

# NAVIGATING COVID-19 THE CHANGE

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## MADANO MINDSET SERIES

**An Expert Viewpoint | April 2020**

Madano has been supporting regeneration, development projects and infrastructure deployment for over 15 years. In that time, we've seen significant change in many aspects of stakeholder engagement.

But with the COVID-19 pandemic, are we about to see a fundamental shift in how we engage with communities and stakeholders around development proposals?

Edition 2 in our Madano Mindset Series explores the potential for the start of a revolution in planning consultation and engagement.

We must also ensure that proposals are not simply mothballed, because conventional consultation methods are not currently effective.

The Government's chief planner advocated an 'innovative approach using options to continue work and continue with consultations', so we've taken a look at a few examples of how we can rethink communication strategies within consultation that may help move projects forward during this challenging time.

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The Coronavirus Act 2020, equips local authorities with new powers to hold public meetings virtually.

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Rather than accepting the fears that Government social distancing measures and the wider concerns around COVID-19 will distract from rigorous review, challenge and debate around planning proposals by communities and core stakeholders, perhaps there are plenty of opportunities to transform conventional consultation phases into rich digital conversations.

We don't have all the answers, but we'd love to hear from you or just continue the conversation.  
Please contact us via [andrew.turner@madano.com](mailto:andrew.turner@madano.com)



## **Edition 2: A revolution in planning virtual consultation and engagement?**

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With the implementation of the Government guidelines to stay at home and work from home unless absolutely necessary, overnight conventional consultation strategies and engagement programmes have become ineffective, non-compliant and put project timelines at risk.

Whilst the absolutely necessary social distancing and lockdowns are forcing us to all work differently and engage online, when we re-think consultation activities we believe there are a number of phases to consider.

Rather than think of this as a burden, better to embrace the positives opportunities. For example, how can we digitise engagement to reach new audiences that have not traditionally ever been captured in village halls and maildrops.

We've looked at these six aspects:

- 1. Appraising the impact of the change** – How does your planned engagement programme deliver its objectives during this 'disruptive phase' which are the major areas affected?
- 2. Engage early - we are all finding our feet** - Engage early with local planning authorities and/or the Planning Inspectorate – we are all finding our feet here, maintaining a positive dialogue can help all parties understand the impacts of COVID-19 and mitigation measures. Discussing options and thinking through possibilities with officers can help to build confidence that new approaches remain accessible to the whole community.
- 3. Restructuring the programme?** – Rather than simply waiting it out, it may be possible to re-programme consultation phases during this COVID-19 outbreak, but we must make sure planning authorities are comfortable with proposed changes and we take them with us.
- 4. Engaging with stakeholders in new ways** – Going out to consultation in this new landscape is different and often will be breaking new ground. As well as using new channels, we must ensure we build in additional time for consultees to adapt to this new way of working and keep stakeholders confident in the accessibility of the programme, without becoming mired in unnecessary delay and procrastination. It is a fine balance to strike.

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The Government's chief planner noted in his March 2020 newsletter forward thinking around adapting to COVID-19 and working out new ways to manage the planning process.

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5. **Ensure there is a feedback loop to capture omissions or special interest groups** – As this is a new way of working, we need to ensure we have reviews and amendment windows planned into our programme to capture special interest groups or different elements of feedback and recognise how we address them. Engaging in a different way is likely to produce feedback we have not received before and in new formats.
6. **Adjusting to the ‘new reality’** – Delivering consultation and engagement in this way breaking new ground, we know that the media, stakeholders and opponents to schemes may add new scrutiny to a project. Ensuring our strategy is accessible, justifiable and compliant will make sure additional scrutiny does not become a showstopper.

Most importantly it may require a change in mindset from developers, local authorities, communities and key stakeholders to ensure we get ‘good planning’ not simply a charter for either roughshod development nor unmitigated NIMBYism.

So, what do we think?

- It is clear that during the lockdown, conventional consultation programmes anchored around village hall exhibitions and public information points are no longer suitable, authentic or responsible when the majority of the UK is being advised to stay at home.
- We are seeing local authorities adapting to the ‘new reality’ and starting to host committee meetings using videoconferencing following the approval of new powers by UK Government. However, this is early days and there are still teething problems, but with the right will and mindset, they can be overcome!
- Various statutory consultees are also getting to grips with the changes too, understanding where surveying and reporting can adapt to social distancing and the lockdown, while giving developers flexibility.
- We believe it is vitally important that developers continue talking with core stakeholders to work together to understand challenges and deploy new ways of bringing developments to committee compliantly. Local authorities are, in the more progressive environments, receptive to changes in the way consultations are conducted but applicants need to take officers on the journey and share the thinking behind how they feel a new way of consulting will be appropriate and accessible for communities.
- Restructuring consultation periods to reflect the current lockdowns can tap into modern technology and smarter ways to share information. However, these changes can be unsettling for communities and we must recognise that stakeholders may need additional time to digest and review information.
- Using digital platforms for project information can enable stakeholders to collaborate more effectively. Although we must remember that community members will not be meeting project teams face to face, and this means an increasing focus on making project information personable, relatable, easy to digest and as transparent as possible.



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- Thinking about the transition:
    - Village hall face to face exhibitions can become digital with presentations to communities with video conferencing, fly throughs, websites designed to walk stakeholders through project information before feedback is welcomed.
    - Face to face meetings with persons with an interest in land, community stakeholders or statutory consultees can take place over pre-arranged telephone sessions – supplemented by traditional mailing drops of information via postal services that continue to operate within the Government's guidelines.
    - Interest groups can meet collaboratively over videoconferencing and projects can support recognised community groups by providing the platform for them to meet.
    - Digital information hosting platforms can enable stakeholders to review, comment and critique documents by attaching sticky-notes directly to the documents.
    - This can be supported with online newspaper and social media advertising of the consultation sessions.
  - Most solutions are scalable and flexible, but developers should engage with local planning authorities, and where relevant the Planning Inspectorate early in the development of community engagement programmes to ensure that new ways of working are relevant, accessible and appropriate to the proposed development.
  - Whilst this is all very positive, we should still remember that as we transition our consultation activity online to continue the conversation, we should keep in our minds that not all stakeholders choose to, or, have access to internet. We must ensure our consultation activity remains accessible by keeping hard copies, mailing lists and telephones in our strategies.
  - We must also recognise that in a digital setting, it will be ever more important to make and respond to criticism and challenge effectively and transparently. It is incumbent on all parties to challenge and be heard – and perhaps the emphasis should be on the listening to ensure we get well-thought through, high-quality and appropriate planning outcomes – where positive or not.
- 1st virtual planning committee - Kensington and Chelsea Council was the first council to hold a first fully virtual planning committee since the new regulations came into force.
- Local authorities across the UK are encouraging the use of aerial and drone photography to replace site visits and inspections.



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Madano has over 15 years' experience working with project teams on landmark, contentious and iconic projects in the public eye. Our development and regeneration team can support your project with:

- Project branding, messaging and reputation management
- Insight and intelligence around projects and stakeholders
- Stakeholder and consultation strategy development
- Stakeholder engagement and consultation phase programme delivery
- Analysis of feedback and drafting of consultation reports

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