



## Coronavirus – will there be any long term effects?

There has been much speculation about how much the current Coronavirus crisis might affect our attitudes, habits, lifestyle and behaviour in a post-Covid era - and by extension, the potential effects on our cities, our streets, our shops, workplaces and our homes.

Will any effect be temporary, or will it have a lasting effect on all these aspects of life as we have known it?

Let's start with our homes. The Council has recently given planning approval to several very large and tall housing developments in the city, such as Moda in Sackville Road (buildings up to 15 storeys), and on the KAP site in Hove (up to 11 storeys). And a planning application has been made for another very tall development at Ellen Street behind the Listed Hove Station (up to 18 storeys).

Then there are ones in Brighton on which work has not yet started – Longley Industrial Estate (18 storeys), Anston House (15 storeys), the planning application for the Marina – nine tall buildings ranging from 8 to 28 storeys, Peacock Industrial Estate – up to 10 storeys. Other tall blocks such as Vantage Point (16 storeys) and the Brewer's site in New England Street are in the pipeline.

Coronavirus has decimated the housing market and has had a disastrous effect on property values, partly because of the lockdown (which will probably be temporary), but also because of the effects on the economy and the likelihood of increased unemployment and reduced overall economic activity.

Will these developments still be an economic proposition if the figures and market values they were based upon don't apply any more? If they don't, they won't get built.

And - with the concept of social distancing now firmly ingrained in our psyches, how many people will feel comfortable using a lift to get to their flat 15 storeys up?

With the likelihood of more and more people working from home in the future how adaptable will many of these tiny flats be where both parents are working from home, particularly if they have children too? And access to open space for exercise and games is not so easy if you live several storeys up in the air.

In relation to the housing need and market demand, will low-rise buildings with ready access to open space and gardens become a more attractive proposition to potential home owners and the rental market than tall blocks of flats?

And what implications will there be for the target of 13,200 new dwellings required before 2030 as set out in the City Plan? The Council is already struggling to meet its five-year housing supply target and has lost control of its ability to refuse these large-scale housing planning applications as a result.

Which brings us to the workplace. Employers all over the country are no doubt reviewing whether they need the amount of office space they occupy. So there is likely to be a glut of office space all over the city. Could the space be used for something else – homes for example? – it might make more economic sense to convert redundant

office space into housing rather than build huge new blocks of flats. There are lots of precedents for this – probably the most well known is the 34 storey Centrepoint in London's Oxford Street which was recently converted into residential apartments. Many offices in Croydon have also changed their use to residential, and there have already been a few smaller examples in Brighton too.

The same questions apply to shops and restaurants. There will be lots of vacant retail space as we emerge from Covid-19. What might that be used for? The footfall in our high streets will inevitably be reduced and the number of office workers will be less than before, to add to retailers' woes.

Not so many people will be going to work on a daily basis, so will there be less traffic and less demand for public transport? After we have now seen the beneficial effect on our city streets freed from traffic fumes and pollution, how many of us in the current era of the new normal will want to revert to the old normal?

Lots of questions for our city authorities to consider. As with so many issues related to coronavirus, there are no easy answers. But we should all be thinking about the implications and working out the best way forward. JM ♦

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## News Update – website and discussion groups

Normally about this time of the year I put together the Chairman's report for our Annual General Meeting which is distributed with the newsletter together with the other AGM documentation. This year because of Covid-19, it looks unlikely that we will be able to hold a conventional AGM, but we are considering arranging a virtual AGM using Zoom video technology, which we think would be a preferable solution to having no AGM at all.

Since lockdown, we have been holding all our committee and sub-committee meetings using Zoom, which has worked well.

So in advance of a possible virtual AGM some time later this year, this article is to update you in the meantime on a couple of important areas we have been working on and the progress we have made in the past year.

### Website, Twitter feed and dedicated sub-committees

The use of digital technology is increasingly important to enable us to reach out to a wider and younger potential future membership.

Our website is an important way for us to publicise to the wider community our concerns and views on any matters which will have an effect on the quality of our city environment.

We have accordingly put a lot of effort into developing the website and producing a regular flow of articles on topical subjects. At the same time we have mounted discussions on Twitter targeted at councillors and the local press as well as a wider public audience. Currently we have over 500 followers including several councillors,

most of whom we expect will have been attracted to our website from the Twitter feeds and seen the articles they find there. We have also posted information on Facebook with links to the website.

Over the past year both The Argus and the Brighton & Hove News have picked up on some of our website articles, so they are evidently keeping an eye open for the issues we regularly raise.

In late 2018 we set up an editorial sub-committee to discuss topics for future articles for the website. This meets every two months and discusses potential content and subject matter, to include both topical and wider general issues of interest. To widen the scope of our coverage we have started to invite guest writers from other local amenity societies to contribute articles to our website.

We are looking to open a members' section on the website, the content of which will only be accessible to signed up members of the Brighton Society.

### Discussion groups

Another sub-committee has been established to attract and reach out to potential future members by setting up discussion groups and events at which other societies and individuals are represented and can join in and contribute to.



*Tougher policy needed*

The first of these discussion events was held recently with representatives from eight other community groups in the city to discuss (via Zoom) the problem of tagging and so-called graffiti which is giving so many areas of the city a scruffy and highly unattractive appearance. Our intention is to create a coalition of community groups whose aim will be to mount a 'stronger together' campaign designed to persuade the Council and the Police Authorities to put together a properly co-ordinated and tougher policy for dealing with the graffiti problem.

Our accompanying articles "**Staying connected in the age of Covid**" plus a new **Members' page**" says more on this topic.

We have put a lot of effort into this anti-graffiti campaign already. We have attended meetings with Cityclean and Councillor Anne Pissaridou, campaigned successfully against unauthorised advertisement graffiti murals in the

North Laine, created maps for the website showing the spread of graffiti across the city, responded to the Council consultation on its so-called Graffiti Policy and expressed our concerns to the Police Commissioner about the leniency meted out to the very few graffiti vandals who have been caught in the act.

But we would be the first to acknowledge that a lot more needs to be done. From our experience of our first 'discussion event', it looks as though this could be a promising way forward. JM ♦

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## Earn your Badge – membership drive

Like every society, we would like to increase our membership. The Brighton Society's many loyal members will have friends and acquaintances with a passion for our city, keen to support our key objectives of protecting and improving the best of our existing urban and natural environment whilst also promoting high standards of planning, architecture and design.



Get yours now!

We would like to ask you, therefore, to think about 'spreading the word'. Prospective members can visit our website [www.brighton-society.org.uk](http://www.brighton-society.org.uk) and sign up on line or contact our Hon. Treasurer at [admin@brighton-society.org.uk](mailto:admin@brighton-society.org.uk) and she will send out membership leaflets which include application forms.

When the person you have recommended becomes a member we will obviously need to know your name and we will then send you, as a thank-you, an attractive mini ceramic lapel badge (2.5cms square) featuring the Birdcage Bandstand. Appropriate we feel, having used this Brighton icon as our logo for many years. These are produced by Martha Mitchell – a fabulous and renowned local illustrator. Nobody should be without one and now you know how to acquire your very own! LLW ♦

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## Email addresses – Help please!

***We know that not all members have an email address but it would be very helpful to the Society if we could use email more in order to contact members. We will use it only to contact you on matters concerning the Society and under no circumstances will we pass it on to third parties without your permission.***

***About a week ago we sent an email to all members for whom we have an email address asking them to amend their details, if necessary. If you DID NOT RECEIVE this email it***

***is because either we have no address for you or we have the wrong one.***

***If you have an email address we may use, or have changed yours recently, please contact our Treasurer, Lyn Lynch-White, on: [admin@brighton-society.org.uk](mailto:admin@brighton-society.org.uk) so that it may be recorded. Very many thanks. LLW ♦***

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## Staying connected in the age of Covid

Over the last two years the Brighton Society's website, along with our social media platforms, Twitter and Facebook, has seen a significant increase in traffic. The changes to the website, a modern logo, more information pages such as 'How to comment effectively on planning applications' and regular posts that highlight contemporary issues within the city are some of the reasons why people are engaging more with the society.

These electronic platforms in the age of Covid have become a vital means of disseminating information for the Society. They are proving effective in creating conversations with the various council departments and other stakeholders in the city. For example, recently some members of the committee organised a Zoom meeting with some Residents Associations (RAs) and Local Action Groups (LAGs) to discuss how best to tackle the graffiti issue that is blighting our city.



This summer we'll be holding more meetings with the RAs and LAGs which we hope will produce a positive action plan that will be more effective than the current one proposed by the Environment, Transport and Sustainability committee (ET&S). The electronic platform will give us an opportunity to invite members of the ET&S to a Zoom meeting to present our strategy regarding graffiti. AG ♦

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## A Re-think on Housing Policy – is this the future for our city?

In January of this year the think tank Policy Exchange published a report titled ***Rethinking the Planning System for the 21st Century***.

For those of us who regard the current planning system as broken the title certainly resonates. Re-think it we must. Perusing the Policy Exchange report, the Guardian's Richard Vize noted one assertion as

undoubtedly correct - *the planning system is not fit for modern times. Fertile land is being gobbled up for ugly, sprawling, car-dependent, amenity-free housing developments.*

*Rethinking the Planning System for the 21st Century* is so strong on rhetoric the sting hiding inside it could be missed. We might happily go along with the notion of councils shackled with too many top-down policy objectives around development (in Brighton and Hove the infamous five year housing land supply 'penalty' comes to mind) - but the sting comes on p.12 [*Local councillors*] *should have no say over deciding applications for new developments – this should be a purely administrative exercise.*'

We might regard this whiff of anti-democratic thinking as depressing but ultimately uncontroversial given that in our city the rule of planning officers and legal advisers very often hammers any hint of democratic, political rebellion back in line. But the troubling aspect of this think tank report is that just weeks after publication its principle author Jack Airey became a No. 10 adviser.

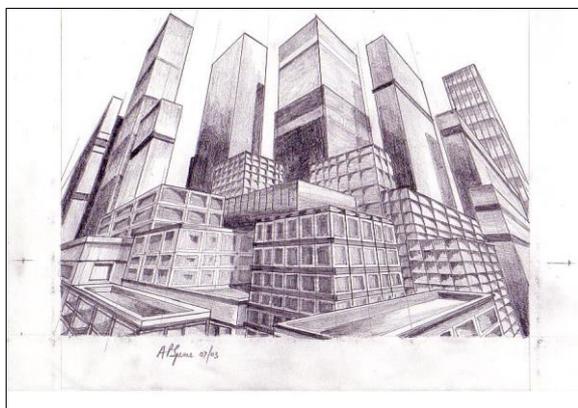


Illustration by Brighton artist Peter Spence

It seems rule by unelected technocrat is the policy-wonk fad that aren't speak its name. Dominic Cummings appointed Liam Booth-Smith (also of Policy Exchange) to lead the team of advisers co-ordinating economic policy. In turn Booth-Smith appointed Jack Airey. This matters because Airey's advice gift wraps its intention to erode democratic accountability with the seductive language of untangling inefficient processes in order to get houses built. Again, as Tize puts it, *'suffocating local accountability and putting developers in charge is not the way forward. Simplistic solutions to complex problems may well appeal to a politician in a hurry, but we will all be left living with the consequences.'*

The regulatory measures accompanying the current Covid emergency have added an even more troubling element. As *Civic Voice* point out *'Section 78 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 allows the relevant national authority to make regulations providing for virtual meetings in local authorities.'* Brighton and Hove planning authority has already demonstrated numerous examples of pushing elected committee members toward a timid compliance with government diktat. The Covid legislation requires public planning meetings to remain accessible in some form (via Zoom or Webcasts) but the local authority gets to decide on how much accessibility. Naturally it will be with great regret that a council leader announces a permanent cut back on

public attendance (something that must continue – 'sadly' – long into the future due to health and safety and, um, *money concerns*).

That too many of our planning committee councillors eagerly go along with the rule of planning officers and, by extension, large scale developers is a problem all by itself. The suppression of meaningful public involvement was already a problem by itself. But a crunch moment is upon us. If we don't mount a concerted campaign to wake up our elected representatives to their own complicity in the shrivelling of democratic process then Jack Airey will have an easy ride – the future of planning will indeed become a remote procedure out of public control, *a purely administrative exercise.* AH ♦

## Members' Page

This summer the society will be launching a new members' page. This will only be accessible by a password login that will be given to all members. The content will be exclusively for members. Additional to this page will be an area where the members can engage with the committee via an **ideas section** within the members' page. More details will be posted about this section in due course.

Increasing our membership is vital for the society to have a greater voice in the city. That voice has to be representative of all demographic groups. The society has set up a sub-committee to discuss ways of increasing the membership. But we also need the help of all our existing members to encourage their friends to support the Society. One approach to increase membership can be found under the article **Earn your Badge!** on the previous page AG ♦

## Film Evening

Many of you will already know that our members' event, 'Rubble and Redevelopment: films, photos, narratives' on May 20th had to be postponed. However, I shall be meeting, remotely, with our University of Brighton partners in a few weeks' time to discuss how - and tentatively when - we may be able to reschedule the event. Rest assured that it will not slip off the agenda!



Construction of the Kingswood maisonettes, 1930s