

# 20251022 - ODSC - Meeting Key Points Discussed

## Project and Community Aims Review

- The work being conducted is part of the **MHCLG planning data programme**, aiming to standardise data throughout the planning permission process to facilitate easier work, leading to increased understanding, improvements, and innovation.
- Feedback on the revised project aim suggested that while the initial focus on standardisation was clearer, the resulting outcomes ("increased understanding, improvements and innovation") were "woolly" and needed to be made more tangible (e.g., demonstrating lack of duplication or easier processes for users and LPAs). Some participants suggested inverting the aim to start with the 'why' (system improvement).
- The community's updated aim is to **co-develop and test specifications** by openly sharing knowledge, evidence, questions, and updates, ensuring the system continues to work and the whole community benefits.
- Participants challenged the phrase "continues to work," arguing that the current system is deficient and the ambition should be framed as **improvement** and helping the planning system meet wider outcomes (e.g., livability, connectivity, health) through **better data points**.

Discussion Area	Question/Concern for Follow Up
Project Aims	Should the project aims be inverted to start with the <b>intended outcomes</b> (the 'why'), rather than the method (standardisation)?.
	Should the community aim be more ambitious, focusing explicitly on <b>system improvement</b> rather than just ensuring the system "continues to work"?.
	How can the outcomes (increased understanding, improvements, innovation) be translated into <b>more tangible or measurable things</b> (e.g., reduced duplication, speeding up the process)?.

## Specifications Update and Policy Context

- **Submission Specifications:** These are in pilot and ready for testing.
- **Decision Specifications:** Research is ongoing, moving towards a working draft. A blog post detailing the research done so far on the decision stage was published this week.
- **Historic Data:** The current piece of work is focused on **looking forwards** from a starting point. Handling legacy or historic information (e.g., formal decisions required to remain on the public register) is acknowledged as a wider programme issue, not

specifically addressed by this project's resources.

- **Standards and Legislation:** Legislation is viewed as the "stick" to force compliance and adoption. However, the team is actively working with legal colleagues to establish how legislation can refer to a **dynamic standard** that can change over time due to policy updates, thereby avoiding the need to rewrite legislation every time a change is needed (a noted issue with the existing brownfield land standard).
- **Process Change:** The project's immediate role is confined to **laying the data foundation**. Participants were reminded that the team is not currently seeking to fundamentally change the planning process itself, despite recognising the significant opportunities that standardisation will open up in the future.
- **Complexity of the Decision Stage:** It was highlighted that while the application submission stage has a standardised start, the process from submission to decision differs greatly across local authorities. The job requires standardising the decision stage, which involves significant compromise from all parties. It was noted that a planning decision is often a set of rules, not purely data, necessitating careful consideration of what aspects of the decision stage can be captured as structured data.

Discussion Area	Question/Concern for Follow Up
Historic Data	Does the term "existing applications" for testing mean 'live' applications, or should it also include <b>determined/historic applications</b> ?
	What approach will be taken to handle the huge volume of <b>historic data</b> that currently exists as scanned images (e.g., on microfiche), which would be resource-intensive to digitise and redact?

## External Partnership Update: Digital Property Logbooks

- An update was provided by the **Residential Logbook Association (RLBA)**, a self-regulatory and data standards body working with MHCLG.
- Digital Property Logbooks (DBLs) are being positioned as a secure digital tool for homeowners, acting as the **pre-eminent repository** for all property data (public, building control, smart meter data, etc.).
- The aim is for logbooks to become the **primary tool for interaction with local authorities** for property-related services, including planning, council tax, and bin information.
- The RLBA has agreed a **core data standard** with MHCLG, adopting a modular structure similar to the planning data specifications.

- A key ambition is to enable homeowners to **compile and submit outline planning applications directly from their logbook** (for specific application types like householder extensions) and receive the decision data back, creating a proper end-to-end solution.
- RLBA works with eight active member companies and sees strong growth driven by retrofit and net zero requirements across Europe and the UK.

Discussion Area	Question/Concern for Follow Up
Logbooks & Interoperability	Is the <b>core logbook data standard</b> available for sharing?.
	Do Logbook platforms operate as a <b>self-contained submission service</b> , or do they integrate with <b>existing submission services</b> (e.g., Planning Portal)?.
	How would the logbook initiative function in <b>Wales</b> , where planning policy is devolved?.

## Submission Specification Testing

- The goal of testing is simple: to **evidence that the specification works** and contains what is needed for planning authorities to perform their jobs.
- The testing focuses on the front end: from submission through to validation.
- **Three core tests** have been defined:
  1. Can existing applications be reshaped to fit the specification (proving compatibility)?.
  2. Can new applications be created that follow the specification (proving usability and consistency)?.
  3. Can a planning authority validate those applications (proving fitness for real-life workflows)?.
- Testing involves generating JSON schemas and using a **rudimentary validator** to check if converted payloads structurally match the specification.
- Involvement is sought from **service providers** (to create new payloads), the core team (to convert existing applications), and **Local Planning Authorities (LPAs)** partnered with back-office suppliers (for validation testing).

Discussion Area	Question/Concern for Follow Up

<b>Data Standards &amp; Mapping</b>	How will the new specifications be <b>mapped to existing system field names</b> , and will suppliers be required to change their database tables/fields?.
	Is the specification <b>aligned to existing standards</b> (e.g., RICS, or other sources) from which data can be automatically sourced?.
	Given the inconsistency in plan requirements, if application types need further refinement (e.g., by development type/Q codes), <b>how many possible scenarios</b> will need to be accounted for?.
<b>Testing &amp; Validation</b>	Should security standards (e.g., verification protocols for sensitive data transfer) be considered as part of the data standard, especially for transfers between organisations?.
	Will an application be considered <b>invalid if the new mandatory data standard requirement hasn't been met</b> upon initial submission?.
	Should the "Can we..." tests be accompanied by "How hard it is..." versions to measure <b>usability and burden</b> ?.

## Decision Notice Research

- The Open Digital Planning (ODP) community has held workshops to define the legal requirements for a modern, digital decision record.
- Current decision notices suffer from inconsistency and inaccessibility as they are essentially **paper-based documents in a digital format**. They also serve multiple functions, including legal compliance, advice, and guidance.
- **A legal brief is being drafted** for MHCLG lawyers to clarify legal points necessary for standardisation.
- Specific elements requiring legal clarity include: whether decision titles are sufficient, the role of council logos, the necessity of including existing or proposed drawings in conditions, whether standard legal text (NPPF, Appeals) is compliant, and the necessity of a physical signature.

Discussion Area	Question/Concern for Follow Up
Decision Notices	Are there <b>additional needs for a template format</b> for decision notices required by data consumers (e.g., other software providers)?.
	In addition to the legal components, is there a need to clearly distinguish between the legal decision and other functions performed by decision notices (e.g., <b>advice and guidance</b> )?.

## Local Plan Specifications

- Work has started on a working draft of technical specifications for the **provision of Local Plans**.
- The approach follows the same standards for planning data process.
- The team will be seeking interested parties for **user testing** to ensure the draft requirements are useful and not overly burdensome.

Discussion Area	Question/Concern for Follow Up
Local Plans	How will the team handle the <b>evidence base</b> that sits behind the Local Plans during specification development?.