PLANNING MARCH 2019

"Why the planning system really needs a digital overhaul"

18/03/2019 Stefan Webb

Future Cities Catapult

As anyone who has had to engage with any stage of the planning process surely knows all too well, it can be a daunting space to step into and as such only a select few ever truly benefit from it.

The complexity of the language and its archaic processes coupled with all too frequent professional hand-wringing can make the development process even seem deliberately obscured to outsiders. All of which makes this vital process notoriously unloved.

What the planning system really needs is a digital overhaul to help set it up for a future where engagement, clarity of vision and collaboration is fast becoming the norm.

The roots of the system's opacity are varied. Planning jargon certainly creates barriers which make it difficult for outsiders to understand the process. This is then exacerbated by the fact that gatekeepers of knowledge – developers, consultants, planners, infrastructure agencies, and politicians amongst them – still exchange critical information in this 'language', thereby maintaining its exclusivity.

Another factor is how the information is archived. It's all too often simply filed away on private drives (or, worse still, filing cabinets!).

Much of the time, that's simply because the value of making this information shareable is usually, and at best, an afterthought. Never is shareability embedded into the documentation from the outset. Information is captured in what are effectively analogue records—at best in proprietary, non-machine readable formats, at worst on paper. It can even on occasion be a conscious decision on the part of the expert.

Either way, this lack of transparency and asymmetry of information is central to the poor functioning of the housing and development market. It means that the barriers to entry are huge even for the largest foreign developers. Skanska and Bouygues, for instance, have taken over a decade to enter the UK housing market.

What hope, then, is there for challengers and disruptors who would encourage competition and boost standards?

Without action, this status quo will continue. Planners, planning, and development, in general, will continue to be made scapegoats for what is an essential function of society. The public is right to complain: cities have a democratic duty to their citizens to enhance their knowledge of how planning works and their involvement in how their cities will look and function in the future.

What cities don't seem to realise is that increased transparency would positively impact on citizens' acceptance of new development. Resisting development is the natural reflex if you don't know or understand what it is, how it came about, or its likely impact – if you feel excluded from it.

The world of data analytics, big data and machine learning seems to have passed by much of the planning system. Yet paradoxically, of all public city services, the planning system possibly spends the most money on generating and retrieving data.

This data, required (usually as a result of regulation and legislation) to provide the evidential grounding for planning applications, master plans and city plans, is held in a vast number of overlapping document management systems which have little or no interoperability, and are inaccessible to both machine and citizenry.
Digital tools and data visualisation though already have a long history of translating complex or opaque ideas and enhancing their legibility and accessibility.

Gov.UK is an excellent example of how clarity of language and clear design can improve citizen engagement with complex government services. Data fusion systems such as those used by CityMapper—a smartphone app that combines freely available public transport data—provide a single window on to an incredibly complex and disjointed pool of public information. And the Metropolitan Police Service's crime mapping allows citizens to straightforwardly probe data that was once locked away in analogue records.

For cities to achieve similar success with planning data, planners will have to work with user experience experts, service designers, data visualisers and software designers to understand the appropriate level of detail and design for different users of the planning system.

Fortunately, there are already startups which are beginning to show how that can work. Cardiff based Urban Intelligence, for instance, is building a single database and search engine of UK planning policy, enabling planners, developers and citizens with the ability to quickly access the planning policy they want to review. And Land Insight is streamlining the process by which developers search for land by providing planning history, ownership information and sales information in an easy-to-access format.

Critics may argue that opening up the planning system to allow greater insight and access to more users will deprofessionalise the planning profession. But, in truth, software and artificial intelligence will soon take over many of the lower-value activities in planning and surveying – such as data collection and collation – anyway. Now is the moment at which planners can actively focus on the higher value, creative components of planning and place-making before technology forces them to.

Only unscrupulous developers, politicians and planners have anything to fear from increasing transparency in the planning sector. Everyone else will be able to enjoy a development ecosystem where standards rise because of increased competition and the public understands – and more readily accepts and engages with – development, because they're aware of how it works.

That is a future that we should be working hard to build together.

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Insights into the skills and mindset of a planner

26/03/2019 Phil Williams

Having spent over 40 years as a local government planner, I am now a planning director in my own consultancy practice.

What's the difference between the two roles? Very little, if you understand that a planner's role is to provide sustainable, good quality designed projects that protect and enhance the built and natural environments, promote economic prosperity and regeneration, and ensure social and cultural cohesion.

The skills needed to be a successful planner are numerous, but central to everything is a mindset based on political impartiality, integrity, transparency, objectivity, the ability to balance competing demands, and measure preferred options on a sound evidence base.

The introduction of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in has added a new and necessary dimension to our strategic thinking, in ensuring that we pay equal attention to the long-term future as to the present day.

Planning can be undertaken at many levels; creating strategic plans at national and regional levels or promoting community-based plans that influence how a development takes place at a local level.

The role is varied; I can be looking at strategic housing or employment solutions in the morning and the impact of a house extension in the afternoon.

The change of emphasis over recent years in public consultations has been welcomed with a focus on the planning work that best serves people and communities.

Increasingly, the focus is around engagement rather than consultation, listening to the aspirations of the individual, the community, and managing political expectations. Listening is a crucial skill and it is our role to listen and take into consideration all contributions and try to influence outcomes for the public's benefit.

At national and global levels, planners can play an important role in tackling many high-level challenges, such as improving well-being and quality of life through health impact assessments, air quality monitoring, gender equality and sustainable transport frameworks.

Add to the list the challenges climate change brings, especially with the continued rise in sea levels, you see how we play a truly integral part in helping to provide answers to fundamental challenges in today's society.

We are regarded by some people as an unwelcome necessity, whilst others see us as providers of solutions to problems that no-one else can provide. It seems to me that the planner adds value to the process!

The planning system has been operating in the UK for over 100 years and the Royal Town Planning Institute celebrated its centenary in 2014. It has over 25,000 members across the world and without that expertise and influence, society at all levels, and the built and natural environments it relies on, would be worse off.

The planners of the future will need to be the guardians and shapers of positive decision making that respond to the challenges of future generations.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act is a primary source of influence, and planners need to use it in their daily thinking. It needs to be seen as a step change in our thought processes and embedded in our DNA.

You can find more about Phil Williams on his LinkedIn profile.