



Workshop Day 2

Preparing for and delivering the digital revolution

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Agenda



- Day 2 – Brief overview
- Scott Cardwell, *City of Doncaster*
- Jonathan Palmer, *Milton Keynes City Council*
- Q & A
- Barriers to Innovation: Discussion and Feedback

Aims & Objectives

Day 1 - Managing the digital revolution or “What's going on?!”

Government is committed to modernising the planning system and core to this is the digital transformation of planning services. Led by colleagues at MHCLG this workshop will provide an overview of the possibilities of digital technologies and discuss how LPAs can be best placed to respond.

Day 2 - Preparing for and delivering the digital revolution or “What can I do about it?!”

Two LPAs will share their digital transformation journeys, highlighting key milestones, lessons learned, and practical strategies for success. This will enable delegates to identify strategies, steps and actions that could be taken to position themselves for the digital transformation.

Day 1 Overview - Managing the digital revolution or “What's going on?!”

Digital Planning in 4 Phases:

- **Phase 1:** Product-led experimentation "*Can we build better tools?*"
 - Local Digital Fund
 - Emergence of BOPS and PlanX
- **Phase 2:** Open Digital Planning (ODP)
 - Realisation that products alone wont scale
 - Connecting councils, projects, and long term change

Day 1 Overview - Managing the digital revolution or “What's going on?!”

Digital Planning in 4 Phases:

- **Phase 3:** Digital Planning Improvement Fund
 - Structured onboarding (£50k oper LPA)
 - Digital Planning Maturity Assessment
- **Phase 4:** Integrated product stack and system change (now) “From improvement to live service change”
 - Products are no longer standalone pilots
 - PlanX, BOPS and the Digital Planning Register are being tested together as a single end-to-end service



**City of
Doncaster
Council**

Preparing for and delivering the digital revolution

Scott Cardwell
Service Director for Development and Traded Services

Background

Doncaster has a strong history of being involved in digital planning related initiatives, playing an active role in user groups

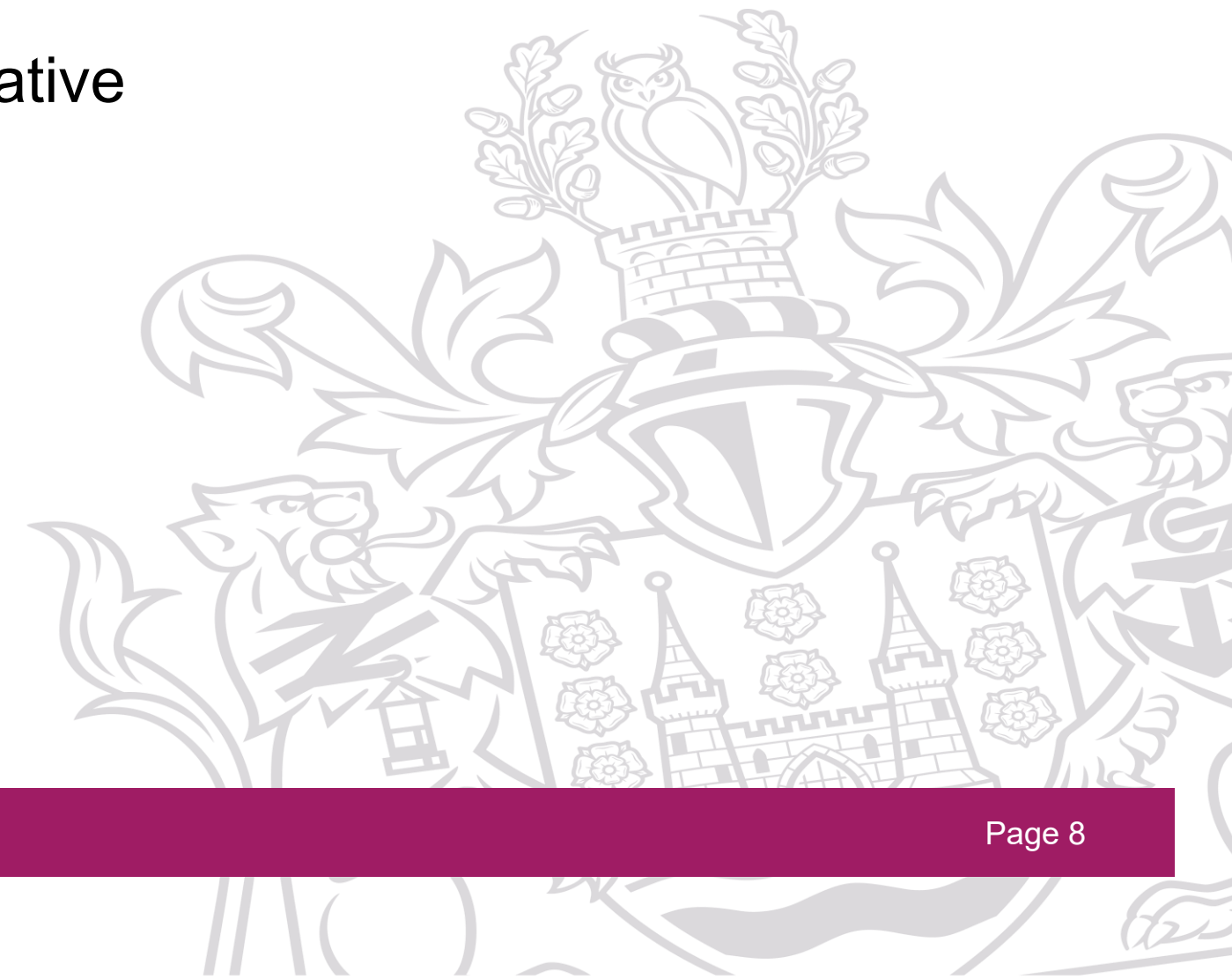
However, we still had major challenges

- Complex customer journey
- Unstructured submissions
- Fragmented data
- Too much office time being spent on manual and repetitive 'admin'
- Backlogs
- Capacity issues

Step Change occurred in 2022 committing to Plan X delivered through the Open Digital Programme from Government

Our Approach

- Target highest-volume pressure points
- Redesign journeys using user-centred digital services
- Build a connected ecosystem: PlanX + Automation + Data Insight
- Ensure digital tools reduce — not add — administrative burden
- Embed change into day-to-day operations



PlanX

- Structured, rules-based digital services
- Replaces email-heavy, document-led processes
- Co-designed with Open Systems Lab
- Doncaster contributes to national product development
- First council to deliver paid digital pre-application advice via PlanX
- Integrated GovPay + back-office systems (now replicable nationally)

Power Automate, Robotic Process Automation and Power BI

- Power Automate + robotic process automation (RPA) removes repetitive tasks
- Structured submissions flow directly into internal systems
- Power BI dashboards for real-time performance visibility
- Sustainable in-house capability — no costly external solutions

What's been delivered and the impact ?

1. Find Out If You Need Planning Permission (Jan 2023)

- Instant, accessible guidance
- 900% increase in engagement
- Major reduction in avoidable enquiries

2. Report a Planning Breach (Jul 2024)

- Structured triage reduces unnecessary complaints by ~80%
- Clear guidance on permitted development
- Automated submission handling

3. Digital Pre-Application Advice (Sep 2024)

- Standardised, policy-led submissions and responses
 - Higher-quality applications
 - Faster, more efficient determinations
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- Significant shift to self serve
 - Removal of admin bottlenecks through robotic process automation (RPA)
 - Reduction in outstanding applications and improved valid to determination times
 - Improved application quality + faster determinations

Sustaining this progress

Important role for Planning management in this work, ensuring buy in and acknowledgment by political and officer leadership of the council via

- Update reports to Mayor and Cabinet and senior management, planning committee and ward members
- Show the difference being made to customers
- Independent evaluation from PAS confirms measurable impact and confirms national standing
- Contribute to national learning, replication and product development
- Access external funding wherever possible
- Garner support from key council departments (IT/Project Management/Finance)
- Creatively use existing resources to prevent significant financial investment
- Re structure to modernise role of teams and help sustain this project as business as usual

Why this work is important

- Whole-service transformation of a statutory, high-demand function
- Creates capacity within the service to focus on adding value
- Demonstrates measurable efficiency, transparency and customer benefit
- Reduces avoidable demand and administrative burden
- Provides a replicable model for councils across England
- Shows what modern, data-driven planning services can achieve



What's Coming Next

- Improving digital engagement on planning applications
- Joint Planning–Building Control services
- 3D visualisation and improved consultation
- Expansion on AI and automation to reduce backlogs and improve accuracy
- Open planning data for transparency and innovation
- Continued and scaled-up collaboration with wider central government departments to align delivery, share learning, and accelerate impact

MK Built Environment Software Solution?

27 February 2026



The Journey so far...

2024

- Used **Commonplace** for Local Plan engagement
- Awarded £100k via the **Digital Planning Improvement Fund**
- Joined the **Open Digital Planning** community

2025

- Migration to new back-office case management system (**Arcus**) for DM, Land Charges, Building Control; and pioneered the site monitoring module
- Migration to new GIS system (**StatMap**)
- Used **PlaceMaker** for Local Plan process (site assessment and selection at Reg 18, and consultation platform for Reg 18 & 19) - [Urban Intelligence MK Case Study](#)

2026+

- Trialling **Plan AI** for Reg 19 consultation rep summary
- Launched an **AI Virtual Assistant** on our webpage
- Following a successful trial, looking to integrate **Valon** into Arcus - [Valon AI MK Case Study](#)
- Embed our **Digital Action Plan** as part of our Service Delivery Plan



The case for change

- Legacy system was over 25 years old and had to be run off our own IT server hardware
- Significant amount of downtime due to upgrades and outages (we were reliant on supplier to make configuration changes)
- Didn't support remote working
- Public Access element was slow, unstable and unresponsive to customer needs (we got lots of complaints including questions at Council)
- Major error with a decision notice (some conditions missing) created significant challenge

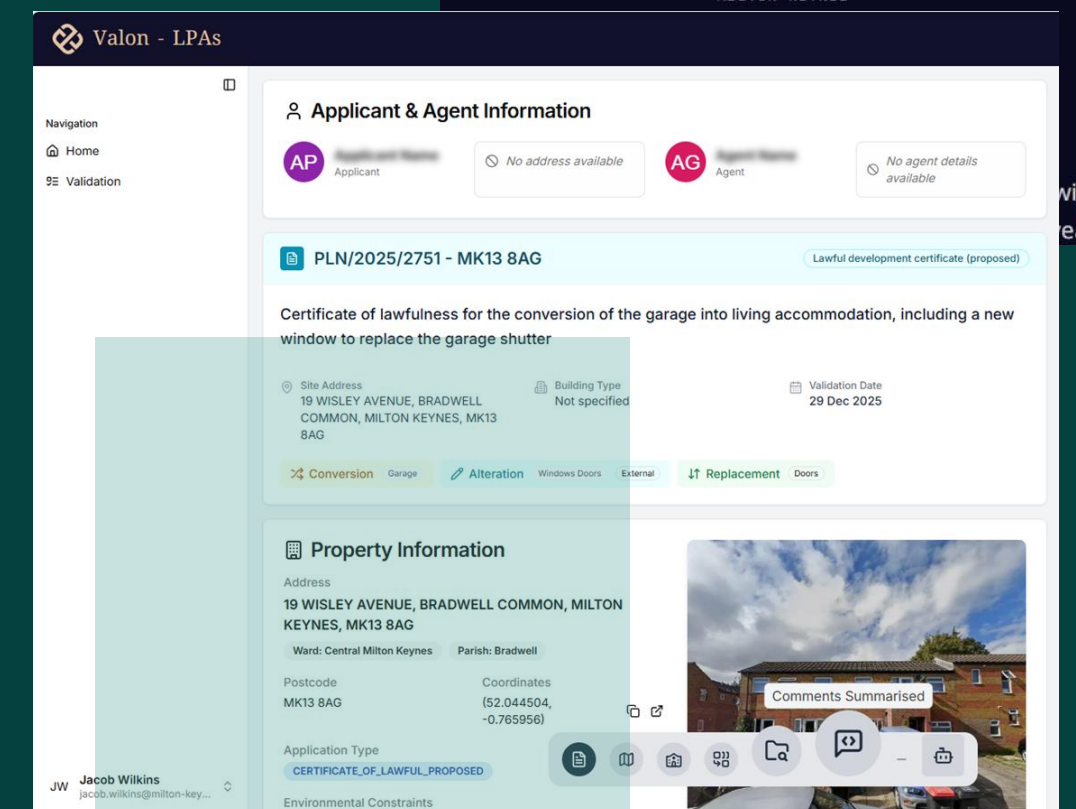
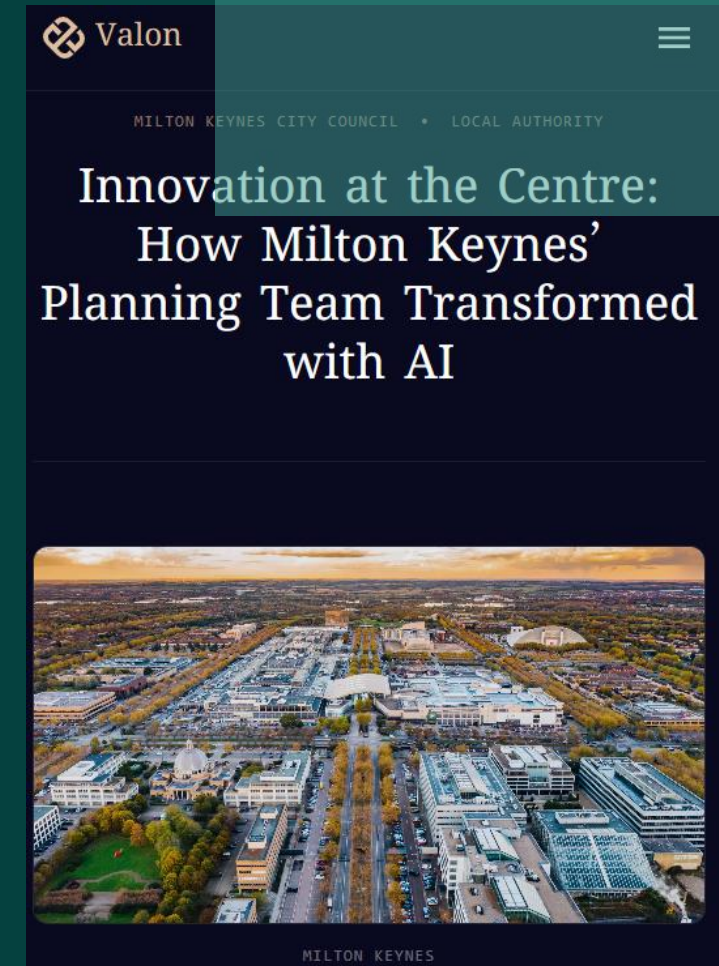


Benefits Analysis – Arcus

- All targets built into the start doc/ business plan have been met:
 - 30% efficiencies on administration time (82% for Land Charges and 51% for DM)
 - 50% reduction in manual intervention for data capture and processing (85% for Land Charges and 51% for DM)
 - 95% reduction in time lost to system upgrades and maintenance (100% so far in 25/26)
- Not constrained by a server-based system and fully supports remote/site-based working
- No customer complaints about unexpected outages and downtime
- Reporting and making configuration changes is significantly quicker and easier
- Much more intuitive to use and search
- Potential for future automation and system integration

Valon AI pilot - validation

- Would not have been possible if we have remained with old supplier
- Deployed directly into live validation workflow, with officers tracking AI vs manual validation for a range of application types
- Achieved 80% efficiency gains over the whole validation process (reduction in officer time spent on validation related tasks)
- Looking to fully integrate Valon within Arcus which includes:
 - An assistant that answers officer questions with evidence-linked citations directly from application documents
 - Planning history and constraints to explain why past cases were approved or refused
 - Summary of consultation comments to provide early insight into concerns raised



The alternatives

	Valon AI	PlanX	BOPS
Primary role	AI-powered auto-validation	Guided applicant journey & rules-based validation	Back-office planning system
Where it sits	Before/at point of officer validation	Before submission	After submission
Document analysis	✓ Reads and analyses PDFs automatically	✗ No AI document reading	✗ Does not auto-read PDFs
Determines validity automatically	✓ Yes (AI with officer oversight)	✓ Partially (rules-based prevention)	✗ Officer-led
Precedent / policy analysis	✓ AI identifies similar cases, constraints, policies	✗ Not offered	✓ Some structured policy matching
Structured data submissions	✓ Can handle documents; uses AI to extract meaning	✓ Yes (core value)	✓ Receives structured data from PlanX
Goal	Automate validation and support officers	Reduce invalid applications via design	Support officers to process cases efficiently

Q and A



Barriers to Digital Innovation - Feedback

Capacity & Skills

- Limited digital and data expertise
- Recruitment and retention challenges
- Competing service pressures

Funding & Procurement

- Constrained capital and revenue budgets
- Complex procurement processes
- Risk aversion in investment decisions

Legacy Systems

- Long-standing contracts
- Poor data quality
- Integration challenges across systems

Culture & Leadership

- Change fatigue
- Fear of failure
- Perception that digital = IT responsibility

Governance & Politics

- Member concerns about risk
- Cybersecurity anxieties
- Short-term political cycles vs long-term reform

Something else

- ??

Thank you for joining!

