

Landscape Institute Scotland: Reflections Series 2020

The LIS Reflections series aim to foster greater debate and transfer of knowledge within the profession. These events seek to be a platform for information exchange and give opportunities for discussion between members regarding a range of contemporary issues that concern and impact upon the landscape profession.

Impact of Covid-19 on the Landscape Profession in Scotland

Online Group Discussion – 12 & 19 May 2020

The Landscape Institute Scotland responded to a call by members to facilitate the exchange of ideas between landscape practitioners to enable all to share, learn and better understand the impact that Covid-19 is having on the landscape profession in Scotland.

The discussion took place online on the 12th and 19th May 2020 between senior practitioners from both public and private sector facilitated by the LIS and with a focus of sharing practitioners experiences. All attendees confirmed they were happy for the information to be circulated to other built environment professional institutes and A&DS. There will be a follow up discussion in mid-July that will pick up on new challenges. In the meantime LIS will work with practices to showcase a re-imagined new outdoors.

Attendees

Name	Position	Organisation
Lynda Thomson	Director	Open
Karen Clifford	Technical Director	Aecom
Kirstin Taylor	Director	LDA Design
Laura Scott-Simmons	Director	Benton Scott-Simmons
Matthew Hawkins	Conservation Manager	Cairngorms National Park
Liane Bauer	Co-Founder	Urban Pioneers
Chris Rankin	Co-Founder	Rankin Fraser
Felicity Steers	Director	Erz
John Farquhar tbc	Director	Raeburn Farquhar Bowen
Rachel Tennant	Chair	Landscape Institute Scotland
Rachel Howe	Scribe & Administrator	Landscape Institute Scotland

Topics Discussed

1. Organisation response
2. Safe working: Home
3. Getting back to the office
4. Safe working practices: Site work
5. Business management
6. Current Project work
7. Future Project Work
8. Future Opportunities to influence positive change

Summary of Discussion

1. Organisation Approaches

- All public and private practice offices in Scotland are currently closed- some shut one week earlier than the lockdown date of 23 March 2020 and others on the day.
- The discussion highlighted the different approaches between small practices to national businesses and international organisations as well as government sector.
- National organisations responses have been dictated by the head office as well as a practice by practice basis to respond to local factors. International and Government organisations are centrally controlled. Individual organisations are Director/ partner led often with staff input.

2. Safe Working: Home

- Communication vital – team meetings and one on one. All are learning and using a variety of technologies to keep in contact, support, manage staff which has been successful. Some new this type of technology but have transitioned well and others have worked that way for a while.
- Home working highlights that digital connectivity is vital. Rural areas connections are not always good enough for staff to work from home.
- Government offices are offering more flexible working and accepting loss efficiencies. Carers leave increased to accommodate short fall in working hours.
- There is a responsibility for all staff, but younger and furloughed staff need a lot of support for both career development and wellbeing. Often younger staff home environments are not easy or set up for home working.
- There is a recognition that trust plays an important part in home working. Also, flexibility to enable people to exercise when appropriate and to deal with family issues.
- The positives of reducing travel to work have been offset by difficulty in switching off in a home environment. Business worries are always there but mingling home and office life can have negative impacts.
- Women and husband/wife teams are struggling more with the pressures of family life/educating children and working from home.

3. Safe Working: Getting Back to the office

- A return to work for businesses not yet ready to handle social distancing will cause anxiety. Government recommendations may be difficult to put in place in some small practices. Although some offices are already set up to work in shifts of two teams because of current practice operation
- Public transport is a huge point of concern for staff in the return to work.
- A phasing of staff back to work is considered most likely with those more local being first back, although it is recognised that this would not apply to those shielding others and those living more remotely would actually benefit coming to work first due to current isolation.
- Government offices will be no more than 1/3 occupied. There will be alterations to buildings required and staggered office attendance, limited use of communal areas. Face to face contact will be highly regulated. Employees will be encouraged to bring as much of what they need for the day to the office with them to decrease the need to share resources.
- There was agreement that home working will lead to a behavioural shift in how larger offices operate. Employees will be encouraged to work from home more often in the future. Management meetings will be online and short travel time eliminated. Leaner organisations.
- LI volunteers and staff have been advised no in person meetings to take place for another 9 months which will restrict any influencing activity or event planning.

4. Safe Working: Site work

- All organisations are waiting for the Scottish Government announcement on lockdown easing to enable them to plan effectively. Landscape architecture is a profession that cannot go entirely digital - to work effectively the profession needs to understand site conditions for design, assessment, management, and construction. All admitted that there were challenges around site work and Government and construction industry advice will be vital.
- The landscape profession must be careful about what it can and cannot change in how the profession operates. Trying different approaches has revealed how some things can work but others such as digital recording of site works not always successful
- Essential work – there has been a degree of confusion about essential work and travel particularly around renewable energy projects. This is compounded by different approaches across the nations when offices are national/international.
- Public engagement has been possible to have online such as Pre-App consultation, but this may risk digital exclusion in some older and more vulnerable communities who may not be reachable.
- Construction Sites – currently only essential work sites are open, and these are suffering delays because sub-contractors are not geared up to return yet.
- Government and public sector are preparing contingency plans for an influx of visitors to outdoor ‘honey pot’ tourist sights when restrictions may be lifted.

5. Business Management

- Most practices are making use of government and other support schemes. (payment for furloughed staff, 10k small business grant, small business rate relief plus options for 3 month rent freeze.
- Sole Practitioners – Self-employment income support scheme is available as 80% of £2,500 as a maximum. They may not be eligible for other government grant schemes that would help provide relief and ease cash flow issues.
- Extended Furlough Scheme– offers organisational flexibility and may allow more people to return to work, some returning on a part time basis and sharing responsibilities. However, part time may not suit individuals who are sole bread winners for a family. There is also a lack of clarity in how the furlough scheme will be scaled back at the end of July. This makes it difficult to forward plan as input requirement from employees is currently unknown and the ability to bring people back for short periods of time may be restricted.
- Government bodies are unable to take part in the furlough scheme and so all staff are still fully employed and working from home where possible
- Business Interruption Insurance – practices using the insurance provided by LI’s insurers are waiting for a response summarising their current approach. It may be a case of what is in the small print.

6. Current Project Work

- All offices relatively busy and seeing new inquiries coming but a sign that work is slowing. Housing masterplan work stopped across most projects. Some design and construction project work also stopped. As a result, some contractors have gone bust which if D&B leads to payment issues for novated designers
- LVIA work continuing to be strong. There are issues around understanding necessary’ or ‘critical’ work and travel. Some clients pressing for field work to continue, often long distances away, but this causes issues where travel across different countries is required each with different rules. The reputation of the profession and the industries we support are critical to

decisions about whether we can undertake this type of field work, as well as the H&S/community aspects. It is likely that there will be delays for submissions of renewable energy applications which in a climate emergency is an issue unless 'lesser' applications are accepted.

- Planning work ongoing with either submissions or responses being dealt with digitally although public consultation can be challenging in reaching all the community. Longer term planning applications are slowed by lack site work and of survey information which will have a longer term affect.
- Year Out/Graduate Students - employment opportunities reduced as offices have new restrictions on staff recruitment.
- Ongoing projects with multi-disciplinary teams may be complicated by what is happening in companies in other sectors, as some furloughed positions may have previously been an important step to landscape professional's involvement in certain projects.

7. Project Work Going Forward

- Smaller organisations are planning around less work being available going forward and are preparing for a gloomy outlook. Some projects are on hold for a year or more and this will not change because of relaxing lockdown.
- Tenders are still being published but mainly for framework agreements that do not guarantee work, and certainly not immediate work especially as Council budgets are already stretched and will be further. Some tenders that were already published and submissions made have either put on hold or cancelled
- There was agreement that in the medium term there is opportunity for landscape architects to ensure they are at the forefront of the short-term solutions to social distancing that will allow the public to return outside. If practices can make it through this phase it may lead to more work with designing more permanent solutions
- The profession will survive if it clearly demonstrates the landscape 'offer' that other sectors cannot provide. Cities are now looking to reclaim street space for pedestrians and landscape should be at the forefront of the discussions surrounding how this is done and work collaboratively with other professions and not lose out as has happened in economic recessions in the past.
- All believe that the Landscape Institute needs to be advocating for the profession and lead a green recovery. The LI CEO has chaired a meeting around this subject with other CEO's of environmental organisations and it is hoped that outcomes will be shared with the membership. A variety of methods of communication to update members of important updates or Institute activities around Covid19 were preferred. Webinars are difficult as senior practitioners and business owners are time poor. Some staff can manage this time, but it is not getting fed back as they are not all working together

8. Future Opportunities

There will be inevitable cultural changes wrought from this lockdown, but could they be used to influence positive change. Will there a push by tech giants in a Screen New Deal rather than a Green New Deal – using technology and AI as the solution going forward for our future business operations, education and health care systems and the way people interact. Will this diminish the role of the landscape profession?

All agreed that opportunities exist for the profession from the following discussion points:-

- People have used the outdoors as the counterbalance to lockdown and having to communicate digitally and this will continue. This has led to an increased understanding, use

and appreciation of the value of their local greenspaces. The opportunity to engage with real spaces and places has affected people positively. The benefits of being in landscape are health and wellbeing and encourages community cohesion.

- A response Covid19 should be based on health and wellbeing as this is a big Scottish Government driver. Learning the lessons from how we deal with Covid19 and making the connection between the events that personally affect people's lives can be scaled up to look at climate change. It is recognised that these responses will be very similar, but climate change is a certain as opposed to a possibility and should be planned, prepared for, and promoted. Green infrastructure solutions and multifunctional landscapes can improve health and wellbeing, educate our children, deal with air quality, reduce flooding and urban heating, improve biodiversity, and reduce our carbon footprint.
- Ensuring the response to return to work is seen as a green one with economic and regeneration of public space provision and improvements to boost the national and local communities through cycling and footpath routes. Encouraging a return to the use of green public transport and not the bad old ways of car travel.
- There is now more awareness of the lack of equality in access to quality greenspace and landscape. Poor landscape, including V&D land, and deprivation often occur together, meaning that those in greatest need are least able to access quality outdoor spaces. New solutions are required to release V&D land for community use.
- There is now more of an economic impetus for open spaces in areas not just for exercise but also for outdoor cafes, markets that can be used for outdoor business with social distancing. Investing money in public spaces is cheaper than new buildings designed for social distancing.
- Greater numbers of people could benefit more from their local parks and greenspaces but under-investment in the design, implementation or stewardship over the years has limited this. There is an opportunity to harness the newfound enthusiasm from communities to have more say about these spaces and input positively into their design and upkeep with appropriate landscape expertise in both public and private sector.
- Advocacy at SG level is important for this message and the work of Scotland's Landscape Alliance, that the LIS co-founded, will be a useful tool.
- Understanding value and quality of landscape and greenspace is not routinely or consistently measured and reported. This is due to variable coverage, methodologies and frequency of collection resulting in a lack of good quality data. Data can also be hard to access. A suggestion for a piece of research on this assisted by James Hutton Institute is recommended.