UKPropTech ASSOCIATION
Part of the British Property Federation

Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government

Unlocking Regional Potential: Planning, Housing & Digital Innovation in the North

24 February 2026

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Introduction

On 24 February 2026, the UK PropTech Association (UKPA), hosted "Unlocking Regional Potential: Planning, Housing & Digital Innovation in the North" in Manchester. Delivered in partnership with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the event formed part of the PropTech Growth Programme, bringing together local authorities, developers, PropTech companies and industry stakeholders to explore how planning, housing delivery and digital innovation can work together to unlock housing delivery across the North.

The half-day event was designed as a practical forum to connect national ambition around housing delivery and planning modernisation with the realities of delivery on the ground. Through a combination of opening reflections, a regional leaders panel, PropTech case studies and facilitated roundtables, the event created space for cross-sector discussion on the challenges affecting housing delivery and where digital approaches and collaboration could help improve planning processes and outcomes. It was supported by partners including PUBLIC, the Digital Task Force for Planning, Future of Manchester, and our hosts Weightmans.

The sections below summarise the key discussions, examples and insights that emerged during the event.

Part 1: Opening Reflections, Regional Leaders Panel and Case Studies

Setting the Scene – Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)

Joanna Averley, Chief Planner at MHCLG, opened the event by highlighting the government's continued investment in digital planning as a key enabler for delivering homes, infrastructure and sustainable growth. She emphasised the opportunity to modernise planning systems through better data, clearer processes and faster decision-making, while also strengthening planning capacity through initiatives such as Pathways to Planning and Public Practice.

Bridget Wilkins, Head of Adoption, Engagement and Innovation at MHCLG, welcomed attendees and highlighted the importance of cross-sector collaboration between planners, government, industry and technology providers. She emphasised the role of digital innovation and the PropTech Innovation Fund in helping explore new approaches to planning challenges and supporting more effective housing delivery.

Keynote Address – Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)

Bethan McCaw, Interim Delivery Team Director at GMCA, outlined Greater Manchester's ambition to deliver 75,000 new homes during the current parliamentary term, including 10,000 energy-efficient homes for social rent, as part of the region's ten-year strategy for inclusive growth.

She highlighted the role of the Greater Manchester Combined Authority in aligning land, funding, skills and partnerships to unlock housing delivery, including the launch of the Good Growth Fund, which has already supported the potential delivery of 2,000 homes in its first wave.

Bethan also highlighted the role of data and digital platforms, including the Greater Manchester Integrated Pipeline and MappingGM, in improving transparency, supporting earlier collaboration and accelerating decision-making across the development system.

Regional Leaders Panel

The panel explored the practical barriers to housing delivery in the North of England, using Greater Manchester as a regional example. Framed within national housing targets, the discussion focused on what slows delivery in practice and what could help improve speed and certainty across the system. Core themes included viability, the cost of time, local planning capacity, predictability, collaboration between public and private sectors, and the role of digital planning and PropTech.

Who Took Part

- Ben Townsend, New Business Director North West at L&Q
- Lucy Woodbine, Senior Principal Planning and Housing Research at Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)
- John Gregory, Partner at Weightmans
- Phil Mayall, Managing Director at Muse
- Moderator: Sammy Pahal, Managing Director at UK PropTech Association (UKPA)

Key Discussion Points

Core barriers to housing delivery

- Viability pressures, particularly in lower-value markets where build costs remain high.
- Time delays as a direct constraint on delivery and investment decisions, especially at consent and regulatory stages.
- Local planning authority resourcing gaps, including specialist capacity shortages.
- Slow discharge of conditions and protracted Section 106 negotiations.
- Infrastructure and statutory process constraints.
- A recurring need for greater certainty and predictability in planning outcomes and timelines.

Digital planning, data and PropTech

- Greater Manchester's approach was cited as an example of regional coordination, including Mapping GM and shared land supply datasets (published in accessible formats).
- The value of pragmatic data-sharing ("lowest common denominator") was discussed, alongside the limitations created by uneven digital maturity across organisations.

- Interoperability was consistently highlighted as a baseline requirement (public and private systems needing to "speak the same language").
- Automation and AI were discussed as decision-support tools to improve consistency (e.g., validation, consultation processes, report structuring), with emphasis on retaining human oversight.
- BIM and digital "as-built" records were positioned as valuable for delivery, compliance, asset management and post-occupancy learning.

Collaboration and alignment

- Effective collaboration was framed as dependent on clarity of shared objectives, mutual understanding of constraints, and long-term relationship building.
- Differing institutional priorities (commercial, regulatory, public interest) were discussed as a driver of friction, particularly in Section 106 negotiations.
- Regeneration was described as more complex than new build and more reliant on effective consultation and stakeholder engagement.

Central government's role

- The panel distinguished between planning reform and delivery mechanisms, highlighting that consents alone do not guarantee delivery.
- Targeted support for planning capacity (funding, skills, retention) was seen as important.
- Legislative stability was discussed as a factor in improving certainty.
- Investment in PropTech adoption was referenced, but positioned as part of a wider system requiring capacity and governance.

Main Takeaways

- Time, certainty and capacity are recurring constraints on delivery.
- Viability is highly sensitive to delay and process friction.
- Interoperability and consistent data standards are foundational for scaling digital planning.
- Technology is viewed as an enabler of consistency and efficiency, not a replacement for judgement or relationships.
- Collaboration works best when shared objectives are clear and partners understand each other's constraints.

PropTech Case Studies

In this session, we showcased four real-world examples of PropTech adoption demonstrating how technology is being applied in practice to support planning, development and housing delivery. Each case study illustrated how digital tools can help public and private sector organisations access better data, improve collaboration, engage communities, and accelerate decision-making across planning and development processes.

Digital Urban – Nicola Stebbing, Marketing and Business Development

- **Client:** Wirral Borough Council
- **Case Study:** Development of a digital twin of Birkenhead and New Brighton to support regeneration planning, funding applications and community engagement. The model helped visualise proposals, analyse environmental factors and enabled more confident decision-making, supporting the council's successful £45m Towns Fund application and future housing development.

PlaceChangers – Sebastian Weise, Founding Director

- **Client:** Gentoo Group
- **Case Study:** Use of Place Analytics and 3D consultation tools to strengthen early-stage community engagement for housing regeneration in Sunderland. The approach enabled clearer communication with residents while significantly reducing reporting time and improving the quality of engagement insights.

SimAnalytica – Steve Puetz, Lead Account Manager

- **Client:** Thames Freeport
- **Case Study:** Use of an AI-powered platform to bring together hundreds of datasets to support site identification and feasibility analysis. The platform enabled faster analysis of infrastructure, environmental and planning constraints, reducing the time required to assess development opportunities.

LandTech – Neil Druian, Head of New Business

- **Client:** Harworth Group
- **Case Study:** Use of LandInsight to consolidate site ownership, planning data and constraints into a single platform to support large-scale site identification. The approach enabled Harworth to analyse thousands of sites more efficiently and build a significant development pipeline.

Part 2 - Roundtable Insights - Summary

In the second part of the event, we grouped attendees into seven facilitated roundtables to reflect on the discussions from the first half of the programme and explore one of two challenges affecting housing delivery and planning. Each table was led by a facilitator and brought together a mix of participants from local authorities, developers, PropTech companies and industry stakeholders.

The Challenges:

- Challenge 1 – Plan-making: How can scalable digital approaches help align evidence and policies across plan-making boundaries and tiers?
- Challenge 2 – Decision-making: How can digital interventions reduce delays caused by S106 (Section 106) negotiations (e.g. viability) to accelerate local authority decision-making on applications?

Following the event, we reviewed the insights shared by facilitators alongside the notes captured at each table to identify the key themes emerging from the discussions. The summary below highlights the main recurring insights across the roundtables, as well as additional perspectives raised in individual conversations.

General Reflections

Recurring insights

- Data quality, accessibility and standardisation remain major challenges across the planning system.
- Resourcing and capacity constraints within local planning authorities affect multiple stages of planning.
- Digital adoption across planning authorities is uneven, with many systems not interoperable.

Additional insights

- Infrastructure data (transport, utilities, schools, healthcare and green space) is essential for planning housing growth.
- Stronger collaboration and multidisciplinary working across planning, infrastructure and energy stakeholders is needed.

- Skills development and training are required to strengthen planning capability and attract future talent.
- Many planning blockers are already widely recognised, with growing interest in exploring PropTech solutions.

Challenge 1 – Plan-making

How can scalable digital approaches help align evidence and policies across plan-making boundaries and tiers?

Recurring insights

- Lack of standardised planning data and evidence structures limits collaboration across authorities and administrative tiers.
- Misaligned evidence bases across plans create duplication and complexity in plan-making.
- Digital planning should improve long-term planning outcomes, not only speed up processes.
- Skills gaps and resource constraints limit the adoption of digital planning tools.

Additional insights

- Infrastructure datasets should be integrated into planning systems to support housing delivery decisions.
- User-friendly digital tools are essential for adoption by planning practitioners.
- Greater transparency and knowledge sharing across stakeholders could strengthen plan-making.
- Early engagement with planning issues supports better long-term outcomes.
- Cross-boundary collaboration and shared long-term visions improve planning alignment.
- Multidisciplinary input strengthens planning processes.

Challenge 2 – Decision-making (S106 negotiations)

How can digital interventions reduce delays in planning decisions?

Recurring insights

- Greater standardisation of S106 agreements and documentation could significantly reduce negotiation time.
- Access to shared datasets and evidence (including viability assumptions and precedents) could improve decision-making.
- Planning data management remains a systemic challenge, with limited resources to maintain datasets.
- Digital tools could support automation and efficiency in documentation and planning processes.

Additional insights

- Early pre-application engagement and design workshops can help resolve issues earlier.
- S106 negotiations are influenced by wider political, policy and placemaking considerations.
- Better evidence-based community engagement could strengthen support for development proposals.
- Alignment of incentives between public and private stakeholders supports better outcomes.
- Improved mechanisms for allocating S106 and CIL funds could increase transparency and effectiveness.
- Technology could help prioritise development opportunities, including SME builders, retrofit projects and smaller sites.