Smarter Planning for Smarter Cities
Interim briefing: Interviews & research
March 2017 | Contact: amanda@futureoflondon.org.uk

About this briefing

This briefing summarises the benefits and challenges of the UK development management system as it applies to London and shares initial recommendations for improving the planning service. These findings are compiled from interviews with cross-sector planning professionals and informed FoL's 7th March roundtable, which took a strategic view of the barriers to change and how to overcome them. As food for thought, the summary is also complemented by a roundup of initiatives other cities and countries use to streamline planning.

Acronyms in this briefing

DM   development management
LA   local authority
PD   permitted development
PPA   planning performance agreement

Q1 What value do planners and the planning system bring? What about the system works well?

- **Relationships:** LAs have a good relationship with the GLA when it comes to planning issues. Planners have a role as mediator among different priorities (communities, developers, etc) and generally perform it well. Pre-application services are especially useful for building relationships with developers and stakeholders, helping identify issues early to work past them.
- **Knowledge:** LA planners have all-around knowledge of their boroughs and development. Their advice for applicants can ensure applications are correct from the start. Private planners may have more specific expertise that can create quality developments (e.g. retail, commercial specialisations).
- **Care:** Planners are keen to make a positive difference and, despite high workloads and constantly changing central government policies, want to deliver good services and projects.
- **Influence:** Planners have an important role in placemaking. They can bring social and economic value, whether they're a private-sector planner working on a new development or a public-sector planner guiding it towards approval and making sure it adheres to policy.
- **Flexibility and trust:** DM allows negotiation and debate with opportunities to try new ideas – but it's embedded in democracy and brings communities into the discussion. People generally trust LAs to execute planning authority appropriately.

Q1A Comments about central government planning policy

- **Inconsistency & burden:** Constant policy and target shifts make it hard for LAs (and other stakeholders) to keep up. By the time central policies are incorporated locally, they change again. It's particularly difficult to apply constant change to long-term schemes and to assess performance under changing targets.
- **Permitted development:** What began as a simple idea to speed development is as burdensome as full applications, but without the fees to cover LA time. Householders are going for the largest extensions possible and landlords are doing office-to-resi conversions without always considering design or impact.
- **Context-blind:** London's heated development market and economic output make it a special case, but that's not recognised, esp. with e.g. vacant building credit, starter homes.

Q2 What takes up the most staff time (disproportionate or absolute terms)?

- **Preparing information/documents:** For applicants, larger applications take considerable time to compile and upload to the planning portal, sometimes needing to be split into small file sizes. For planners, going to committee requires officers to prepare information and presentations. Planning reports are also lengthy and time-consuming for some applications.
- **Householder applications:** Extensions are extremely popular, particularly in outer London and among wealthy inner-London residents, but handling these applications is time-consuming, especially when neighbour disputes are brought into the DM process. PD and prior approval haven't eased workloads, and generally create as much work as regular applications without bringing income to cover staff time.
- **Discharging conditions:** Large applications result in several conditions – the Planning Advisory Service [analysed over 12,000 records](#) nationwide and found the average fee to discharge a condition was £93 (not including internal costs to applicants) compared to an average cost of £268 for the planning authority to handle it. Further, on multi-year schemes, specialist knowledge of applications and conditions is lost when case officers change.
- **Engagement & negotiation:** Applicants and officers spend time engaging with one another and stakeholders at various stages from pre-application to Section 106 negotiations.

Q3 Where do blockages occur?

- **Incomplete applications:** Missing or incorrect information halts an application's progress and results in planners having to chase applicants. It's particularly problematic among householders or smaller developers who may not have the expertise to submit an application that meets all policy requirements.
- **Last-minute changes:** Both applicants and officers struggle if changes or conditions are undertaken late in an application timeline. It can cause delay, withdrawal, refusal, or require additional staff time.
- **Deadlines and backlogs:** Deadlines may create 'perverse' behaviour where officers reject incomplete applications nearing deadline instead of liaising with applicants to get missing information. Resubmitting the application adds work for both applicants and officers.
- **Minor changes/non-material amendments:** Each often requires a separate application even where impact is minor. The system isn't flexible enough to deal with permission being granted for schemes that aren't designed yet, and that parts of those schemes are bound to change once construction begins.
- **External consultees:** Within councils, some departments that need to be consulted don't have enough resource to comment. Statutory consultees may take a while to respond. For some issues, like sustainability or environmental health, some LAs outsource due to lack of expertise, for additional time and cost.
- **Late/poor/unsuccessful engagement:** When applicants/developers approach communities early and with an open mind, and communities are willing to work with them, the engagement process can go smoothly – but it's often the case that developers engage too late or communities are defensive.
- **Householder disputes:** Officers occasionally deal with complaints about householder applications that have more to do with neighbour disputes than disobeying policy. When householder applications go to committee, it's usually over non-planning issues.

Q4 What has your organisation done to streamline processes?

- **Paperless working:** Planning applications and all supporting documents are submitted online. For consultations, some LAs continue to mail notifications to neighbours but encourage them to submit responses online; others deliver notifications during site visits; others have stopped delivering them altogether in favour of online-only notifications.
- **Being transparent:** The status of each application is tracked live through a planning portal, available online for anyone to view. Pre-application advice is added to the portal once the application reaches a certain stage so the public doesn't have to make freedom of information requests to get this information.
- **Working to statutory requirement:** Pare back services to provide only what is statutory requirement; applicants who need more advice must pay a fee. One LA has stopped doing any local validation, requiring applicants to submit materials only as per the national validation list.
- **Filtering and self-allocation:** Officers only take on new applications when they have capacity to do so. Unsuitable applications are rejected right away; officers liaise with applicants over incomplete applications; and simple, complete applications can go straight to consultation and approval.
- **Using conditions appropriately:** Applicants with large schemes won't often have or need detailed designs and specifications until they've progressed towards consultation or construction; reducing pre-start conditions moves them through the DM process quicker. For multi-phase schemes, grouping conditions by

phases can make discharging more straightforward. By contrast, front-loading conditions on small schemes avoids incomplete applications and makes them easier to decide. Discussing planning conditions early benefits both officers and applicants.

- **Grouping conditions:** Both applicants and LAs find it more efficient to bundle requests to discharge conditions relating to a single application. For LAs, it's faster than adding individual conditions to digital systems; applicants can follow progress more easily since they have fewer reference numbers to cite.
- **Condensing documents:** For officers, template checklists are a popular alternative to bespoke planning reports. One applicant suggested that streamlining supporting documents could reduce information overload for officers.
- **Relationship building:** PPAs have helped parties work through contentious issues before an application is submitted, resulting in higher rates of approval; covered costs for planning teams; and improved relationships among planning teams, applicants, communities, and members. For smaller schemes (e.g. householder), online guidance paired with advice from officers results in more complete applications and a quicker, smoother approval process. These tactics are a change in mindset from 'development control' to 'development management'. Applicants reported engaging early not just with officers, but with councillors, so they understand a scheme ahead of committee, and contractors, to ensure potential construction issues are dealt with.

Q5 What more could be done to achieve efficiency?

NB. This feedback is broad and some points may contradict each other. However, it's worth presenting a range of ideas, as what works for one organisation may not work for another.

- **Use a pan-London approach:** Housing, employment, industrial space, and transport are city-wide issues and the GLA could have a larger role coordinating planning strategies and applications in these areas.
- **Share services:** Not all LAs can afford specialist staff (e.g. ecology, design, conservation, tree officers). Pooling resources across boroughs to hire these roles would reduce consultancy costs and speed decisions. LAs could also work together on cross-borough issues; for example, joint Strategic Housing Market Assessments could more effectively consider local housing markets, which have little regard for borough boundaries. Where digital systems are the same, back-office teams could be pooled to register applications throughout an area or city-wide.
- **Use technology:** Improved digitisation/handling capability for application documents would make using planning portals a smoother experience; interactive maps showing all applications as well as boundaries for various spatial/planning policies (e.g. conservation areas, neighbourhood plans) would make it faster to find information relevant to a site.
- **Revisit permitted development:** Devolving PD to the GLA or LAs could make this tool work in the London context. Alternatively, instead of using PD for building types/land use classes, it could be used for trusted institutions (e.g. LAs, statutory applicants), especially for local development orders or minor applications. At the householder level, a self-certification/self-assessment scheme could replace PD.
- **Use the right regulatory regime for the job:** DM doesn't need to create conditions for matters covered by building control, licencing (e.g. hours of operation, impact of fumes), or separate legislation (e.g. contaminated land). Using the right regulatory regime will free DM from tasks it doesn't have the skills or time to undertake.
- **Standardise viability appraisals:** Standard methodology for viability assessments would improve transparency and time spent interrogating assessments. One interviewee proposed removing viability assessments, saying they overshadow the more important consideration of whether a scheme is well-planned and designed.
- **Use committees well:** Only send major applications to committee and delegate all minor/other ones.
- **Stop abuse of appeals system:** Information presented to the inspectorate should be the same as that submitted to the LA, not a new submission that can pass inspection but hasn't been consulted on.
- **Rethink KPIs:** Consider metrics beyond government-mandated deadlines, such as end-to-end processing times and customer satisfaction surveys.
- **Communicate:** Officers throughout London should talk to each other more and share best practice. Both LA- and applicant-side planners need better communication with politicians and communities to achieve buy-in for schemes. Press notices are outdated and could be replaced with web and social media notifications. When it comes to relationships between applicants and LAs, picking up the phone is often the quickest way to resolve issues and build good rapport. Both parties could also benefit from being on site more often to check progress and work through issues together. Finally, the RTPI could be more vocal about the impact of central government policies.

Other ways of working: case studies

- Rugby Borough Council rebuilt its DM system to **remove non-essential processes and focus on end-to-end service**. Each application has a dedicated officer from inquiry to final decision, reducing the number of withdrawn and refused applications and increasing customer satisfaction. End-to-end customer experience is considered a more meaningful way to measure success than abstract deadlines. The new system has been particularly useful for junior team members, who say they experience greater stimulation and satisfaction in their roles. (Case study from November 2014 RTPI report)

- Rutland County Council has adopted several innovative practices. For example, **DM managers don't take caseloads** but assist and manage their teams; officers adopt a 'positive planners' approach during queries and pre-app talks, **focusing on a scheme's benefits** and how to improve it further; **planning reports are not used** for applications that are delegated with no objections; and **conditions are avoided** whenever possible. (Case study from Planning Advisory Service)

- Section 106 agreements often require applicants to create travel plans and monitor them every 2 years. WestTrans, a partnership of six boroughs (Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon, and Hounslow), employs **two specialist staff to ensure travel planning compliance**.

- Several North American cities (e.g. Phoenix, Chicago, New York, Vancouver) run **self-certification schemes, giving city-approved architects/developers quicker planning permission** (eligible developments vary by city). Companies must attend city-run courses to gain approval and take on legal responsibility for compliance with building codes. Developments are subject to random audits and self-certification rights are revoked for companies failing to meet standards (architects risk losing their licences). Critics say the system can be easily abused and result in poor quality, unsafe buildings.

Other sources

- The Planning Officers Society's 'Flexibility in Planning Manifesto' suggests various adjustments to development management, such as allowing split decisions, imposing conditions to resolve unacceptable details (rather than holding up approval while details are amended), and improving the process for minor amendments; however, these require support from central government before they can be rolled out.

- Future Cities Catapult is funding projects to **'create a more data-driven and digitally enabled planning system'** through its Future of Planning programme.

- The Bartlett School of Planning's '5 Radical Ideas for a Better Planning System' calls for stronger planning regulation to ensure affordable housing is provided in all development: "Policies that allow developers to demand the renegotiation of affordable housing elements and to refrain from providing financial information for setting the amount of affordable housing should be replaced." It argues that regulation improves quality of development and empowers planners to deliver schemes with public benefit.