

## **ANNUAL REPORT OF RTPI INDEPENDENT CONSULTANTS NETWORK 2022**

### **STEERING GROUP CHAIRMANS REPORT JANUARY 2023**

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During 2022, the newly elected Chair of the Steering Group (Pete Lloyd) had to step away due to personal circumstances and I resumed my former role as Chair to bridge the gap, as a rapid substitute with relevant experience and contacts was needed. A new Chair will be selected during in early January 2023 so this is my final report on behalf of the ICN Steering Group.

The ICN has continued to thrive during 2022, with membership stable or growing. A consultation was carried out during summer 2022 to explore trends of change in Members business sector – something we do every 2-3 years - and produced information on a number of issues. Key amongst these were an increasing proportion of female independent consultants and a larger proportion of members beginning to plan for retirement.

The latter issue is of significance because ICN members almost all become independent consultants during the middle of their careers, after gaining wide post qualification experience in LPAs or larger consultancies. As self-employed planners they also tend to stay working later in life than those in direct employment. It is always regrettable to lose this experience from the group, so efforts are continually made to stimulate new active participation in the network. Stimulating more active engagement from the silent majority will be a major focus for 2023, as recently agreed by the Steering Group.

The Network continues to make very active use of an online and email forum for daily interaction, which is hugely valued by members as a major resource in what can be isolated working lives. This promotes learning opportunities (including recommendations to on-line webinars run by experts outside the RTPi) as well as direct discussions and sharing experience on individual issues and work/social contact for those without office colleagues. It has been said before but is important to repeat that this Forum, and the work of the Steering Group to provide an Annual Conference, is viewed by many as the main advantage of RTPi Membership for ICN members.

The Steering Group maintains excellent direct relationships with the Planning Inspectorate and the Planning Portal, and through this seek to improve processes and outcomes. We are assured that we provide a valuable contact group to provide feedback and suggestions and have engaged in specific consultations with both organisations where changes are under consideration.

Our first in person Conference since Covid took place in Chester during September and was a notable success. Year on year, this has developed into something close to a Club event, with content designed specifically to meet members professional interests as expressed during the year on the Forum, with added education and discussion on emerging issues. Popular new topics this year included the implications of BNG, the future of High Streets and Pubs post Covid, Neighbourhood Planning and business operation.

The annual conference is for many the only event which focusses on ICN members specific needs, where they can speak openly to their peers and forge wider contacts. It is an essential basis to the success of the Network. It was our first year working with the new RTPI Conference Team rather than making all our own arrangements, and at times the process was problematic. A joint post event review has identified a positive way forward for the future.

Professional indemnity insurance is a significant cost and frequently discussed concern for our network. For the first time, RTPI headquarters staff invited participation from the ICN on the procurement exercise to identify a preferred supplier. This invitation was greatly appreciated and we understand from the Director involved we made a significant contribution to a successful process.

Going forward, The Steering Group welcomes invitations from HQ to be involved in both Policy and procedural consultations and decisions which affect our members. I say this every year in hope of Board positively supporting our greater involvement.

Having undertaken our survey, together with ongoing queries from the Forum, we are now able to move forward and refresh the RTPI document providing advice for those starting up or working as Independent Consultants. Since this was published in 2016 the working context has changed in many respects, and the revised document will aim to address (inter alia) issues including the mental health of practitioners, confidentiality of data, financial systems, debt recovery and recommendations on sources of useful professional information. We also have a number of members with experience working outside the UK, so plan to expand advice in this area as appropriate to a general Advice Document.

The revised practice advice document will have a direct impact on the professional standards and reputation of our members.

The Steering Group has also been reviewing protocols for use of the forum and specification of ICN membership criteria. This will be concluded in 2023.

Concerns have been raised about the current process for selecting Steering Group members. Discussions with Richard Blyth have indicated that there is scope for a different approach which would better suit this particular Network, to ensure Steering Group members are representative of the range of skills and opinions of the ICN. Again, a review will take place during 2023.

We have appreciated the support of our new Network Coordinator Madeleine Bauer in what has been a very busy year and hope she will continue to support the Network in future.

I trust the Board members find this report interesting. The Steering Group invites and welcomes comment and feedback.

**Deirdre Wells Dip TP MRTPI  
Chair of RTPI Independent Consultants Network**