

Building control post-COVID podcast transcript

Hannah Peck: COVID-19 has changed the world we live in but one of the few positives to have come out of the pandemic is the way we have adapted to this new reality. How we work and interact with one another has changed, and industries have had to adapt too.

In the fifth episode of this series of podcasts, we will be looking at how COVID-19 has changed the building control industry. Joining me to provide an insight is Jane Keely, one of the directors of Assent Building Control, a UK-wide corporate building control approved inspector.

Hi Jane. Thanks so much for joining me. How are you doing today?

Jane Keely: I'm good. Thanks for inviting me. It's a lovely day here in Yorkshire.

Hannah: Great. Are you all right if I just head straight into the first question? How has the building control industry changed in the post-COVID world?

Jane: I'd say construction certainly didn't stop when the pandemic hit. It did slow down during the first lockdown - there was a lack of materials - but construction has continued to grow massively. Since May 2020, we've seen a huge rise in the number of projects.

There's been different types of projects coming in, particularly early on in the pandemic. We saw hospitals submitting applications for converting wards into specialist COVID wards. There's still also the programme of changing flammable cladding on high-rise buildings, following the tragedy at Grenfell.

This programme was combined with a difficulty in obtaining some of the materials that they needed for that. Brexit's also had an impact on that. We did find that we had to recheck some of the specifications of the materials that were being submitted due to difficulty in obtaining that material.

We've also found a lot of people are not spending money on going away on holidays and they're working from home so there's a desire to extend or do home alterations and improvements to enable them to home-work. What we have got is a real shortage of competent approved inspectors in the industry. All of that combined means that we're extremely busy. We're enjoying it, but we're extremely busy.

Hannah: It's good to hear that the industry is doing well because you don't hear that often when talking about COVID. How quick do you feel that the industry was to adapt during the crisis?

Jane: I think people, the surveyors particularly, adapted very quickly to the new way of working with building control. Surveyors do a combination of their check-in plans in an office, or on a laptop or out on-site. Prior to the pandemic, the surveyors already were flexible in their working methods. They'd go out, do their safety inspections and then come home rather than going all the way back into the office.

If they were closer to home, they would just log in from home and be able to continue working from home. So, very little change for them. At Assent, our systems are internet-based so we have online project-tracking. The challenge for us really was to move our support staff to home-working as well. We've got time-bound legal documents that we need to issue such as initial notices or final certificates. Our administrators and our finance

departments had to move to home-work as well. They did that very successfully and it's been great. They've done a fantastic job.

We appointed three degree-level apprentices who were on the UCEM building control pathway and that recruitment process started in 2019. So those young people had to deal with finishing their A levels from home and not knowing how their exams would go and then we didn't know how they'd be able to start with us. But we did manage to get them into the office in September where they worked with us through until December in the office environment.

Then we had the third lockdown after Christmas so they had to work from home. They adapted brilliantly. We have multiple mentors for our apprentices and they liaised with them during the lockdown and we were able to provide them with online training via Microsoft Teams. So, we very much embraced the technology to help our young people coming through.

Hannah: I feel like Microsoft Teams has definitely helped and saved people through these various lockdowns. It's good to hear that the apprentices were able to go into the office for a little bit, at least to see what it was like.

A lot of people listening to this podcast might be new to the industry or just listening in to hear what it's like. What kind of working life can they expect to have if they're entering into the profession?

Jane: Yes, that certainly is one of the challenges that we have: not many people know much about building control. We're trying to work on that. We're trying to get to speak to other people, to young people, in particular, to let them know a bit more about what we do.

It's a very busy career, but very interesting. It's never boring. I'd say the difference between ourselves and architects or quantity surveyors is they will have a number of projects that they're dealing with which will be much smaller. They might have three or four projects that they're working on at any given time whereas we would be dealing with up to a hundred or so projects in various stages.

We don't go into the same detail as architects and quantity surveyors, but we do have to manage that volume to make sure we keep up to speed with what's happening on any site. That's why we've got a bespoke document control sensor as it helps to support our surveyors in project management. There's an alert system to show staff where projects are up to, when they need to visit or carry out, for example, consultations with fire authorities. It could be one day you are dealing with somebody having a new conservatory built on the back of the house or an extension on the back of their house. The same day you could go to a multimillion-pound hospital.

It's never ever boring. There are always new challenges even after more than 30 years in the industry. There's always something new.

Hannah: That does sound great. It sounds like you've got to be someone that can juggle lots of different things and have your head in different places. I didn't personally know a huge amount about building control so that's a very good overview, thank you.

Another question: how do you think that COVID will change the built environment in the long term?

Jane: I think that investment in technology and teams will play a big part. Remote inspections will become more prevalent in the industry. When you go on-site, you're looking

around and your experience and your knowledge tells you where you should be looking and what things you need to look at. But we have found particularly during the first lockdown that you can do a very effective remote inspection using Microsoft Teams, for example, where you can speak to that person in a meeting when they've got their phone, and you can ask them to walk over to a certain area and show you what they've done in that area.

It's not relevant for all inspections. Some definitely still do need a person there on-site to assess the conditions of the ground, for example, but remote inspections definitely will be playing a part and, now we use Microsoft Teams, it means that we can speak to the design team and the contractor who is on-site and share plans on the screen. That's definitely something I can see we'll be doing more of in the future.

In terms of the actual buildings, I think the adage of 'insulate tight and ventilate right' will be more critical than ever in spaces such as classrooms and auditoriums or pubs, for example. Where people are congregating, they will need to make sure that they are sufficiently ventilated to minimize the risk of the spread of COVID, however, we still have the climate crisis, so the ventilation needs to be balanced against keeping the spaces at a comfortable temperature without too much heating or cooling.

So, there's things like MVHR, which is mechanical ventilation with heat recovery systems. They're going to be in greater demand, so we'll probably see more of those. You still extract the stale air out, with it potentially having COVID in it, but heat exchanges are used to keep the new air coming in to warm it up or cool it down because it works both ways. I think that kind of system could really be vital going forward with COVID.

Hannah: Very interesting. Lots of challenges trying to balance out the environmental impact and making sure it's COVID-friendly. I haven't really thought about that.

So, do you have to be the person that would have to make the decision, or would you be advising the client?

Jane: The client would put the design together, but we would check that it was efficient in terms of the carbon emissions and that there was proper ventilation. That's definitely part of our role.

Hannah: Your job actually has quite a lot of responsibility because you make the say on what clients are allowed to do. That's quite a lot of weight on your shoulders.

Jane: It is. The awful tragedy of Grenfell really made people realise how much responsibility building control has and what can happen if it does go wrong. Ultimately, it's something we want to stop ever happening again.

Hannah: Of course. Can I ask you how the pandemic has personally affected the way you work?

Jane: My husband is also in building control for Assent so we're in the same place. Like a lot of people, we had to adapt our home to give us both space to work from home and keep away from each other during the working day, which I think is very common with a lot of people.

It does have the benefit though, that because we're both in the same industry, we can discuss technical issues together. Some people who are on the road, or don't have somebody who is in the same profession as they are can find it quite isolating because there's no one to bounce ideas and technical issues off. That again is where technology can

come into play because you can share your screen with someone and show a plan or an extract from a planner and a photograph.

Hannah: Can I ask one final question? Why do you think someone should consider a career in building control? This is your chance to do the sales pitch!

Jane: It's a great career. There's lots of flexibility and room to develop. We're very short of young people coming into the industry so I would encourage people to look into it and ask questions. Certainly, feel free to give me a call if you wanted to know more about building control.

There are transferable skills, a lot of problem-solving required and attention to detail. You need to be quite pragmatic and technical. The regulations are constantly changing so you do need to have that thirst for continual improvement.

It's great because you can specialise if you have a particular interest in fire safety or thermal efficiency or disabled access. All of those areas you cover in your career, but people do go on, once they've qualified, to become experts in certain areas. This means they can help their colleagues with their particular knowledge on the areas that interests them.

I recently spoke about women in construction. There's a loss of skills and aptitude that work well in construction. And certainly, it's not something to be frightened of. It's a very welcoming industry. I've found it a great career to have.

More females and more young people are what the industry needs.

Hannah: What a great way to finish the podcast. Thank you so much for joining me. It's really interesting to hear about building control and about what you do

Thanks so much for your time and insight today, it's really appreciated. If you're listening to this and are interested in learning more about building control, then take a look at our building control degree on our website - www.ucem.ac.uk. Thanks for listening!