



Suffolk Preservation Society say there is a risk profits may be favoured over integrity as building projects resume after lockdown

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# BEWARE DEVELOPMENTS THAT TRY AND GIVE THE ECONOMY A POST-LOCKDOWN BOOST

**A**s I write this column, it is being reported that the UK has passed the peak of infections and deaths attributable to COVID-19.

Whether this is true – or a false dawn - remains to be seen. But having spent, like many EADT readers, the last six weeks at home, making only the occasional trip to buy essentials and taking in a daily walk, I'm aware that the pandemic has changed virtually every significant aspect of our lives.

In the short term, I have seen with fresh eyes, during those walks but also via the hundreds of images that people are sharing on social media, just how beautiful our county is. Despite the pandemic Mother Nature is delivering the joys of spring blossom and birdsong.

I'm also aware of how lucky I am to have access to a garden that has helped sustain my own mental and physical health and wellbeing. I'm more than aware that many people don't have such options: more on that in a moment.

I also think the impact of the pandemic will be much more long-term as well. Fundamental question marks now surely hang over any return to many of the

**Fiona Cairns** of the Suffolk Preservation Society says that as the UK economy tries to recover from lockdown, we must be wary of projects that threaten the integrity of Suffolk



previously 'normal' ways in which society worked.

This might well include social distancing and how we relate to each other as individuals and in groups for years, to come. It may also necessitate an end to cheap travel and a total focus on measures to minimise the impact of climate change and an increase in more sustainable forms of transport and more locally produced food.

At first glance, the planning system might appear a comparatively marginal issue here. But it shouldn't.

I believe that we can use the planning system to both improve individual health and wellbeing and contribute to wider social and economic outcomes.

We must prioritise delivering new houses that provide choice, including generous provision of

public open spaces, private or communal good-sized gardens and easy access to allotments and or community orchards. The focus must be on new housing developments that incorporate trees and planting, that people and wildlife can enjoy. We have also learnt the value of homes that offer enough flexible and light interior space for a measure of remote working. All these things are very much within the gift of planning professionals.

Good design must surely, from now on, focus on these things rather than them being an afterthought or something that developers can wriggle out of committing to when it suits them?

In fact, prior to the COVID-19, various pieces of the planning jigsaw that facilitate such a 'people first' approach were

starting to fall into place.

Firstly, the new requirements in the National Planning Policy Framework have placed a greater emphasis than before on local council planners being able to refuse permission for developments that are blighted by poor design.

In particular, paragraph 130 clearly states that permission should be refused for developments that fail to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area.

Secondly, last year the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) went further and produced a document called the National Design Guide.

This really was a breakthrough.

It tries to set the coordinates to design in beauty and design out blandness by highlighting ten key characteristics that need to be taken into account when new housing is being considered.

Local planning authorities will be expected to take the Code into account when developing their own local design codes and guides and when determining planning applications.

And finally, the growth in communities in Suffolk

successfully creating Neighbourhood Plans, which form part of the borough and district local plans, has meant much more local knowledge and input into the details of future housing development.

So, the Suffolk Preservation Society was hopeful that the forthcoming Planning White Paper would put well-designed homes, locally distinctive places and a 'people first' ethos at its very core.

But all is not well. The large housebuilders are lobbying hard for more not fewer permissive planning standards!

In the past, governments have relied on building our way out of a limp economy. So with the UK in the deep freeze because of the economic impact of COVID-19, there is the very real threat that large developers will use the recovery to boost their own profits at the expense of high quality local materials, amenity spaces for trees, ecology, people and domestic, small scale food production.

This would be a terrible return to the 'old normal' and one which the Society, alongside most of Suffolk will have to fight, and fight to win what should be commonplace.