

# Transforming the planning process - challenges for the service designer

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the public consultation process for planning applications which have an effect on physical changes to urban settlements. We draw on experiences from project work undertaken on the planning system in Liverpool (UK). We discuss the process as is, critique the current limitations in regard to public engagement on planning applications, and develop advice to service designers who want to work within such an existing institutional setup. In particular, we caution service designers to be aware of issues related to open data access, the difficulties in managing expectations of actors, and the importance of understanding one's own biases. We suggest that more research is required on understanding suitable service design approaches to break up existing institutional practices in urban planning.

**KEYWORDS:** urban planning, public consultation, planning applications, role of service designer, existing institutions, redesigning interactions

## Introduction

Complexity science demonstrates how interventions on a specific element in a complex system influence the overall structure. Cities are complex systems shaped by many elements and actors of different interests interacting among each other and with the environment in a non-linear (and therefore often unpredictable) way. Most basically, urban planning can be defined as “art and science of ordering the use of land” (Wyatt et al., 2003). Because of the scale of its interventions, urban planning deals with wicked problems, which calls for deep understanding to anticipate “waves of repercussion generated by a problem solving action directed to any node of the network” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 156), and the involvement of different stakeholders in decision-making processes.

The planning system has a statutory public consultation period of 21 days, during which local planning authorities attempt to notify, inform and engage with citizens. Social complexity associated with public consultation, defined as a function of the number and

diversity of players involved (Conklin, 2006), and the importance of this step in promoting civic engagement, calls for a careful design of the interaction that different actors have with this service.

Buchanan (1992) argued that design plays a significant role in dealing with complex, ill-defined, wicked problems. The main question that we seek to address with this paper is the contribution of designers to the definition of services that facilitate discussion between government and local actors during the planning application process.

A holistic understanding of a service system and its actors is part of the discipline of service design (Mager et al., 2000) and we argue that it should contribute its methodologies (e.g. service design thinking) and tools (e.g. blueprints, system maps, actor maps, scenarios) to the development of improved participatory urban planning practices. By applying their skills of “see-show-foreseen” (Zurlo, 2004, p. 96), service designers are able to visualise the current structure of a service system and contribute to the development of a strategic direction. However, for participation in changing urban planning processes, service designers face the difficult task of designing publicly accessible touch points and interfaces. These should be “useful, usable and desirable” for the citizens, and “effective, efficient and distinctive” for the public administration (Mager, 2008, p. 354). Acting as change agent, service designers can play a leading role by involving members of government, market and civil society to the design of interfaces and touch points (Manzini et al., 2012) in order to improve established consultation processes.

In this paper we report on our experience as part of an interdisciplinary team in redesigning the public consultation process for planning application in Liverpool, UK.

## Open Planning, project overview

Open Planning is an ongoing project that aims to enhance the quality of planning applications, by intervening on public consultation, with a tool for active engagement and citizen empowerment. As a service platform, Open Planning seeks to improve the interaction between stakeholders by providing spatial reference, integrating information through a set of physical and digital touchpoints, and making such information readable and visible.

The paper reports the development of the first stage (April-June 2013) of the project, in which a heuristic evaluation (Nielsen & Molich, 1990) of the planning system in Liverpool was conducted. A number of activities with stakeholders were organised in order to identify limitations and opportunities from the point of view of local government, commercial investors and civil society groups (Friedman et al, 1998). Our primary research was accompanied by an exhaustive study of the recent evolution and current status of the policy framework (Killian & Pretty, 2008; Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, an additional review of participatory urban interventions that succeed to engage with citizens, and connect physical place and digital data was carried out.

During the second stage (February–April 2014), a number of co-design activities with stakeholders will inform the development of a digital tool that aims to complement the identified deficiencies of the current system, encouraging everyday civic engagement through the integration of mobile devices, social media and GIS data. Finally, a first prototype will be

tested and evaluated in collaboration with Liverpool City Council and Engage Liverpool (scheduled for April 2014).

## Re-designing interactions around planning applications

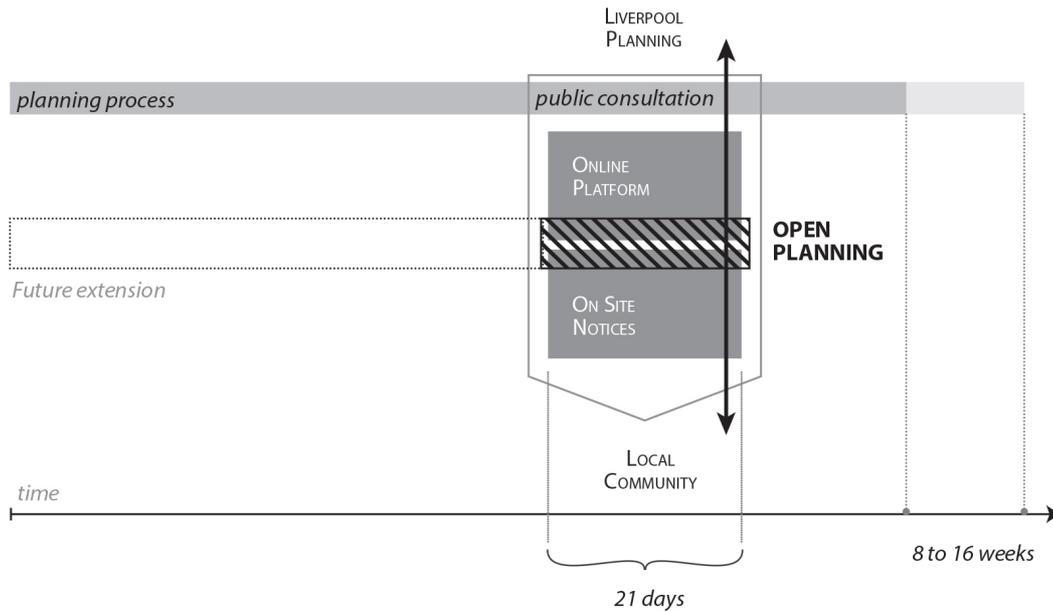
As part of the research conducted with stakeholders, members of civil society and representatives of local community groups provided first-hand experience with the planning system in a cognitive walkthrough (Hannington & Martin, 2012) In this exercise, the statutory publication requirements for planning applications were analysed, and citizens identified site notices and the online portal to be crucial boundary artifacts (Star et al., 1989).

Although site notices and online portals might seem highly democratic, accessible official methods of communication, a number of weaknesses in the system may prevent citizens from being notified, informed and participating in the decision making process. For instance, citizens pointed out the difficulties in understanding the technical, text-based format of the announcements, the inability to envisage the impact of the application, the challenge of spotting a planning application on the street, or even to retrieve information from the online portal. Consequently, citizens rely on alternative sources of information, and expressed distrust towards local planning authorities efforts to engage with citizenry.

On the other hand, local planning authorities provided clear information on current practices, desired improvements, legal requirements and limitations. Although a strong desire to improve efficiency during the public consultation process was expressed, resource constraints were highlighted, mainly in terms of funding and time for development. Efficient use of already present resources, i.e. the information attached to planning applications, especially the GIS database, was particularly welcomed.

Constraints in time, team resources, and institutional inertia (inflexibility of changing the current system quickly) lead us to approach the current system through an acupuncture approach (Jegou, 2010): we focused on small, targeted interventions, which in the logic of complexity science lead to the desired final outcome for the system as a whole. For this reason, the Open Planning team decided to concentrate on the redesign of the aforementioned touch points of the system, as a promising way to innovate the interaction between citizens and local government, and generate a systemic improvement.

We identified an opportunity to increase citizen empowerment by developing a digital tool that complements the public consultation stage of the planning system. Building upon the preliminary findings, a digital tool will be co-designed and developed during the second stage of the project, aiming to provide planning applications with the geographical reference they currently lack, and create a digital platform for public debate that shall be integrated with official channels provided by local planning authorities (site notices and online portal), and make use of widespread digital communication practices.



**Figure 1 shows where Open Planning is positioned, in relation to the planning application process.**

## Challenges

We found three tensions particularly pertinent and worthwhile to note for a service designer who may want to work within the existing set-up of the planning system:

1. Checking one's own perceptual biases: Our aspiration for a participatory process (Manzini & Rizzo, 2011) was challenged not only by tensions of interests among different actors, but also because we were restricting our approach as a result of the bias coming from the original project brief, which suggested an augmented reality-based mobile app. Rather than draw from research findings, this bias preconfigured our research approach and participatory activities. Conversely, the sustainability and significant difference towards strengthening opportunities for informal deliberation in an augmented-reality based app was questioned. Although the local authority and local community members favoured the development of a mobile app, more research is now required to confirm our approach with a wider audience.
2. Accessing data: A third party company holds and manages the GIS data attached to planning applications, while the data itself is owned by local authorities. Hence, we foresee that the feasibility and sustainability of revising the service platform will depend not only upon the ability of the local authority to be proactive, but also the services provided by the third party company.
3. Managing risk averse stakeholders: Even though creative urban practices were regarded as one of the pillars to foster engagement and connect site notices with digital platforms; creativity was ultimately deemed as dispensable and even risky. With regard to the inclusion of visual content in a primarily text based system, although favoured by citizens, local authorities were conscious of possible legal constraints, lack of resources to implement it and developer backlash.

The interim outcomes have shown that the designer's fundamental role in engaging in the redesign of a system faces many challenges, but offers promises for radical service changes. A key challenge is to spend sufficient time to understand the existing institutional set-up and actors' interactions, but also to clarify one's own assumptions, expectations and perceptual biases. Some of these challenges could be mitigated very successfully by having locally well-known and respected team members, who act as local champions and provide trust. As a critical success factor, Open Planning succeeded to develop trust relationships among key actors in a very short time. The support and active contribution of local authorities and community groups has been paramount to the success for such a service design project.

Moreover, in projects conducted collaboratively between practitioners and researchers, the process may be subordinated either by the demands of action or the research community. Necessary parts of the research process are often neglected in favour of the action aspect (Kemmis, 2010). Although we have noticed this issue in our own practice, we concluded that even though each stakeholder has behaved according to the requirements and conditions of their practice, the pursuit of a common objective, i.e. the improvement of the planning application system, has brought the team together.

## Next Steps and Preliminary conclusions

As a next step, we will proceed with our next challenge of undertaking additional co-design workshops with local actors in order to reinforce our learning from the initial project phase. This is particularly important to the development of a novel interface to the planning process.

Collaborative, design-led efforts such as Open Planning open doors and make key decision makers become receptive to change. However, design actions must be integrated into a process that, because of bureaucratic, infrastructural and budget limitations, present very little flexibility. We see that service design's holistic approach is valuable in understanding such established contexts as traditional consultation activities and their resources in new light. Our experience has shown that more research is required into the urban planning process from a service design perspective to explore the applicability of service design methodology in the development of touch points of interactions between different local actors to promote civic engagement.

### *Acknowledgements*

Many thanks to the Open Planning team, especially to local authorities and community members for their kind collaboration. Open Planning is a Lancaster University project funded by The Creative Exchange and AHRC.

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