

## AECOM are undertaking virtual site visits during the Covid-19 crisis

### AECOM pioneers keep neighbourhood plan moving despite Covid-19

Site visits are a crucial element in many of the Neighbourhood Plan evidence gathering activities, including the technical support packages delivered by AECOM. They help neighbourhood plan groups to tell their consultant what the local issues are; give a sense of the area's context; and explain what makes the neighbourhood special. With travel restrictions now in place, it is important to preserve the value of the local knowledge shared by the group with their consultants as effectively as possible.

Fortunately, AECOM and Locality's recent deployment in the use of MS Teams, with co-use of online tools such as Google Street View, are allowing site visits to go ahead without in-person travel. In ordinary times, Nick Beedie and Lee Wood, two urban designers based in AECOM's Manchester office, would have coordinated an in-person site visit with a group in Morecambe, only 60 miles away. Yet today, travel from the city of Manchester to the scenic and historic coastal resort of Morecambe is restricted.

Adapting quickly to the travel restrictions in place to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic, the group and the AECOM team of consultants arranged a virtual site visit for the town's Design Codes project on 27th March with a well-planned online alternative. This virtual site visit proposal was welcomed by the group who had been instrumental in its realisation (special thanks to John Bates, steering group chair). The AECOM team wish to share their tips with other groups about how to make a virtual site visit successful which are useful whether working with AECOM or your own consultants.

### 1 – Schedule a test-run

It goes without saying that it is best to trial online software that may be new to you prior to your important first meeting. Take the opportunity to schedule a run-through Microsoft Teams session (or whatever alternative software you are

using) with your consultants to discuss the proposed virtual site visit. Provide email addresses for all participants to your consultants and ensure that they have the right web browsers. It is better to anticipate such teething problems than have them occur unexpectedly on the day. Key recommendation: make sure everyone can join online with minimal technical difficulty!

## **2 – Make sure you are on the same page**

The shared-screen function of Microsoft Teams, or similar software, enables you to go on this journey together and collaboration between you as the local tour guides and your consultants will add a wealth of insights to the benefit of the project. Also consider having other relevant documents open in the background so that they can be readily brought up on screen for reference and to inform discussion. For example, we know that some of the Street View imagery is out of date so think in advance about what has changed.

## **3 – Plan your route and site visit activities**

When you are having your kick-off meeting, anticipate how the virtual site visit session will work in advance. There may be many places and issues to cover, particularly in larger settlements with several distinct areas. Having a route and schedule in place will help to keep things running smoothly.

Engage your consultant and wider group members about collaboratively designing a route which focusses on key areas and features in a systematic way. Discuss the roles people will take during the virtual site visit, such the Google Street View ‘pilot’ and the designated ‘tour guide’. Key recommendation: Not all places are covered or updated in online mapping so test the route to see if key sites and locations appear as required.

## **4 – Engage your group – commentary is king!**

When undertaking a virtual site visit with a larger group it is valuable to include breaks during the tour for wider discussions, workshop activities or questions to the group which maintain engagement. On the Morecambe virtual site visit, the town was covered systematically from the west to east. Prior to the session, the group annotated the planned route with places that deserved special attention. They also took pauses along the route to discuss key developments, landmarks, public spaces and sites, facilitating important conversations.

Key recommendation: maximise airtime for your group members, as the local experts, to deliver as much commentary and information as possible.

Finally, embrace and enjoy the challenges of new working methods. Both AECOM and the group came away from the virtual site visit feeling they had been able to share key local insights from Morecambe. They successfully adapted to the new online landscape in a way that will allow us all to keep progressing with work on neighbourhood plans during this difficult time.

Before you start just make sure you are content that the virtual tools you are using to gather evidence will give you something robust. After that, you are good to go!

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