Digital Service Standard assessment

Southwark Council

Back-office planning service (Discovery)

25/4/19

Assessment participants

- Lead assessor : Martin Chaney
- UR assessor : Jacob Bonwitt
- Technical assessor : David Durant
- Product Owner : Jack Ricketts (Planning Officer)
- Tech Lead : Martin Evans (Unboxed)
- Dev : Celia Collins (Unboxed)
- Service design : Boris Divjak (Unboxed)
- DM : Graeme McCubbin (Unboxed)
- UR : Paul John-Baptiste (Unboxed)
- UR : Wingwo Kwai (Hackey)

About the service

URL

None as this was a Discovery review.

Introduction

Sections below from the delivery team's slides for the Service Standard assessment.

Long-term project vision
To create a user-centered back-office planning system that makes planning data and records easily accessible,increases efficiency across the planning application process, and fits the needs of its users (Planning Officers).

Discovery phase goals
This Discovery phase aims to provide a better understanding of:
● The user needs of planning officers and other stakeholders
● The potential scope of a new system to meet these user needs
● How a new system might bring together other projects in the PlanTech space
● Potential benefits of a new system and how to measure success
● The team required to deliver the next phase (alpha)
● The design principles that should inform the new system
● The data standards and technical architecture needed to support the new service
● What should be considered out of scope for the new service

Given the national scale of the issues the team at Southwark formed a cross-organisational group with a number of other local authorities and the Connected Places Catapult to create a pitch for the MHCLG Digital Fund following Southwark adopting the MHCLG Digital Declaration. This was successful and was used to bring Unboxed on board to undertake the Discovery for a service to handle one of the simpler application types (“8 week application”).

The proposed service is part of a significant new ecosystem of planning projects being worked on in a number of partnerships in the local and national government sector under the umbrella term “plantech”. Another group, headed by Hackney Council, is working on the citizen facing part of the planning user journey. Work is also starting on a common cross-org “planning data cloud” and standardisation of APIs across the plantech projects. A managing group for plantech is currently forming.

The project was developed from the beginning with a view of being compliant with the Local Government Digital Service Standard. The team produced high quality week notes throughout the discovery phase and recorded their user research insights in the Local Gov Digital user research library.

Southwark Council Planning department have renewed their existing contract with their current planning back-office supplier but with a newly introduced break-clause to allow them to move to this new service if it is successfully developed.

Standard	Met/Not met	Score (>0 = met)
1. Understand user needs	Met	5
2. Have a multidisciplinary team	Met	5
3. Use agile methods	Met	3
4. Iterate and improve regularly	Met	3
5. Evaluate appropriate tools and systems	Met	3
6. Evaluate user data and information	Met	3

7. Use open standards	Met	3
8. Test the end-to-end service	Met	3
9. Make a plan for being offline	Met	3
10. Make sure users succeed first time	Met	3
11. Build a consistent user experience	Met	3
12. Encourage everyone to use the digital service	Met	3
13. Identify performance indicators	Met	5
14. Do ongoing user research	Met	3
15. Test with senior manager	Met	1
Overall result	**MET**	**49**

Total score (Min met 15, max 75):	49
Main strengths:	A thorough, well planned and executed discovery. Excellent user research and understanding of the problem and pain points as well as sensible recommendations for the next phase. Recommended as a Discovery template for other back-office services.
Main weaknesses:	None

Visuals

No visuals as Discovery period review.

Back-office planning service background

Problem statement

Local authorities lack a user-centred solution providing back-office case management, transactional functions and database necessary to efficiently manage a planning service. Planning services are currently dependent on proprietary solutions that are developing slowly and resistant to interoperability. The market is dominated by just two providers and

commercial incentives to support innovation are low. The practical problems associated with poor quality software create challenges for the effective administration of the national planning system.

The cost of the problem

- High cost of change – projects cost >£1m to transition from one provider to another and are lengthy and resource intensive
- Hackney estimates it spends >£250,000 in administration time
- Future Cities Catapult found that planning authorities in England receive ca. 450,000 planning applications a year. A typical household application takes 4-7 hours to process, yet ca. 50% of these are returned as invalid because they lack the right information. Assuming an average salary of £50,000, ca. **£500M** is wasted annually across the UK.

Detailed assessment

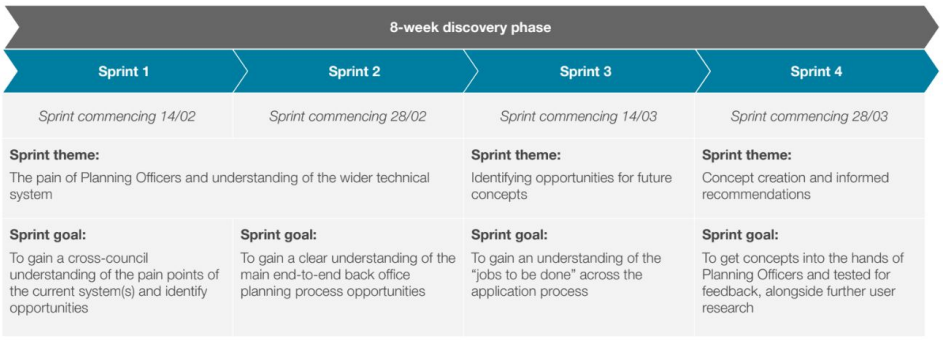
For the overall rating, 1 indicates the minimum level of compliance to the standard, and 5 the highest. Again, these are not terribly scientific scores, but the aim should be to identify where improvements can be made.

1. Understand user needs *Research to develop deep knowledge of who the service users are and what that means for the design of the service - find out more*	
What was good?	The team undertook significant desktop and user research in discovery. The team conducted research into existing resources that local authorities used to provide planning back office services. As stated above the market is very small and none of the products are either user centred or rapidly iterated. The following user personas were identified: ● Planning Technical Support Officer ● Graduate Planning Officer ● Planning Manager ● Strategic Planner (e.g. working on a large scale item such as a regeneration project) The team undertook the following user research during the Discovery period: ● 17 x user interviews with planning teams ● 2 x existing system demonstrations ● 3 x insight and co-design workshops ● 4 x planning application process shadowing ● 12 x back-office concept prototype testing sessions

	Engaging with: ● 7 x London borough councils (Southwark, Hackney, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets, Haringey, Lambeth & Islington) ● 1 x Metropolitan district council (Leeds) ● 2 x other councils (Canterbury & Huntingdonshire) ● Covered users of the major software solutions Key insights included the following: ● Poor quality of submissions (standards will help) ● Need to manage expectations of people submitting plans ● Most processes are currently very manual - lots of communication ● Lack of transparency of state of applications ● Lots of working outside the current system (e.g. individual planning officers having their own spreadsheets). The co-design workshops lead to two propositions. First : “Data informed workflow” - automated validation, keeping applicants better informed, “assisted assessment” - prompts for case workers about relevant policies &c, much better reporting. Second: “Collaborative 3D workflow” - 3D submissions, collaborative alterations, open 3D data for AR applications.
What could be improved?	N/A
Overall rating	1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | **5**

2. Have a multidisciplinary team *Ensure a suitably skilled, sustainable multidisciplinary team, led by a senior service manager with decision making responsibility, can design, build and improve the service - find out more*	
What was good?	The core team structure for this discovery team: ● Product Owner (Southwark Council) ● Senior Service Designer (Unboxed) ● Technical Lead (Unboxed) ● User Researcher (Unboxed) ● User Researcher (Hackney Council) ● Developer (Unboxed) ● Delivery Manager (Unboxed)

	A well-balanced and well resourced team				
What could be improved?	N/A				
Overall rating	1	2	3	4	**5**

3. Use agile methods *Create a service using the agile, iterative and user-centred methods set out in the Government Service Design Manual - find out more*	
What was good?	The team undertook four sprints using all the standard Agile methodologies and ceremonies.  8-week discovery phase Sprint 1 / Sprint 2 / Sprint 3 / Sprint 4 Sprint commencing 14/02 / Sprint commencing 28/02 / Sprint commencing 14/03 / Sprint commencing 28/03 Sprint theme: The pain of Planning Officers and understanding of the wider technical system Sprint theme: Identifying opportunities for future concepts Sprint theme: Concept creation and informed recommendations Sprint goal: To gain a cross-council understanding of the pain points of the current system(s) and identify opportunities Sprint goal: To gain a clear understanding of the main end-to-end back office planning process opportunities Sprint goal: To gain an understanding of the "jobs to be done" across the application process Sprint goal: To get concepts into the hands of Planning Officers and tested for feedback, alongside further user research In particular their show and tells were impressive - taking place on the Planning team area of Southwark Council with large numbers of Planners attending.
What could be improved?	A good example of appropriate discovery methodology. Agile is more important at the alpha stage and we would advise the team to make sure that the product is developed prioritising the agile manifesto over and above agile ceremonies. (this is standard advice that applies to all projects)
Overall rating	1 / 2 / **3** / 4 / 5

4. Iterate and improve regularly *Build a service that can be iterated and improved in response to user need and make sure you have the capacity, resources and technical flexibility to do so - find out more*	
What was good?	The service does not yet have a technical implementation as this was a Discovery period. That said, the team showed considerable

understanding of the potential issues surrounding this such as how multi organisational collaboration introduces its own complications (such as feature / issue prioritisation).

The team have defined an ideal team for the Alpha development phase.

Team makeup for alpha phase

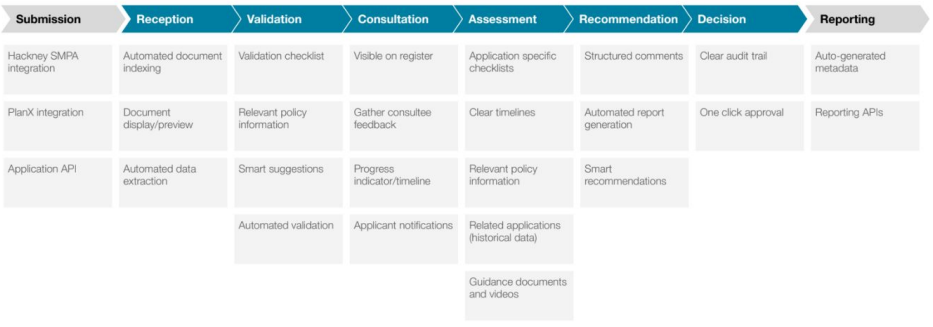
For the alpha phase, Unboxed recommends the following core team structure:

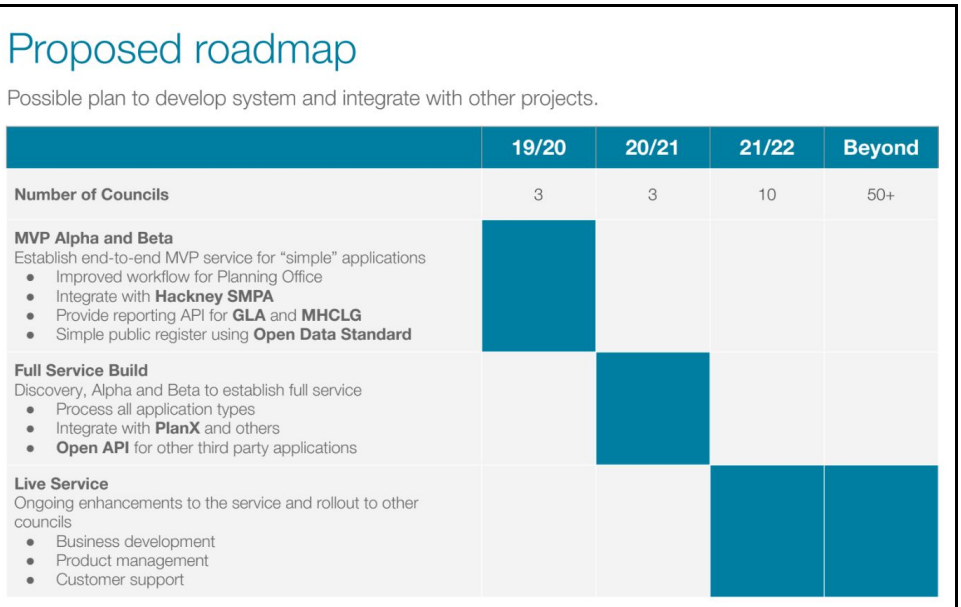
- **Product Owner**
- **Senior Service Designer**
- **Technical Lead**
- **User Researcher**
- **User Experience / User Interface Designer**
- **Developer**
- **Developer**
- **Delivery Manager**

As well as proposed a roadmap for future stages of development.

Proposed alpha phase

Exploring an end-to-end MVP service for “simple” 8-week applications, starting with householder applications/certificates, and then minor applications.



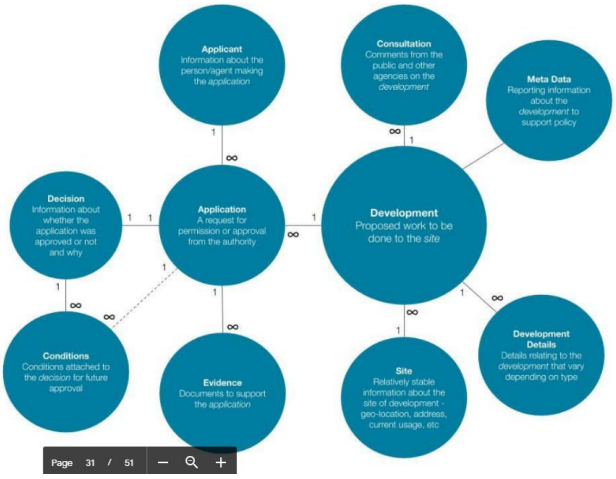
	
What could be improved?	As funding for the Discovery period was provided by the MHCLG Digital Fund it's not immediately clear what resources will take this work forward - although it is obvious that a significant number of organisations, including MHCLG, wish it to progress. Some discussions with MHCLG have taken place regarding the next round of their Digital Fund. The team is also working with Catapult to build a consortium of LAs that could each put some money into supporting this. Finally, as with all similar services, it is highly recommended that a permanent service team be funded and not just a fixed term project team.
Overall rating	1 | 2 | **3** | 4 | 5

5. Evaluate appropriate tools and systems *Evaluate what tools and systems will be used to build, host, operate and measure the service, and how to procure them, looking to reuse existing technologies where possible - find out more*	
What was good?	Not required as this was a Discovery period. Attention will need to be paid to this in Alpha. Especially in terms of scalability if this does become a national service (especially for user identity management and how potentially sensitive data will be stored and access controlled).

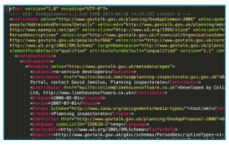
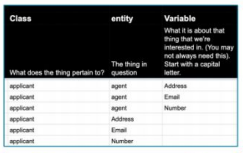
	Similarly, the team will need to decide what business model will be used if this service scales to a national product. Probably out of scope for the MVP of this service but there's some really interesting possibilities of using AI to automated some of the more data-and-rules type planning decision making.
What could be improved?	N/A
Overall rating	1 | 2 | **3** | 4 | 5

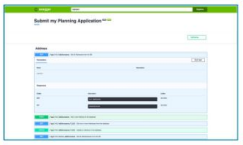
6. Evaluate user data and information *Evaluate what user data and information the digital service will be providing or storing and address the security level, legal responsibilities, privacy issues and risks associated with the service - find out more*	
What was good?	Not required as a Discovery review. Lots of things to consider going forward. Not just in terms of the personal data of which Planner worked on which reviews but also potentially commercial confidentiality of some submissions. For the latter we suggest the team speaks to the GLA about the model that has developed for the London Infrastructure Mapping Application.
What could be improved?	N/A
Overall rating	1 | 2 | **3** | 4 | 5

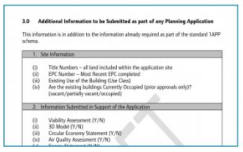
7. Use open standards *Use open standards, existing authoritative data and registers, and where possible make source code and service data open and reusable under appropriate licenses - find out more*	
What was good?	Planning Portal have a standard XML-data schema - it's not clear how widely that's used. The service roadmap specifically includes creating an open data standard and an open API.

<table>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>
<h1>Data standards</h1>
There is currently lots of activity around planning data standards with a great deal of overlap between the various projects.
There is a healthy dialogue amongst the different teams working on these projects and a strong drive towards alignment.
Back office systems are an essential factor in the flow of data from pre-application to national reporting.
We have identified the high level data entities required.
As this project develops, we will continue to participate in this dialogue and ensure that our system supports the emerging standards.


<h1>Standardising data</h1>
List of projects currently concerned with the standardisation of planning data in the UK


Open data incentive scheme
An attempt to standardise planning data from 2013-2015
Not widely adopted
Local government, Hampshire council

1App
Planning portal's schema
Imported into the various back office systems used by LAs
Planning portal


PlanX
"Passport" schema mapping planning policy to data variables
Open Systems Labs, Southwark
https://beta.planx.uk/_default

Submit my Planning Application
Schema based on the householder application process
Snook & Hactar, Hackney
http://smpa.hactar.is/#show


Single Register of Planning
"Design pattern" for LAs to report to the National Planning Register
MySociety, MHCLG
https://digital-land.github.io/project/single-register-of-planning/

GLA Planning Data Standard
Data needed to inform and monitor London policy
GLA
https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/updated_non_technical_planning_data_standard.pdf
</td>
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<tr>
<td>What could be improved?</td>
<td colspan="5">Consider adding any new standards to schema.org. Speakto GDS about this and adding the service's APIs to GDSs new cross-org list of government APIs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall rating</td>
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8. Test the end-to-end service
Be able to test the end-to-end service in an environment similar to that of the live version, including all common browsers and devices - find out more

What was good?	No software testing took place as this was a Discovery period. That said, it was good to see the team being very conscious of how data consumed and produced by this system would be passed to other systems that would make up part of the service.				
What could be improved?	N/A				
Overall rating	1	2	**3**	4	5

9. Make a plan for being offline *Make a plan for the event of the digital service being taken temporarily offline, and regularly test - find out more*					
What was good?	No plan required as this was a Discovery period.				
What could be improved?	N/A				
Overall rating	1	2	**3**	4	5

10. Make sure users succeed first time *Make sure that the service is simple enough that users succeed first time unaided - find out more*					
What was good?	The team considered solutions to fit the least able user in all cases so they can be useful for users of all skill levels and experience.				
What could be improved?	One of the things the team could do is expand the project remit to include some definitions of the whole end-to-end service including the non digital parts of the process. Working with their various organisational partners on starting to define a common set of ways of working will become much easier to design supporting digital systems that work in many places.				
Overall rating	1	2	**3**	4	5

11. Build a consistent user experience *Build a service consistent with the user experience of government digital services, including using common government platforms and the Government Service Manual design patterns - find out more*					
What was good?	Not needed as this was a Discovery review. When designing prototypes during the Alpha development period it will be interesting to see what decisions are made regarding the user experience. We recommend considering the GDS Design System as the basis for the front-end but, given the intention of potentially making in a national-scale product, decisions will need to be made on the overall branding - especially how it fits in with the over plantech services being developed by Hackney Council, the GLA and others.				
What could be improved?	N/A				
Overall rating	1	2	**3**	4	5

12. Encourage everyone to use the digital service *Encourage maximum usage of the digital service (with assisted digital support if required) - find out more*					
What was good?	Not required as this point as it was a Discovery review. That said, the wide scale of involvement of people working in a variety of roles in Planning departments across multiple organisations shows a strong desire to both include Planners as part of the development process and encourage them to use it after. Potentially out of scope of this project but it would be very interesting to discuss the development of an online community of the users of the various plantech tools currently in development. This could be used to further gather user needs but also to enable community-level self-support for the products.				
What could be improved?	N/A				
Overall rating	1	2	**3**	4	5

13. Identify performance indicators *Identify performance indicators for the service, incorporating existing indicators and*

publishing to a performance platform, if appropriate - find out more	
What was good?	The team has done a lot of good thinking about this. Analysis was done of how much time was spent on each of the existing tools and processes as part of the overall process mapping piece in order to create a baseline for KPI measurements going forward. For example, certificates take up 50% of Planner time. 
What could be improved?	Usability testing could be considered (old system vs new) to demonstrate and evidence the anticipated time/cost savings.
Overall rating	1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | **5**

14. Do ongoing user research *Put a process in place for ongoing user research, usability testing to continuously seek feedback from users, and collection of performance data to inform future improvement to the service - find out more*	
What was good?	The team strongly recommends doing continued user research throughout the rest of any MVP development and initial "go live". The group's recommended team for the Alpha stage of development includes a full time user researcher.
What could be improved?	At the moment the funding for the next stages of development is unclear so we don't know for certain that more user research will take place - although given the level of interest from many organisations, including MHCLG, it seems highly likely.

Overall rating	1	2	**3**	4	5

15. Test with senior manager *Test the service from beginning to end with appropriate council member or senior manager responsible for it - find out more*					
What was good?	The Southwark Director of Planning (and their manager) are both aware of the outcomes of the Discovery work and are keen for this to progress.				
What could be improved?	It would be great if one or both of those people, as well as representatives from other involved organisations, could give a short statement of support at one of the videoed show and tells. It is recommended that senior managers are included in future usability testing.				
Overall rating	**1**	2	3	4	5