

Digital Planning Services 2025 to 2026 report and recommendations

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Context

The Digital Planning Programme forms part of the Welsh Government's wider digital transformation agenda, aimed at improving the effectiveness, consistency and sustainability of public services across Wales.

Following early discovery and engagement activity, the programme entered an Alpha phase to explore opportunities to improve the planning system, with a particular focus on areas causing friction for both users and service providers.

The Alpha phase focused on the pre-application advice service, making several recommendations on how to improve this service for applicants and local planning authorities (LPAs).

After the Alpha phase it was determined that the project scope would be extended to investigate opportunities across the whole of the planning journey.

Introduction

The Centre for Digital Public Services (CDPS) has worked in partnership with Welsh Government and LPAs to explore how the end-to-end planning system in Wales could better support householders and planning teams.

The long term aims and objectives to meet the First Minister's priority of improving planning services continued through the Discovery and Alpha phases and into the 2025 to 2026 programme of work.

These aims and objectives were to improve the planning application journey for householders and improve long-term efficiency and consistency of the Welsh digital planning system by:

- reducing time and effort for both applicants and planning officers
- standardising planning practices and processes across Wales
- improving the digital services used in the planning application and assessment process
- collaborating and sharing best practice across the sector
- reducing pressure on the sector by enhancing operational efficiencies



Scope

Our focus for this phase of work was the end-to-end journey from awareness to the point where a development decision is made. However, as this is a long and complex journey it was agreed that the focus was the end-to-end householder application journey. This ensures appropriate outcomes were achieved with the resource available to each workstream in the programme of work.

The infographic below shows the end-to-end journey stages and what was in or out of scope. It was agreed that the pre-application advice service would be out of scope for this work as Alpha already covered it in detail.

The apply and pay phase was also out of scope for recommendations. This phase is primarily made up of the Planning Portal and so although the process was mapped and documented in our as-is blueprint, no further investigation or usability testing was conducted on this service.

Similarly, enforcement and appeals were out of scope because the work focused on the application journey, not what happens after a decision. The process was mapped and documented, but further investigation and analysis was not prioritised in this phase of work.

The Figma concept prototype includes the pre-application advice service designs so users can understand the proposed end-to-end journey.

Aims and objectives

Through this phase of the project, we aimed to:

- understand the end-to-end journey from an applicant and agent perspective
- understand the end-to-end journey and process from an LPA perspective
- discover what LPAs, applicants and interested parties' needs were
- understand pain points and key areas for improvement
- understand the end-to-end data flow
- understand the skills development needs of people delivering planning services across Wales

How the work was structured

The programme of work was split into dedicated workstream areas:



Improve content and understanding of the planning service

Information provision and access to LPA digital services is inconsistent and can be frustrating for service users.

Content can be confusing and often assumes higher knowledge, leaving many domestic applicants to either submit poorer quality submissions, or cause increased contact rates for clarification.

The availability of, and ease of access to, guidance on LPA websites in general were identified as areas for improvement.

Key measures would be a reduction in avoidable contact to the LPA due to an increased ability to understand and 'self-serve'.

Improve end-to-end user journeys

Planning services rely on other components to deliver their services online. This includes online forms and payment gateways.

The specific developments of improvement of these parts of the service were not in scope of the work proposed but would benefit from a review of the design and improving understanding of how these points in the user journey could be enhanced.

This work consists of research to understand if further investment is needed to improve these aspects of the service.

Both the pre-application advice service (Alpha phase) and application service were combined within this workstream. End-to-end service mapping across the current service (as-is service blueprint) was done to understand pain points of users and those providing the service. We have used the insights and findings of the as-is service blueprint, to identify and document the opportunities areas for improvement that will be developed and illustrated using a future service blueprint (to-be service blueprint).

Shared data principles and standards

Planning data across Wales is not yet standardised, which makes it difficult to share, compare, or use effectively. This limits opportunities to streamline processes and introduce automation.

To address this, we carried out a detailed data-mapping exercise to understand how planning data is currently structured across local authorities. This included:

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- developing an as-is data schema
- identifying the data formats in use across systems and manual processes
- highlighting opportunities to use geospatial data more consistently to support validation, automation, and location-based checks
- clarifying how key planning data flows through the end-to-end service

This work provides a clearer picture of the existing data environment and forms the basis for developing a common data standard for planning in Wales, supporting more efficient processes and future digital services.

Standardising LPA digital service delivery knowledge and capability

Access to services and user journeys through the planning system is inconsistent across Wales. This leads to varying levels of service standards.

Digital knowledge among LPA officers responsible for decision-making and procuring digital services can be improved.

There is a wide range of digital services and systems across LPAs, with significant differences in capability and usability for both officers and service users.

Work was carried out to strengthen digital knowledge among planners and senior managers. This focussed on improving understanding of the value of standardised digital services, practices and data and how these can support more effective service delivery and better use of resources.

Engagement activity promoted examples of common service design approaches and data standards. This supported improved public access, better information sharing, and increased collaboration between organisations. It also encouraged a more standardised approach when specifying consistent requirements for procuring third party digital services.

Community of Best Practice research

In earlier CDPS planning research, and in more recent Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) reports, it was identified that planning officers in Wales are not regularly working together or sharing best practice.

It's widely agreed that better collaboration and sharing of best practice would benefit planners and the wider Welsh planning system. It would support



innovation and improvement across LPAs and help create a more consistent approach in Wales.

CDPS believes that a Planning Community of Best Practice (CoBP) could provide planners in Wales with a valuable forum to enable more sharing of best practice. We therefore proposed to open the scope during the project term, to include a rapid, light-touch round of research to better understand what planners would need from a CoBP to make it valuable and successful.



Delivery plan

Below is the delivery plan agreed at project inception for the programme of work, across the five workstreams.

Project	31/03/2025	31/05/2025	31/07/2025	30/09/2025	30/11/2025	31/01/2026	31/03/2026
Shared data principles and standards	Initial data mapping and business process mapping report and data quality guidance. Detailed project plan for next 12 months to be signed off.	Tool assessment with key process pain points identified	Data process recommendations	Initial data principles, standards and architecture proposal	Initial development of data pipeline design.	Initial proof of concepts designed.	Proof of concepts completed, and recommendations published.
Standardising LPA digital service delivery knowledge and capability	Work to start April 2025	Define Training provision outputs. Review discovery report and engage with stakeholders to refine the requirements and user needs.	Design training provision and plan delivery mechanisms for training	Course advertising/enrolment	Deliver initial training cohort. Assess training impact and report.	Deliver training to second cohort.	Review of impact of training across the year. Summary report against discovery findings.
Improving content and understanding of the planning service	Content audit of central planning content. Assessment and recommendations on 3 LPA Searching Planning functionality. Prototype with content of an improved search planning application user journey. Project plan for the year.	Design priority area Bilingual Content	Usability testing and iteration on initial design areas.	Collaboration with LPAs to support the delivery of content prototypes into live.	Identify other areas for content improvement and start to consider the online and offline touchpoints for messaging.	Wider content designs progressed. Proposed content defined in shareable format for wider LPA adoption	Scaled Roll out of content with production of shared content guidelines and support for sustainable design.
Improved end-to-end user journeys	Work to start April 2025	Identify scoping and identification of priority improvements. Leveraging initial findings from business process mapping and service mapping. Identify key LPAs to collaborate with.	Initial research and investigation to define end-to-end journey. Analysis of key pain points.	Synthesis and ideation in collaboration with LPAs.	Develop prototypes for ideas for initial stakeholder feedback and feasibility assessment. Start usability testing of prototypes.	Continue testing and research to improve, define, and report on findings. Provide recommendations for service improvement and plan for implementation.	Identify implementation partners. Stakeholder engagement and partnership development. Test and iterate to final version. Report to summarise impact of workstream.
Pre-application design	Alpha complete and recommendations. Prototype design completed.	LPA engagement and roll out of design.	Report on learning for scale.	Work to transfer into end-to-end design work.			

What we did

To gather relevant information and insights we:

- conducted research interviews with planning applicants, community councillors, interested parties (people or organisations who are affected by a proposed development or planning decision), planners and key stakeholders
- conducted research surveys with planning applicants, interested parties, community councillors, planners and members of the public
- reviewed insights from recently published RTPI Cymru reports: [Scoping the potential for digital planning to ease resource pressures and improve planning outcomes](#) and [Public Sector Planning Resources in Wales](#)
- held a collaborative ideation session with LPAs
- held a prioritisation session with LPAs to understand their biggest priorities

To map the service and identify issues, we:

- mapped the end-to-end journey and processes with several LPAs
- created a Wales-wide high-level service blueprint
- created a detailed maps for each stage of the journey
- visited LPAs to map and document the back-end system capabilities and data flows

To explore, test and improve planning content and practice, we:

- reviewed, user tested and prototyped concepts for improved planning content to validate findings and test recommendations
- shared content design best practice with LPAs
- worked with Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (PEDW) to review public-facing planning content
- developed a bilingual glossary of planning terms with the Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW), RTPI and Welsh Government to support consistent Welsh and English planning guidance



- Worked with expert planning consultant Emma Watkins of Prospero Planning Ltd to build knowledge, test hypotheses and check the accuracy of the concept prototypes

How we did it

Gathering information and insights

We carried out qualitative and quantitative research with users of planning services and planning professionals.

Our research activities included:

- in-depth qualitative interviews with residents, community councillors and planning applicants
- pop-up research in Cardiff and Newport with Welsh citizens with and without experience of planning
- research surveys shared with community council residents and ‘interested parties’, and with community councillors
- semi-structured qualitative interviews with key stakeholders and LPA staff
- quantitative research survey shared with planners

This research helped us understand how people experience the planning application journey, how they access planning information and how they engage with LPAs.

We also learned more about the challenges that planners face and explored how a Planning Community of Best Practice could offer value to planners in Wales.

Mapping the service and identifying issues

Using the research findings and existing reports, we mapped insights onto a journey map. This formed the basis for several mapping sessions with LPAs. Initially we outlined the process and high-level pain points and then went on to validate and refine the maps.

Due to the depth of insight, we were able to create a high-level service blueprint (as-is) to show the current end-end process and most common pain



points, as well as several detailed maps for each stage of the journey to highlight different processes across LPAs and document the user needs.

The as-is service blueprints were shared to all LPAs via POSW to offer feedback via email or directly in Miro, any feedback that was received was then added and documented onto the maps.

By mapping out the end-to-end journey, the common pain points and inconsistencies across LPAs were identified. This then gave us the foundations of where to begin to improve the planning service.

A future service blueprint (to-be) was created using the insights and ideas we had collected. This documents what the applicant and LPAs needs are at each stage and the short, medium and long-term activities that can be completed to iteratively improve the journey.

Exploring, testing and improving planning content and practice

Alongside the research and journey mapping, we explored how planning information is presented to users in practice.

We reviewed some public-facing planning content [[Appendix 1](#)] and created limited, exploratory prototypes to test potential improvements to clarity, accessibility and usability. These prototypes were not intended as finished solutions, but as a way to validate research findings and show how relatively small content changes could address common user pain points in real services.

For selected prototype content, we used a trio writing approach, bringing together a content designer, translator and subject expert to support equivalent Welsh and English user experiences. This helped ensure that content was clear, accurate and usable in both languages, rather than translated after the fact. [[Appendix 2](#)].

We visited Bannau Brycheiniog National Park to present a review of a sample of their webpages. We shared feedback on how well the content meets user needs, including clarity, structure and use of plain English, and highlighted where it could be simpler and easier to use. We also shared examples of

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content design best practice and practical suggestions to help the team improve and maintain their content over time.

Alongside this work, we worked closely with Planning and Environment Decisions Wales (PEDW) to review a sample of their public-facing webpages. We created a high-level content inventory to understand the scale and nature of existing content and identify duplication. This was used to inform prioritisation and longer-term content management.

We shared findings with PEDW colleagues through two workshops. These sessions provided structured feedback on reviewed pages and introduced practical content design techniques, such as focusing on user tasks, reducing unnecessary content and improving page structure. The workshops were designed to support PEDW teams to apply these approaches themselves when improving existing content and creating new pages.

In addition, we supported Welsh Government in developing and publishing a bilingual glossary of planning terms to support people writing planning guidance across public sector websites. The glossary was produced using a trio writing approach, working with Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW), the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) and a translator. This work helps promote consistency, clarity and equivalent Welsh and English terminology across the planning system, beyond individual services or organisations.

This work grounded the research findings in real examples and informed the recommendations set out in this report. These recommendations were acknowledged and endorsed by Emma Watkins of Prospero Planning Ltd and the Strategic Advisory Group for Planning Wales.

Constraints

Research participant recruitment

Recruitment for research interviews was challenging and the sample size of participants recruited was small (7 participants) and not evenly representative of all user groups.

There was also limited geographic and demographic spread amongst the research participants.

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Engagement with LPAs

Engagement with LPAs during this phase was low. This meant we did not secure formal partnerships as planned.

We carried out two visits to LPA offices. These visits helped us understand their processes and gather insights.

We also shared the 'as-is' service blueprint through POSW. We received one response with feedback from an LPA.

Limited engagement affected our ability to:

- identify which systems each LPA uses
- understand differences in their processes
- assess how local demographics affect LPA performance

Recommendations

Policy and legislation

Review how the policy for publishing planning applications impacts service efficiency

78% of the public researched said they don't read their local newspaper

Problem

LPAs are required to publish planning notices in local newspapers, despite declining readership and limited public impact.

These notices are often printed in very small text, provide limited information and do little to inform or engage the public.

Reliance on newspaper publication can delay public awareness and participation. It also creates avoidable cost, with some authorities reporting that a large proportion of their publicity budget is spent on newspaper notices.



By contrast, digital channels can reach a wider audience at lower cost but are not always used as the primary means of communication.

Impact

Current publication requirements limit the effectiveness of public engagement:

- members of the public may become aware of developments late in the process
- opportunities to comment or object can be missed
- public funds are spent on activity with low reach and impact

This reduces the overall effectiveness of consultation and adds unnecessary cost to the system.

Benefit

Reviewing publication policy creates an opportunity to use more effective and proportionate methods.

More timely and accessible publication:

- improves public awareness
- supports earlier engagement
- reduces reliance on costly, low-impact channels

This helps ensure public money is used more effectively.

Immediate action

Review the policy and statutory requirements for publishing planning applications. Identify and assess alternative approaches that offer wider reach, faster publication and better value for money.



Review how planning developments are communicated to the public to support awareness and early engagement

85% of participants would expect the council to notify them directly of any planned development that might impact them.

Problem

Current methods for informing the public about planning developments do not consistently meet user expectations. Many people expect to be told directly when a development may affect them, rather than discovering information by chance.

Existing approaches are often seen as reactive and easy to miss. Awareness relies too heavily on public notices that are easily overlooked. While many participants indicate a preference for notification by letter, communication preferences vary and also include email, physical notices, consultations, and online channels.

"Notices on a lamppost...I can't see that being a 2025 way of informing the community."

Impact

People frequently miss information about developments in their area. Public notices, such as those placed on lampposts, are often difficult to understand. They are described as unclear, visually unengaging, and overly complex.

Notices commonly use technical language and provide too much detail, while failing to explain the key points people care about. As a result, many people only become aware of proposals late in the process. This can leave individuals feeling excluded or unaware that they had an opportunity to comment.



Benefit

More people are aware of developments that may affect them because information is clearer and easier to understand, regardless of how it is accessed. Improved communication encourages earlier engagement during consultation stages, when feedback can still influence proposals. This reduces the risk of people missing opportunities to take part, helps ensure they feel they have had a fair chance to contribute, and improves trust and transparency in the planning process.

Immediate action

Review lamppost notices to:

- improve accessibility and visual impact
- reduce technical language
- clearly explain what is proposed, where it applies and how to respond

Agree minimum, standardised requirements for notices across all LPAs.

Review existing notification methods and pilot additional ways to notify those impacted by developments where appropriate.

Mid-term goal

Improve promotion and engagement with Local Development Plans (LDPs) to help communities understand how they can influence development earlier.

Long-term goal

Provide a single, national service where people can:

- check planning activity using their postcode
- view nearby or relevant developments
- sign up for alerts within a chosen area or radius

Review planning application processing timeframes so they reflect current workload, service demands and complexity

Problem

Several target timeframes across the planning application process, including the eight-week determination period, have remained unchanged for decades.

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These targets no longer reflect the volume or complexity of modern planning applications.

LPAs report that they are operating under timeframes that are widely perceived as unachievable from the outset. Increasing application complexity, combined with ongoing resource and skills pressures, means authorities often feel set up to fail against targets that do not reflect current realities.

Impact

This contributes to frustration for applicants and planning officers, undermines confidence in the system, and places additional pressure on already stretched services.

Benefit

Target timeframes better reflect the complexity and volume of modern planning work.

Performance measures are more realistic and meaningful. Reduced pressure on planning officers working to unachievable targets. Improved transparency and trust in reported performance. A stronger evidence base for future service and workforce planning.

Immediate action

Use the quarterly datasets already being collected to assess how current processing times compare with existing targets.

Work with the Planning Officers Society Wales (POSW) to review whether current timeframes reflect:

- workload and case volume
- application complexity
- available skills and capacity



User experience

Ensure planning information is clear, consistent and accurate across all platforms

‘We often get feedback that people can’t find or understand planning information.’

Problem

Applicants and agents access planning information from multiple sources. These include the Planning Portal, Welsh Government guidance, and LPA websites.

Content varies across these platforms:

- wording differs
- key information is presented inconsistently
- local requirements are interpreted and explained differently

Important guidance can be hard to find. Some information is missing or buried within large volumes of text.

As a result, users struggle to understand what is required for a valid application or objection.

Applicants may follow national guidance. They may then encounter additional or differently framed expectations at local level.

This creates uncertainty about which guidance is accurate and which information to follow.

“Everything is written like you are an architect, not a homeowner.”

Impact

Inconsistent and unclear content increases avoidable demand.

- Applications and objections are more likely to contain errors
- Invalid submissions and resubmissions increase

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- Delays and additional costs are incurred

LPAs spend time responding to enquiries and correcting mistakes. This adds pressure to already stretched services and reduces confidence in the planning system.

Benefit

Clear, consistent planning information reduces friction across the user journey. Applicants can submit more accurate applications and objections. This reduces the need for additional support and follow-up from LPAs.

Immediate action

Adopt existing, tested content where available. This includes the pre-application advice service prototype and using the shared glossary to support clear, consistent and accessible use of planning terms across all content. Ensure staff responsible for planning content attend content and accessibility training.

Mid-term goal

Design bilingual planning content centrally. Adopt the same content and structure across all relevant platforms.

Long-term goal

Establish a single, central source of planning guidance. Applicants can access one set of clear, consistent content. This applies regardless of which LPA they are applying to.

Ensure planning websites are user friendly and accessible across all platforms and devices used by applicants

“The website isn’t very user-friendly...a lot of the time you can’t access it.”

Problem

Many LPA planning websites are difficult to use.

Users often encounter:

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- outdated or slow interfaces
- unclear navigation
- large volumes of poorly structured content
- information that is hard to find or interpret

Although most users attempt to access planning information through official websites, usability issues make this challenging.

As a result, many users turn to non-official sources such as Facebook or WhatsApp groups, to understand local planning activity.

This increases the risk of misinformation being shared.

Impact

Poor usability creates avoidable problems in the planning process.

- Users struggle to find the information they need
- Confidence in digital planning services is reduced
- Contact with LPAs increases

This leads to more enquiries and adds pressure to already stretched LPA resources.

Benefit

User-friendly and accessible websites help applicants find and understand information independently.

This:

- reduces confusion
- lowers the volume of enquiries to LPAs
- improves confidence in digital planning services

Immediate action

Conduct targeted UX and accessibility reviews of the platforms most commonly used by applicants. Prioritise improvements that address the highest-impact usability issues.

LPAs should adopt the pre-application advice service pages where appropriate.

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Mid-term goal

Centrally design standard page templates, navigation structures and content patterns. Adopt these consistently across all platforms.

Long-term goal

Provide a single, central planning product. This service should offer a seamless user experience, with consistent navigation and presentation across all content.

Ensure equal standards are applied when creating Welsh language services

Problem

Welsh language provision across the planning service is inconsistent. Some pages do not have a Welsh equivalent.

Where Welsh content is available, it is often weaker than the English version.

This includes differences in:

- clarity and structure
- completeness of information
- usability across the end-to-end journey

In some cases, planning decisions and consultation responses are published in Welsh, but members of the public then ask staff to translate them into English.

This indicates gaps in accessibility and parity between languages.

Collectively, this means Welsh language users do not receive the same standard of service as English speakers.

Clear and easy to understand Welsh language equivalents across the journey will enable Welsh users to have the same standard of user journey as English speakers, meaning they are less likely to need additional support with their applications.



Impact

Without change, Welsh language users are more likely to:

- experience delays
- require additional support
- struggle to complete planning tasks independently

This increases demand on planning teams and undermines confidence in bilingual digital services.

Benefit

Clear Welsh language content across the journey allows Welsh users to complete planning tasks to the same standard as English speakers.

This reduces the need for additional support from planning teams.

Immediate action

All LPAs and the Planning Portal should review their Welsh language content against Digital Service Standard for Wales. Address the gaps in coverage, quality and usability.

Mid-term goal

Design bilingual content centrally. Adopt the same content, structure and standards across all relevant platforms.

Long-term goal

Design services and content bilingually from the outset. Welsh and English should be treated as equal throughout service and content design, not added retrospectively.



Enable applicants to make an informed decision early about whether planning permission is required and what fees apply

“Fees (should be) clear, money is important to people.”

Problem

Applicants experience uncertainty at the earliest stages of the planning process.

Many want to understand:

- whether they need planning permission
- what fees apply
- what steps are required before submitting an application

This information is often difficult to find or interpret.

Planning fees are not always visible upfront. Users are unclear about what fees cover, whether they are up to date, and how they relate to service delivery.

This lack of transparency can reduce confidence in the service, with some users questioning whether fees are reinvested in the service.

At the same time, guidance on whether planning permission is required is not always clear or easy to follow.

Essential information such as forms, guidance notes, and key planning documents can be hard to find. Reliance on PDF formats further reduces accessibility.

Inconsistent messages across LPA websites, the Planning Portal and other resources add to confusion.

Difficulties contacting planning staff compound frustration.

Impact

Without clear upfront information:

- applicants rely on staff support before submitting an application
- avoidable enquiries increase

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- applications are delayed or submitted incorrectly

This adds pressure to planning teams and slows the overall process.

Benefit

Clear, upfront guidance enables applicants to make informed decisions before starting an application.

Applicants can:

- understand whether planning permission is required
- see applicable fees early
- prepare correctly before submitting

This reduces confusion, improves application quality, and lowers demand for early staff support.

Immediate action

LPAs to adopt the pre-application advice service pages and common project pages.

Mid-term goal

Create a fee calculator tool and an interactive house (or similar) tool.

Long-term goal

Have one central product that provides consistent navigation and content, and includes tools to help users make informed decisions.

Provide users with clear and timely progress updates on their planning application or objection

“I think any update about timeframes is great.”

Problem

After submitting an application or objection, users often have little visibility of what is happening next.



Clear updates, timelines and consistent communication are not always available.

This can create a sense of entering a “black hole”.

As a result:

- users feel uncertain and unsupported
- confidence in the service is reduced
- applicants contact LPAs for reassurance or status updates

Limited online functionality and self-service options mean users often rely on phone calls or emails to obtain basic information.

This increases contact volumes and can lead to inconsistent responses.

Impact

Without clear progress updates:

- avoidable enquiries increase
- staff time is spent responding to status requests
- users experience delays and frustration

This adds pressure to LPA resources and reduces the efficiency of the planning service.

Benefit

Providing clear progress updates allow users to:

- understand the current status of their application or objection
- anticipate next steps and required actions
- prepare supporting information in a timely way

This reduces the need for direct enquiries, improves consistency of communication, and eases administrative pressure on LPAs.



Immediate action

Undertake further user testing and refinement of the progress-update prototype. LPAs should adopt the prototype and set clear expectations through published guidance and indicative timelines.

Mid-term goal

Introduce automated updates that notify users as their application or objection moves through key stages of the process.

Long-term goal

Implement a single, centralised system that provides real-time status updates. Applicants, agents and interested parties should be able to:

- receive automatic updates, or
- check the latest status of an application or objection online

Create a standard, user friendly online journey for commenting on or objecting to a planning application

“Can be hard to get information, we spend a lot of time waiting.”

Problem

Consultation responses are submitted through multiple channels. Consultees and interested parties can submit comments by email, post or separate systems.

There is no consistent way to comment or object across LPAs.

This makes it time-consuming for officers to:

- track responses
- verify submissions
- consolidate comments

Consultation stages are often delayed.

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External consultees do not always respond within the standard three-week period.

These delays create knock-on effects across the determination process and can lead to extensions of time being requested.

Impact

Fragmented response processes increase administrative effort:

- officers spend time managing and reconciling responses
- determination timescales are extended
- applicants experience delays and uncertainty

This reduces efficiency across the planning service.

Benefit

A standard online journey makes it easier for consultees and the public to comment or object, it:

- reduces the time needed to collect and process responses
- improves consistency and traceability
- supports quicker decision-making

Applicants benefit from fewer delays.

LPAs benefit from reduced administrative effort.

Immediate action

Ensure all LPAs have an online method for consultees and interested parties to comment on applications. Direct users to submit comments through this method as the primary route.



Mid-term goal

Review and improve the usability of existing platforms that already support online comments. Ensure the journey is simple, clear and accessible.

Long-term goal

Implement a single, central system for consultation responses. Consultees and interested parties can submit comments in one place. Applicants and LPAs can view all responses in a consistent format.

Responses should feed directly into back-office systems and support status updates for applicants.

Data and automation

Standardise data and automation foundations to enable consistent processing across LPAs

Problem

Levels of automation and digital maturity vary significantly across LPAs. Some LPAs can automatically ingest and record planning submissions, while others rely on manual processes such as re-keying data, managing work via email or spreadsheets, and handling hybrid paper-digital records. These differences are driven by inconsistent data standards, fragmented tooling, and uneven system integration, leading to variation in how and when key process steps are completed.

There is currently very little standardisation of core data formats, integration patterns, or automation expectations. This makes it difficult to automate key stages of the planning process consistently across all authorities.



Impact

Essential stages of the planning process steps such as submission, validation, case creation and status updates cannot be automated consistently.

Users experience different levels of service depending on the authority, and some LPAs have more work to do than others depending on their level of automation.

Benefit

Introducing shared data standards and interoperability it will reduce manual effort for LPAs, improve efficiency. It will also help ensure that planning applications are processed in a broadly comparable way across authorities, improving the overall user experience.

Immediate action

Define a national minimum set of process steps that should be system-driven rather than manual. For example, application receipt, case creation, document registration, boundary ingestion.

Standardise data formats and validation rules so all LPAs can automate these steps consistently.

Mid-term goal

Align tooling and integration capabilities across LPAs and other systems

Promote shared patterns, rather than bespoke builds, for task queues, validation workflows, and officer dashboards.



Long-term goal

Have a single system used by all LPAs, which auto-pushes tasks to an officer at standard points of the journey producing the same data formats, integration patterns and automations.

Introduce clear, automated quality validation checks supported by guidance to prevent incomplete or inaccurate planning applications (BRD3.2.2)

Problem

Validation processes are widely perceived as inefficient and error prone, largely due to the absence of robust automated quality checks.

Without an effective form of quality validation, applications can be submitted with missing or incorrect information, allowing incomplete or inaccurate cases to enter the system.

Introducing automated quality and validation checks, supported by clear guidance for applicants, would help improve the quality of submissions from the outset. Where information is missing, it can be identified and requested automatically, reducing the need for repeated manual validation and allowing resources to be redirected towards more valuable tasks.

Impact

Many applications are delayed before they reach a planner because required metadata or documentation are missing. As a result, planning officers often have to request additional information, even when applications were thought to be complete.

As a result, a significant amount of administrative effort is spent on manual validation, corrections, and follow up. These issues are compounded when applicants lack the expertise to prepare appropriate plans and supporting materials, leading to delays, rework, and increased pressure on validation and administrative teams.

Benefit

Clearer guidance and automated validation checks improve the quality of applications at the point of submission. Missing or incorrect information can gwasanaethau.cymru/digitalpublicservices.gov.wales



be identified earlier and more consistently, reducing the need for repeated manual checks.

This allows applications to move more quickly into the decision-making process, reduces rework for staff, and enables limited resources to be focused on higher-value planning activity.

Immediate action

Provide clear plain-language guidance for applicants on what makes a valid application.

Mid-term goal

Introduce stronger automated quality checks on application.

Long-term goal

Standardise and embed automatic validation across planning with one centralised system.

Standardise data exchange on JSON to enable consistent, machine-readable sharing across Wales (BRD3.2.3)

Problem

Data sharing across the planning system is inconsistent and fragmented.

Despite most applications being automatically retrieved by LPAs from Planning Portal, and the standardised XML that has always been provided in those submissions containing the majority of application form data and metadata, many authorities heavily rely on unstructured formats such as PDFs, emails and Word documents.

This prevents LPAs from exchanging information seamlessly. Officers have to re-enter information into multiple systems, which introduces unnecessary room for error.

Although the Planning Portal can already provide authoritative JSON data, many LPA systems do not yet ingest or process JSON reliably. This limits the value of structured data and restricts opportunities for automation, validation, and real-time status updates.



Impact

Inconsistent data formats prevent planning information from flowing smoothly between systems.

Officers spend time manually transferring and correcting data rather than progressing applications. Automation is difficult to apply consistently, and status updates are often delayed or unavailable.

As a result, processing varies between authorities, data quality suffers, and users experience different levels of service depending on where they apply.

Benefit

Standardising JSON as the national data exchange format provides a consistent, machine-readable foundation across all LPA systems. This reduces duplication and allows future services to operate on the same structured datasets. For example, automated validation, live case tracking, cross-system and management information.

Immediate action

LPAs to adopt JSON files to align with industry standards.

Mid-term goal

All LPAs follow a consistent set of data principles and standard, to enable consistent integration and data sharing.

Long-term goal

Support live data synchronisation between LPA systems, Welsh Government dashboards, and public services via JSON APIs.



Standardise the file type used by LPAs and encourage the use of geospatial files

“Only 18% of respondents considered themselves highly skilled in GIS.”

Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)

Problem

The absence of a centralised, Wales-wide spatial data infrastructure limits the effective use of geospatial analysis, visualisation, and modern digital planning tools. Without consistent access to integrated GIS capabilities, many LPAs are unable to provide interactive mapping tools that help applicants to easily understand site-specific constraints and considerations.

Although users already create site boundary location plans, LPAs cannot view or use them because they do not support the submitted file types. This creates additional rework and leads to missed opportunities for both LPAs and applicants.

Impact

Planning staff often have to manually remap site boundaries from submitted applications because geospatial files cannot be used directly. This increases effort and duplication and limits the ability to use mapping tools effectively. Applicants are also less able to understand constraints or restrictions affecting a site, which can result in poorly prepared submissions and additional follow-up.

Benefit

The use of geospatial files removes the need for LPAs to manually remap site boundaries from submitted applications. It makes it easier for both LPAs and applicants to identify and understand constraints or restrictions affecting a site.

This reduces the time and effort required to obtain this information and enables more effective preparation of supporting documentation or evidence.



Immediate action

Use Data Map Wales to help LPAs to more effectively use existing geospatial information.

Mid-term goal

LPAs update processes or systems to enable the use of GeoJSON files to automate the mapping of site boundary within applications.

Long-term goal

Provide a single service which uses geospatial layers to allow users to input their postcode and see restrictions affecting their boundary or area before applying.

Create a consistent approach to creation, submission and analysis of performance data

Problem

There is no consistent way to define or record data used to assess performance across LPAs. Authorities collect, interpret and report information differently, so current performance measures are often unreliable.

Without standard data structures and stronger criteria, it is difficult to spot inefficiencies, evaluate outcomes or understand the real impact of delays and decisions. This lack of consistency reduces transparency, limits evidence-based improvement and often leads to decisions based on inaccurate data.

Impact

LPAs and Welsh Government do not have a shared, trusted view of performance across the planning system. Inconsistent data makes it difficult to understand how authorities are performing or to compare performance meaningfully.

This limits the ability to identify where change is needed and weakens confidence in the data used to inform decisions.



Benefit

Following this recommendation will give LPAs a dataset that both they and Welsh Government trust. This will help them understand how they are performing, make business decisions, and assess the impact of those decisions using accurate data.

Immediate action

Create a standard of how performance data is collected and analysed.

Provide training and guidance on the data standard so that each LPA can analyse the performance data and take action where needed.

Mid-term goal

Create a standardised approach of how performance data is collected and analysed. Provide training and guidance on the data standard so that each LPA can analyse the performance data and take action where needed.

Long-term goal

Provide a single central system which automatically collects performance data, analyses it consistently and produces accurate real time reports of LPA performance.

Inconsistencies between LPAs

Encourage consistency and alignment in processes across LPAs

Problem

There is no consistent approach in processing planning applications across LPAs. Particularly in validation requirements and decision-making.

While national policy and legislation provide an overarching framework, the way LPAs interpret and apply these rules often varies. As a result, applications that are considered valid in one authority may be rejected or require additional information in another.



For applicants, agents and developers who submit applications across multiple LPAs, this creates uncertainty around expectations, documentation standards and timelines. These inconsistencies undermine confidence and trust in the planning system and create perceptions of unfairness, inefficiency and unpredictability.

Impact

Inconsistent processes lead to delays in application processing and increase the amount of rework required by LPAs. Applicants experience confusion and frustration when requirements differ between authorities. LPAs also use additional resources managing avoidable queries, validation issues and process variation.

Benefit

Greater consistency in processes reduces delays and lowers resource demands on LPAs. Applicants experience a clearer, more predictable journey, regardless of where they apply. This improves confidence in the planning system and supports a more efficient and fair service overall.

Immediate action

Publish a standard validation and decision-making checklist for LPAs to use.

Mid-term goal

LPAs who use the same systems begin to work together to maximise collective bargaining power during procurement and get the most out of their systems.

Long-term goal

Provide one centralised system that shows the steps in the process and when you must complete each one, including the timescales for each step. Including a standard approach to validation and decision making.



Provide a standardised training and skills framework across LPAs

Problem

Variation exists both between LPAs and among staff within them.

Inconsistent application processes and differing interpretations of policy and procedure create uncertainty for applicants and stakeholders. Differences across authorities also raise wider concerns about consistency and coordination.

These variations can create confusion and reinforce perceptions that processes are open to interpretation rather than applied uniformly. Perceptions are further shaped by beliefs that enforcement and decision-making lack consistency.

These issues are compounded by shortages of specialist knowledge, skills gaps, limited training opportunities, and funding constraints. Recruitment and retention pressures also leave some teams understaffed, increasing strain on resources.

Together, these factors act as operational barriers, reducing efficiency, consistency and clarity, and risk undermining public confidence in the planning system.

Impact

Inconsistent skills and training lead to uneven application of policy and process across LPAs. Applicants experience uncertainty and frustration when approaches differ between authorities or individual officers.

LPAs face increased pressure on limited resources, while the lack of shared training reduces opportunities for collaboration and consistent practice across Wales.

Benefit

Standardised training across all LPAs will help to develop consistent skills across the planning service and allow sharing of resources and processes.

Shared training reduces reliance on external consultants and lowers costs for individual authorities.

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digitalpublicservices.gov.wales



Wales-wide training for all planning staff will also help LPAs to reduce individual training costs and support staff development and retention.

Raising skills and consistency across Wales will help improve public trust in the planning system.

Immediate action

Promote existing working groups and communities that support up-skilling, such as the CDPS Connect Service.

Mid-term goal

Roll out the initial skills framework for planning staff, alongside a list of free to end-user courses.

Long-term goal

Further refine and develop the planning services syllabus to meet role-specific requirements and broader planning service needs.

Sharing of best practices between LPAs

“If all funding was cut in planning, the community of practice should be the last thing to remain.”

Problem

LPAs operate independently of each other, where sharing of knowledge, experience, and effective working practices is limited and restricts opportunities for efficiency and improvement. Variations in processes between authorities often lead to duplicated effort and inconsistent approaches to solving common challenges.

An example of this can be seen where some LPAs use more advanced digital tools than others but understanding of system functionality and potential efficiencies is rarely shared beyond individual authorities. As a result, LPAs frequently rely on external consultants to address gaps that may already have been resolved elsewhere, creating avoidable costs and inefficiencies.



Impact

Limited sharing of best practice leads to repeated effort across LPAs and missed opportunities to improve efficiency.

Authorities spend time and money solving problems in isolation, even when similar challenges have already been addressed elsewhere.

Inconsistent practices also result in varying experiences for applicants, which can affect confidence in the fairness and reliability of the planning system.

Benefit

Sharing best practice allows LPAs to build on solutions that have already been developed elsewhere, reducing the time spent resolving common issues. Authorities benefit from existing work carried out by other LPAs in similar areas.

Over time, this approach would promote stronger collaboration between officers which could improve consistency between LPAs and encourage a positive culture of innovation and change in planning in Wales.

Immediate action

Conduct in-depth research to understand the full extent of LPA needs for a Planning Services Community of Best Practice in Wales.

Review the potential for MS Teams, or a similar communication platform that is accessible to all LPAs, as an interim asynchronous space for planners to ask questions and share knowledge.

Mid-term goal

Design and launch a Community of Best Practice and define governance structures and ownership.

Long-term goal

Maintain and grow a successful Community of Best Practice that is at least partially member-led, to ensure it continues to provide value to its members.



Identify or design an online communication platform that meets user needs and is accessible to all planners and enables planners to store and share resources.



Acknowledgements

We sincerely thank all the organisations who generously shared their time and expertise with our project team over the past year.

Their contributions have been invaluable in helping us understand the challenges facing planning services in Wales. It has also helped us identify opportunities to improve service delivery for both staff and users.

Aberdyfi Community Council

Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority

Blaenau Gwent Local Planning Authority

Caerphilly Local Planning Authority

Ceredigion Local Planning Authority

Data Cymru

DataMapWales

Eryri National Park Authority

Gwynedd Local Planning Authority

Monmouth Town Council

Newport Local Planning Authority

Open Digital Planning

Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority

Planning Aid Wales

Planning and Environment Decisions Wales

Planning Officers Society Wales

Planning Portal

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digitalpublicservices.gov.wales



Porthcawl Town Council

Prospero Planning Ltd

Royal Town Planning Institute Cymru

Strategic Advisory Group for Planning Wales

Welsh Government Planning Policy

Wrexham Local Planning Authority



Appendices

Appendix 1 – Common projects

- [Planning Permission: common projects webpage usability recommendation report](#)
- [Planning Permission: common projects before and after prototypes](#)

Appendix 2 – Bilingual content

- [Planning terms: plain language guide and glossary](#)
- [Apply for householder planning permission](#)
- [Householder planning application fees in Wales](#)

Appendix 3 – Planning blueprints and maps

- [Planning blueprints and maps](#)