

DIGITALISATION IN PLANNING FOR COUNCILS

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Interview with Brett Leary, Head of Planning and Building Control at Redbridge Council.

How have you ended up becoming a tech pioneer for the planning sector?

I've always had a personal interest in tech. I am passionate about public service and what local government can offer despite facing austerity.

From a lower government perspective, we still have a long way to go in terms of embracing the possibilities of technological innovation in the planning fraternity. Moving forward, planning needs to embrace technology to deal with the challenges we are trying to navigate.

Have any other councils approached you with the idea of engaging technology services?

The Wirral Council got in contact as they are currently undergoing an IT transformation programme. Some of their key challenges as a council include engaging with services like planning efficiently and effectively.

Plan Tech isn't just about the functional process elements within planning departments. Certain tools can be

powerful in terms of aiding placemaking, allowing for an officer to focus on what is really important and provide a great service.

Is there an example of a community that has benefited from such technological shifts?

Milton Keynes is a great example. In partnership with FCC and MACLG (Planning innovation grant) they focused on 3 themes of change:

1. Reduction in first contact demands i.e. directly emailing/calling officers about application information that is available online by creating a 'chat-bot' to answer resident queries and help them navigate the Council's website.
2. Automating the validation process through AI, helping with PPAs and Pre-apps.
3. Getting AI to assess and determine householder applications, so that the officer call time can be freed up for other, placemaking orientated tasks.

What was the main lesson learnt through Milton Keynes?

Lower government only have access to a small number of key players in terms of the databases and learn from them, as public sector systems have profited from keeping their systems closed. However, AI systems need to be open so that they can learn from the public sector processes and communicate with them.

The technology works by picking out key words from statements and reading plans and drawings. The biggest challenge for AI is differentiating between a document and a drawing, especially when a document contains drawings, it is a process of learning.

Replacing people with AI – does this encourage any questions around ethics?

There are questions around desirability and ethics as to whether we should involve AI in placemaking. Redbridge are working with Agile Applications to introduce AI and automate 80% of all current functions within 3 years. PlanX are helping to develop a householder model based on the IKEA concept, this will help give householders design ideas for alterations and extensions that would help them get approval.

This had led to discussions around AI acting as another brain in helping professionals and individuals to think deeper about the design aspects of various schemes.

Have you found it challenging getting people on board and involved with your ideas?

As the technical changes are aimed at creating more efficient processes in the day-to-day operations of Local Government, this does not tend to involve the public at this level. Therefore, engaging with others in the public sector and bringing the right people on board through good leadership is necessary when trying to shift perceptions of practice.