City of Westminster

# Planning & City Development Committee

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**Classification: General Release**

**Title: Digital Planning Options**

**Report of: Director of Place Shaping and Town Planning**

**Financial Summary: None.**

**Report Author and Contact Details: Oliver Gibson (ogibson@westminster.gov.uk/ 07971026919)**

## 1. Executive Summary

1.1 The digital planning technology ('plan tech') sector has expanded rapidly in recent years through greater understanding of the potential for technology to enhance the planning process and due to the availability of new sources of funding, such as the Government's Local Digital Fund. It is in this context that the Government's White Paper 'Planning for the Future' provides significant support for greater use of digital technology in planning.

1.2 In Pillar One, Proposal 6 of the White Paper Government sets out a raft of potential digital enhancements to the planning process, of which the key points are summarised below:

- Greater digitalisation of the application process to make it easier for applicants, especially those proposing smaller developments, to have certainty when they apply and engage with local planning authorities.
- Validation of applications should be integrated with the submission of the application so that the right information is provided at the start of the process.
- A new, more modular, software landscape to encourage digital innovation and provide access to underlying data should be introduced to help automate routine processes.
- Government undertakes to work with tech companies and local planning authorities to modernise the software used for case-managing a planning application.
- Introduce shorter and more standardised applications, where the amount of information required is reduced and made machine-readable.
- Planning registers should be data-rich so that planning application information can be easily found and monitored at a national scale, and new digital services can be built to help people use this data in innovative ways.
- Data sets that underpin the planning system, including planning decisions and developer contributions, should be standardised and made digitally accessible.

- A standard digital template for planning notices should be created so that planning application information can be more effectively communicated and understood by local communities and used by new digital services.

1.3 The projects identified in this report pre-date the Planning White Paper. However, they all aim to deliver against one or more of the digital enhancements to the planning process set out in the preceding paragraph. In light of the White Paper's focus on digital planning, this report provides an overview of the emerging plan-tech and considers whether there are opportunities for these innovations to be adopted in future by Place Shaping and Town Planning to streamline the planning decision making process and enhance the customer experience for applicants, objectors and other stakeholders.

1.4 In view of officers being at an early exploratory stage of identifying which digital technology may be of benefit to the Council's planning service, a timeframe for implementation has yet to be adopted.

## 2. Recommendation

2.1 Members are asked to consider the contents of this report and to note the possible planning technology that could be adopted in future following further exploration and evaluation by officers.

## 3. Background

3.1 The Town Planning service has been operating as a wholly digital, paperless, service since November 2015 using the Uniform software platform and IDOX document management system. Over the last five years the paperless model adopted in 2015 has been steadily refined using knowledge built up through day to day operation of the service. Consequently, it is now an effective platform on which to operate the service. Indeed, the paperless operating model, in tandem with use of more recent digital networking tools such as Microsoft Teams, has enabled the day to day operation of the Town Planning service to continue largely uninterrupted by the impact of the COVID-19 during 2020.

3.2 Officers recognised though that there is a continuous need for change and innovation. In this context since 2015, there have been a number of enhancements to the planning service. Automatic updates for applicants were introduced in 2018 to improve applicants understanding of the status of their planning application and reduce call volumes to officers and the call centre. Since January 2019 those signing up to a 'My Westminster' account have the ability to choose to be consulted by email on all applications within a certain radius or property within the City, ensuring that they are always informed of a development that may affect a property or place they have an interest in. This digital consultation is provided in addition to traditional methods of application notification (i.e. site notices and letters to neighbouring properties).

3.3 Most recently the Civico software platform was introduced in early 2020 in collaboration with Committee and Governance Services to allow the live streaming of planning committee meetings. This has improved customer access to this content and provided greater transparency of the planning application process, particularly at the decision-making stage.

3.4 As set out in paragraph 1.1 there has been a rapid expansion in recent years in plan-tech, particularly from smaller innovators who have recently entered the digital planning market and this has been supported by the GLA as part of their agenda to promote a

'smarter city'[1] and through funding from Government via the Local Digital Fund and the Connected Places Catapult. The GLA now holds an annual 'Plan Tech' week to help foster innovation in the sector and enhance collaboration.

3.5 Therefore it is appropriate now to consider whether the emerging technology could provide opportunities for further enhancement of the planning service in Westminster, particularly where this could improve the efficiency of the service in areas that have been traditionally hard to streamline (e.g. validation) and improve the accessibility and usability of the planning service for customers (e.g. how we display planning data and provide basic planning advice to customers).

## 4. Considerations

*Promotion of Digital Innovation - Local Digital Fund & Connected Places Catapult*

4.1 The MHCLG regularly provides funding via their Local Digital Collaboration Unit to enable local authorities that, like Westminster, are signed up to the Local Digital Declaration to research ideas for new digital technology that can then be developed into implementable digital applications. This funding is open to all functions within local government but has been used on a number of occasions over the first five funding rounds since the launch of the Local Digital Fund in 2018, to fund projects related to planning and the public realm.

4.2 Innovate UK (part of UK Research and Innovation) operates a network of 'Catapults', which look to make long-term investment in the UK's economic capability. The Connected Places Catapult engages with academic networks, diverse small and medium enterprises, business and government departments to foster new markets, boost demand for innovation and increase the supply of proven products and services across transport, cities, towns and villages. The Catapult has been involved in a number of projects related to planning and the public realm.

*'Plan X'*

4.3 Plan X[2] is described as a platform for creating and publishing digital planning services. It aims to make planning more straight forward for everyone involved in the process. It has been developed by LB Southwark, LB Lambeth, Wycombe District Council and the Connected Places Catapult.

4.4 The application provides a single point of access for planning enquiries to a council's website with the aim of ensuring that applicants can 'self-triage' their project to establish whether their proposal requires planning permission. It also seeks to identify issues with proposals in advance of making an application. Plan X is programmed to take into account the General Permitted Development Order (GPDO) and can be locally controlled and edited to account for each local authorities' policies. The beta version of the application is used by the LB Southwark.

4.5 The tool has potential to assist with simpler planning enquiries, particularly householder type development where the constraints to be taken into account are fewer and less complex. It appears unlikely to be capable of providing advice on more complex and large-scale developments or in more complex locations, such as within the Central Activities Zone. The application is reliant on the accuracy of the user inputted data and

[1] Smarter London Together (2018) - https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/smarter_london_together_v1.66_-_published.pdf
[2] Plan X: https://beta.planx.uk/southwark

this could result in the application providing incorrect information on the need or otherwise for planning permission.

*'Planning Back Office'*

4.6 This is an LB Southwark project, with technical support from partner Unboxed, which has received funding from the Local Digital Fund. Coventry City Council, LB Crydon, the GLA and LB Hackney are also partner local authorities. It aims to streamline the back-office functions of planning departments by targeting issues such as high volumes of incomplete or invalid applications, poor and non-responsive user interfaces, poor data quality and data accessibility, lack of digital systems integration with associated increased administration activity and reliance on external software providers and their chosen product development 'roadmaps'.

4.7 The project aims to create a user-centred back office planning system that makes planning data and records easily accessible, increases efficiency across the planning application process and fits the needs of its users (planning officers). To date the project has been progressed to an 'alpha' testing phase.

4.8 The alpha version of the application seeks to provide a back-office tool that is more focused on planning officers, drawing key information from submission documents and integrating the application documents with other back-office reporting and admin platforms, rather than using a separate document management system. The aspiration is to also identify all policies relevant to each site and to provide officers with tools that assist with assessments of some application types such as certificates of lawfulness. However, given the relatively early stage of development, it is difficult to assess the benefit of this system relative to conventional software such as Uniform, which has benefits in terms of being operated within the Council across multiple departments and functions.

*'Submit my Planning Application'*

4.9 The 'Submit My Planning Application' (SMPA) application has been developed by LB Hackney in partnership with private sector partners Snook (now Northgate) and Hactar. LB Hackney have also collaborated with LB Camden and LB Southwark in later phases of the project. The project has also received funding and support from the Local Digital Fund and the Connected Places Catapult.

4.10 The aim of the project was to either build a new digital planning service to meet the real needs of the planning authorities, businesses and residents. The application that has been developed to a beta stage allows the submission of householder planning applications via the application without the need for applicants to use the Planning Portal. The application aims to provide better information to applicants than other submission portals to guide their submission and minimise the proportion of applications that are invalid. It also captures data at the point of application that is currently lost in pdf documents submitted in support of applications.

4.11 Following extensive development since 2017, the beta version of the SMPA application is now in use on the LB Hackney website[3].

[3] 'Submit My Planning Application' Beta Version: https://planningapplication.hackney.gov.uk/

*‘PlanBot’ – Artificial Intelligence Chatbot*

4.12 The use of ‘chatbots’ is common across many commercial websites, particularly in the retail sector. The LB Redbridge has worked with Agile Datum (data science specialists) to develop an artificial intelligence enabled chatbot for planning applications (known as ‘Planbot’) built on a Microsoft Azure platform. The aim of the project was to assist in freeing up the council planning team from general enquiries and to cut turnaround times for planning validation services from 3 weeks to 24 hours.

4.13 The Planbot was launched in March 2020 and LB Redbridge report that the Planbot has already reduced costs and improved enquiry response times, whilst enabling planning staff to focus on more complex applications. The Planbot has also been used to support those without specialist planning knowledge, such as call centre staff, enabling them to respond to enquiries accurately without the need for input from planning officers.

4.14 It is understood that it is intended that the tool will continue to be developed to provide further assistance to customers during the validation phase of planning applications and to cover other work areas, such as building control.

4.15 Officers have held preliminary discussions with LB Redbridge in October 2020 to better understand the potential benefits of using a planning focused chatbot in the context of Westminster’s planning service, which operates with significantly less delay than was the case in LB Redbridge prior to the introduction of their chatbot functionality.

*‘London Development Database’ & ‘London Infrastructure Mapping Application 3.0’*

4.16 The London Development Database (LDD) is a collaborative project between the Mayor and the London boroughs, which monitors planning permissions, starts and completions across London. The database has been running since 2004.

4.17 In 2018 the GLA launched a project, funded by the Mayor and MHCLG, to automate the LDD to streamline how planning application data travels from applicants, through London’s 35 local planning authorities (LPAs) to the GLA. The aim of the automation initiative is to address challenges LPAs face when it comes to monitoring planning performance and data. The objective is to create a ‘live hub’ of planning and development information, accessible to all Londoners by reforming the information collected when applications are initially submitted. To achieve this the GLA is seeking amendment of the standard planning application forms to ensure the forms contain the data that needs to be captured, rather than this being provided in unreadable pdfs supporting the applications. By capturing all relevant data in this way will enable seamlessly transfer into each LPAs back-office systems, where planners can verify it before it is passed on to the GLA for collation and provision to the public via the GLA website. The project will help to reduce the officer time required for monitoring and improve the quality of data that is obtained.

4.18 The London Infrastructure Mapping Application[4] is an interactive tool developed by the GLA since 2015, which is designed to visualise data in order to support improved coordination of infrastructure planning and delivery throughout London. The tool enables better understanding of the pipeline of development, potential impacts on demographics and population growth and enables co-ordination of infrastructure delivery for new development. The data is sourced from the Mayor of London and

[4] London Infrastructure Mapping Application 3.0: https://maps.london.gov.uk/ima/

affiliated agencies (including London boroughs), Central Government, utilities providers and market research providers.

*'Viability Assessment Checker' & 'Viability Comparison Tool'*

4.19 This project aims to improve the accessibility of viability assessments to members of the public and overcome barriers that viability assessments can put up for small developers. The project is led by LB Southwark, who initially worked with Future Gov to ascertain whether a digitally driven approach to viability assessments could benefit local authority planners, viability consultants and developers.

4.20 Following initial scoping work LB Southwark have worked with the GLA, LB Tower Hamlets and the Connected Places Catapult during 2019 to develop alpha phase prototype applications. Two digital concepts were prototyped. Firstly the 'Viability Assessment Checker', which is an open tool that provides developers early, high-level indications of expected ranges of planning obligations from the council, allowing them to adjust and test out figures before submitting. A second 'Explore and Compare' tool was also developed that supports the council to better understand viability assessments by allowing the exploration and comparison of similar sites, along with high level analysis, enabling more informed discussions with developers.

4.21 Viability assessments are by their nature complex and difficult to replicate, particularly on sites in complex established urban environments such as in Westminster. The desire to improve accessibility and transparency of these assessments is fully supported. However, digital automation of assessments raises the risk that one or more of the variables within a viability assessment would be misrepresented leading to a diminution in the quantum of planning obligations that would be secured from proposed development.

4.22 Following the judgement in R (Holborn Studios) v London Borough of Hackney (No.2) (2020), LPAs are now required to publish viability reports and therefore this project would not significantly enhance the transparency of development viability. There would also be limited financial saving as the Council currently procures independent specialist viability advice at the applicant's expense where viability matters are raised. The Viability Comparison Tool is therefore likely to be of greater use to most LPAs as it could assist officers by providing high level viability information at pre-application stage, prior to the appointment of an independent viability consultant.

## 5. Financial Implications

5.1 None.

## 6. Legal Implications

6.1 None.

## 7. Conclusion

7.1 The Committee are asked to note the range of digital planning applications and tools that are currently being developed. Officers are currently analysing those applications or tools that have the greatest potential to deliver service improvements and efficiencies in the context of the Council's existing planning service.

**If you have any questions about this report, or wish to inspect one of the background papers, please contact: Oliver Gibson (ogibson@westminster.gov.uk / 07971026919)**

**Background Papers:**

N/A