

# MATT WOOD-HILL ON TRANSFORMING THE PLANNING SYSTEM IN ENGLAND AND WALES

## Transcript

**Linda O'Halloran (00:00)**

Matt Wood-Hill, thank you so much for joining us. Would you start by telling us a little bit about your role and your mission for planning in the UK?

**Matt WH (00:08)**

Sure. So what we're trying to do as a programme is to bring the planning system, which was designed literally in 1947, into the 21st century. And particularly, as you can imagine, using the latest kind of technology and data opportunities.

And the part of that that I'm responsible for is around how we improve planning applications and planning decisions. And that's a really interesting part of the system to be working in because it's really closely linked to the software that local government uses — how they buy it, how they design it, what it does, and what it doesn't do. And so from my perspective, there's a really strong kind of systems change, market change angle on this related to what government's role should be in intervening in this kind of a market, or this kind of a systems challenge.

**Linda O'Halloran (01:01)**

I know you've done loads of thinking as well about the different types of intervention that you've tested to varying degrees and that might be applicable to other local services in particular. So we'll definitely dig into that a little bit later on.

To start, would you tell us a little bit about the origin story for the digital planning program? Did it start out like, "We have a systemic problem, we know that there's vendor lock-in, and that there's skills gaps, and that no individual organisation in the system can change their own service to the degree that they would like"? Did it start that way, or did it start from a different motivation?

**Matt WH (01:39)**

I guess yes and no.

So, rewinding to 2018–2019, there's a program that you were part of in MHCLG, which was the Local Digital Program. And that program gave opportunities to local authorities to pitch for money to solve some shared problems that they had. And a few authorities came together and said, "Hey, we've got some problems with our planning services. We'd like to explore how we can improve the way that we get better quality planning application submissions and that we can process them more effectively in the back end." But that was really starting from the problem viewpoint.

At the same time, there was some work going on around how we improve planning data across the country. And there was a separate team in MHCLG Digital looking at that. And I think what was really interesting about where this went next was that there was a really strong political focus on improving planning in general — the planning reform agenda. And we were able, as a team in MHCLG Digital, to kind of piggyback onto some of that and be a part of that puzzle, which actually saw the team move out of MHCLG Digital and into a planning reform directorate.

**Linda O'Halloran (02:50)**

That was a pretty exciting moment as well for people that have been interested in the local digital space for a while, because you might have been one of the first to really collaborate with policy people that owned national policy and that brought totally different insights and networks. How beneficial has it been to be seated and collaborating so closely with planning policy?

**Matt WH (03:16)**

I think it's been really important collaborating with the profession, and there's two ways we've done it, I would say: internally and externally. So one place that we've had a really massive advantage, I would say, over other programs that emerged out of that vanguard of local digital projects, was that, luckily for us, MHCLG owned the policy responsibility and the kind of digital capability for delivering this change under the same roof. So it was really useful for understanding how the policy teams work and actually getting stuff in legislation that can support some of our outcomes.

So, through something called the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act, which passed in 2023, we've got powers that mean that we can mandate that local authorities publish planning data to certain standards and even approve the software that they use for it. How we use those is a different story, and that's in like, secondary legislation. But that's

been really important. That wouldn't, I don't think, have been able to move at pace without us being so close to the policy teams.

**Linda O'Halloran (04:16)**

There was probably some conversation as well about future-proofing the legislation so that it wasn't overly prescriptive and it allowed for the kind of digital interventions that you were developing.

**Matt WH (04:41)**

Yeah, I agree. I think taking some overarching kind of umbrella-type powers in primary legislation that are broad and can then be defined in secondaries has been one of the good approaches that have been taken, definitely.

But that general principle of aligning policy and delivery, or policy and digital, I think, is something that could and should be common across all change programs. And actually, it's the sort of thing where if you don't have those aligned, maybe you need to start asking yourself some slightly different questions. Because if you're working in government and you're trying to effect change in a market or in a system, and you're not using your big stick in legislation or regulation, maybe you're not going forward with the full suite of things that you could bring to bear on solving a problem.

**Linda O'Halloran (05:33)**

You're assuming that it's all working perfectly and you don't need to.

**Matt WH (05:35)**

I suppose you could go too heavy-handed with regulation and legislation. But I think if you're not having the conversation about that, then you should ask yourself why. And it might be that the timing's not quite right, the maturity of teams and people is not there, the political backing isn't, and that there are other ways to change the dial on some of those things to lay the groundwork for that in the future.

In our case with planning, and particularly in my work, it's "speed up planning decisions." That's a very focused thing. And through our business case, it was "speed up planning decisions in 50% of local authorities by 20% by kind of '25, '26." You know, so it was time-bound, targeted. And that was really helpful in us focusing on an outcome rather than solving a problem like "improve the planning system using data and tech." Where would you even start with a problem like that?

So if a team has the luxury of starting with a blank canvas like that, I think you might take a slightly different approach to what we did. We were quite goal-focused initially, but I think depending on the way that you think about approaching a problem, you can be goal-focused with a systems lens or you can be goal-focused with much more of a results-driven mindset.

**Linda O'Halloran (07:11)**

Interesting. I wonder: are the two that different? Because I think you do have to have a target outcome in mind. I think what we're advocating for is that if you're in a complex system where your outcome is in the hands of a complex system, and you can't totally control how to achieve your outcome, then it's kind of vital to consider how the technology landscape is going to enable or disable you. And even though your remit might be that outcome, it's still really important to engage with technologists and engage with people that do the less sexy side of public service delivery to make sure that you're covering as many bases as possible. And actually, you might find that you start dabbling in things that weren't pure policy initiatives but have a really, really beneficial impact on your target outcome.

**Matt WH (08:10)**

Sometimes it's those byproducts of the work that are actually the most influential things. So, to give you an example, we were working on a piece of technology called Plan X, and we funded local authorities to design this. We insisted on local authorities coming together to co-design this, and many of them taking on roles as kind of product owners, influencing some of the product decisions. And as central government, our main interest was: how does it speed up planning decisions? So, how is it used to improve the quality of data that's basically received as part of a planning application submission?

But the local authorities started to see other needs and other uses for it in terms of providing better information and support for members of the public and applicants when they're doing that process — to streamline the reporting of certain planning complaints, for example. And I think it's important to keep both things in mind, right? The kind of result or the goal that you're aiming for, but also some of the other opportunities where there could be some really significant benefits in the system.

The other thing that we've probably been talking around is understanding the type of problem you're tackling, right? And whether it's a complicated or a complex problem. Because in government, sometimes we like to think everything is a complicated problem — i.e., something that has a pretty clear series of steps in order to get to the end outcome. But most of the time that's not the case, just because of the complexity of stakeholders, markets, users or people, and legislation that's built up over the years. And

maybe if we took a step back and started to make an assumption that everything was a complex problem initially, that might help reframe some of our thinking.

**Linda O'Halloran (10:16)**

I also wonder how useful it might have been to have an outcome of reducing failed planning applications, for example, in your ability to flex your approach. Because I think often a trap we get stuck in is that we hypothesise that some particular intervention is going to really, really help, and then it doesn't really. We realise that actually the problem might be as much a skills and adoption problem as "there isn't this thing that would help."

**Matt WH (10:52)**

That's totally what we experienced. We supported authorities to design great, modern technology according to things like the service standard, meeting the tech code of practice, ticking all of the right boxes.

But when it comes to adoption, then you hit a few different barriers — things around just the way that local authorities manage procurement and contracts. And going even deeper than that, how ready they are to move to modern technology that's all based around data, when that requires you to then take on responsibilities for things like data maintenance, for example, and learn a slightly different set of digital skills.

Actually, one of the most interesting things was getting people together, talking to them about digital, and seeing the panic on their faces at points. This was maybe from local authorities thinking that digital is this mysterious, magical thing. And then very quickly, within a matter of weeks or months through some of the support that we provided — in terms of, for example, encouraging people to do a digital planning maturity assessment and getting access to some training around digital skills — just seeing them realise it was just a confidence thing all along, and actually there are no mystical arts here. A lot of digital is common sense, but it's given people the on-ramp to realise what that is for them.

**Linda O'Halloran (12:24)**

What's the future that you're enabling? And go on, have a guess. How far along the journey are you?

**Matt WH (12:37)**

I think we're turning the dial when it comes to planning. I think it's a really long game; I think that's one of my lessons. You know, we started with a business case that was three to four years into the future, and that's unrealistic. And one of the reasons it's unrealistic is we're talking about really deep organisational and culture change. And this is, again, the kind of thing where if you bring that lens to things, you can start to map out maybe expectations and milestones of when things might happen.

So, where we are at the moment, there's a fairly entrenched technology market. There is local government reorganisation that is about to happen, which is just completely throwing all sorts of normal dynamics or predictable next moves up into the air. Like, we're going to find out how the chips land. But the work that we've done has really, I think, laid a lot of the seeds for the change that needs to come. So we've funded and supported local authorities to co-design new planning services together — digital planning services — and they work really well. But in doing so and finding out how challenging it has been to get them adopted in the market, we've uncovered the next layer of challenges in many ways.

And it's caused us to reflect internally as a programme about exactly where our interventions should be focused. And I wouldn't say it's a case of, "We're going to now start doing other things we weren't doing before." That is actually really far from the truth. It's more like we're sitting there with our fingers on a few different dials, and the dial isn't always money. The dial is more often effort. We ought to be dialling up the things that support an interoperable marketplace, so we bring that ecosystem into being a bit more. So we're talking about things like data standards, we're talking about things like some kind of digital public infrastructure that the department already runs, and how can we make more of that?

But I think the green shoots that are really obviously already there are through this community for change we've created called Open Digital Planning. So the story for us was: begin by funding projects, try and get more people involved in these projects, and then see where it goes to. And the "where it goes to" part was that people started to work on different things within this ecosystem, but all want to be part of the same conversation or the same series of conversations. And so we leaned into that and, rather than just make this one mammoth project team, there's some kind of community of practice here where people want to share what they're working on. How can we grow that? How can we reduce the barriers to entry to this conversation in general?

So we provide some funding and a kind of onboarding service that gets people up to speed with the conversation around digital planning and, I'd say, kind of raises the floor of their digital data maturity. That's the goal. And now that's 200 local authorities strong,

with different amounts of representation from within those authorities. But you can see and feel the tangible change in the atmosphere and the rooms that you go into where these people are getting together. It's no longer a fringe thing, which it really felt like to me even back in 2020. I remember going on some calls where we would put funding out into the world and some people would come on the call saying, "Yeah, but is this a thing?" Like, you want to call?

**Linda O'Halloran (16:07)**

I think so many people have been trying to push this anvil up the hill for so long because it's so sensible — like "fix the basic rules according to which you collaborate." But the reality is that it's really hard.

**Matt WH (16:26)**

I think it's a thing now. Let's just say that's landed! All of the insights and all of the learnings that we've got inform us really more on what we need to do. We were kind of wading our way through the fog, and we've kind of come out on the other side, and we know that the next steps in the route are here, here, and here. Whereas when we started that journey, it was much more of a "sense and respond" type approach with some really particular goals in mind. But now we can see the landscape almost in its entirety, with the exception of things like AI coming over the horizon, of course.

**Linda O'Halloran (17:10)**

It's a huge effort to convene a community. How would you describe the benefits of having done that, having engaged almost the entire sector, really?

**Matt WH (17:19)**

Yeah, there's benefits to us in central government, and then there's benefits to the other members there. So, you know, a traditional way of doing some kind of sector engagement is to set up a series of round tables over a number of weeks and to consider who you invite, you know, delicately based on representation from across the country and from different roles and this sort of thing. And that's one way of doing it.

But the way that we've done it is to start by working with the coalition of the willing, and then to just make them the people that are solving the problem on behalf of everyone, really. For some people that we were working with, it was almost the first time they'd spoken to someone in central government who was coming to them and saying, "Oh, hey, how do we fix this thing? You're the person that is best placed to inform this decision. It's definitely not me, for example." So there's a bit of flipping things there.

Where it's also beyond useful, I would guess, is actually for how local authorities are starting to help each other out. And that's where you come into some of the anecdotes

that we've heard, which is, "I need to put together some kind of options appraisal for a procurement I'm doing. I've never done this before. Who's done this?" And then we have an open Slack workspace with hundreds of people in different local planning teams on it now. And then you'll see the responses come in, and it's just like, "Here's a template," "I'm available for a chat." It's like kind of just closing the feedback loops and the gaps — communication gaps between people in different authorities and between local and central government. I think all policy and all change should be done this way personally.

**Linda O'Halloran (19:03)**

This is the message that we are evangelising through this project.

**Matt WH (19:07)**

I probably rambled a bit too much there, apologies, but hey, there's a bit to say.

**Linda O'Halloran (19:14)**

I love a bit of a ramble, and I cannot judge because I'm a major Rambler myself.

You talked at the beginning about your three-to-four-year plan that is almost definitely informed by the wishful thinking of the political cycle. How have you managed keeping the program on the road, given maybe the need to manage political cycles and politics? And can you tell us about the importance of case making and continuous case making?

**Matt WH (19:47)**

One of the things that we've done that I think has made this really effective, kind of beyond, slightly outside of political cycles, I guess you might say, is that a lot of this work's been positioned outside of central government. So we, as MHCLG have not been directly delivering big parts of this work. We funded local authorities to contract delivery partners. And what we've been doing there is more of a kind of coordination and leadership piece, which is to say, "Okay, we're going to work in this particular way within this kind of framework of collaboration." We provide advice, support. Sometimes we've had a staff member who's been like a direct delivery manager involved in making that real.

But I do wonder if it would have been possible to deliver the things that we did if MHCLG was doing it directly. Would we have the same level of representation and buy-in from the industry and the sector? I don't know. I think Open Digital Planning is kind of slightly its own thing. It's not necessarily an MHCLG-run network or organisation or arm's-length body. It's something quite amorphous, actually. It's a partnership that sits in this quite grey space between local authorities and central government. It's a blessing because it's disruptive of some of those power dynamics that you might get, but it's a curse because it's like ethereal, right?

**Linda O'Halloran (21:26)**

One of these classic things in the public sector: it's no one's responsibility.

**Matt WH (21:31)**

For example. I mean, does it exist?

**Linda O'Halloran (21:34)**

Yes, Matt, you talk to these people all the time. It exists.

**Matt WH (21:37)**

But it's a website, it's a project. It's not got like a... it hasn't got a steering board; it doesn't have formal governance. It works because people want it to work, and people show up, and people commit to it, and that there's some financial backing from MHCLG. And I think that's quite an interesting model because actually, these things can work without needing to be formalised things. The question then will be, when the funding from central government stops, what happens?

We don't know, but we've done some research recently, and what we've kind of learnt through some of the insights coming from various people across the community is: we came for the money, but we're staying for the connections. We're staying for the peer learning in particular and just the exposure that we get to everything else that's going on.

But one of the things we did upfront to kind of navigate certain timeframes, I suppose, was to think about a long-term vision. It was to get together in a workshop and talk about what things look like in ten years' time and what things look like in two or three years' time, so that we created those kind of staging posts between, like, "Okay, we are where we are today. We know we've got a funding cycle here which goes to this point. Where do we want to be by then?" But then let's think a bit bigger than that. Let's think ten years into the future, and that's the vision that we actually will hold in our minds. Everything else is part of the journey on that way.

**Linda O'Halloran (23:07)**

Beautiful systems practice in action, Matt, and a beautiful transition into maybe a little chat about the flavours of intervention you have developed and tested, and maybe also those that you think could be really beneficial but maybe you haven't had the chance to test yet.

**Matt WH (23:27)**

Levers that we've tested and ones that we haven't tested but might want to?

**Linda O'Halloran (23:32)**

Yeah, be bold.

**Matt WH (23:33)**

Yeah, it's quite fun. Oh, well, I've got loads on that, but I don't know what I'm allowed to say.

Well, I think in terms of interventions and levers, we started with the two classic ones of legislation as the stick and funding as the carrot. I think there's a lot more nuance, actually, to that, and I think sometimes teams don't always maybe pause and take a step back and have a think about what else do they have? Because there's so much you can do with, for example, really good supply-side or demand-side engagement — warming people up to where the change is going, bringing them on the journey and making them part of it, asking their opinions and genuinely valuing their opinions and acting on the information that they might give you.

I would say one learning for me over the last few years has been that because when I came in, the focus was on supporting local authorities to develop alternative services, because there were two of us working on this, we didn't do very much engagement with the software market. But actually, they're a massive part of the solution. And as soon as we started to talk to them more, of course, we found that they were encountering so many of the same problems that we've been discovering through the funded work to build new services, and that actually maybe we ought to take a bit more of a step back and think about some of the common ways that we could influence the market at large. And it's not like the private sector was saying, "We don't want data standards." It's kind of the opposite. They're saying, "Of course we want data standards. What we want is clarity from government around what those data standards will be, when they will be introduced, how they'll be legislated and enforced," and those sorts of things.

Which then, I guess, takes me to a kind of like, well, where might we go? Well, if you're taking more of that market-shaping type approach and you are leaning into some of those levers, how actually are you going to make sure they stick? That's always the thing with change. It's easy to get people excited, and it's easy to get people on the journey, and maybe it's easy to get some of the pioneers quite far on the journey. But how do you reach a tipping point? And then how do you make sure that things stick enough in the system to actually get all the way to the end so you get kind of 100% coverage? Because when it comes to modernising any local service, it's not really good enough if only 90% of local authorities are benefiting from the change, is it?

**Linda O'Halloran (26:04)**

That would still be a pretty good number, 90 or 99.

**Matt WH (26:08)**

It would be good, but we should aspire to more.

**Linda O'Halloran (26:10)**

We should aspire to 100% coverage for sure.

**Matt WH (26:15)**

You've followed the work that we've been doing for quite a bit, and it's always interesting to get that external perspective on what you think has been a particularly insightful or interesting approach.

**Linda O'Halloran (26:27)**

Who's interviewing who? I realise, when I talk to you, how there's so much more nuance to what you do that I don't have access to. But yeah, for sure, the community engagement dimension of your work seems unique. And I think that is one of the biggest lessons from planning to replicate. It's so hard to make the case for these things that you can't measure an immediate return to the Treasury for. And you'll never be able to as well because so much of the benefit, as you say, is that people get together and they share knowledge, and they save each other time and have better approaches to their problems than they would have otherwise, were they working in smaller communities or in isolation.

**Matt WH (27:12)**

Yeah. And I wonder why — I do wonder why this is — because if you're doing something in a system or in a market like we are, there are three... You could argue there are three main stakeholders: there's like government, there's people in the buyer side, there's people on the seller side. And it feels like we usually just talk about how government regulates to people selling things, but I don't know, why is that in the market that we're working in, local government? Is it because we've just decided local authorities are just too intractable a problem to solve? Because for us, the reason we felt we had to solve something there, or to have an intervention there, was because local authority readiness for modern technology and data practices is just nowhere near where it needs to be for the future.

**Linda O'Halloran (28:09)**

That's kind of almost a separate intervention. So, one intervention is the collaboration ecosystem. It's the means of finding out about what you're doing, giving feedback and getting involved in co-design workshops. But then there's a whole other work stream when you've identified that there's this, that, and the other skills gap, to deliver training, train-the-trainer interventions. Sounds like that's the thing that you did. You could tell us more about it.

**Matt WH (28:36)**

I think a lot of the things that we've done have been heavily inspired by what other pockets of government have been doing. So, where we came from with the training side of things was the way that the local digital fund worked, which was a really smart bit of strategic design: there was funding available, and in order to be eligible for the funding, you have to sign the local digital declaration. That means you can get the funding. Once you've got the funding, you then have access to free training opportunities.

So we looked at that model and, effectively, we talked about what training is more applicable to planning, how can we expand that out slightly, and how can we introduce a little bit of variation. So we have two or three different kind of tiers of training: one that's just like how-long 101 sessions, some that are more applied online training courses, and some that are in-person training sessions. Something I need to write up needs to just say, "Hey, we did this, but the people who did it first were LOTI. We did this, but the people that did it first were HMRC. We did this, but the people who did it first were DHSC." Because so many things have been inspired by and cribbed from other parts of the public sector. And we brought that and interpreted that into our own kind of, I suppose, transformation model or something, you might call it.

**Linda O'Halloran (30:01)**

The other amazing thing about working in the open is that you are exposing yourself and your category of problem to as many people as possible, and it just makes you far more accessible to those who can help you as well as those who will benefit from you.

**Matt WH (30:16)**

Yeah, and I'm so grateful for all of those teams having put their stuff out there because I sometimes wonder if we've done that enough, even though we've had this great opportunity to go really deep. We've also had to run really fast, and sometimes it's been difficult to get out of the depths and lift our heads up, look around, and talk about what we're doing. But there must be loads of other teams across government that are solving

really difficult problems in creative ways, not kind of as widely seen as maybe they should be.

**Linda O'Halloran (30:46)**

This again speaks to the question of where is the digital policy market-shaping community of practice? Have you managed to measure the impact of your training interventions? You know, you were clearly a bit stuck in having developed some really useful things, but then people not being able to adopt them. Were you able to attribute an increase in adoption to training?

**Matt WH (31:10)**

I do think that there's something more practical you can measure in terms of that's a bit more input-output, right, with training. So, "We provided you funding, local authorities, to publish some datasets. You're not super proficient in data publication. Here's some training with GIS." And I'll be measuring how many or how quickly you're publishing your datasets. So there's a bit more of an even value exchange and way of measuring that, I would say.

The interesting thing that we're doing at the moment is because we've been working with some local authorities in the community for well over a year, getting on for two years now, we're asking them to re-baseline their digital planning maturity so that we can see where it was when they started the program and where it shifted to. And, anecdotally, I've seen some charts where everything's gone up kind of one level on the scale of one to five that we'd created. So that's encouraging. And actually, when it comes to measuring true impact and true benefit from the program, I don't know how you quantify that. But having done that across the country is a... is a huge impact that we should be proud of, but it's a difficult story to tell. It means slightly different things to different people; it's very qualitative.

**Linda O'Halloran (32:40)**

The benefit of having maybe a suite of interventions and a longer time period to look back over. I wanted to ask you about what's been the hardest.

**Matt WH (32:52)**

We had the challenges of working out how to spend money when you're like, "We don't actually always need that much money."

**Linda O'Halloran (33:00)**

Valuable insight too.

**Matt WH (33:01)**

What you want to do is fund the right things at the right time with the right amount of funding, and I think, as we all know, the way that budgets work in a lot of public programmes is that you have an amount to be used within a financial year, and typically the amount you have the next year tracks to what you had or had allocated or had spent in the previous year. So let's say you're going for some kind of hockey-stick-style transformation. What does that mean when you know that across, let's say, a five-year program, you really wanted to push a lot of your spend into years four or five? I think the key to that is having those conversations, hopefully in the Treasury or somewhere like that. How we can reform that will be massive.

**Linda O'Halloran (33:46)**

It would be great to be reusing your narrative about how important it is to not go overboard in the first few years but make sure you're doing the right thing, making the right connections, the good foundations so that you can swing that hockey stick up high and have the resources in the bank to do it.

**Matt WH (34:03)**

Yeah. Sometimes we don't acknowledge that there's fog. It's weird. It's like someone fires a starting gun and it's like we're going from here to here. But you can spend a long time wading through uncertainty.

**Linda O'Halloran (34:18)**

Although I guess in the early days, uncertainty is just a given. It's really uncomfortable and some people are more wired for it than others. And the trick will be to learn from the successes of planning and other programs like social care interoperability to shortcut some of that early wandering around in the fog that is necessary, I think, and maintain enough openness to continued uncertainty and like AI bombs landing while still making... What makes it hard to keep going every day?

**Matt WH (34:51)**

There's something around the misalignment of inputs which makes things really challenging. So having budgets that need to be used in the first year but not having headcount, for example. Having dependencies on things like policy, and when's that

going to come into play, and therefore people external to the project quite rationally sitting on the fence saying, "Do I need to act here?" And in our case, that was software suppliers, and that was local authorities — two of the target audiences that we wanted to work with were wondering if there was going to be an election, and if an election came around, would that change the focus? So that constant navigating of ambiguity has been difficult.

But I just don't think alignment is actually realistic in a lot of these scenarios. I think the concept I'd prefer is convergence on this stuff. Where are we trying to get to in a year's time, and how do we bring the different threads together for a point there?

**Linda O'Halloran (36:00)**

A goal of the playbook in some ways is to be "my therapist friend," because it is trying to do something that is out of your control, coming up against a system that is designed to do what it does, and making changes to the nature of something is notoriously hard.

**Matt WH (36:16)**

You said it in a sentence; I've waffled for two minutes, but you're right. It's like the system's set up for operational stuff, not for transformative stuff, right? And so then there's this human cost of trying to push through change constantly, and the burnouts that you go through. You get some good wins, but there are sometimes you feel like you're trying to push water uphill.

**Linda O'Halloran (36:44)**

Yeah, that's why it's so important, I think, to kind of understand what conditions are needed for whatever intervention you're trying to make. Because there are times when you just can't, and it's devastating when you're like really, really sold on the art of the possible. But at the end of the day, if you're not going to get political support, and you're not going to have enough money to do the thing, or access to the people that you need, sometimes you just have to wait. But we're hoping we can shortcut people's torture by sharing benefits narratives that have worked in planning, in social care, in like housing and other areas. Any hot tips on the narratives that have landed really, really well with Treasury and, you know, the DG and up crew?

**Matt WH (37:34)**

I think having a really clear killer stat that informs your elevator pitches helped us a lot. So we would talk about how up to 50% of planning applications are invalid when they're received, so they can't be processed. People would turn around and go, "Really?" And so, what's the thing that you've got that gives someone that aha moment within less than 30 seconds? And it doesn't have to be the entire problem, right? We didn't say, "Our local

government technology market is stuck," or "Planning teams are under-resourced and lacking in digital capabilities." That might be the real story, but that's not the one that lands.

**Linda O'Halloran (38:24)**

Something that I suspect is just always hard in solving gnarly challenges that touch so many different disciplines and organisations. You need input from people that have lots of deep expertise in completely different things. And that's just always really hard, you know, to learn another person's language and to be able to simplify what you do to the right level of detail for somebody who's got a different part of the puzzle.

**Matt WH (38:53)**

Yeah, I guess one of the things that we could talk more about is just how far — and you've been implying it all along, right — which is how far there are elements of this that are some kind of a model for how public service transformation could be done across sectors and across industries in the future. And this is from a lot of the literature on mission-driven governance. Again, not like we invented this at all, but there's something about closing the gap between people on the front line and people in policy and digital positions in central government. A lot of the stuff that the Test, Learn and Grow team is already talking about and is working on. I think we've got some good practical examples of how that's worked in certain specific projects and interventions between central and local government.

The thing that I think is super interesting that is still a bit under-explored is what you need to actually do that across a system and where the boundaries of that system are. So in planning, for example, yeah, you've got central government, yeah, you've got local government. We've been talking about things like technology providers old and new, but also you've got arm's-length bodies, also you've got the development industry, also you've got statutory consultees. There's a family of organisations that make up the system. And so one thing I've been thinking of is: what's the right vehicle for transforming other central organisations? Do you need something else that sits outside of one particular policy vertical to enable some of that?

**Linda O'Halloran (40:34)**

A cool thing, I think, about Open Digital Planning as a community — a collection of energy that lives in this liminal space that doesn't belong to any organisation — is that it gets stuff done without worrying about bureaucracy. And I think the more we can focus on co-articulating our outcomes, co-prioritising how we go about achieving them, and the less we worry about the future organisation of government, the better. And the question for me is like, what basic collaborations and responsibilities need to be put in place now so that we can do those kind of projects?

Organising around missions, I think, is like a really sensible approach. And the right way around seems to me the Open Digital Planning way around, whereby the department that cared the most got started, gave somebody enough responsibility for an outcome and money to do something about it, and said, "Away you go." It could be that, you know, in the next spending cycle, it makes sense to spin Open Digital Planning out into an arm's-length body-type thing or create a new funding model, à la Local Gov Drupal, to see if it can sustain itself that way. But my feeling is, let's not worry too much about that now, and let's just fricking fix the plumbing.

**Matt WH (41:51)**

Do we have the maturity to set up institutions that we plan to wind down? Because that's a different conversation.

**Linda O'Halloran (42:00)**

Matt Wood-Hill, thank you so much for coming and sharing your time and your big brains. And we can't wait to share more widely and keep the conversation going.

**Matt WH (42:10)**

Thank you, nice to chat.