

# Doing Planning Differently

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The Department for Levelling Up,  
Housing and Communities (DLUHC)  
Digital Planning Programme



Department for Levelling Up,  
Housing & Communities



# Introduction from Rachel Maclean MP

Minister of State (Housing and Planning) at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC)

## The DLUHC Digital Planning Programme aims to enable a modern and efficient planning system in England.

The programme will shift a documents-based system to one that is data-driven, standards-based, and powered by modern user-centred products and services.

This will speed up the planning process with improved decision-making, faster plan-making, greater access to planning data and wider local community engagement.

We believe the planning system should deliver the things that communities need, making places liveable, sustainable, and beautiful. It should be trusted by communities, who should be empowered and able to engage with what gets built and where.

To do this, the system needs to be faster, more efficient and more certain. It needs to be clearer to citizens, communities and developers what the rules and permissions are to enable a better conversation about what land is allocated and what is built.

Although central government sets national planning requirements and policies, planning is delivered by over 300 Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) alongside wider public organisations and the private sector.

DLUHC's Digital Planning Programme values innovation and collaboration with LPAs and industry partners spanning digital, data, property technology (PropTech) and property development.



**The planning system needs to be faster, more efficient and more certain. It should be trusted by communities, who should be empowered and able to engage with what gets built and where.**

All these stakeholders, along with local communities, play an important role in supporting DLUHC's Digital Planning team to design, co-create and deliver digital and data transformation. Collaborating with planning officers through agile working practices and the development of digital tools, platforms and systems is key to how we approach the programme.

The programme has directly supported over 70 councils to date through funding streams such as the PropTech Innovation Fund and the Planning Software Improvement Fund.

This has allowed LPAs to launch new citizen-facing digital planning services, improve their back-end systems and increase citizen engagement with planning.

In 2022 the programme launched a new national planning data platform: [planning.data.gov.uk](https://planning.data.gov.uk)

This is being used to help build software and services that support planning officers to make faster, better-informed decisions.

Here we set out DLUHC's vision for how the programme will deliver on four key digital planning outcomes - to make plan making faster and more effective, improve decision making for development, give better access to planning data and improve local community engagement.

**Rachel Maclean MP**  
Minister of State (Housing and Planning)

The DLUHC Digital Planning Programme



# Problems with the current planning system

The current planning system is slow and inefficient due to its limited use of digital tools and the high number of paper-based processes.

This makes information hard to access for both government and citizens wishing to get a full and accurate picture of housing and planning needs, and for the private sector to build useful and innovative services.



For some applicants it can take **Over 70 hours** to prepare and submit a planning application.

Up to 50% of planning applications are invalid on submission.

Each invalid application causes on average **34 days of delay...** ...straining planning authority resources.

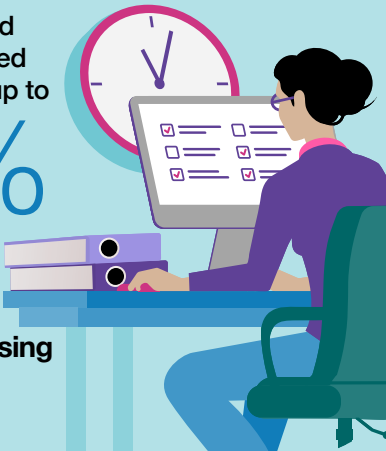
The majority of planning applications are 'straightforward' homeowner applications for things like extensions and changes of use.

But outdated and often paper-based methods mean up to

**50%**

of planning officer time is spent on manual processing and dealing with errors.

This takes capacity away from the development of larger (minor, major and strategic) schemes.



## THE SLOW AND FRUSTRATING APPLICATIONS PROCESS IS HAVING AN IMPACT ON THE INDUSTRY

In 2008, over

**70%**

of planners worked in the public sector



By 2018, only

**56%**

of planners worked in the public sector



## THE IMPACT ALSO EXTENDS TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Only around a third

of local authorities have adopted a Local Plan within the last five years.

The Royal Town Planning Institute believes that less than 1% of the population of a district engage in the development of their Local Plan in the current system.

## ACCORDING TO A GROVESNOR REPORT

Only **7%**



of citizens trust local planning authorities to make decisions in the best interest of the local community.

This lack of trust can result in citizens missing opportunities to engage with councils consulting on plans for development, that could be beneficial to the area.

## Digital Planning in numbers

### The problem

Up to  
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of planning  
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There are  
**34**  
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Engagement with the  
development of Local  
Plans can be less than  
**1%** of a  
district's  
population

**50%**  
of planning officer  
time is spent on  
'straightforward'  
homeowner  
applications

Local Plans take  
an average of  
**7 years**  
to produce

### The digital opportunity

Faster plan making:

From **7** to **30**  
years months

**20%**  
Minimum amount of time  
saved for planners working in  
development management

 Better access  
to planning and  
housing data

 Improved local  
community  
engagement  
with planning

### Programme deliverables

 Central  
Government  
funding to enable  
Local Planning  
Authority digital  
transformation

 Modern,  
easy to use  
development  
management  
services

**5** new planning  
data powers  
proposed in the  
Levelling Up and  
Regeneration Bill

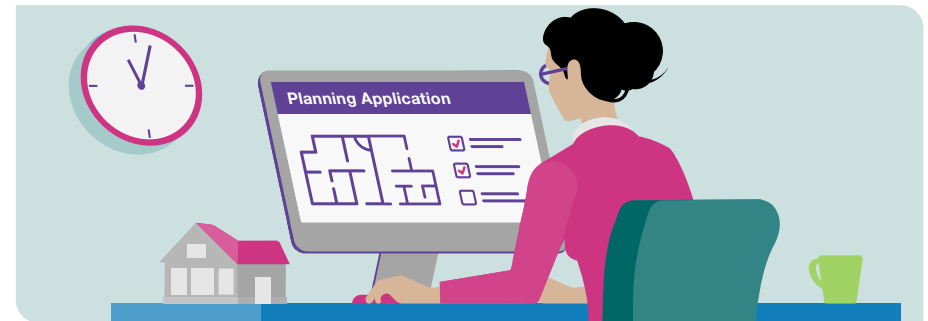
 A new national  
planning data  
platform

# How Digital Planning can help fix these problems

The programme's four key outcomes will shift the current documents-based system to one that is powered by data and modern user-centred products and services.



**Better access to planning data**



**Faster and more efficient planning decisions**



**Improved local community engagement**



**Simpler, faster, more accessible plan making**

# Better access to planning data



**We have built a national planning data platform. This will allow faster, more informed decision-making for central and local government that is based on up to date and easily accessible data. It will also empower the private sector including PropTech companies to develop innovative tools that create more efficient and productive housing and planning markets.**

Our data infrastructure work is the foundation of the modernisation of England's planning system, standardising the way planning information is submitted, processed and published.

We aim to create data flows through the planning, housing and land ecosystems that will increase productivity and create more efficient processes, which will help with faster and better-informed decision making.

Lack of data is the biggest barrier to creating new services. Planning is devolved to hundreds of different organisations which include local authorities, national parks and development corporations, and in some cases even neighbourhoods.

It is currently very difficult to know what data exists and where to find it. The data is not accessible, it takes a lot of work to make it usable, and there aren't consistent standards which means the data cannot be relied on.

In addition, because of a lack of open data, anyone creating a new planning service must start from the beginning each time and local authorities are often unaware of existing tools and services on offer.

The current lack of interoperability between different planning services used by local authorities has a negative impact on the whole system, from applicants to the private and public sector, resulting in a poor user experience for planning officers, applicants and local communities.

For example, planning officers have to regularly perform repetitive administrative tasks like manually re-entering planning information into different parts of the process, and applicants find it hard to know what information is required in their application. Local communities are also impacted as the potential benefits of proposed developments are not clear.

DLUHC's Digital Planning Programme has developed a **data platform** which collects data from different sources and makes it available in national datasets which can be downloaded or built upon using an Application Programming Interface (API). The platform is an index that signposts where the data came from and provides feedback on the data itself and the technical data standards.

Bringing the data together and displaying it in this way allows central government to work closely with local authorities, planning policy teams and the growing PropTech sector to design data which meets the needs of users and planning professionals.



#### Key outcomes will include:

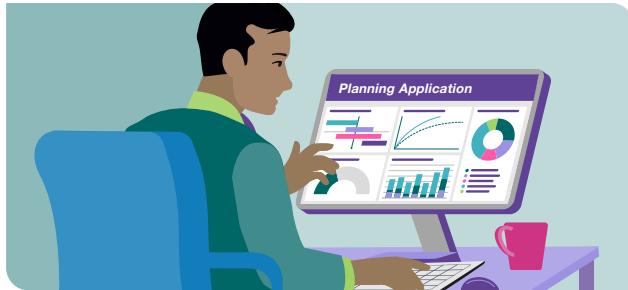
- Local authorities using modern, data-driven digital planning services such as those being developed through the DLUHC funded **Open Digital Planning** project.
- Creating data flows that will increase productivity and create more efficient processes, including a faster development process.
- Increasing trust between communities, local authorities and property developers.
- Planning officers making better informed decisions based on their community's needs.
- The PropTech sector growing and providing more innovative tools and services to drive local authority efficiency.

Since launching [planning.data.gov.uk](https://planning.data.gov.uk) we have been focused on scaling to increase the types of data available and support more LPAs to provide data. Alongside the creation of data standards, we help more people find, understand, use and trust the data they need to build digital planning services.



**Paul Downey**  
Planning Data Service Owner –  
DLUHC Digital Planning Programme

# Faster and more efficient planning decisions



**We are building modern services for submitting and approving planning applications in collaboration with local authorities and delivery partners. These services will speed up decision-making for planning officers and applicants.**

Due to better use of data and more flexible technologies, LPAs will have more choice on development management software in the market.

DLUHC is working with LPAs and technology companies to modernise the software used for submitting and managing planning applications, making processes data-driven and efficient.

The planning system in England still makes limited use of digital tools and many citizens find it difficult to understand. Many planning teams rely on software that needs upgrading or has not kept pace with wider technology change. As a result, council officers spend avoidable time on manual processing and admin tasks. Our work aims to improve the user-experience for people applying for planning permission, and to reduce errors, time and costs for local planning officers.

DLUHC's Digital Planning Programme has been working with LPA planners to translate complicated planning legislation into machine-readable rules.

These rules can then be incorporated into modern software and services which are able to reuse data, putting the needs of users at their heart to 'design out' common mistakes.

Collecting data from different sources and making it available consistently in national datasets via [planning.data.gov.uk](https://planning.data.gov.uk) makes it possible to create modern, open source software which can be used not only by the LPAs DLUHC currently funds, but others looking to adopt new (or improve their current) services.



Our ambition is to enable the creation of modern planning software which leverages value from data and digital technologies to provide better services for citizens and local planning authority officers.



We have demonstrated that innovative software and citizen-facing services designed around users and data-led approaches can be co-created by central government, Local Planning Authorities and the private sector, launching three end-to-end, open source services this way.

**Matt Wood-Hill**

Head of Digital Planning Software –  
DLUHC Digital Planning Programme

#### Key outcomes will include:

- More LPAs in England using modern software that enables them to make planning decisions at least 20% faster.
- Digital planning services providing a better experience for applicants, building certainty, trust and efficiency into the process of applying for planning permission.
- Greater flexibility in the planning software market, whereby different systems can connect to each other more easily and the flow of data is seamless, enabled by common data standards.
- Encouraging and enabling local authorities to develop new digital skills through funded project work.
- Ensuring that all funded project work can be reused by and benefit other organisations, both in the private and public sector.

#### The programme has two main tracks of work to achieve this vision:

- 1 Supporting a group of pioneering councils and digital agencies to develop new software products that prove that things can be done differently through the Open Digital Planning project. This visionary work champions planning services being designed by planners themselves. A submission tool called PlanX and the Back Office Planning System (BOPS) are currently in development.
- 2 Funding councils on projects which focus on collaboration with their existing software providers, to improve current products and develop the overall digital planning product ecosystem.



# Improved community engagement



**New community engagement guidance and toolkits for LPAs will support the adoption of digital tools used during the consultation process. This will support a hybrid approach to engagement that uses digital and traditional methods, increasing the quality and quantity of feedback to shape development in their local area.**

Through the PropTech Innovation Fund we are working with the PropTech sector to scale their services across LPAs.

Our vision is to support local government and the growing UK PropTech market to innovate and adopt digital approaches to engaging communities, which in turn streamline the planning process and help enable faster housing and infrastructure development.

The DLUHC Digital Planning Programme is working to transform how local authorities and the development industry use digital tools to enable more inclusive and diverse placemaking.

This work is helping to tackle fundamental problems in the current planning system, such as low levels of public engagement, complexity of planning information and the inefficiencies of working in a system where data cannot be easily accessed, analysed or shared.

By fostering and steering existing market offerings to accelerate the widespread adoption of digital tools by LPAs, barriers to engagement with the planning system can be reduced and PropTech can act as a delivery vehicle for change and improved democracy.



Since launching in August 2021, DLUHC's PropTech Innovation Fund has invested over £8m in local authorities who are adopting a blend of digital and traditional tools to undertake more inclusive and efficient consultations in planning. The fund is the largest UK Government PropTech programme and has been globally recognised as a best practice case study in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) report on Global Trends on Government Innovation 2023.

As part of our approach to advocating for greater adoption, we have worked with the sector to publish case studies which bring these projects and their outcomes' to life. One example is where funded local authorities have increased engagement by up to 300%, developed new technology that is now being scaled by market leading companies and reached user groups who have not previously responded to planning in their local area. As the fund develops, we will continue to support LPAs and the sector to scale by sharing best practice and guidance with the wider planning industry.

### Key outcomes will include:

- Increased quantity of community participation in planning.

**Our funding and approach to driving adoption of Digital Citizen Engagement tools has been recognised as a catalyst to revolutionise the planning sector. With emerging outcomes and evidence now coming to life, we continue to scale learnings and impact across the sector.**

**Bridget Wilkins**

Head of Adoption, Engagement and Innovation – DLUHC Digital Planning Programme



**The programme's work to engage with and foster a thriving PropTech sector is an opportunity to support faster adoption of existing technologies and accelerate progress in the planning industry.**

**Jess Williamson**

PropTech Strategist – DLUHC Digital Planning Programme



- Increased quality (diversity) of community voices engaged in planning.
- Increased awareness about the benefits and trade-offs for new development to help enable faster housing and infrastructure development.
- Increased transparency between LPAs and their communities which can support a positive relationship and greater trust.
- Reduced planning officer time and resources to undertake consultations.

### Our ongoing engagement with stakeholders in the PropTech sector aims to:

- Accelerate adoption of innovative PropTech tools, the use of real time data and artificial intelligence.
- Bring insights into policymaking to ensure new policy is flexible and enables the innovation required to improve England's housing and planning systems.
- Provide confidence on the direction of government ambitions, to spur investment and growth in the UK PropTech market.

# Simpler, faster, more accessible plan making



**We will develop tools and guidance that ensures Local Plans are underpinned by good quality data, become simpler to produce and understand, are more accessible for users and can be adopted more quickly, with Local Plans in place in 30 months.**

Our ambition is to bring plan making into the digital age - to provide faster, simpler, more accessible plans that deliver better outcomes, informed by up-to-date data and shaped more actively by communities and other stakeholders.

This will support the development of well designed, sustainable places, reduce inefficiencies and provide greater consistency, transparency and certainty in plan making.

Reforming Local Plans will change users' experience for the better, whether they are a local authority planner creating a Local Plan, an inspector examining it, or a citizen or developer wanting to engage and shape its content.

We are learning from what is working and not working right now, to remove identified barriers wherever possible. We are building on digital tools, technologies and innovations from within our Digital Planning Programme and beyond, developing a range of guidance and tools to support the varying needs of all users involved in plan making.

This will allow planners to get Local Plans in place faster, ensure all parts of the community can engage more easily in shaping the content and provide greater consistency and transparency for planning inspectors to understand why decisions were made. Having up-to-date adopted Local Plans in place will provide the certainty and confidence that development will come forward that meets community needs. Our approach will ensure that even before a new system for plan making is fully developed, we can deliver plans more effectively.



Our key outcome is to support the delivery of Local Plans in 30 months.

**To achieve this, we are working with users to develop emerging tools and products, including:**

- Visualisation of plans, policies and spatial data.
- Templates, checklists and step-by-step guides to provide clarity and efficiencies.
- Standardisation of data.
- Dashboards for transparency and communication.
- Search tools to better access information.
- Automation tools and artificial intelligence to process and report.
- The sharing of best practice through case studies and blog posts.

**Local Plans direct development in every place and affect every community in our country.**

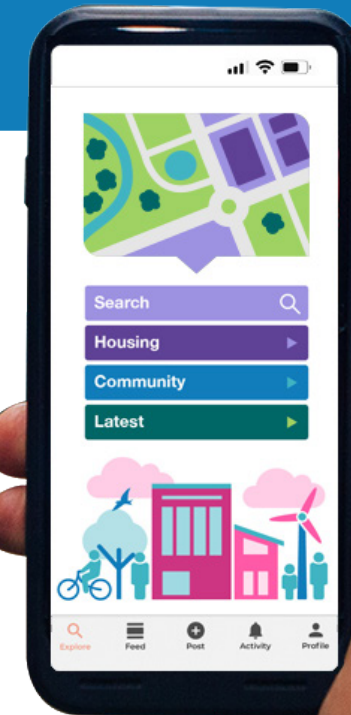
**Together we are developing digital tools and guidance that will ensure Local Plans can be delivered faster, are simpler to produce, and will show what is planned in local areas more transparently, so people can engage more easily and shape development that benefits all.**

**Adele Maher**

Head of Planning Transformation –  
DLUHC Digital Planning Programme



The pace of technological change means we need to be ambitious in our reforms whilst bringing those who use Local Plans on the journey. User needs will inform how we roll-out change and ensure local autonomy and market innovation remain pillars of the new Local Plans system.





# Contact us



You can contact the team by emailing [digitalplanningteam@levellingup.gov.uk](mailto:digitalplanningteam@levellingup.gov.uk)

We regularly post updates about our work on our [website](#), [LinkedIn](#), [Twitter/X](#), the [Open Digital Planning website](#) and our [data platform](#)

There is a plain text version of this document available on our [website](#). If you would like an alternative format please [email the team](#)

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## Sources for statistics referenced on pages 4 and 5 of this document:

[UK Government – Planning for the future White Paper \(2020\)](#)

[Reducing Invalid Planning Applications – Alpha report \(2020\)](#)  
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[Royal Town Planning Institute – Publication – Planning and public engagement: the truth and the challenge \(2017\)](#)

[Grosvenor – Discussion paper – Rebuilding Trust \(2019\)](#)

DLUHC internal document – Open Digital Planning Project – Reducing Invalid Planning Applications and Back Office Planning System benefits case (2020)