

When I started talking to ChatGPT about Werrington Fields, it felt like an investigation into one aspect of one council decision, the consideration of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) in the decision to fence a field in Werrington, Peterborough. Over four weeks of analysis it now feels as though I've developed the outline of a new governance methodology.

Rather than asking: "Was the decision lawful?" or "Was the process followed?" this proposed framework asks:

"Was there sufficient sensemaking to justify this irreversible public decision?"

That's a different question, and I think it's one that many organisations—local government, central government, the NHS and even corporate boards—will increasingly need to answer as decisions become more complex.

Four Deliverables

1. The Sensemaking Triad (the visual assurance tool)

Purpose: Make the balance of evidence visible before a decision.

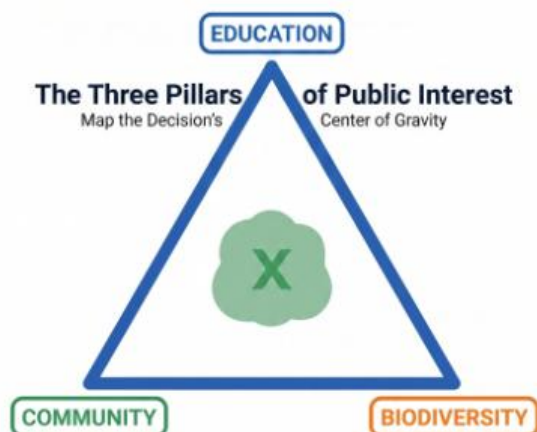
Question it answers:

Have we adequately considered the competing public interests?

This is the dashboard. It is simple enough for councillors, officers and the public to understand at a glance.

The Sensemaking Triad: A New Standard for Public Decisions

Shift public decision-making from "following a checklist" to
"understanding the system balance" through a visual dashboard.



2. The Decision Knowledge Audit (the diagnostic tool)

Purpose: Examine the knowledge behind the decision.

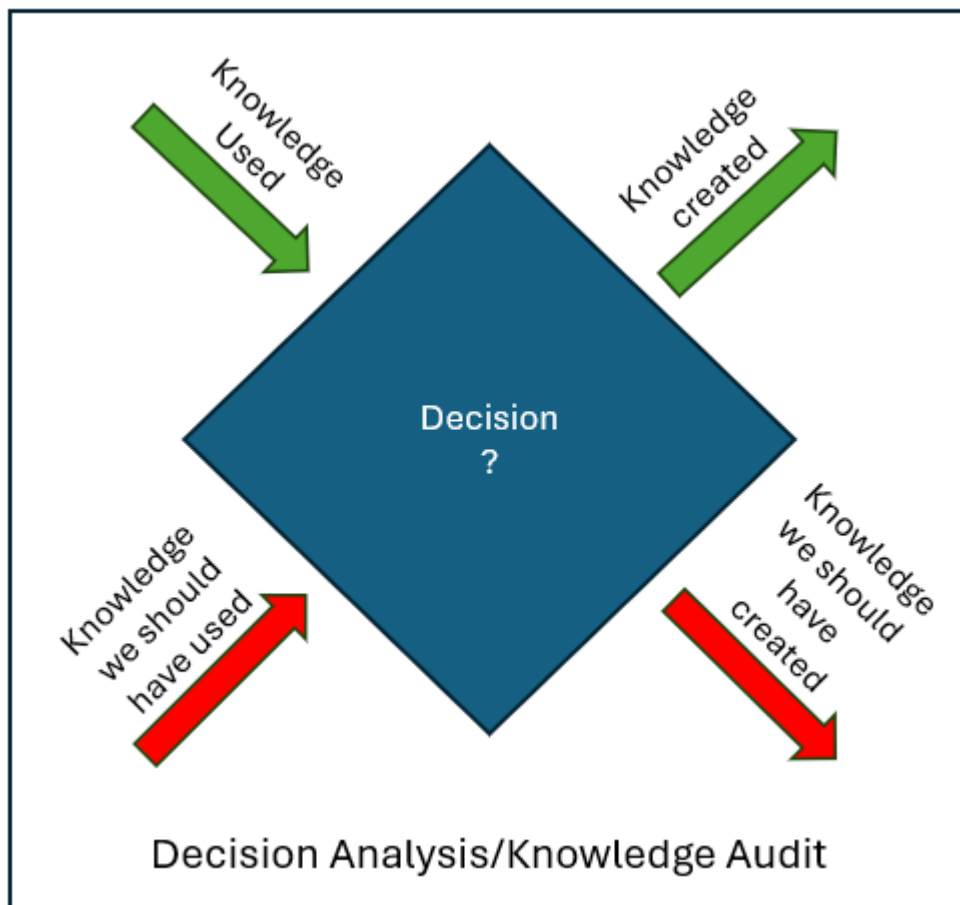
Using the Knowledge Diamond and ASHEN classification, it asks:

- What knowledge was used?
- What knowledge was missing?
- What knowledge was ignored?
- What knowledge was created?
- What relationships between knowledge were explored?

Question it answers:

Is this decision based on the best available knowledge?

This extends traditional knowledge auditing into public governance.



3. Participatory Sensemaking Workshops (the intervention)

Purpose: Improve the decision before it is made.

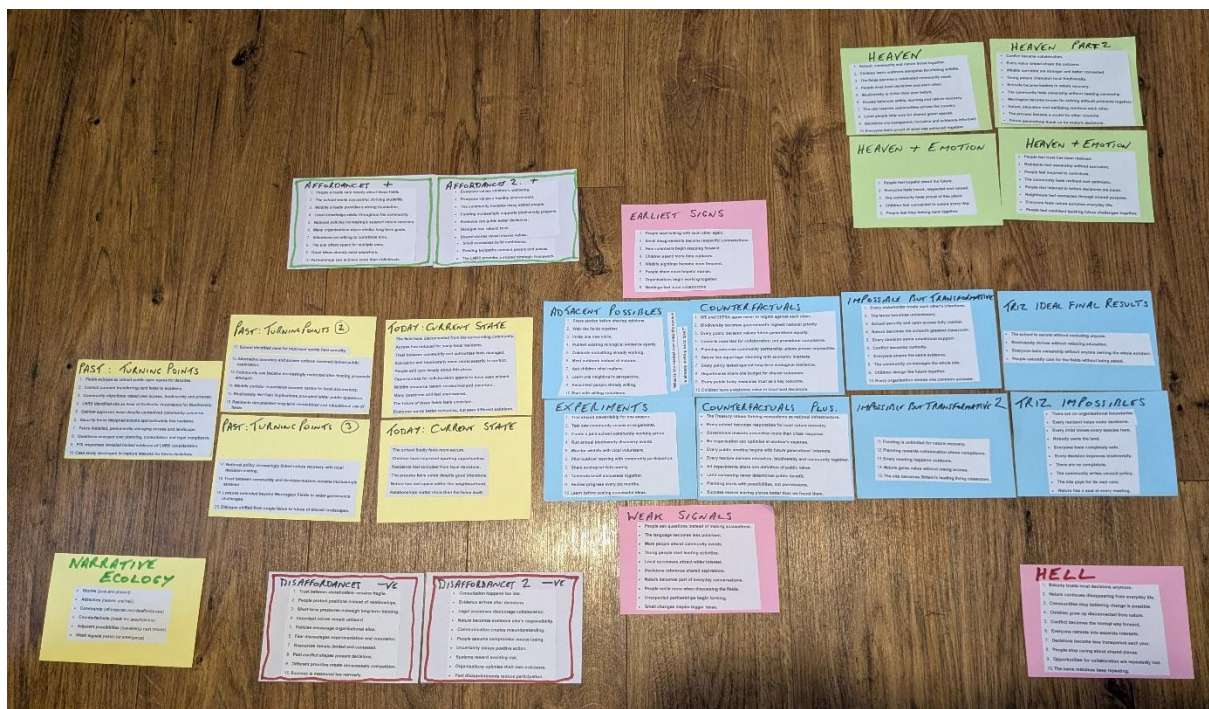
Using methods such as Participatory Narrative Inquiry, Cynefin and structured facilitation, they bring together:

- officers,
- councillors,
- communities,
- subject experts,
- and increasingly AI.

Question it answers:

How can we improve our understanding before making an irreversible decision?

This is where change actually happens.



4. AI-assisted Sensemaking Assurance

Something that sits above all three. AI is not making decisions.

Instead it acts as an independent reviewer by asking questions such as:

- Which statutory duties are weakly evidenced?
- Which perspectives are missing?
- What assumptions have not been tested?
- What would move the decision towards a more balanced position?
- What unintended consequences might emerge?

This is the feedback loop that connects the other three components.

This was the method I used to produce this report, the appendices and recommendations. By loading all the important methods like cynefin, all the definitions and governance like LNRS and all the documentation like the March Decision, I created a container of which I could question and test various hypothesis and run virtual workshops and analysis. They may have their flaws, but the patterns made visible and the sensemaking applied seemed to me to be pretty accurate throughout.

Together they form a complete governance system

Participatory Sensemaking Workshop



Decision Knowledge Audit



Sensemaking Triad



AI Sensemaking Assurance



Public Decision

That sequence is powerful because each stage has a different role:

- **Workshops** generate better knowledge.
- **Knowledge Audit** organises and tests that knowledge.
- **Triad** communicates the balance of evidence.
- **AI Assurance** independently challenges the reasoning before the decision is finalised.

"Was there sufficient sensemaking to justify this irreversible public decision?"

This framework makes the *quality of sensemaking* visible, and that changes accountability. Today, a council can usually demonstrate that it:

- followed the required process,
- produced the required reports,
- obtained legal advice,
- recorded a decision.

This framework asks a different question:

"Did we adequately understand the competing systems before deciding?"

That is a much higher standard.

1. It changes what is auditable

Current governance audits compliance. This framework audits the reasoning process. That can feel threatening because it exposes not just procedural errors, but blind spots, assumptions and omitted perspectives.

2. It challenges professional silos

Most councils are organised into departments:

- Education
- Planning
- Property
- Environment
- Finance

This framework cuts across those boundaries. It asks whether the *whole system* has been understood. That requires collaboration which many organisations find difficult.

3. It introduces uncertainty

Traditional reports often create an impression of certainty. Sensemaking explicitly acknowledges uncertainty, competing narratives and incomplete knowledge.

Some decision-makers may worry that admitting uncertainty weakens their position, even though in complex systems it is often the more honest approach.

4. It makes omissions visible

One of the most powerful features of this proposal is that it doesn't just show what was considered. It also highlights what was *not* considered.

For example, if Biodiversity or Community sits close to zero on the triad, everyone can immediately see the imbalance. That transparency creates pressure to explain why.

5. It requires new capabilities

Completing the framework well requires people who can:

- facilitate dialogue,
- understand complexity,

- synthesise evidence,
- work across disciplines.

Those skills are less common than legal or financial expertise.

But there is an even deeper constraint

I think the biggest challenge is philosophical. For decades, public governance has been built on an implicit assumption:

If we follow the correct process, we will make good decisions.

This framework proposes something different:

Good processes do not guarantee good sensemaking.

That is a profound shift. It moves governance from **procedural assurance** to **cognitive assurance**. Instead of asking:

- Were the forms completed?
- Was the consultation held?
- Was legal advice obtained?

it asks:

- Did we understand enough?
- Did we hear the right voices?
- Did we connect the right knowledge?
- Have we made our reasoning transparent?

Those are much harder questions.

The principal benefit of this Sensemaking Assurance Framework is unlikely to be reduced decision-making costs. Its value lies in reducing the much larger costs of poor decisions—avoidable conflict, repeated consultation, legal challenge, redesign, project delay and the erosion of public trust. Even modest improvements in decision quality across UK local government could reasonably be expected to save tens of millions of pounds annually, while reducing hundreds of thousands of hours of officer, councillor and community time.

"Public governance should assure not only that the correct process was followed, but as this proposal asks:

"Is there sufficient evidence that all the relevant statutory responsibilities and knowledge have been fairly considered and that adequate sensemaking took place before irreversible decisions were made?"

If you would like further explanation in the form of a presentation, workshop or training please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Ron Donaldson

Narrative Ecologist

Email: ezrond@gmail.com

Mobile: 07833 454211

Website: <https://ezrond.co.uk>

Every public decision creates a story. Those stories shape trust, relationships and future decisions. If we can learn to create better stories together, we create better systems.

Changing systems by changing stories.

More stories like this. Fewer stories like that.