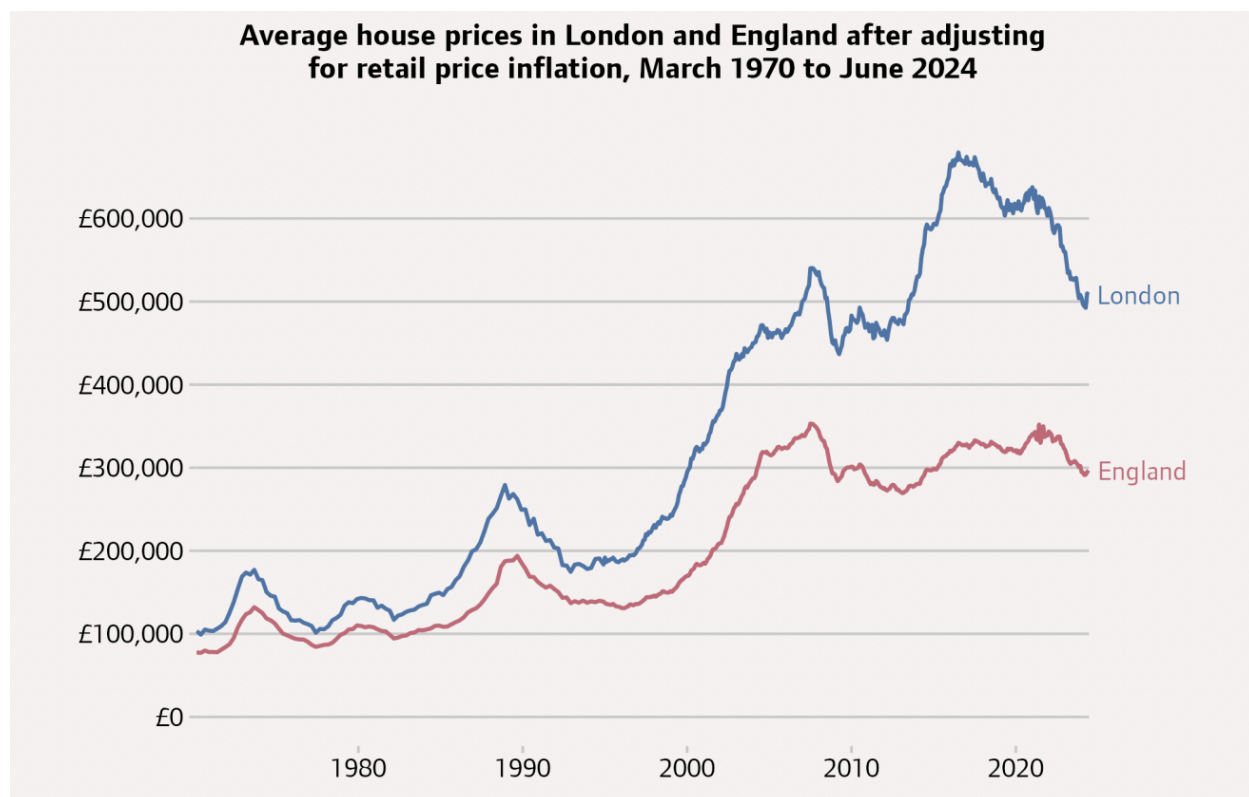# Productivity & Digitalisation of the Planning System - a Case Study from Singapore

01 - The Position in the UK

Navigating the UK real estate landscape over the past few years has felt like an immense task. The challenges have been numerous and varied, ranging from the impacts of COVID-19 to construction cost inflation, labour shortages, wars, economic and political uncertainty, and spikes in interest rates. The list is extensive. This combination of factors has meant that when adjusted for inflation, house prices in the capital have been on a downward trend since 2016 ([Source: London house prices down 25pc since Brexit](#)) and dropped by over 15% in real terms since Brexit, as shown on the below graph ([Source: GLA Housing in London - 2024](#)).

Another challenge lies in productivity within a systematically inefficient planning system—a concern highlighted by the previous government in the Planning White Paper ([Source: The Economist](#)), which aimed to establish a more streamlined approach. Whilst the graph below looks at the public sector as a whole which undertakes more labour-intensive tasks at a greater scale than the private sector, the image still raises the question of whether more can be done to improve within the sector.

Average house prices in London and England after adjusting for retail price inflation, March 1970 to June 2024

Source: GLA Housing in London (2024)

Inefficiency drive

Britain, productivity by sector, 1997=100

Market (private)

Public*

1997   2005   10   15   22

Source: ONS   *2021-22 data are experimental

Source: The Economist

Compounding the challenges of public sector productivity, the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) revealed that between 2009 and 2020 (Source: RTPI recognises budget support for new planners, but urges long-term investment), a quarter of planners moved from the public to the private sector. The cumulation of these productivity and resourcing issues, along with increasing application requirements has resulted in the percentage of major planning applications decided within the statutory period 13 week

period reducing significantly - from 47% in 2014, to just 20% during 2023 ([Source: Live tables on planning application statistics](#)).

Clearly, this is a complex and multifaceted area, however, in our view, we should look to learn from the examples of the most efficient corporate and public environments not only in the UK, but across the globe. Whilst there are many public sector case studies that could be examined, this memo focuses on Singapore, which is known for its efficiency, especially in planning and governance.

02 - Mungers Solution?

The layers of complexity within the planning system is often viewed as a significant barrier within the industry. In Berkshire Hathaway's shareholder meetings Charles Munger often highlighted how bureaucracy can lead to excessive administrative overhead, unnecessary complexity, and a lack of adaptability, which can be detrimental to business operations and growth. If unchecked, bureaucracy creates environments where decisions are made slowly, innovation is discouraged, and operations become overly complicated. The view is that these inefficiencies lead to decreased competitiveness and reduced organisational agility.

03 - CMA's findings, wasn't it obvious?

In 2023, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) concluded a thorough investigation into the UK housebuilding market and found significant inefficiencies within the planning system. The report highlighted the system's complexity and unpredictability as major barriers to increasing housing supply. It criticised planning departments for relying on outdated local plans and lacking clear, actionable targets, which severely obstruct housing development.

These challenges lead to delays that significantly impact housing delivery, infrastructure projects, and broader economic growth. Industry reports consistently point to a system mired in bureaucratic inertia, lacking the flexibility needed to meet the demands and complexities of modern urban development. The resulting backlog exacerbates our housing crisis and deters new investment. These are issues that we explored further in a recently published SAV Memo ([Development Viability: and why not enough homes are being built](#)) which underlined the challenges raised by the CMA.

To counter these challenges, the CMA made a series of recommendations such as calls for streamlined processes and better-resourced planning departments to more effectively respond to evolving housing needs. «Better resourcing» has continuously been raised as a solution, and whilst the Autumn Budget 2024 includes an investment in housebuilding (albeit limited), it does not specify substantial direct funding increases for Local Planning Authorities (LPAs). The RTPI emphasises the necessity for long-term strategies to build capacity, however, the additional 300 planners promised by the government equates to <1 per Local Planning Authority (LPA) and seems unlikely to present a solution to any of the issues raised by the CMA.

Accordingly, in a time of competing demands for resource allocation, it is crucial to explore ways to boost productivity. While there are clearly a multitude of factors at play, today's landscape of technological advancement encourages us to focus on digitalising the planning system, supported by AI.

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04 - Digitalisation in Singapore

For over a decade, Singapore has made significant strides in digitising its urban planning system through initiatives aimed at enhancing efficiency, transparency, and sustainability. Whilst the list is not exhaustive, we have summarised some of the most interesting measures below.

- Smart Nation Initiative

Singapore's Smart Nation Initiative is a comprehensive programme to leverage technology across all sectors of society—urban planning, healthcare, transport, governance, and the environment. It uses digital planning to optimise city operations, sustainability, and livability. Data collected from various sources (like sensors and IoT devices) is integrated into virtual simulations to model urban dynamics and test the outcomes of potential policies before implementation.

- Digital Mapping

Geospatial Urban Modelling is leveraged with advanced tools like 3D GIS and digital twins, which simulate the entire city in a digital format (shown below) ([Source: Singapore's journey towards a nationwide digital twin](#)). This enables planners to analyse and visualise urban spaces in real-time, considering factors like traffic, environmental impact, and resource consumption.
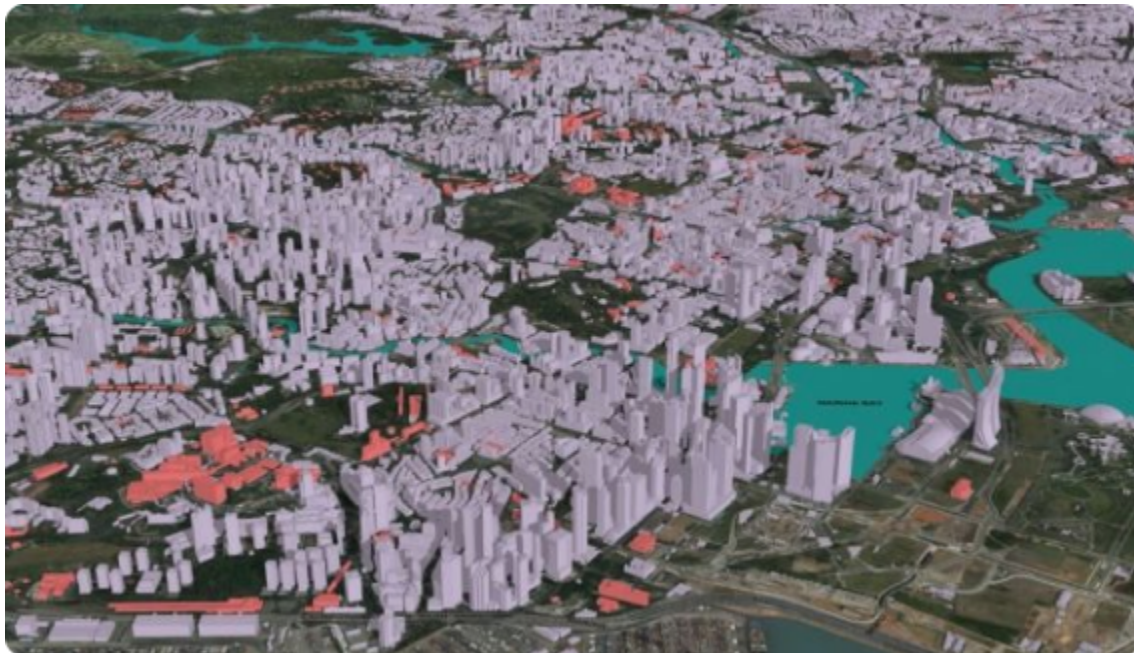
Source: GIM International

OneMap is another crucial component – it is a national digital map system that serves as a tool for land-use planning, providing real-time information to the public and developers about zoning, land ownership, and planned developments. It is an advanced system designed for public use, offering general information while also serving as a platform for collaboration and

community engagement. In this context, it must be stated that some of the largest local authorities in the UK lack basic features like map or keyword search options for finding live or historical planning applications.

- ePlanner

The Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) of Singapore developed ePlanner to align with the nation's sustainability goals and Smart City Initiative. This platform integrates environmental data—such as green spaces, biodiversity, energy efficiency, and climate resilience—into urban planning, enabling planners to make decisions that prioritise long-term sustainability. ePlanner combines geospatial data, planning policies and real-time information, with advanced tools for simulation, scenario analysis, and cross-agency collaboration, supporting long-term planning efforts. Advocates highlight its ability to improve the speed and efficiency of decision-making by centralising information for government planners, urban development agencies, and other stakeholders.

- Online Services for Development Applications

Singapore's CORENET (Construction and Real Estate Network) is a system that allows developers to submit and track development applications in a single location. It integrates seamlessly with the URA's digital planning tools, providing developers with immediate access to land-use policies, zoning regulations, and other relevant spatial data.

In the UK, whilst there is a centralised system for submitting a planning application (the «Planning Portal»), once submitted, it is handed over to LPAs who have different systems, adding a layer of complexity for developers and the public. For those areas with less sophisticated systems, users often experience issues finding historic planning applications, since the UK's Planning Portal does not serve as a centralised archive for all documents across LPAs, and retrieval often depends on local councils, who have varying document retention policies.

Compared to the UK, the CORENET system appears far more efficient, allowing for developers, the public and government agencies to collaborate, obtain information and process applications more efficiently.

Implementation in the UK

Although the UK has made strides in digitising its planning process through the Planning Portal, it still lags behind Singapore's advanced, integrated systems. Adopting a similar approach in the UK would come with challenges, including a larger geographic scope and the complexity of multiple jurisdictions. However, a successful implementation of a unified digital platform could greatly streamline application workflows, foster collaboration, and provide developers and the public with easy, real-time access to essential information on land use, zoning, and environmental planning.

Prioritising the exploration of such systems at the central government level could be instrumental in bridging productivity gaps. By optimising available resources within planning authorities, this approach has the potential to accelerate the planning process and offer a robust framework to meet the UK's ambitious housing delivery targets.

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05 - What else can we learn from Singapore?

When Singapore began the overhaul of its public sector operations, the reforms aimed at fostering a culture of efficiency and meritocracy. A pivotal aspect of these reforms was aligning public sector salaries with those of the private sector, a strategy designed to attract and retain top-tier talent. This approach, sustained by successive administrations, holds that competitive compensation is key to minimising corruption and promoting effective governance.

The below Minister's salaries are benchmarked against top earners in Singapore ([Source: Here's How Much Singapore's President, Prime Minister, And Cabinet Ministers Are Paid In Salary](#)):

- Prime Minister (Lawrence Wong) - The Prime Minister earns an annual salary of S$2.2 million (approximately £1.3 million).
- Deputy Prime Minister - The salary for a Deputy Prime Minister is S$1.87 million per year (approximately £1 million).

- Entry-level Minister (MR4) - The salary for an entry-level minister, which applies to positions such as the Minister for National Development (Desmond Lee), is S$1.1 million annually (approximately £0.65 million). This includes fixed components (13 months) and variable bonuses based on performance and national targets.

Whilst the UK proportionately pays its Ministers much less, the UK's GDP per capita is much lower than in Singapore, which makes direct comparisons challenging, especially when factoring in sector differences, average professional wages, and other economic variables. Nevertheless, the Singaporean model offers a thought-provoking perspective when considered in the UK context.

When it comes to town planning in the UK, the RTPI's «State of the Profession 2023» report reveals that, when adjusted for inflation, real median salaries for planners have significantly declined over the past 15 years, intensifying recruitment and retention issues within LPAs. This combination of reduced real wages and budget constraints has accelerated the transfer of planning professionals from public sector roles to higher-paying private sector positions, creating a compounding effect that further strains local authorities. Considering this context, it could be that adopting the Singaporean approach would serve as a strategy to help retain public sector planning professionals within LPAs.

It should be noted that we are not advocating a copy and paste approach of Singapore, which in planning jargon is a country that would be termed as «Sui Generis» (of its own kind). Directly replicating such policies could ultimately prove unworkable because of the political, geographical and economical differences in the UK. We have not mentioned anything about the Housing & Development Board (HDB) or the government ownership of most of the land in Singapore that is distinctly different from most countries. All these aspects merit a more detailed consideration.

Nonetheless, there are undoubtedly valuable lessons to be learned for a planning system likely to continue facing significant challenges, requiring more fundamental interventions than the current trend of «reform».

DISCLAIMER

Appendix

1. Article «London house prices down 25pc since Brexit»
2. GLA Housing and Land: Housing in London 2024 (November 2024)
3. Article «Jeremy Hunt wants to improve Britain's public-sector productivity»
4. Article «RTPI recognises budget support for new planners, but urges long-term investment»
5. Article «Live tables on planning application statistics»
6. Article «Development Viability: What You Need to Know!»
7. Article «Singapore's journey towards a nationwide digital twin»
8. Article «Here's How Much Singapore's President, Prime Minister, And Cabinet Ministers Are Paid In Salary»
9. Article «State of the Profession 2023»