

## **Cabinet**

**23 September 2025**

### **Open Digital Planning – Progress Report**

Portfolio Holder: Councillor Simon Curry, Portfolio Holder for Climate Change & Strategic Regeneration

Report from: Adam Bryan, Director of Place

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#### **Summary**

This report provides Cabinet with an update on the progress of Medway Council's involvement in the Open Digital Planning (ODP) programme. The update has been requested by the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change & Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, to reflect the transition from early-stage research and development to the live pilot phase. The programme, funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), aims to transform planning services through digital innovation.

#### **1. Recommendation**

- 1.1. The Cabinet is asked to note the updates and progress on the Open Digital Planning Programme.

#### **2. Suggested reasons for decision**

- 2.1. The update has been requested by the Portfolio Holder for Climate Change & Strategic Regeneration, Councillor Curry, to reflect the transition from early-stage research and development to the live pilot phase.

#### **3. Budget and policy framework**

- 3.1. The programme is funded by MHCLG, with no additional financial burden on the Council. Funding is secured through to March 2026. Future opportunities for additional funding or expansion are being explored.
- 3.2. The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 provides a basis for transforming the planning system into a digital-first model. Section 84-88 empowers local planning authorities to use approved digital tools, publish planning data, and enable open reuse, supporting a transparent, efficient, and standardised planning system.

- 3.3. This report aligns with Medway's Financial, Improvement and Transformation Plan and Productivity Plan, demonstrating the planning service's commitment to delivering transformational change through the strategic use of technology and data. It reflects a focus on improving service efficiency, transparency, and value for money.
- 3.4. The programme also supports workforce development by equipping staff with the skills and qualifications required to meet evolving service demands, particularly in transitioning from email-based interactions to structured, digital service delivery. It promotes collaboration with MHCLG, developers, and local planning authorities (LPAs) nationwide, fostering innovation and shared learning across the sector.

## 4. Background

- 4.1 Medway Council is a key participant in the ODP initiative, a national collaboration involving over 150 LPAs, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), and multiple design and development teams. Internally, Medway's Business Change, Intelligence, Digital, and ICT teams have worked together to drive this transformation.
- 4.2 ODP is a community of forward-thinking LPAs working together to shape a more efficient, data driven planning system, by shifting from document-based processes to data-driven digital services. It includes the co-development of tools such as PlanX, Back Office Planning System (BOPS), and the Digital Planning Register (DPR), all designed to improve efficiency, transparency, and user experience in planning services.
- 4.3 Medway's journey into ODP began in 2021, when the planning service successfully secured funding from the Local Digital Fund, managed by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). This funding was designed to support local planning authorities in developing innovative digital products and services, while also promoting the standardisation and openness of planning data.
- 4.4 In 2022, Medway joined the RIPA/BOPS project team, a collaborative initiative involving several LPAs focused on designing and testing digital tools to improve planning workflows. This marked a significant step in Medway's commitment to modernising its planning service.
- 4.5 By 2023–2024, the project evolved into the broader ODP a community of LPAs in England aimed at transforming the planning system from document-based processes to data-driven digital services.
- 4.6 The purpose of Medway's involvement in ODP is to deliver a more efficient, transparent, and accessible planning service. This aligns with the council's Financial, Improvement and Transformation Plan, aiming to ensure value for money, foster collaboration, and upskill the workforce to meet future service demands.

- 4.7 Medway has adopted a collaborative, user-centred approach. Through agile development, stakeholder consultation, and cross-departmental teamwork, the Council has co-designed digital tools, tested new services, and embedded continuous feedback loops.
- 4.8 Medway has played an active role in this transformation. We are one of 13 councils participating in the 'Adopting and Designing New Services' fund, contributing to national pilots, co-developing digital tools such as PlanX and BOPS, and hosting key events including ODP Camps and external "Show and Tell" sessions. These activities have helped showcase Medway's leadership and innovation in digital planning.
- 4.9 Six PlanX services are currently live, offering customers faster, more accessible digital planning services that can be used at anytime, anywhere, with 53% of users accessing the services on mobile devices, enhancing the customer's experience.

### **Live Services**

1. Find out if you need planning permission
  2. Report a breach
  3. Report a derelict or empty building
  4. Report exempt works to trees
  5. Submission of Householder planning applications
  6. Submission of Lawful Development Certificates
- 4.10 To date, over 14,600 users have accessed PlanX services, with 96% successfully completing their interactions without encountering errors. The Planning Service has recorded a 12% increase in Lawful Development Certificate applications, contributing to additional income generation. Furthermore, there has been a 28% reduction in inbound calls, a 50% decrease in invalid planning breach reports and 197 'positive exits' meaning reports were not identified as planning breaches. These improvements have helped manage customer's expectations, enhanced operational efficiency, enabled more effective resource allocation and allowed staff to focus on other priority areas within service.
- 4.11 The co-creation and piloting of the Back Office Planning System (BOPS) and the Digital Planning Register (DPR) continues, which aims to streamline internal processes and improve public access to planning data. Medway are one of only four authorities to participate in the end-to-end testing pilot of householder applications and Lawful Development Certificates and the only one outside London. While early metrics are promising, the most valuable outcome at this stage is the opportunity to gather feedback and observe the system's development in a live environment.

## **5. Options**

- 5.1. No further options are provided. The Cabinet is asked to note the contents of the report.

## 6. Advice and analysis

- 6.1. The planning service will continue to focus on service design and creating and deploying new PlanX services. Future services currently in the research phase are 'General Enquiries' 'Validation Checklist' and Pre-Application submissions.
- 6.2. Continue our participation in the end-to-end testing, broadening the scope to include testing further application types.
- 6.3. There is currently no formal commercial model for BOPS this is currently being reviewed; however, its open-source, modular design enables scalable adoption across local authorities.
- 6.4. We will be reviewing how new ways of working can be embedded into service design and delivery, alongside exploring options for resource management and sustainable funding to support long-term implementation.
- 6.5. MHCLG and the ODP community are actively reviewing options to support future deployment.

## 7. Risk management

| Risk  | Description  | Action to avoid or mitigate risk   | Risk rating |
|---|--|--|-------------|
| Funding Sustainability;                     | Embedding new ways of working and digital services into business as usual remains challenging without long-term funding commitments from central government                    | Building financial provision into the development management budget and using increased planning fees to invest in future service delivery.  | CIII        |
| Insufficient Internal Knowledge and Skills; | Focus on developing in-house skills and embedding digital practices within core service delivery to reduce dependency on external support and ensure long-term sustainability. | Dedicated training and development plans through performance appraisals and career conversations.<br><br>Peer learning and knowledge sharing across local planning authorities through the ODP community to share best | CIV         |

| Risk                                      | Description   | Action to avoid or mitigate risk  | Risk rating |
|---|---|---|-------------|
|   |   | practices, tools and lessons learned.   |             |
| Lack of Agreed Commercial Model for BOPS: | Without a formal commercial model, there is a risk that BOPS cannot be sustainably scaled or supported across local authorities, potentially limiting adoption and long-term viability. | MHCLG and the ODP community are actively reviewing options to establish a sustainable approach. | CII         |

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

| Likelihood  | Impact:  |
|---|--|
| A Very likely<br>B Likely<br>C Unlikely<br>D Rare | I Catastrophic<br>II Major<br>III Moderate<br>IV Minor |

## 8. Consultation

- 8.1. Medway's approach to consultation is rooted in its active participation in the ODP community, MHCLG, and design teams. This collaborative model encourages open dialogue, peer learning, and shared development of digital planning tools.
- 8.2. Consultation with residents, applicants, and planning professionals has directly informed the development of digital planning services such as PlanX and BOPS. These tools were designed to reduce errors, improve reporting accuracy, and streamline application processes based on feedback from real users. In addition to local engagement, research has been conducted at a national level, supported by Nomensa, who are leading on user-centred design. Their involvement has ensured that the tools are grounded in robust user research and best practice, enhancing accessibility, usability, and overall service effectiveness.
- 8.3. Consultation sessions with Members Groups highlighted key developments in digital planning. A live demo of the "Report a Breach" service illustrated how residents can report a planning breach online. The sessions aimed to raise awareness, gather feedback, and support the development of more efficient, user-friendly services.

- 8.4. Medway has hosted external “Show and Tell” sessions, away days, and in October 2025 an ODP Camp to showcase progress, gather feedback, and consult with wider audiences. These events help build trust and ensure that digital planning solutions meet community needs.
- 8.5. The consultation process is iterative, with feedback loops built into product testing and service delivery. Metrics such as service completion rates and reductions in invalid submissions are used to assess impact and guide further development.
- 9. Climate change implications
  - 9.1. [The Council declared a climate change emergency in April 2019](#) - item 1038D refers, and has set a target for Medway to become carbon neutral by 2050.
  - 9.2. The shift to digital services reduces the reliance on paper and in-person interactions, supporting the Council’s climate objectives. Improved planning processes may also contribute to more sustainable development outcomes.
- 10. Financial implications
  - 10.1. The programme is funded by MHCLG, with no additional financial burden on the Council. Funding is secured through to March 2026. Future opportunities for additional funding or expansion are being explored.
- 11. Legal implications
  - 11.1 The legal implications are contained within the body of the report.

## Lead officer contact

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## Appendices

None

## Background papers

[Open Digital Planning](#)

[The Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023](#) – Section 84 - 88

[Medway’s Financial, Improvement and Transformation Plan](#)

[Medway’s Productivity Plan](#)