Big Brother is coming to London planning

The GLA's Ministry of Truth department is in the process of building an omnipresent London government surveillance system for all planning applications reveals Andy Rogers

Although you may not realise it, the GLA's Ministry of Truth Department is in the process of building an omnipresent London government surveillance system for all planning applications. Their ambition is to create a live hub of comprehensive planning and development information that will be accessible to all - a refined and updated version of the London Development Database (LDD) that has been running since 2004.
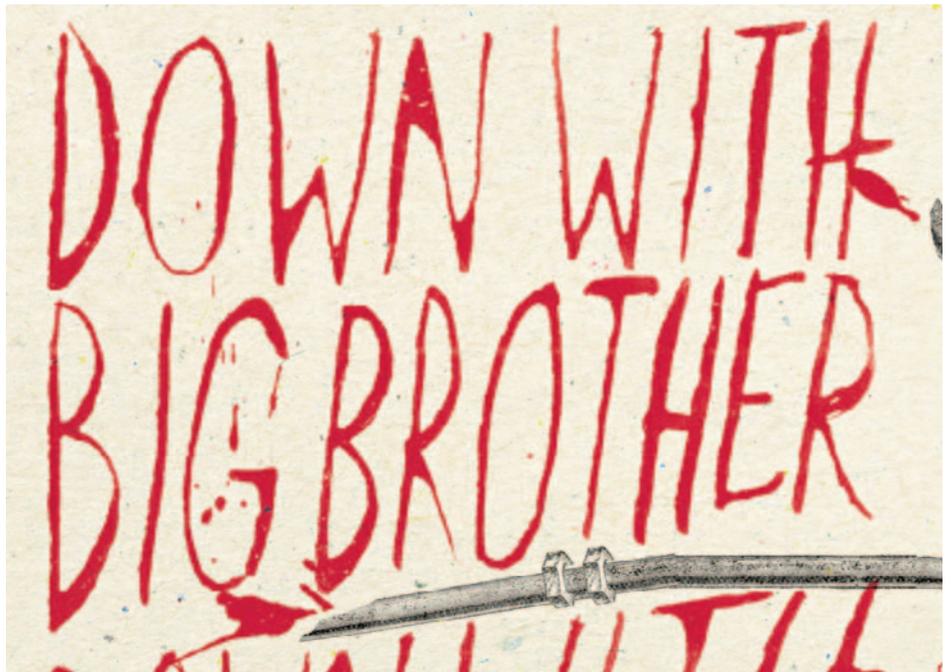
This is to be done, we are told, by reforming the application information that is already (somewhat haphazardly) collected from London boroughs, by gathering data up front automatically from the initial planning application itself, via improved "back-office" verification and validation systems of local authorities. It will then pass seamlessly into City Hall and onto a public website.

We are also told that this is necessary because research has shown how difficult it is for local planning authorities to meet the monitoring needs of the GLA in terms of data accuracy and completeness – monitoring that informs the housing and planning statistics that guide the GLA's development control policies and the London Plan.

This ambitious programme, known as The London Development Database Automation Project, has been running since last October and is expected to become "live" early in 2020. Although currently planning applications contain most of the data required by City Hall to monitor the planning process and forthcoming development, the information is often held in supplementary documents and text fields that make it difficult to locate.

In future the information required will be collected from all planning applications in machine-readable fields to allow for automation (usually through the Planning Portal). We are told this is for monitoring purposes but obviously if readily available to all, such information could be very helpful to others, from developers and homeless charities to communities and objectors.

At present the LDD monitors a limited amount of information, such as the number of new-build residential units, larger changes of use, loss or gain of open space, and so on. It also records only planning consents, not refusals. In future the system will comprehensively capture every validated planning application and its fate (whether permitted, refused, amended or withdrawn) – including (eventually, we are assured) development completion.

And here lies the snag. The ultimate aim of the surveillance is not just to monitor what is being applied for and permitted, or even what is built, but whether the result accords with what has been allowed. A form of follow-up that copies what is already standard, for example in Greece and Spain, but which will rely on local planning authorities to administer – with or without additional resources.

What, I hear you ask, is the extra data that is to be harvested from the machine-readable fields of the planning application? The Combined Planning Data Standard document that has been produced in draft sets out the "additional" information that is required to be submitted as part of any planning application in the GLA area. This is broken down into three main categories: Householder Planning Applications (9/19 pieces of information to be submitted by the applicant / the LPA), Prior Approvals (30/19), and All Other Planning Applications (69/25).

The data required for all applications includes the site's Title Number (Land Registry information), gross internal floor area, number of additional bedrooms/bathrooms, parking spaces, description, etc – ie not all actually additional. But in addition and if applicable the applicant will have to provide any known intended name for the development, existing use(s), proposed building subdivisions, ownership status, extant planning permissions, current lead developer, projected start and completion dates, etc, etc. And also to specify whether the proposal has been subjected to air quality, transport impact and viability assessments; might be phased; includes a 3D model; has any solar panels, dry recycling storage space, passive cooling, or demolition waste; and so on.

The whole project is backed, if not initiated (for possible use in wider areas than just London), by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Or MINITRUTH - the Ministry of Truth as George Orwell would have it. ■

Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past
— Nineteen Eighty-Four, George Orwell