

The **London Forum** of
Amenity and Civic Societies



working to protect and improve the quality of life in London

London Forum *Insights*

Welcome to the first issue of London Forum *Insights*

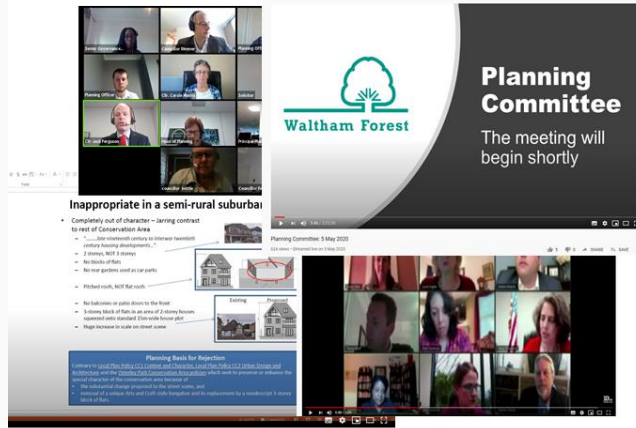
Firstly a thank you to the many members who have attended our four online Zoom meetings held during the first two months of the lockdown. This means we have increased the frequency with which we communicate with members, in both directions. London Forum *Insights* is replacing our thrice annual newsletter, Newsforum, at least for the time being. It aims to provide timely articles of substance, which should be of interest to most, if not all member societies. Where articles are too long for the email format, an abstract is included here, with a link to the full article on the London Forum website.

In this issue:

- Safeguarding the Public Voice in Planning: how are the boroughs doing?
 - Reallocation of Streetspace; an opportunity for the Civic movement?
 - Planning for the Future; London Forum airs its concerns ahead of the anticipated White Paper
 - Why Verified Views matter
 - What future for the High Street? A view from Civic Voice
 - Round the Societies, a call for contributions
 - Book Review - Simon Jenkins, A Short History of London
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Safeguarding the Public Voice in Planning

Overall, the transition to online Planning has been smoother than might have been predicted. We are not aware of any systematic attempt to stifle the public voice in the Planning process; indeed most boroughs are trying to ensure that the rights previously enjoyed by



objectors and third parties are replicated in the virtual world. However there are still many flaws in the way that some boroughs are operating - objectors not allowed to speak at Planning Committee meetings, poor information on Council websites, continued suspension of site visits etc. It's time these were fixed, says London Forum Vice Chair, Paul Thornton. Click [here](#) for the full article.

Streetspace Reallocation - Andrew Bosi sees opportunities for the Civic movement

The Covid-19 crisis has had a seismic effect on transport. Use of public transport is being discouraged, because of the need for social distancing, and there is little indication of when that might end. The government has offered money for schemes to facilitate walking and cycling. Temporary measures can be implemented without consultation. In some places the need may be temporary, e.g. where queues have formed on pavements outside supermarkets. In others permanent change might be justified – this would require consultation at a later date.



TfL measures introduced in recent years have almost exclusively benefited cycling rather than walking. Many of the recent temporary schemes address the needs of pedestrians. At the Forum's Zoom meeting we saw images of the scheme in Brixton and evidence of popular support for it. Likewise a scheme in Camden outside the large Sainsbury's addresses a long standing need for

space for shoppers walking or catching the bus. Member societies should be identifying areas where pedestrians in particular are faced with overcrowded pavements that make social distancing impossible, and lobby for temporary measures to address this. Where schemes are implemented they will need to be vigilant for the consultation that may follow to make them permanent. This is particularly so when there are unintended adverse consequences for residents, local amenities and local businesses.

There was much comment about macho cyclists and their anti-social behaviour causing a division between different sectors of the population. The hope was expressed that by making cycling safer for all, a more diverse population would take to cycling with reduced speeds and greater consideration for others as a result. Member societies will want assurance that this is so.

It seems likely that e-scooters will be made legal. Trials commencing on July 4th specified a maximum speed of 15 mph, a ban from the pavement, and limited to e-scooters hired from licensed dealers. How the latter is to be policed is anyone's guess: use of illegal e-scooters has been widespread.

Urban Design London seminars on changing streetspace and managing traffic can be viewed [here](#) and [here](#).

Planning for the Future - London Forum Chair, Peter Eversden asks the big question

On 12 March 2020 the Secretary of State made an important [statement on Planning for the Future](#). It set out a number of housing and planning reforms, which were summarised in 'Planning' magazine by an article [here](#). The Building Better, Building Beautiful Commission [report](#) 'Living with Beauty' was published on 30 January 2020. The Secretary of State indicated that a response to its recommendations would be part of a Planning White Paper, now expected later this month.

It is common ground that the planning system is failing to deliver great places. A well researched [study](#) claims that three-quarters of new houses are either of 'mediocre' or 'poor' quality design. Councils are rejecting such applications, only to see them approved on appeal, "fatally" undermining the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Many unfit dwellings result from the use of Permitted Development Rights to convert offices to homes.

Ahead of the White Paper, a Business and Planning Bill to restart the economy was recently published (see [here](#)), further widening Permitted Development to include upward extensions to some blocks of flats, and easing some restrictions on conversion of office and retail premises. Permitted Development reduces the power of Councils with their communities to determine

what happens.

In [paragraph 19 of the Government's National Design Guidance](#) are the words "Communities can effectively shape both design policies and development through a collaborative process of meaningful participation. Early engagement and linking engagement activities to key stages of design, decision-making and plan-making can empower people to inform the vision, design policies and the design of schemes. Engagement activities offer an opportunity to work collaboratively with communities to shape better places for local people."

Will the White Paper give teeth to these aspirations? This is the lens through which the civic movement will judge the Government's intentions.

Why Verified Views Matter - Michael Bach, reveals that appearances can be deceptive

Last September [revised guidance by the Landscape Institute](#) was issued on the 'verified views' photographs used in planning applications. This guidance means that all applications since then should use the default setting of a 50mm focal length lens, which is more or less what the human eye sees, rather than using a 24mm focal length wide-angle lens because this presents a distorted picture of what a person standing in the street would see.

The visual representation industry has a vested interest in using wide-angle photographs in order to gain planning consents for their clients. This may be the beginning of the debate – but from now on we must all look at these "verified views" with a degree of scepticism.

It is now down to:

- The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government and Historic England to reflect this in their design advice; and
- local planning authorities and the Mayor of London to require a change in practice when developers submit applications.



Read Michael's full article [here](#). Contrasting views of the proposed Kensington Forum development can be seen [here](#).

Civic Voice 'In Conversation' talking High Streets

Civic Voice had a week-long set of events, asking: How can we do high streets differently? The most recent event focused on how we can strengthen local engagement and governance in our high streets.

- **Phil Prentice, Scotland's Town Partnership** shared his perspectives as to why the future of our high streets will be Community Improvement Districts. Phil said he hoped that we could adapt BIDs to strengthen the role and input of communities. . [Watch the #inconversation with Phil Prentice here](#).
- **Vidhya Alakeson, CEO at Power to Change** made a compelling case as to why we need a new model. Vidhya shared examples of community businesses that are setting up across the UK and said that we need to build local economies around people who have a proper stake in their communities, not distant investors and absent landlords. [Watch the #inconversation with Vidhya Alakeson here](#).
- The final talk of the week featured **Patrice Frey, Main Street America** who discussed the [Main Street America](#) approach and we considered whether the approach would work in the UK. Patrice logged in from Seattle and we heard that despite the differences between our countries, there are many similarities and opportunities for shared learning. Watch the #inconversation with [Patrice Frey back here](#).

We can only hope that with initiatives such as the Grimsey Report and the [High Streets Task Force](#), we will come out of the coronavirus pandemic with the motivation to build a better high street, town centre and ultimately, community. And perhaps, that will be our lasting legacy.

We know that many of you are trying to 'Do High Streets Differently' and we encourage you to register for our seminars and to offer to speak at future sessions. [Sign up here](#). See also London Forum's update on this subject [here](#).

Round the Societies - notice to members

Our popular section featuring news from Member Societies has in the past been compiled by us, picking out items from members' newsletters which we think would be of interest to other members. However, we don't, of course, know which issues are of most concern to the societies whose activities are being reported.

This is an invitation to all member societies to send us short articles for inclusion in the next issue, on a topic which they consider would be of most interest and relevance to other Forum member societies.

Pieces should be a maximum of 250 words and should be emailed to michael@hammerson.me.uk before the end of August.

Have you, for example, used novel methods for communicating with members while physical meetings are impossible? **The Finchley Society** has had meetings by Zoom on topics of local interest that have been well attended - of course some members may not be able to participate because they do not have the technology, but others find Zoom easier than travelling to a venue, and at least one old member who moved away was seen after a long absence.

Sam Dunkley, Hillgate Village RA reviews Simon Jenkins' book *A Short history of London – the creation of a world capital* (Hardback 2019, published this month in paperback by Penguin)

Simon Jenkins' 18th book combines an excellent summary of 2000 years of history with a rallying cry to preserve what is left of our ravaged skyline. Claire Tomalin called him "*a blessing to the nation*" and this book is certainly a blessing to anyone interested in conservation.

The introduction sets out the major theme of his later chapters: "*I shudder to think what generations to come will say of our handling of London's skyline, just as we shudder at what our parents and grandparents did after the Second World War.*" With the extraordinary number of towers built or in progress across London, this critique could not be more timely. Jenkins is even handed in criticising the Mayors of London: "*Johnson performed a personal U-turn on tall buildings. Having accused Livingstone... of creating "Dubai on Thames", he became high-rise's most ardent advocate.*"

His first half provides a fascinating summary from Roman times to the 19th century, with some references - such as the Black Death and the "Great Stink" – now having fresh resonance. Later chapters include eye-catching headings such as "Going for Broke – 1997–2008", and "Constructs of Vanity – 2008 to the present."

Jenkins' concludes: "*The new towers that rose over the metropolis in the first two decades of the new century appeal to their purchasers precisely for the reasons they should not have been allowed. They offered privacy, secrecy, gated security and a lack of nosy neighbours. With their ownership often hidden behind offshore companies, the towers were bank vaults in the sky.*"
