



COMMONWEALTH ASSOCIATION OF PLANNERS – STATEMENT

Planning in the Commonwealth Post-Covid-19

The Commonwealth Association of Planners exists to meet the challenges of urbanisation and the sustainable development of human settlements throughout the 53 nations of the Commonwealth. Rapid urbanisation continues throughout the globe – in the Commonwealth it is estimated that 65,000 people a day (23,750,000 a year) are moving to cities. Over half this urban growth is in slums with no planning and little by way of sanitation and infrastructure.

Planning for health was a major issue before the arrival of the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic. The dramatic impacts of the virus have affected all nations, rich or poor, Global North or Global South, and are likely to have a lasting effect on the way that governments, regions and local authorities plan for housing, jobs and services into the future. In efforts to limit the spread of the virus, billions of people have been confined to their homes for extended periods; businesses have closed; public transport – where it exists - has been suspended or severely curtailed; and food supplies have become strained through panic buying and disruption to supply chains.

Governments generally are now looking to move out of ‘lockdowns’ into a period of recovery, bringing with it dangers and new opportunities. Aside from the evident dangers of fresh outbreaks of Covid-19 infection, there are real and long-term dangers in re-igniting global warming, which remains a serious threat to our planet, to biodiversity and to mankind. Governments may be tempted to reach for ‘off-the-shelf’ infrastructure and development projects to boost economic recovery. The Commonwealth Association of Planners is concerned that many of these may hark back to carbon-intensive lifestyles while short-term exhortations to avoid the use of public transport (such as that issued by the UK Prime Minister on 10th May), alongside arguments to allow greater urban sprawl in low density developments, risk further instilling unsustainable ways of living and developments. In current jargon, projects should be “shovel worthy” rather than just “shovel ready”.

The pandemic is still a recent and on-going event and there is much to learn from national and international experience as the world looks to address its adverse impacts but also to prolong the benefits that have flowed from efforts to counter the infection. There is a critical role in this for the collection and sharing of data to aid systematic understanding of the virus, its impacts and the efficacy of measures taken to address these – including those relating to the built environment.

Amidst this, there are real opportunities in the present situation for planners to work in collaboration with the other built environment professions to remodel our cities and towns to create better-planned developments that contribute to climate action, to improved homes and to healthier lifestyles – and to leave us better prepared to face future pandemics.

The International Energy Agency has forecast the CO₂ impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, suggesting that emissions could fall by 8% in 2020. This reduction compares well with the reduction of 7.6% each year required in order to limit global temperature rise to within 1.5 degrees of pre-industrial temperatures. But if we are to tackle global warming effectively it is essential that we maintain this level of reduction, rather than return to ‘business as usual’.

In the pandemic, people have been confined to their homes for long periods, placing serious physical and mental health pressures on those who live in small, overcrowded homes. Public parks and open spaces in many cities have become vital outlets for recreation and access to exercise but have frequently become overcrowded, not allowing adequate space for social distancing. Large numbers of people and school children have been forced to work from home, reliant on sometimes variable electricity supplies and strained broadband networks for links to family, jobs, clients, shopping and essential services.

On the other hand, communities have worked together with greater common purpose. Traffic reductions have contributed to quieter living environments and cleaner air quality in our cities. People have rediscovered the hidden joys in conversation, in mutual support, in birdsong – and in enhanced regard and respect for our public services, especially health and care workers. Working with local communities, planners and other built environment professions have the chance to learn from and perpetuate these positive experiences – provided the right investment is made in the resources made available to these professions. Throughout the Commonwealth there is a great – and in some places, acute – shortage of planners and other built environment professions.

Accordingly, there is a huge opportunity for governments (both central and local), communities and private sector organisations to grasp the opportunities offered by our experience in the current pandemic to:

- Improve housing standards, both in setting good, minimum standards of accommodation and providing good sanitation, ventilation and sustained power supplies that allows space and services for families who must remain indoors for extended periods;
- Meet the urgent need for enhanced, stable broadband connectivity that allows many members of the same family good access from home to work, schooling, shopping and support services;

- Achieve well planned neighbourhoods with locally accessible shops and services and adequate provision of parks and open spaces to allow for community cohesion and much needed exercise;
- Focus transport investment into active modes of travel – walking and cycling – that allow people to move between homes, jobs, shops, schools and services with reduced reliance on private vehicles and (in times of pandemic) public transport;
- Remodel our city and town centres to enable greater levels of housing in the centres, where there is a reduced need for space for retail and commercial premises, ensuring that open space and essential services are available to the new as well as existing residents.

Good governance is critical to being able to deliver good planning and remains a vital part of responding to the pandemic within the continuing context of rapid urbanisation and the need to implement UN Habitat's New Urban Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Commonwealth has the potential to act as an international convenor and facilitator in spreading knowledge, experience and good practice across the globe in responding to the pandemic, achieving a beneficial, green recovery and avoiding the temptation to revert back to 'business as usual.

Now is the time for governments to strengthen planning powers and the resources available for good planning.