.”

3. AUTHORITIES FACE A SIGNIFICANT LOSS OF INCOME, BUT PLANNING FEES ARE GENERALLY HOLDING UP SO FAR

A major issue for Authorities will be accounting for not only the additional costs of responding to COVID-19, but the loss of income. Authorities are seeing immediate reductions in income from parking services and rent from commercial properties, as well as council tax as many residents move onto universal credit. Over the medium-to-longer-term, major reductions in income are anticipated around business rates, property investments and delivery programmes, CIL and S106.

Income from planning fees “has not yet fallen off a cliff-edge”, with many developers using this period to progress with securing permissions rather than discharging conditions or getting on site. Some Authorities report slight increases of householder and prior approval applications, others report reductions in the numbers of smaller applications. Major applications generally appear to be holding up better.

“In fact, the current situation has prompted the owners of a big shopping centre to come to us with a major pre-application for mixed-use development.”

Over the medium-term planning fee income will be subject changes in the market, as well as government reform. Some Authorities are projecting a reduction in planning fee income of 35-45% over the next 6-12 months.
4. EXISTING RECRUITMENT IS PROGRESSING, BUT THERE IS A TEMPORARY HOLD ON ADVERTISING NEW POSTS
Decisionmaking on resourcing is being held back by uncertainty over the timescales of the lockdown and social distancing measures and the process of exiting from them, as well as the implications for council income and funding.

The majority of Authorities are completing existing recruitment exercises remotely (interviewing using video conferencing), and expect to continue to recruit to existing vacancies although with some delay. The majority of new starters are being onboarded remotely. Some Authorities are pushing back start dates until after lockdown where this is workable for candidates, or delaying recruitment altogether because of the challenges of onboarding and managing new starters remotely.

A minority of Authorities have imposed a recruitment freeze, although this is already beginning to thaw as it has become clear that the lockdown period is being extended and then gradually released. Some planning departments are holding posts vacant while they monitor fee income to see if they need to terminate agency posts or review overall staff numbers. If necessary, Authorities may consider shifting capacity from development management to planning policy or other functions rather than reducing their overall establishment.

Some HR departments are responding creatively to the way COVID-19 has changed people’s attitudes to work and disrupted the employment market, for example by introducing a scheme to ask whether staff would prefer to return to work on a part-time basis.

5. DECISIONS ARE BEING DELAYED, MORE AS A RESULT OF PRIORITISATION THAN TECHNICAL BARRIERS
Authorities are reporting delays of at least 2-3 months to non-essential decisionmaking at both a political and senior officer level. Many Authorities were already anticipating delays to decisions from the pre-election period leading up to the local and mayoral elections that were due to take place in May 2020. In these areas the impact of delays is likely to be more telling over the next few months.
Most Authorities reported making good progress with adopting remote decisionmaking powers, including virtual planning committee meetings and greater use of delegated decisions. New online formats appear to be reaching a larger number of people, and there were suggestions that Authorities should be looking to sustain these larger levels of engagement post-lockdown, rather than simply reverting to pre-COVID-19 methods. At the same time, concerns that online consultation is less accessible - particularly for communities with higher rates of digital exclusion - are leading some Authorities to delay decisions that could be subject to challenge. Measures to improve digital accessibility will be important if online approaches are to be maintained over the longer-term.

The vast majority of capital projects and physical regeneration work appears to be on hold and subject to 3-12 month delays due to a combination of challenges around public consultation, decision-making, constraints on construction, and uncertainty over budgets. Most Authorities expect Government and funding deadlines and targets to be pushed back, if this hasn’t already been confirmed. This is enabling them to be more strategic about dedicating resources to where they can most add value in the current climate, rather than prioritising hitting targets.
1. LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS TAKING A MORE PROMINENT ROLE IN SOCIETY

Authorities are generally expecting the Government to continue with a more “Keynesian” and interventionist approach, that is likely to result in a larger public sector with local government given a greater role.

“This crisis has exposed fragile social structures and unleashed a demand for public services that was previously suppressed. As a result the state will be called upon more than ever.”

In the eventuality of a slowdown or “freefall” in the housing market, Authorities expect to be given - or take on - a greater responsibility for housing delivery.

“The Government is realising that in an emergency situation they are reliant on Local Authorities as their delivery agents. We
expect to be inundated with further requests from Government to deliver new funding programmes.”

COVID-19 is also redefining local government’s relationship with civil society. Many Authorities have been working closely and successfully with established and emerging community and voluntary organisations, including mutual aid groups. As a result, some Authorities anticipate a greater role for the voluntary sector following the response-phase, particularly around social services, culture and leisure.

More broadly, trust appears to be rebuilding both ways between local government and communities. The Edelmann Trust Barometer shows a dramatic rise of trust in government over since January. Public recognition of key workers and public servants on the front-line of the response is encouraging Authorities to think differently about how they present themselves publicly.

“Over the couple of years before COVID-19 trust in public institutions had probably reached an all time low, but over the last few weeks there has been a radical shift in appreciation of public services.”

At the same time, there are some concerns that Local Government’s part in providing social care, supporting people on the shielding list and preventing people from ending up in the NHS system in the first place has not been recognised enough - and that this may be reflected in funding settlements from Government.

“Local Authorities have been the silent emergency service in all of this. Despite some attempts at trying to raise the profile of key workers, it’s been an NHS gig.”
2. AUSTERITY MIGHT BE OVER, BUT THE FUNDING CHALLENGES WILL CONTINUE

Authorities already face a significant shortfall in meeting the short-term costs of responding to COVID-19, despite previously unimaginable levels of public spending. Looking over the longer-term, there are even bigger questions in store. Authorities suggested the true social costs of the emergency will only become evident once the job retention scheme, Government grants, and rent and debt deferrals inevitably come to an end. This could result in an ‘economic crunch’ for Authorities with a long tail of higher costs around social care and the economy, as well as lower income, which it was suggested could change the shape of local government.

“Before this my department already had a 15% cut to deliver over the next three years. Now demand for all of our services is only going to increase. We expect to be spending more, but we’ll have less ability to raise the money.”

Services that have become increasingly reliant on generating their own income as a result of austerity are particularly exposed. For example, planning services used income generation to cover 37% of their total costs in 2010-11, but by 2017-18 it had risen to 54%. If planning fees fall as a result of changes in the market, this raises questions over how Authorities will fund not only development management but other planning services that will be critical for the recovery. It remains unclear how far Government will be willing to step in to bridge the gap, with Authorities citing mixed messages from hearing “whatever it takes” to being told that they will be expected to “share the burden”.

“Authorities are already reeling from 60 per cent cuts over the last 10 years, and it’s safe to say they are going to have to continue to do more with less.”
3. COVID-19 IS RESTRUCTURING THE CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY

Construction generally paused in April. Sites are now reopening, but the indications are that it could take 12-18 months for construction to get back up to speed given the challenges of social distancing guidelines, material supply chains and the market. Some identified a risk that the slowdown in the market will lead to fewer sites coming forward for development.

Authorities anticipate that the demand for affordable housing in London and the South East is unlikely to go away. If anything, the prominent role played by key workers in the response has led to calls for a new generation of ‘Homes for Heroes’. However, there will be other challenges around securing finance and the capacity of the construction sector.

It is also worth considering wider factors affecting housing demand and delivery, including the publication of lower 2018 population projections. Even before the impacts of COVID-19 and Brexit, these raise questions over the standard housing methodology and housing targets in Local Plans.

A major area of uncertainty is relations with development partners. Question-marks around the financing, viability, and deliverability of schemes involving private sector partners and registered providers are necessitating a pause in the majority of projects. While some Authorities expect partnership working to become more important than ever, others are considering postponing decisions over entering into partnerships and JVs.

Authorities cite examples of some developers asking for suspension of CIL and S106, and making the case for revisiting existing commitments. A number of Authorities are interested in sharing experiences of the pressures they are facing from the development industry to ensure they are negotiating on a consistent and fair basis.

“Viability will become a big issue post-COVID-19, as developers will be reopening whether their schemes are viable whether it’s true or not. We’ve only just away from the legacy of the same discussions that took place after the 2008 financial crisis.”
Authorities expect development partners and the finance and insurance markets to take a more risk averse approach, which could be particularly problematic for external investment in estate regeneration.

“Perversely, previous experience from the financial crash tells us that in these situations developers ramp up their profit margins and returns because of the increased risks. I expect the market to retreat to safety, which will see a juddering stop in some types of housing schemes.”

There are particular concerns that smaller contractors will be unable to ride out this period, further reducing the diversity of the construction market and leading to rising costs.

Conversely, the long-term picture for Authorities working on major 20-25 year regeneration projects remains relatively unchanged, as this scale of project is always likely to have to ride out recessions and different economic cycles. Some Authorities emphasised the importance of maintaining confidence in projects or places, and avoiding being overly diverted from longer-term plans.
4. THE PUBLIC SECTOR WILL NEED TO PROACTIVELY DRIVE DEVELOPMENT

Delays to Council-led housing schemes already in the pipeline are currently anticipated to be between 3-6 months, and flexibility over grant funding timescales will be essential. Where schemes are about to go into contract Councils are adding additional COVID-19 clauses allowing for two-stages of design then construction.

Some estate regeneration schemes that rely on decanting strategies are likely to face more significant delays due to the knock-on effects of other schemes not going ahead. Others rely on wider public sector investment in town centre regeneration or infrastructure which now may be jeopardised. Rents from commercial units in Council-led development are likely to be impacted, which will also challenge viability models and need new placemaking solutions.

In the context of an anticipated drop in private sector development, the public sector is expected to play an increasingly important role in providing projects to keep contractors going, and make the most of any spare capacity in the construction sector. Authorities are anticipating needing to ask for grant funding to keep delivery going if the market goes into recession and sales values drop. Government may need to re-look at the Public Works Loan Board, and consider giving out loans or grant funding to “recharge the development sector”.

Most Authorities anticipate an increasing onus on the public sector to deliver, and an acceleration of council-led housing across both social housing and income-generating tenures. Authorities are already looking to intervene and acquire newly built schemes and unbuilt consents from registered providers and developers, taking advantage of borrowing at 2% from the Public Works Loan Board for HRA-based purchases. They may also begin to take a more direct role in the delivery of non-residential development including employment uses.

“Broadly speaking, the longer and deeper the recession is, the greater the role Local Authorities are going to have to take on.”

5. AUTHORITIES ARE PRIORITISING NEW CROSS-CUTTING APPROACHES TO SUPPORT THE MOST VULNERABLE

The experience of directly contacting and supporting vulnerable people in partnership with NHS, other public services and the civic and voluntary sector is leading Authorities to plan a more joined-up approach to health and social care in the future. Although mainly outside the remit of planning, regeneration and development teams, a key priority for Authorities is helping residents who are most exposed as a result of COVID-19, for example through homelessness or unemployment. Related priorities include new projects around child poverty, social integration and community cohesion, particularly given the virus's disproportionate impact on BAME communities.
6. HIGH STREETS AND TOWN CENTRES NEED SUPPORT TO FIND A PURPOSE BEYOND RETAIL

Authorities have been monitoring the significant drop-off in economic activity during the lockdown period, and anticipate that economic development and regeneration will play critical roles in the recovery. Many Authorities were already facing challenges sustaining local high streets and town centres in the face of online retail and a reduction in footfall. COVID-19 is exacerbating these existing trends, and the impact on local economies is expected to be devastating. There are concerns around the ability of cafes, pubs, restaurants, and other culture, leisure and entertainment businesses to survive the lockdown period, particularly as they are likely to be some of the last businesses to reopen.

“COVID-19 has accelerated the shift to online retail - and it’s obviously now here to stay.”

Authorities are already directly supporting businesses and administering Government funding schemes, which in some cases is being delivered by redeploying staff internally to economic development teams. Business support, economic development and regeneration work around town centres is expected to increase significantly, and to be a political priority for any available funding. Activities mentioned included supporting businesses to transition to online, meanwhile uses, place-led regeneration strategies, public realm works, low-threshold business startup space, startup grants, and supporting high streets to diversify beyond retail by looking at alternatives including civic and residential uses.

“What is happening to a local high street is a barometer of what is happening with the local community. High streets are not just economic assets, they are also social and civic assets - and they are disproportionately important for deprived communities.”
7. LOCAL PLANS WILL NEED TO BE REWORKED IN RESPONSE TO DEMOGRAPHIC AND ECONOMIC CHANGES

Many Authorities expect to need to invest just as much, if not more, resources in progressing their Local Plans, and may redeploy staff to this area. In the short-term, the lockdown period has inevitably caused some delays to planmaking, particularly around surveying and gathering evidence, consultation and the duty to cooperate. Over the medium-term, Authorities at the earlier stages of producing their Local Plan expect at least some level of rethinking as a result of COVID-19.

Authorities cited emerging demographic trends which are likely to have been accelerated. For example, London’s population has been falling in every demographic group apart from overseas incomers. The combined impact of COVID-19 and Brexit may mean that London’s population has already peaked for the foreseeable future.

Similarly, the spatial economy of cities may change as agglomeration no longer seems so attractive, or even feasible. This may result in more dispersed and polycentric models of growth based around walkable neighbourhoods, with a stronger role for local centres.
8. STREETS AND OPEN SPACES NEED TO ADAPT TO SHIFTS IN TRAVEL PATTERNS AND THE USE OF PUBLIC REALM

The lockdown period has temporarily transformed travel patterns, and the way we use transport and the public realm. Authorities are exploring what the lasting implications might be for public transport, streets, parks and open spaces, and how they can be influenced. Public appreciation of the value of outdoor spaces for health and wellbeing appears to have grown, and Authorities expect to invest more in parks and open spaces. The likelihood of physical distancing continuing for the foreseeable future also means there will be an ongoing case for increasing the provision of public realm.

Overall demand for travel is likely to remain lower even after the lockdown period ends, but Authorities anticipate a significant and potentially lasting shift away from public transport towards other modes. Ambitious work is already underway to capture the benefits of recent increases in walking and cycling, as well as guard against a growth in car use. Measures include reprioritising road space by widening footways and rolling out segregated cycle lanes, establishing low traffic neighbourhoods, school streets and play streets, and introducing traffic filtering and car-free periods or zones. Authorities also highlighted the need for innovative approaches to coordinate changes to highways with utilities and other infrastructure.

9. COVID-19 IS LIKELY TO RECALIBRATE HOUSING STANDARDS AND DENSITIES

COVID-19 is bringing a renewed focus on housing standards and typologies. There are significant concerns that inadequate housing standards, particularly relating to overcrowding and a lack of private and shared amenity space, are placing the most vulnerable in society at higher risk from the virus, and that these inequalities have only been exacerbated by the extended lockdown period. Authorities expect greater levels of campaigning around housing standards, and in particular the shocking effects of office-to-residential permitted development rights. At the same time, there are concerns that the Government may be lobbied to consider further deregulation to stimulate housebuilding.
“Planning is not the enemy here. It should be even more obvious from the lockdown period that decent minimum housing sizes and quality outdoor amenity space is essential.”

There is mixed opinion about the wider and longer-term impacts COVID-19 might have on densities. One the one hand, some suggest that concerns about the spread of disease in lifts and densely occupied public realm, combined with the greater value placed on external amenity space and the possibilities of remote working may lead to a reduction in demand for high density housing in central locations. On the other hand, there is evidence that compact urban forms of development have greater benefits in terms of public health and tackling climate change. This policy debate continues to play out, but the net effect may be to ‘average out’ the difference in densities between central and suburban locations.
10. WORKSPACE COULD BE MORE DISPERSED AND LOCALISED
COVID-19 has exposed the lack of resilience of supply chains and logistics in the face of an emergency. Authorities expect an increased focus on the importance of industry in the city, and policy measures to encourage shorter supply chains and onshoring. Existing issues around a lack of industrial land supply, particularly in London, are anticipated to continue if not worsen.

The provision of office space is also expected to evolve in response to changing patterns of work. In the short-term, demand for office space is unlikely to fall significantly, as ongoing physical distancing will result in an inefficient use of space, potentially occupied in rotas. Over the longer-term, as businesses and employees become more used to flexible working arrangements, there could be a permanent shift towards a greater proportion of employees working from home or locally. This could shift some demand from large central office space towards smaller local provision.

11. AUTHORITIES NEED TO REINTEGRATE PUBLIC HEALTH AND PUBLIC PLANNING
A number of Authorities referenced the importance of tackling the stark health inequalities across communities exposed by COVID-19. Public health duties returned to local government in 2013, but some respondents suggested Authorities could go further to integrate their approaches to public health and public planning. There is increasing awareness of how the built environment affects health and wellbeing, including air quality, active lifestyles, obesity and mental health. It was suggested that Authorities should go beyond reactive measures to control the spread of the virus and use proactive planning to promote good underlying health.

“Health should be thought of as an asset not a cost.”

A greater emphasis on health and wellbeing through planning and design is likely to have implications for Local Plans, housing standards and design guidance.
12. THE RECOVERY FROM COVID-19 COULD HELP BUILD THE RESILIENCE NEEDED FOR THE CLIMATE EMERGENCY

Authorities cited local improvements in air quality and wider reductions in carbon emissions as positive side-effects of the lockdown period that should be continued and consolidated as far as possible, despite likely tensions with increasing car use.

Many Authorities identified a correlation between a shift in priorities to recover from COVID-19 and their priorities to tackle the climate emergency.

“After the 2008 financial crisis, the response was growth at any cost. Now it’s got to be sustainable growth.”

Officers discussed how the sense of urgency generated by COVID-19 could be translated into urgency to deliver on climate emergency declarations, and where there may be commonality between recovery plans and climate action plans. Potential areas of overlap include encouraging a shift towards sustainable travel and logistics, investing in retrofit programmes that boost employment and support local construction industries, and directing economic development funding towards growing a greener economy.

“COVID-19 seems likely to bring forward thinking about the climate emergency as this crisis only highlights the likelihood of another.”
Capacities & Capabilities: How might COVID-19 change the resourcing of public planning?

1. NEW CHALLENGES FOR AUTHORITIES WILL DEMAND NEW WAYS OF WORKING, AND NEW CAPACITIES

Authorities recognised that despite the likely financial constraints, there will be a need for additional expertise to help to realise the recovery and shape new post-COVID approaches for local places, communities and economies. The areas of expertise that Authorities consider to be most critical for the recovery are listed below in order of most frequently mentioned. A number of Authorities expressed an interest in recruiting practitioners with local knowledge and lived experience to develop a deeper understanding of how they can support those most affected by the pandemic. Public Practice will be recruiting a diverse range of practitioners across all of these areas for placements into local government.

— LOCAL ECONOMIES: Economic development, business support, skills brokerage and community wealth building, particularly bridging between socio-economic and physical regeneration.
— COMMUNITIES: Community engagement, participation and co-design, to continue the momentum of the extraordinary community and voluntary response to COVID-19.
— PLACEMAKING: Urban design, public realm, landscape, architecture and heritage, particularly supporting the renewal of high streets and town centres.

— HOUSEBUILDING: Council-led housing delivery, development management, development finance, property management, retrofit of existing stock and supporting community-led housing.

— CLIMATE EMERGENCY: Environmental sustainability, resilience & decarbonisation, particularly where there are synergies between climate action plans and the recovery from COVID-19.

— MANAGEMENT: Programme and project management, more so than ever given the likely need to deliver recovery funding or grant programmes.

— DELIVERY: Viability and S106 negotiation in the context of changes in the market, and a new kind of role stewarding developments from consent to construction.

— URBAN HEALTH: Cross-cutting roles integrating public health and public planning.

— PLANTECH: Accelerating the development and adoption of digital and data-driven approaches to planning, particularly given recent step-changes in remote working.

— INFRASTRUCTURE: Planning, coordinating and delivering infrastructure to enable growth, including utilities, new approaches to highways and streetscape.

— PLANNING: A continuing need for senior development management planners, and planmaking expertise.

— ECOLOGY: Biodiversity, ecosystems, natural habitats, green infrastructure and environmental engineering including sustainable drainage.

— SERVICE DESIGN: Supporting vulnerable people, particularly through frontline services that are having to respond to new scales and types of demands.
2. AUTHORITIES WILL NEED MORE FLEXIBLE AND COLLABORATIVE MODELS OF RESOURCING AND RECRUITMENT

In the context of increasing demands and fixed budgets, Authorities are likely to need to think more flexibly about their own workforce. A number of Authorities anticipate that it will be challenging to justify growing their core establishment with new permanent posts.

In some cases, for example Development Management, Authorities may look to translate existing vacancies into new posts that directly address the recovery rather than lose them altogether to budget savings. Some planning departments suggest there may be efficiencies or productivity gains from the introduction of new technologies and ways of working that could free up resources from administrative tasks associated with the planning process and reinvest them in more meaningful roles.

“We don’t need less people - we need less people spending time on uninteresting jobs that don’t add any value.”

COVID-19 has exposed complex and cross-cutting issues including loneliness, mental health and air quality that demand more agile, interdisciplinary and collaborative approaches. Authorities are looking for staff with enthusiasm for taking on new challenges, versatile skills, and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

“We need people who are unfazed by the fact this isn’t going to be about returning to normal - it’s a jumping off point for change. More so than ever, the public sector can’t afford to work in silos.”

A number of Authorities expressed an interest in establishing more place-based approaches, and a need for individuals who can introduce new ways of working and bring different teams and organisations together. Public Practice’s placement programme offers one route for Authorities to build these kinds of capacities in house.

“There are huge prizes for Authorities from collaborating. The impacts of COVID-19 haven’t respected Authority boundaries, so nor should the solutions to the climb out.”
3. LOCAL GOVERNMENT NEEDS MORE WAYS TO RAPIDLY SHARE EMERGING KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE

Every Authority is facing a barrage of new questions as a result of COVID-19, and there is clear interest in pooling intelligence about the answers and learning from what others are trying.

“We’re inevitably like rabbits in the headlights with this situation, and haven’t got much time to pick up the phone to other Authorities, so there’s a risk we’re all inventing the wheel at the same time.”

Specific areas of practice affected by COVID-19 that Authorities suggested would immediately benefit from knowledge-sharing include high streets, resilience, planning flexibilities, engaging with contractors, negotiations with development partners, community engagement, the duty to cooperate, using council assets to support local economies, design review, and integrating planning with public health. Public Practice will be orienting our R&D programme to address these issues, hosting invited roundtables and public discussions online, and publishing practical guidance and toolkits.

4. NOW IS THE TIME FOR THE PUBLIC SECTOR TO DRAW ON A WIDER POOL OF TALENT

Recruitment continues to be a greater challenge to building capacity than a lack of funding for the majority of Associates. Pre-COVID-19 LGA figures show that Authorities face more difficulties recruiting planners than any other discipline, including social workers and legal professionals. Respondents expressed concern about a trend of Authorities “poaching” staff from each other, which is not helping to build the overall capacity of the sector.

However, Authorities suggested there may be “sea change” in the employment market as a result of COVID-19, with large numbers of private planning consultancies, multidisciplinary engineering firms and architecture practices reported to be furloughing staff and considering redundancies over the medium-term. As a result, Authorities anticipate that there will be a greater likelihood of
attracting talent from the private sector over the next 6-12 months, and are considering timing planned growth in their establishment to make the most of the opportunity. One sign of this shift is that Authorities report Interim agency staff and contractors are now expressing an interest in going permanent as they look for a “safe haven” for the coming recession. Public Practice will be promoting the advantages of joining the public sector on behalf of all Authorities.

“I suspect the public sector will become more attractive as it will be seen as both a safer and more exciting career option.”

5. AUTHORITIES ARE LOOKING FOR NEW WAYS OF ACCESSING SPARE CAPACITY FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR
In the context of a downturn, Authorities are interested in exploring new ways of accessing spare capacity from private sector consultancies and developers, as well as housing associations. Some respondents noted an apparent contradiction in Government paying to furlough the kind of built environment professionals that the public sector is struggling to recruit, and suggested there should be a way of enabling people who are subject to furlough to contribute productively to the crisis.

Some Authorities are actively seeking secondments from private sector firms and housing associations on an ad hoc basis. Secondments offer Authorities a relatively flexible and affordable way of accessing additional capacity, and can also be a way for them to support suppliers during this period. A number of Authorities expressed an interest in a more structured scheme that could offer transparency, generate scales of efficiency, and support secondees with the transition. Public Practice is currently developing a secondment programme to respond to this demand.
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Local authorities have shown extraordinary agility, resourcefulness and commitment in the immediate response to COVID-19. At the same time, it has become clear that local government - and public planning in particular - will need to play an increasingly important role to tackle the wider social and economic impacts of this emergency.

The situation for local government is changing rapidly - and it won't go back to being the same. We wanted to understand how COVID-19 is changing public planning by listening to the people who know best. We asked officers across local government: How is COVID-19 affecting the work of planning, housing and regeneration departments right now? How could it change how we plan in the future? And what might that mean for the way authorities are resourced? This report summarises what we learned during a snapshot in time.

Faced with change on an unprecedented scale, the decisions authorities make now will have long-lasting effects on people’s everyday lives, as well as their built environment. They could also have significant implications for the purpose of public planning. Authorities are only at the beginning of a long and challenging process of recovery. But there is an opening here for local government to take a proactive role in leading the process of rebuilding resilience and renewal.

Practice Notes and other resources are available to download at www.publicpractice.org.uk/resources