Open Data Standards Community (ODSC) 24 September 2025

We started the meeting with an overview of our ongoing project to create open, reusable, and modular data specifications for the planning permission process, based on national legislation.

We stressed that we need your help and collaboration to ensure the specifications we develop are effective and have minimal issues before we embed them into practice.

Specification Development Stages and Timeline

We gave a quick refresher on the four stages our data specifications progress through:

1. Working Draft: This is a human-readable version for review and feedback.
2. Pilot: Here, we create a more machine-readable output for testing.
3. Candidate: At this stage, the data design process is complete.
4. Approved Data Standard: The specification becomes mandated through the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act.

We explained that we have been focusing on two main areas: planning application submission data specifications and decision data specifications. The submission specifications are currently in the pilot stage and are ready for testing.

Our indicative timeline for the submission standards is to reach the "candidate" stage by this autumn (2025), with preparation for mandating regulations to occur between this autumn and autumn 2026. We've started the research phase for the decision specifications, with the aim of creating a working draft.

Working in the Open

We emphasised our commitment to working openly and transparently. To help with this, we've created a public GitHub Kanban board to provide a transparent view of our backlog, current tasks, and issues raised during development.

We also listed some of the other ways we've been engaging widely over the past year, such as running this community group, publishing our pilot specifications, aligning with the Open Digital Planning (ODP) team, publishing blogs and weeknotes, and making all our code and tools open source.

Updates on Submission Specifications

We explained that our recent work has focused on making the submission specifications easier for people to use, review, and test. This also helps us to stress-test the declarative model that underpins our information models.

We shared some of the recent outputs we've generated from the model, including:

- Spreadsheet versions of the specifications for each application type, allowing for field-by-field feedback.

- JSON schemas for each application type, which allow for automated validation of data payloads against the specification. We noted that while we have a basic validator in place, we need more sample data payloads to test them thoroughly.

Development Management Software Fund (DMSF) Project Update

Mary Lester from Dorset Council then gave an update on the DMSF project, which involves five Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) and their back-office suppliers. Mary explained that the project's goal is to gather real-world evidence on the practical application of our new submission standards. The project has been re-scoped into three phases: evidence gathering, testing, and then adoption.

Mary detailed that phase one, which is their current focus, involves analysis and evidence gathering rather than building technical systems.

Key deliverables include schema mapping, data quality assessments by LPAs, and technical feasibility statements from suppliers.

This phase aims to establish a baseline, understand alignment with our standards, and assess data quality. Mary assured us that the results of this work will be shared with our data standards community, with care taken over any commercially sensitive information.

The timeline is ambitious, aiming to have evidence packs completed by the end of December. The DMSF project team will work closely with us to ensure their evidence effectively informs the standards' development.

User Research on Decision Data

We clarified that when we talk about decision data, we mean all the up-to-date information ("stuff") used at the point of decision, including details of the decision and any conditions applied, all provided as data. Our research involved a survey with 25 responses and interviews with planning officers, software suppliers, and planning consultants.

From the research, we've broken down the need for decision data into four key areas:

- Forecasting: The most accurate data exists at the point of decision, but it is often buried in documents, making forecasting difficult.
- Appeals: The Planning Inspectorate (PINS) often has to recreate structured data from documents submitted during an appeal.
- Monitoring and reporting: Structured data is crucial for statistical analysis and assessing policy effectiveness.
- Statutory consultees: Each consultee has specific information requirements, and conditions provided as data are important to ensure they flow through the system correctly.

We've also identified several problems with the current state of decision data:

- the lack of a standard format / agreed content for decision notices,

- information changing throughout the application process without being tracked as structured data,
- critical information being locked in PDF documents.

We asked you what the biggest challenges will be in standardising this data, and you highlighted:

- the need for a comprehensive skills program
- addressing cultural resistance to change, and
- ensuring the standards serve long-term needs (e.g., 50+ years) rather than just the immediate next step in the process.

Community Feedback on Sessions

You told us that the conversational style, probing questions, and range of perspectives are working well.

You suggested future content could better highlight the connections between different ODP workstreams, engage with other relevant data bodies, and that we should frame our conversations around outcomes rather than the technical details of data standards to engage a wider, non-technical audience.

There was also a strong call for better join-up with data standardisation work happening in other government departments (e.g., DESNZ) and other parts of MHCLG (e.g., home buying and selling).
