

Final Draft Ipswich Local Plan

COVID19 Paper for

the Inspectors

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Planning and Development
Ipswich Borough Council
Grafton House, Russell Road
Ipswich IP1 2DE
(01473) 432019



IPSWICH
BOROUGH COUNCIL

[Email: planningpolicy@ipswich.gov.uk](mailto:planningpolicy@ipswich.gov.uk)

[website:www.ipswich.gov.uk](http://www.ipswich.gov.uk)

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This short paper sets out to explain how the local authority, and the local planning authority has procedurally and operationally in the production of the plan for the Regulation 22 submission responded to the COVID19 emergency.
- 1.2 In addition, planning officers have sought to understand the impact of COVID19 on the building industry, developers and agents at a local level.

2. At Local Authority Level

- 2.1 Ipswich Borough Council (IBC) was quick to respond to the COVID 19 pandemic. On 17 March 2020 it took the decision that all staff from 12 noon at Grafton House (where the planning service is based), were to work from home and needed to leave the premises, with the exception of skeletal staff for some key service areas such as Home Emergency Alarm Response Service (HEARS), facilities management and print room staff.
- 2.2 Staff already had the capacity through Agile working arrangements which were already in place to work from home effectively and are supported through robust IT systems which included facility for ZOOM; Skype and Microsoft Teams. This allows remote meetings to take place effectively between staff and with outside organisations.
- 2.3 Emergency management arrangements were put in place at the same time, both to manage the work of the organisation strategically and to manage the new role expected by Central Government to: deliver the goods and services required to meet the needs of the vulnerable; rough sleepers; those adversely affected by the pandemic through Government grant aid distribution to businesses; food parcels for the vulnerable; and implementing effective closure of public buildings.
- 2.4 As part of their emergency planning a hold was put on all Ipswich Borough Job Advertising. This did not impact on the capacity of the Planning Policy Team as the team was full staffed as of January 2020.
- 2.5 In addition, some staff were seconded from their normal role to help in the crisis. However, strategically, the Ipswich Local Plan was identified as a core priority for the Council and staff capacity in the Planning Policy Team was unaffected by secondment.

3. Local Planning Authority Level

Procedurally

- 3.1 Continual dialogue was ongoing throughout the plan preparation stages with the appointed Programme Officer at key points and early advice was sought as to how to deal with the key process of notifying residents that the plan had been submitted and

in particular, how to deal with those without access to computers and ensure they could engage effectively without disadvantage. That is, to exercise our statutory Equality and Diversity requirements effectively.

- 3.2 It is normal IBC practice under the Statement of Community Involvement (2018), to send letters to the individuals and organisations who have opted for this option as well as email contact to others. It was clear that individuals would receive the news that the final draft plan was submitted in the format they requested.
- 3.3 However, in view of the closed public buildings, which is where hard copies are normally distributed for viewing purposes, submission of the final draft local plan to the Secretary of State in accordance with the SCI is made more difficult owing to the restrictions in place at the time of submission. In order to meet the 'public duty' outlined in the 2010 Equality Act, the Council has provided a phone number for individuals to ring who do not have access to the internet, so that alternative arrangements can be made to meet the needs of individuals on a personal basis.
- 3.4 A printed copy of the documents will be at the Council's principal offices and County Library for viewing when restrictions are relaxed.
- 3.5 In addition, there is a strapline, attached to the Core Document list making paper copies available if required. This was incidentally available during Regulation 19 consultation.
- 3.6 In addition, given that the IBC planning staff are currently working from home, all office phone numbers have been automatically transferred through to laptops (through Skype) or mobile phones. This means that the public can directly speak to IBC staff with any queries about the local plan or submission, without needing to be transferred which provides a more seamless experience for the public.
- 3.7 Furthermore, the IBC contact centre main switchboard phone number is still available for the public to call. Calls going through to this central number will be forwarded on to the planning team as normal.

4. Impact of Covid 19 on the local building industry, developers and agents

- 4.1 In order to understand the impact COVID19 has had on the local building industry in Ipswich Borough, the Planning Policy Team devised a questionnaire (Appendix 2) and set about establishing a representative sample of major builders; Small and medium enterprises (SME's), agents and developers who were known to have sites within the Borough. We identified 50 organisations to contact by telephone. Although the return was 22%, this was of a similar scale to responses from other local authorities in the region whom had conducted similar surveys. In addition, at a Suffolk level, information arising from such surveys is being collated to understand the broad picture in Suffolk as a whole which is being passed to Government via the Suffolk Growth Programme Board.
- 4.2 Generally, large scale infrastructure projects, investment and development in the vicinity of Ipswich appears to be unaffected by COVID19. Such as highway works on

the A140; large development sites such as Brightwell Lakes, located adjacent to the A12, which is a new community to the east of Ipswich providing up to 2,000 dwellings and its associated infrastructure including schools, outdoor recreational space, sports facilities and highways improvements.

- 4.3 Ipswich Borough Council has a dedicated Major Projects team working on bringing forward development at the Ipswich Garden Suburb (IGS). The team remains fully staffed and is working closely with the developers of the garden suburb to progress the development. However, the IGS project has been affected by Covid19. In the short term, COVID19 has impacted anticipated delivery timescales and any additional impact is unquantifiable at this time, although all parties remain fully committed the scheme and are actively progressing discharges of condition and reserved matter approvals.
- 4.4 Outline planning permission was granted for two applications on 31st January 2020 for 1,100 and 815 homes respectively. The Council was successful in its bid to Homes England for £9.8m of Housing Infrastructure Funding (HIF) through the Marginal Viability Funding route. The funding will deliver essential infrastructure at IGS in the form of two railway bridges (one vehicular, and one ped/cycle) and a country park. All of the necessary legal agreements securing this funding are in place.
- 4.5 Owing to Covid19 and the effects on the supply chain, the milestones within the HIF legal agreements may be impacted. To this end IBC are in discussion with Homes England about how best to address this in order to take account of possible delays to the delivery of housing and infrastructure on Site.
- 4.6 In addition, the Council itself is actively pursuing its own development sites despite COVID19, such as the former Tooks Bakery Site which includes housing, (60 homes), and land for a new medical centre. Furthermore, the town-centre regeneration site of Grimwade Street where it will deliver a further 16 dwellings. It is clear that the Council has an important role in building business confidence, and it is exercising it.
- 4.7 One of the key issues is that there has been little take-up of Government grant and loan help related to Covid19 by the local building industry. It is unclear what the impact of this will be on build out rates, but this is surprising. It is difficult to know if this is repeated across the industry in Ipswich. Only 36% had taken these up and they tended to be the larger companies rather than the SME's.
- 4.8 There were concerns from some of the larger companies about the need to ensure supply chains (including staff availability at consultants, developers, architects, and construction workers) were operating effectively before recommencing on site. This would have an impact on build out timings. In addition, some of the Government restrictions regarding on-site working safely were identified as likely to have an issue on the speed of build-out rates despite the Government increasing hours of working.

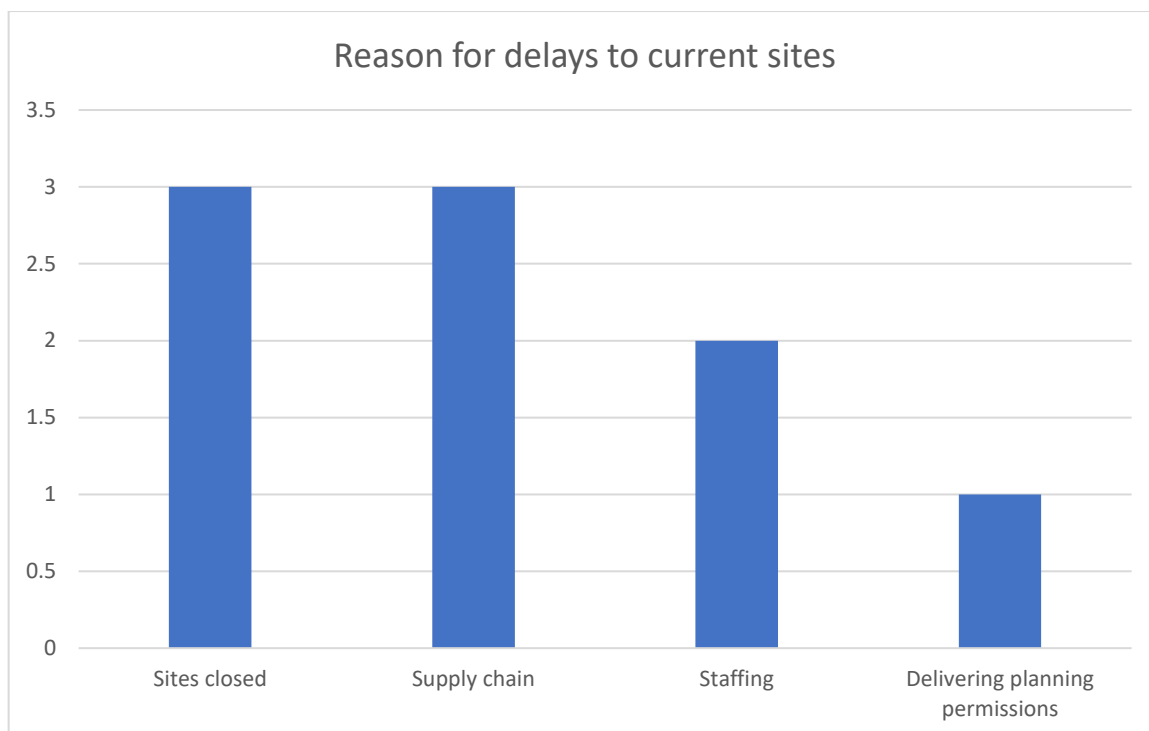


Table 1 - The responses to the questionnaire show given reasons for delays (x axis) and number of responses (y axis).

- 4.9 Some identified the speed of the local plan production as a major issue for their sites and others had concern around bank lending despite historically low Bank of England interest rates.
- 4.10 Some felt that the extension of the time that planning permissions are live needed further extension, so that developers could progress sites effectively taking into account any delays that were outside their direct control.
- 4.11 A number of respondents expected impact but were unable to quantify it yet. However, 75% of those interviewed with active sites expected there to be delays in building programmes as a result of the Pandemic.
- 4.12 Of those interviewed only two companies (ie 18% of respondents) said they had to furlough staff directly, although three (27%) suggested that some of their contractors/clients had had to. This probably relates to responses that were waiting for supply chains to be operating effectively.
- 4.13 50% of those interviewed with sites coming forward in the next 5 years expect there to be delays and 37.5% have suggested potential delays. The most common reasons given for this include market uncertainty and business confidence, issues with bank lending, supply chain issues, working restrictions and progression of the Local Plan.
- 4.14 64% of those interviewed suggest that they expect initiatives to help future housing delivery will be required. The most common examples given include the Housing

Infrastructure Fund (HIF) and assistance with issues surrounding archaeology for example, and up-front survey work. This is something that we are considering. This issue has also been identified in the Housing Delivery Action Plan.

- 4.15 There was some lack of economic confidence expressed, particularly by smaller companies. The building industry traditionally is well known to be one of the first areas of the economy to react to economic concerns. Should the absorption rate fall, there would be a significant impact on the rate of new homes in any given year and this can impact on affordable housing levels.

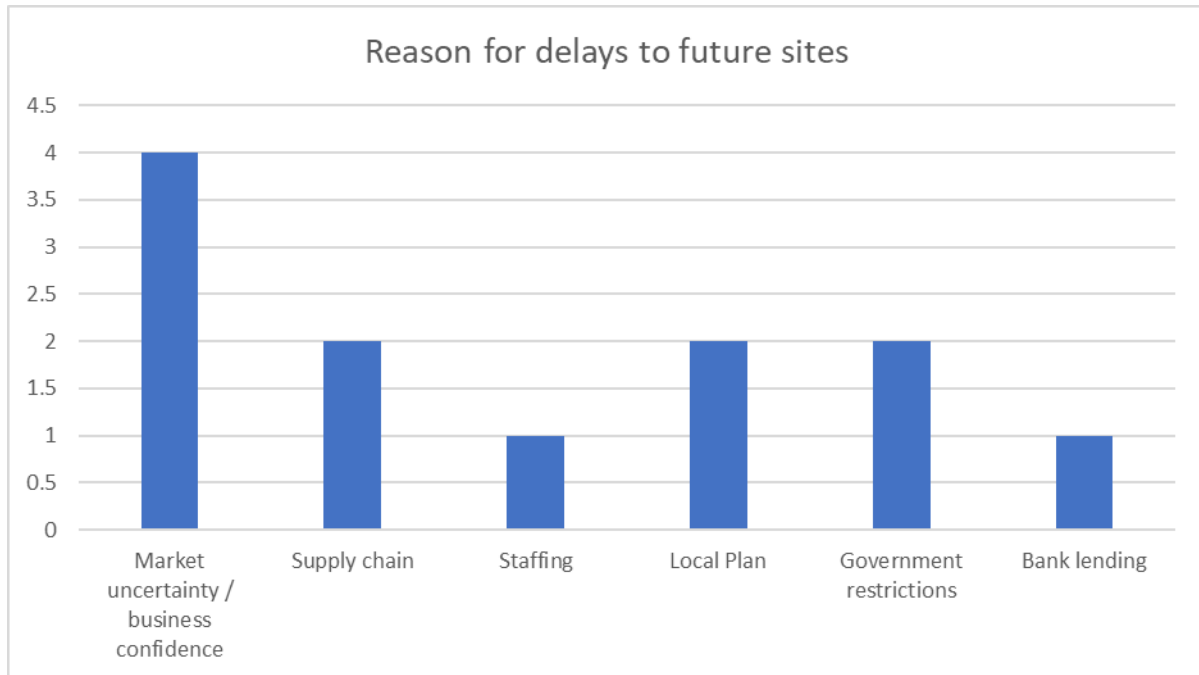


Table 2 – reasons given by respondents to expected delays to future sites (x axis) and number of responses (y axis)

- 4.16 This said, the Government is significantly investing in transport infrastructure nationally and Ipswich Borough is also continuing its current building programme which aims to deliver its objective of 1,000 homes in 10 years as outlined in the 2017 Corporate Plan 'Building a Better Ipswich'. Both these initiatives are examples to build business confidence.
- 4.17 Whilst this is only a snapshot in time and based on a sample of businesses, it is important to understand the initial impact of COVID19 as the country and Ipswich start to move out of lockdown. This will continue to be monitored by the Borough Council as business moves forward. We plan to repeat the survey in November/December which will have given time for the 'new normal' to have bedded down.

Appendix 1 – Questionnaire for the local building industry

Ipswich Borough Council survey for Developers and Registered Providers to establish the impact of Covid-19 on housing delivery and the housing market

In response to the Covid-19 crisis, Ipswich Borough Council is contacting developers and registered providers who are active within the Borough to try and establish the impact of the current restrictions on the house building industry.

The information gathered will help the Council to further understand the implications of Covid-19 related restrictions on the current housing market and future housing delivery, allowing identification of the main issues being faced by house builders and the possible effect this will have on the Borough’s 5 year housing supply and Housing Delivery Action Plan.

In order to gather this information, we will be asking a short series of questions. If you do not wish to take part in the survey, then there is no obligation to do so. Any information you give us will not be identifiable in any published report.

Company Name and Contact:

Questions and prompts	Answers
<p>1. How many people does your business currently employ?</p>	
<p>2. How have the current Covid-19 restrictions impacted your business to date?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Closure of building sites • Delays to construction work on site • Staff redundancies/furloughing • Issues with access to skilled labour • Issues with supply chains and accessing materials • Issues with cash flow • Issues with paying/collecting invoices 	
<p>3. How do you anticipate the impact of the restrictions will affect your business over the next 6 months to a year?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Site viability • Site completion • Housing demand • Sales/profit • Sale completions • Property marketing • Workforce e.g. shielding/homeworking 	

<p>4. Do you have any active development sites within the Borough?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Project name • Location • Size • Programme 	
<p>5. Is the current programme still your intention?</p>	
<p>6. If not, why has the situation changed and what is your new intention?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supplier issues • Staffing • Site conditions 	
<p>7. Do you have any other sites in the Borough which should be coming forward in the next 5 years?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location • Size • Programme 	
<p>8. If yes, how do you expect Covid-19 will affect the programme for bringing these sites forward?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delays? • How long? 	
<p>9. Are you using any of the Government initiatives to keep your business going or to help you recover?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Furloughing • Loans • Grants 	
<p>10. Do you expect to need further interventions to aid housing delivery?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Housing Infrastructure Fund 	

10b If yes, for what specifically – dealing with a physical constraint? Providing infrastructure?	
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If you are concerned about the effects of the Covid-19 restrictions on your business, you can visit <https://www.ipswich.gov.uk/businessratesgrant> for advice on whether you are eligible for a Government business grant and information on how to apply.

In order to understand the changing effects of the Covid-19 restrictions we would like to contact you for regular monthly updates. If you would not like to receive any further contact then please let us know.

