

National Planning Improvement Annual Report September 2023-24



Foreword



Craig McLaren

National Planning Improvement Champion

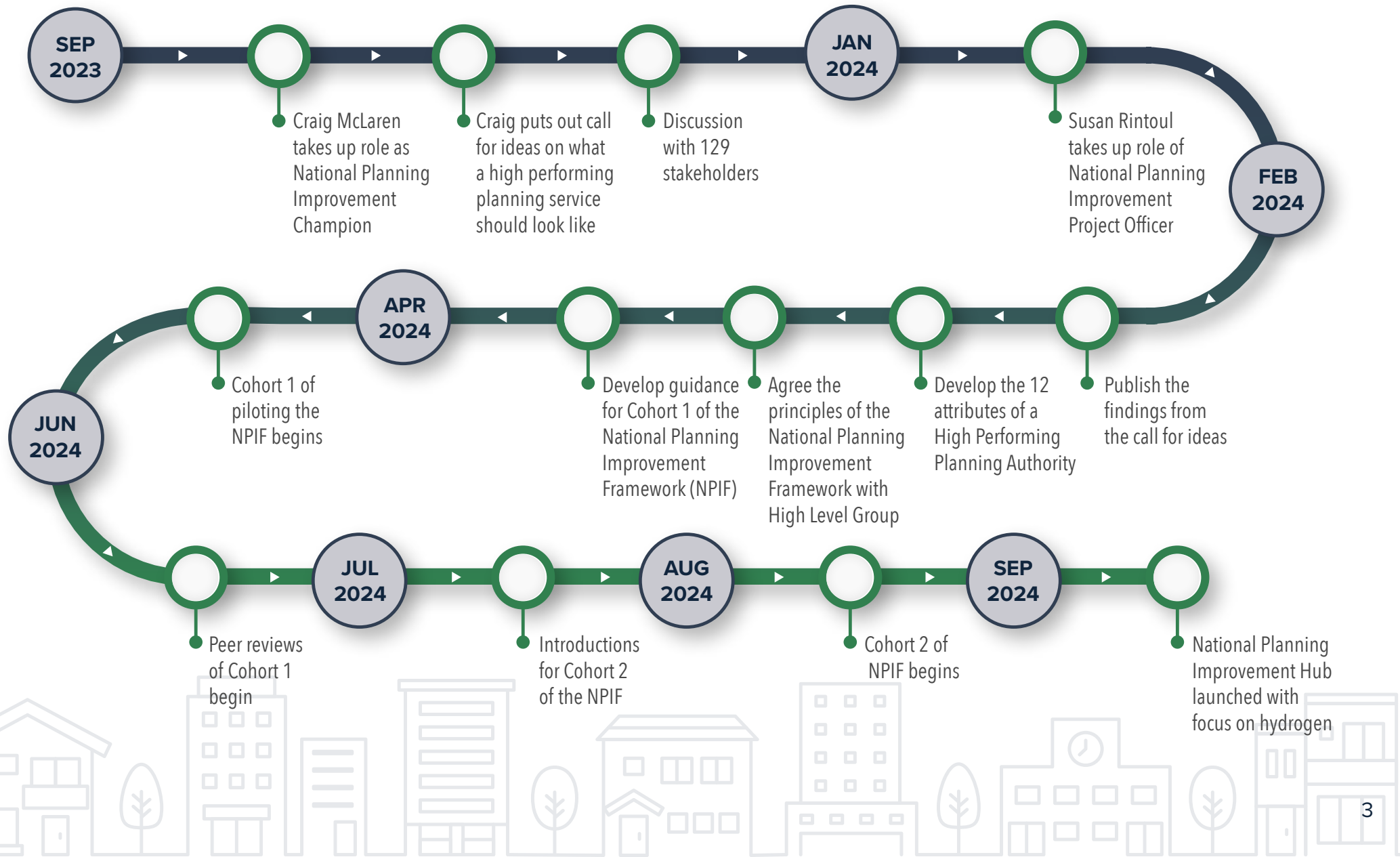
The 2019 Planning Act obliges planning authorities to prepare a report on their performance every year which is submitted to Ministers and published. In doing this it established the National Planning Improvement Champion role to monitor the performance of planning authorities and to provide advice to them – and others who have a role in the system – on what steps might be taken to improve their performance. I took up this role in September 2023 and was joined by Susan Rintoul a few months later. We are based in Improvement Service and fully grant funded by Scottish Government.

This annual report tells the journey we have gone through over the last year to deliver the priorities for planning improvement. It outlines how we have worked to develop and pilot a new performance and improvement framework and highlights

some of the emerging themes and lessons being learned as part of this. It is not a full and in-depth analysis of the performance of all planning authorities. Rather it sets out emerging lessons from first cohort piloting that we believe are valuable. The report contains recommendations for others and actions we will undertake, which we will monitor and report on. This will be the start of more in-depth analysis as we gather more information. We have strived to be as collaborative as we can across planning stakeholders in both conceptualising and piloting the National Planning Improvement Framework. We would not have been able to do this without the support, input and commitment from planning authorities, Scottish Government, COSLA and a host of other people and organisations across sectors. We are grateful for their contributions and continued engagement.

Our work has been based on core foundations of embedding trust and promoting collaboration; measuring what matters including outcomes and quality as well as outputs and quantity; accepting the complexity of planning performance, especially by recognising planning authorities' dependencies; and focusing on improvement and using performance assessment as a stimulus for this. In the spirit of this we have tested new ways of measuring performance and supporting improvement. We are all learning along the way and this report sets out what we are beginning to understand. This learning will continue as we move forward

Our journey so far



Year in numbers

1



call for ideas

129 people engaged

3



National Planning Improvement
Framework Guidance papers

5



Self assessment and improvement
action plans completed

23



presentations

2



staff recruited

10



peer collaborative reviews
completed

1



appearance to give evidence before
the Scottish Parliament's Local
Government, Housing and Planning
Committee

34



planning authorities engaged
with on NPIF

10



media articles and blogs

The role of National Planning Improvement (NPI)


The National Planning Improvement team are based within the Improvement Service and have three key functions: to monitor performance and provide advice, identify and share good practice and identify strategic challenges and broker action.

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 formalised how to measure and report on planning authorities' performance and support planning authorities to improve.

We aim to support the purpose of planning to “manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest” through ensuring that:

- The planning system enables the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.
- Planning services are equipped to work effectively and efficiently, embedding continuous improvement.
- Users are able to engage constructively with the planning system and planning service.



 **Video: What is the role of the National Planning Improvement team?**

Call for ideas

In October 2023 the National Planning Improvement Champion launched an open call for ideas asking stakeholders for their thoughts on what a high performing planning system should look like. Three questions were asked:

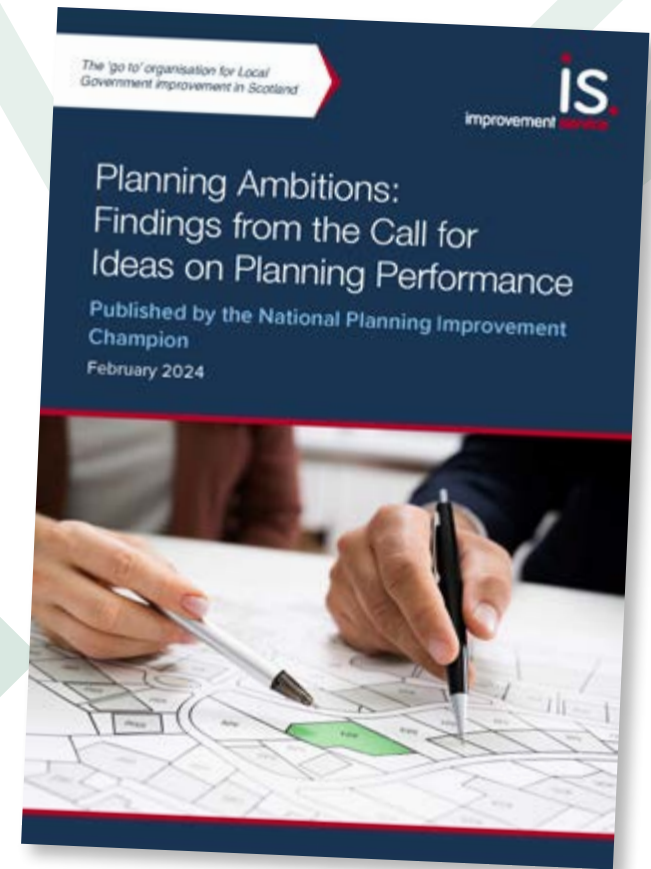
- What are the outcomes we need the planning system to deliver to have impact?
- What makes a high-performing planning authority?
- How can we measure this?

Alongside this an engagement programme took place with a series of one-to-one discussions with key stakeholders whilst 4 workshops were organised to enable a 'deep dive' into the questions outlined in the call for ideas. In total 129 organisations or individuals engaged in the discussion comprising a wide mix of interests in the planning system.

In February we published the findings, you can read the [full report](#) on our website.

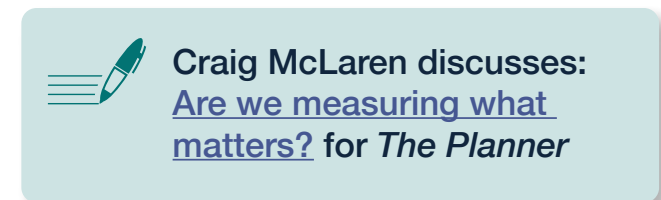
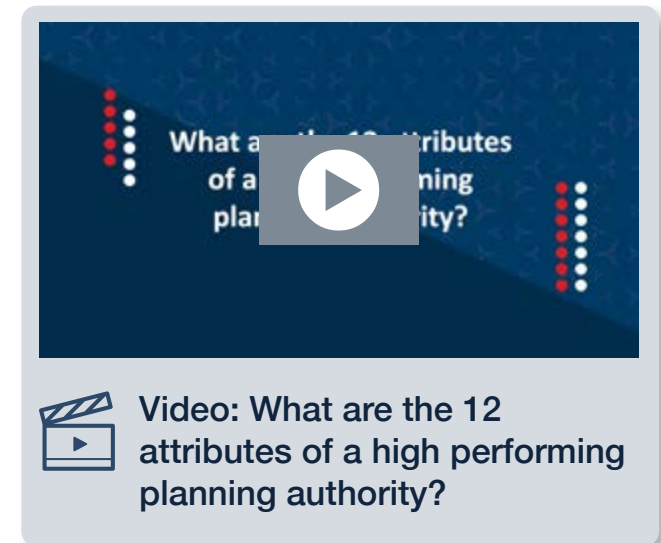
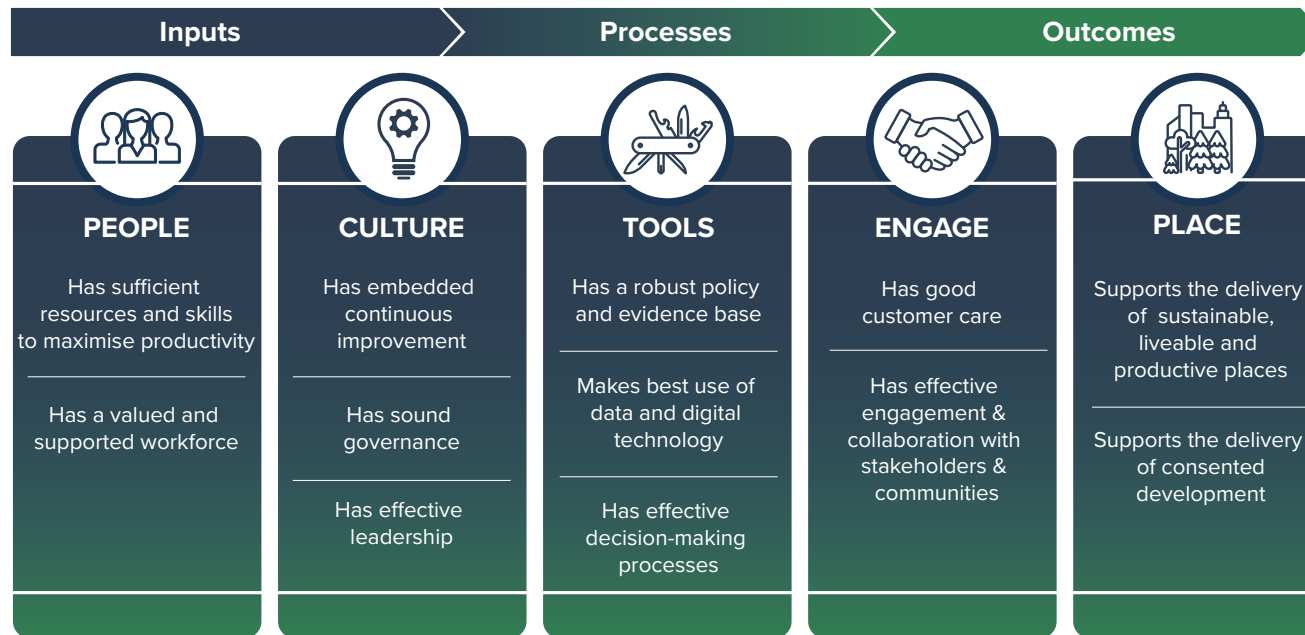


We also published a [blog](#) summarising the key findings.



12 attributes of a high-performing planning authority

The findings from the 'call for ideas' helped us to develop the '12 attributes of a high performing planning authority'. These form the basis of the National Planning Improvement Framework.



Our partners

Our work feeds into the Planning Performance High Level Group. The group aims to support improved planning performance and linking performance with planning fees.

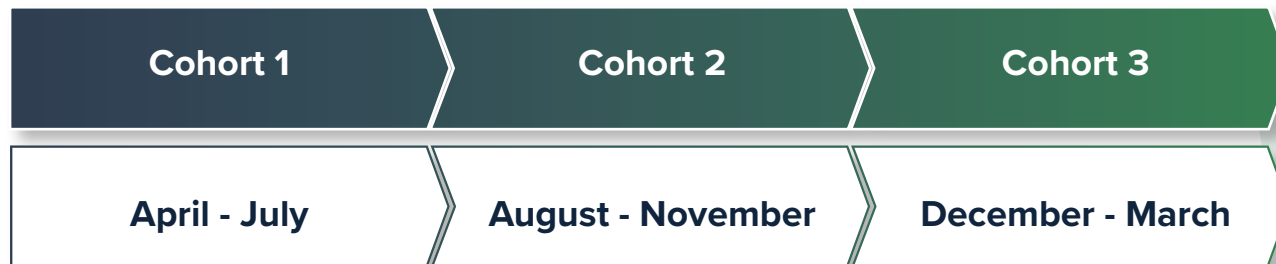
We have been working collaboratively throughout the last year with High Level Group to develop the new National Planning Improvement Framework.



National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) approach

One of the key tasks of the last year has been developing the new National Planning Improvement Framework. We are testing it incrementally in three separate cohorts throughout the 2024-25 financial year. All planning authorities are expected to be involved at some stage in the pilots to allow for feedback, adaptation and to ensure preparedness. The pilot aims to test the new framework, it's an opportunity to explore what works and what doesn't.

We proposed that the planning authorities have three months to complete, and we have one month of reflection after each cohort. The timescale of how long it will take to complete is one of the things we are looking for the planning authorities to test.



National Planning Improvement Framework

feedback

Throughout the pilot we have been looking for the planning authorities and others involved in the process to examine and provide feedback on:



Learning so far...

We are still gathering feedback from those who have participated in cohort 1 of the pilot. Feedback so far shows that:

The 3-month timescale was quite tight for some planning authorities. The final cohort 1 peer review is scheduled for the beginning of October. This has meant there has been some overlap in the cohorts.

Adjusting to the new process was challenging for the planning authorities, but many commented that it will be easier in future years now they understand the approach.

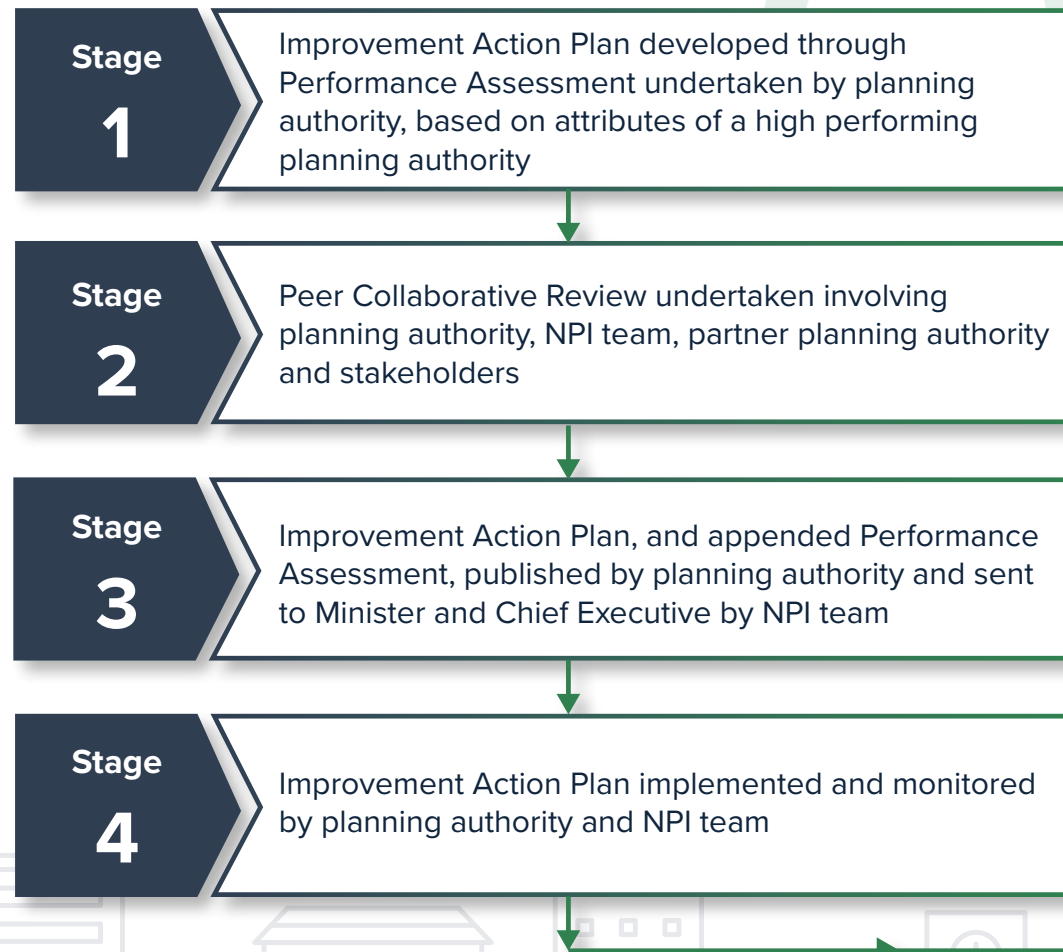
A few have mentioned that there have been more conversations between peer review partners than previously.

There has been a general agreement that the 12 attributes cover everything that makes a high performing planning authority.

Overall, everyone has found the peer review process valuable and a positive experience.

National Planning Improvement Framework process

The National Planning Improvement Framework is split up into four stages:



Cohort 1

Cohort 1 began in April 2024 and 10 planning authorities volunteered.

This [guidance for cohort 1](#) was sent to the planning authorities, and we also provided templates for them to fill out.

So far:

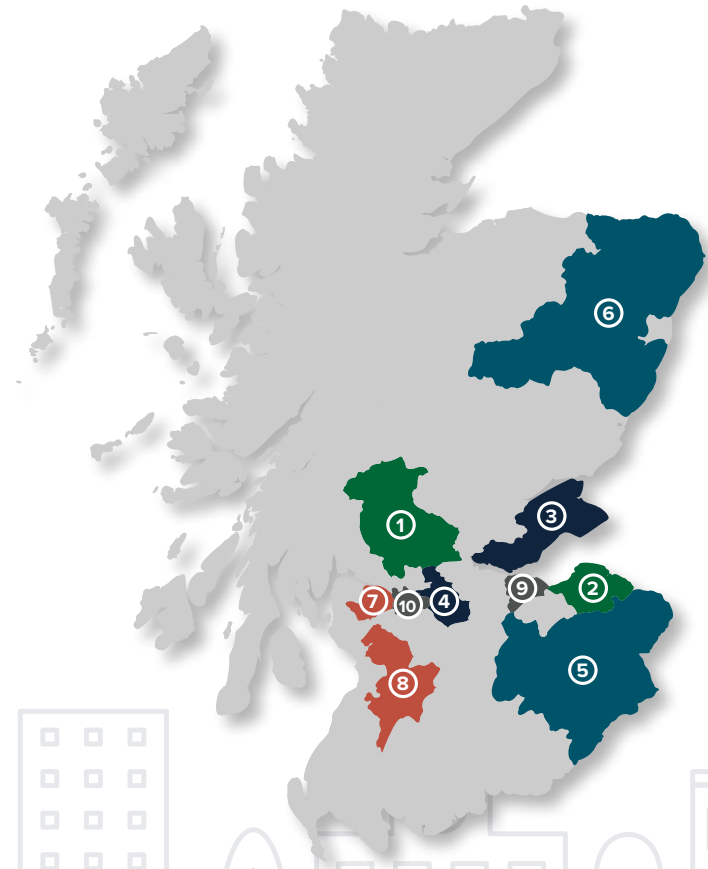
- **10 planning authorities completed their peer collaborative review process**
- **5 finalised improvement action plans**

Cohort 1 Planning Authorities and Pairings

- | | | |
|--------------------|---|---------------------|
| ① Stirling | ↔ | ② East Lothian |
| ③ Fife | ↔ | ④ North Lanarkshire |
| ⑤ Scottish Borders | ↔ | ⑥ Aberdeenshire |
| ⑦ Renfrewshire | ↔ | ⑧ East Ayrshire |
| ⑨ Edinburgh | ↔ | ⑩ Glasgow |



Susan Rintoul
reflects on Cohort 1
in this [blog](#)



Feedback so far from Cohort 1

"Fife Planning Authority were pleased to be part of the 1st cohort to undertake the new National Planning Improvement Framework. The assessment provided the Authority a structured assessment and review, with particular value from the Peer Review customer group to help shape the improvements that require to be actioned."

Pam Ewen, Head of Planning

"We welcome the introduction of the new Planning Improvement Framework and found participation in the pilot, including the peer review process, informative and worthwhile. Clearly there are a number of challenges for Planning at a local and national level and we look forward to continuing to work with you, and other colleagues and partners, to take forward improvements to the planning service, including those outlined in our Improvement Action Plan."

North Lanarkshire Council



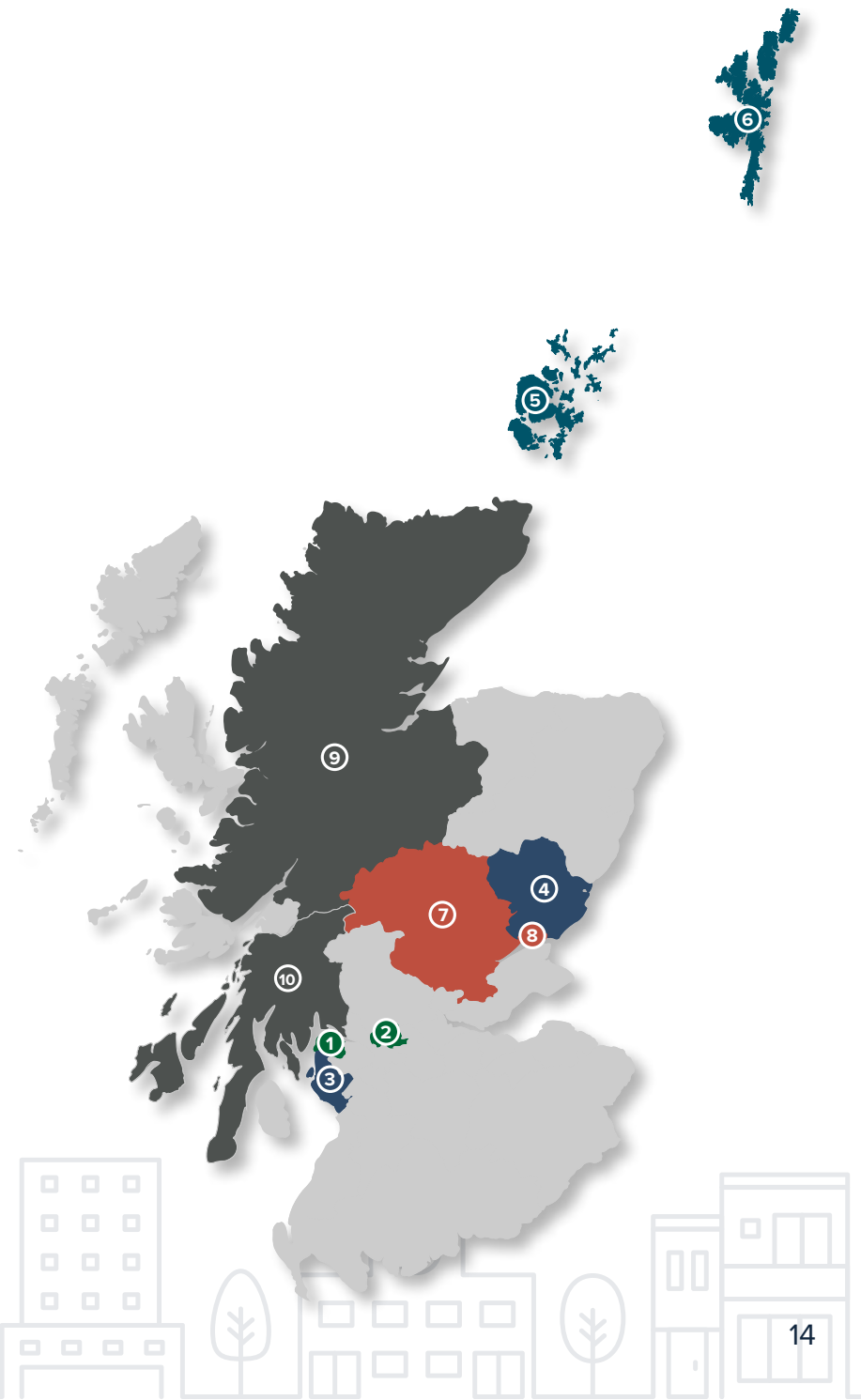
Cohort 2

Cohort 2 began in August 2024 and we have 10 planning authorities.

Following cohort 1 we updated the [guidance](#) from the feedback.

Cohort 2 Planning Authorities and Pairings

- | | | |
|---------------------|---|-----------------------|
| ① Inverclyde | ↔ | ② East Dunbartonshire |
| ③ North Ayrshire | ↔ | ④ Angus |
| ⑤ Orkney Islands | ↔ | ⑥ Shetland Islands |
| ⑦ Perth and Kinross | ↔ | ⑧ Dundee |
| ⑨ Highland | ↔ | ⑩ Argyll and Bute |



Peer review process

Stage 2 of the NPIF, the peer review process brings together key stakeholders to provide constructive feedback on the improvement action plan and self-assessment. This consists of a half day workshop.

So far peer reviews have taken place in Fife, North Lanarkshire, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stirling, East Lothian, Aberdeenshire, Renfrewshire, East Ayrshire and Scottish Borders.

We put together [guidance for facilitators](#) of the peer review.



Craig McLaren asks: [Are we marking time, or taking time, for collaboration?](#) in *The Planner*



Feedback on the peer review process

Following each peer review workshop we send out a survey to the participants to gather feedback on how they felt it went.

From the 41 participants who have responded so far, when asked ‘do you feel you were given the opportunity to contribute your thoughts on the Improvement Action Plan?’, everyone responded ‘yes’.

“The workshop was very open and honest and there was a collective will to try and improve the customer experience and an understanding on the other side around proportionality and issues facing the profession nationally. Very worthwhile format and discussion and hopefully we helped colleagues with actions to consider.”

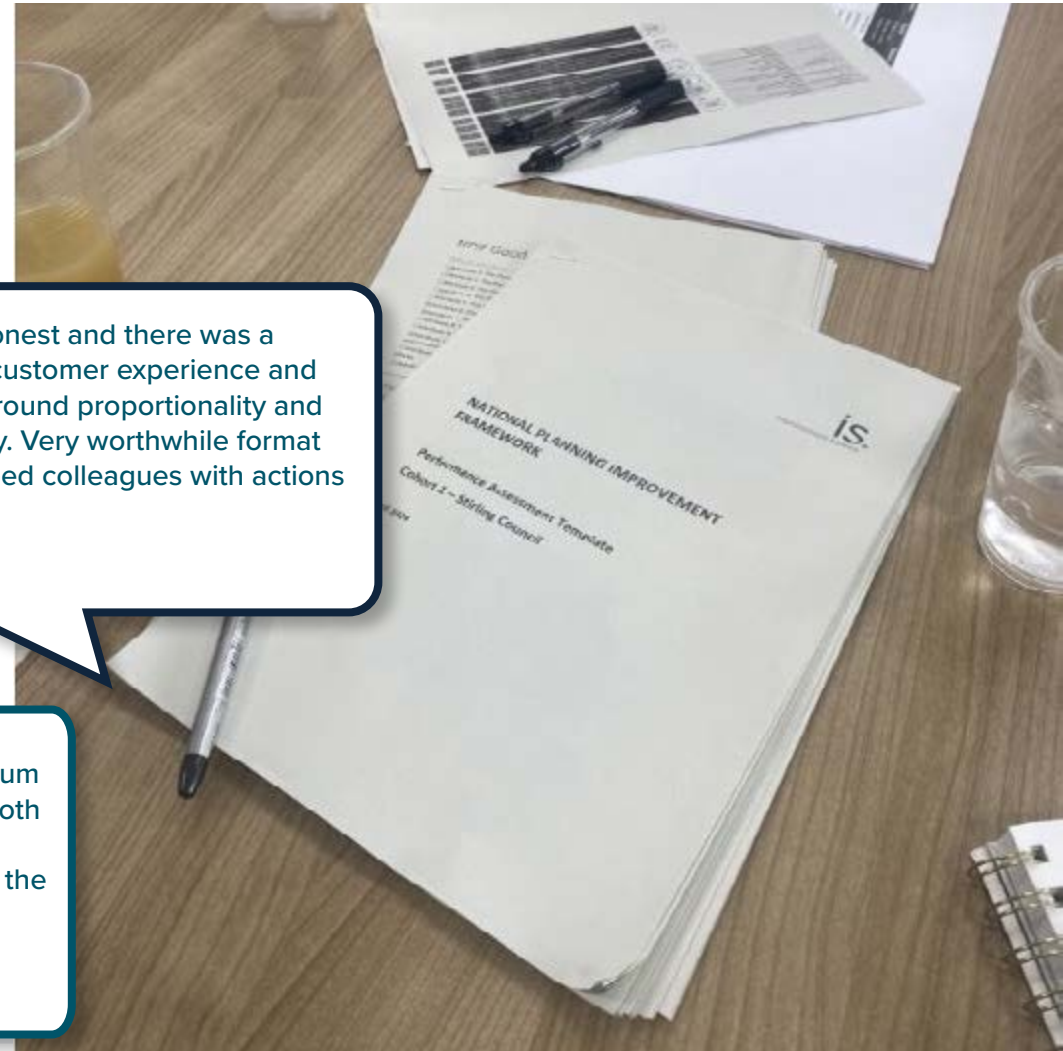
Edinburgh peer review participant

“The process for the workshop was clear and well structured with good facilitation and good opportunity to explore issues and contribute in a positive and collaborative way.”

East Lothian peer review participant

“A really good opportunity and open forum to collaborate and share experiences, both from those working with and within the Local Authority on how we can improve the service.”

Aberdeenshire peer review participant

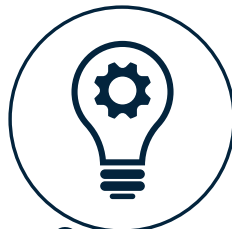


Emerging themes so far

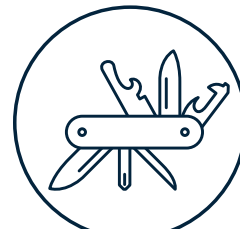
One of NPI's key roles is to identify strategic challenges facing planning authorities. The following pages set out the key themes that are emerging from the cohort 1 self-assessments and peer review process we've seen so far. Please note that these may adapt and change over the next two cohorts, and when we get the finalised cohort 1 reports, but in the meantime, we will be identifying best practice in these areas and starting conversations with stakeholders on how to improve. We have identified some initial actions for partners and outlined what the National Planning Improvement team will be taking forward.



People



Culture



Tools



Engage



Place



Emerging themes so far: people



Reduced resources available to planning authorities and their dependencies was a key issue identified through the self-assessments and in all the peer review workshops to date. Key challenges are:

- Recruitment has been difficult due to the national shortage of qualified planners.
- The loss of accredited planning courses has reduced the number of routes to attract people into the profession.
- Competition for planners across sectors has resulted in many leaving planning authorities for better paid jobs in other sectors.
- New policy and legislation has led to an influx of energy proposals and short term lets that has placed further demands on planning service resources.
- Most planning authorities have highlighted that they have a workforce strategy in place, focusing on retaining current staff as a priority.

All of the finalised improvement action plans have actions in relation to this issue, and the competition between authorities and sectors show that this is an issue nationally.

Skill gaps and the need for upskilling have also been raised as an issue. In particular, changes introduced through the Planning (Scotland) Act and NPF4 require new skills and expertise not always currently found in planning authorities. Specific examples highlighted include flooding, biodiversity and renewable energy technology such as battery energy storage. This comes at a time when planning authorities say they have limited resources to upskill or bring in specialist expertise.

Glasgow improvement action:



Implementation of resource business case to address immediate staffing challenges and support long-term growth and investment. This includes short to medium term measures in relation to recruitment, staff retention, training and upskilling not only in Planning but also in other council services that support the Planning function.

Edinburgh improvement action:







Prepare a People Plan specifically for the Planning Service. The People Plan will cover the following topics:

- Age profiles and succession planning
- Addressing the demands of National Planning Framework 4 (NPF)
- Developing leadership at all levels; Employment policies; Training; Mentoring programme
- Performance management
- Workforce planning; and Wellbeing.

The People Plan will include an objective for teams to visit projects, to come together as a group and to reflect on projects in terms of Place and Wellbeing Outcomes.

The People Plan will set out how the Planning Service intend to receive staff feedback on improvements and how staff will be consulted on and involved in delivering the improvement actions.

Actions

-  We recommend that Scottish Government, the RTPI and HOPS take a strategic approach to improve routes into the profession for graduates, young people, returners and those considering a change of career through supporting new planning courses, an apprenticeship and/or practice based pathway, building on the actions identified in the Future Planners report.
-  We recommend that members of the High Level Group on Planning Performance agree approaches to be taken to support an enhanced focus on developing planning skills and to support more people to take up planning as a career.
-  We recommend that Scottish Government, Heads of Planning Scotland, COSLA, other members of the High Level Group on Planning Performance and industry continue to engage in the development of the National Planning Improvement Hub to ensure it supports planning authorities to upskill and gain access to specialist expertise they need.
-  We recommend that, in undertaking its Education for Everyone review, the RTPI recognises and responds to the specific circumstances and demands of the planning profession in Scotland and the need to increase the number of people entering the profession. This should be embedded in the accreditation, design and delivery of planning degree courses, the outcomes education providers are expected to achieve, and approaches to widening accessibility to planning education and employment.

What we will do



NPI will work with Scottish Government, Heads of Planning Scotland, COSLA, other members of the High Level Group on Planning Performance and industry to further develop the National Planning Improvement Hub and make sure it is well placed to support planning authorities to upskill and gain access to specialist expertise they need.

NPI will undertake and publish an annual workforce survey to identify trends in numbers of, and demand for staff; demographics of the workforce; expertise strengths, gaps and demands; qualifications; and actions being undertaken to manage and develop the workforce.

NPI is happy to share with the RTPI any relevant evidence and intelligence we have gathered through our work that can help inform its Education for Everyone review.

Emerging themes so far: culture



The key issues identified so far have been:

Chief Planning Officers: The appointment and role of the Chief Planning Officer became a statutory requirement in April 2024. Many of the planning authorities in the performance self-assessments reflected on getting this role in place and monitoring its impact.

Schemes of delegation: A few planning authorities mentioned the need to update and/ or review their Scheme of Delegation.

Elected member training: Throughout the peer review workshops the importance of training for elected members has been discussed and the need for a consistent national approach.

Continuous Improvement: All planning authorities have voluntarily agreed to take part in the pilot of the National Planning Improvement Framework, over 3 cohorts. Lessons emerging from this are set out on page 10.

Actions

-  We recommend that Scottish Government prioritises the development of a model to enable statutory training for councillors who are involved in making planning decisions.
-  We recommend that Scottish Government develops a monitoring and evaluation framework to track progress and impact of statutory councillor training.
-  We recommend that the High Level Group on Planning Performance agrees how best to monitor progress made in appointing Chief Planning Officers and the impacts this is having for planning services and planning more broadly.

Fife improvement action:

Develop a suite of e-learning modules for local elected members.



What we will do



NPI will work with the High Level Group on Planning Performance to agree and implement the approach to be taken in years 2 and 3 of the National Planning Improvement Framework.

NPI will work with planning authorities to monitor and review the actions contained in the Improvement Actions Plans.

NPI will work with planning authorities to agree what support they need to implement their Improvement Action Plans.

NPI will discuss the issues emerging from the National Planning Improvement Framework with key stakeholders.

North Lanarkshire improvement action:



We will continue to look for opportunities to enhance our service delivery through sharing good practice, skills and knowledge with our partners and stakeholders.

Emerging themes so far: tools



A number of challenges have been highlighted through the performance assessments, improvement action plans and peer review workshops held:

Validation: Throughout the peer review workshops the need for consistency in what is required for the validation of planning applications and the information required to enable an application to be properly assessed was highlighted. This was discussed in the large majority of peer review workshops by planning authorities and applicants.

Digital and Data: The need to maximise digital solutions has come through the self-assessments and peer review process. The key challenges are:

The closure of the Planning Digital Programme at Scottish Government, has meant there is potential for a lack of coordination around digital and more pressure on planning authorities.

It has also led to a lack of understanding within some planning authorities of the

potential of digital approaches to support their business functions in the longer term. In particular there is a need to explore the use of AI and PowerBI and upskilling the workforce on the use of these tools.

Improvements are needed to the e-planning system nationally.

We have identified this as an area that planning authorities will need more support on.

East Lothian improvement action:



The Policy and Projects Team will seek to use an online platform that would allow wider access to the data from the Evidence Report and the next stages of the LDP.

Glasgow improvement action:



Improve planning application guidance documents to increase number of applications validated first time.

Actions



We recommend that the HOPS national guidance on validation is reviewed, and further promotion of the document takes place and that applicants take this into consideration in submitting planning applications



We recommend that industry bodies work with Scottish Government and HOPS to promote the revised validation guidance and the importance of providing the information required.



We recommend that the High Level Group on Planning Performance consider how to take a strategic approach that supports planning authorities to maximise digital approaches to their work.

What we will do



NPI will explore with members of the High Level Group on Planning Performance and others how best to build on the resources already developed by RTPi Scotland to support planning authorities 'raise their sights' on the potential of digital and data-based approaches that can help their business ambitions now and in the future.

NPI will work with colleagues on the Improvement Service Spatial Hub to further develop and promote the data contained on this and support planning authorities to use this.



Emerging themes so far: engagement



Throughout the peer review discussions, the topic of **communication and engagement** came up often. Some of the key points raised were:

- The need for better user experience and customer care where planning authorities engage more proactively.
- The potential of using digital communication tools to keep stakeholders and communities up to date and engaged with specific applications and planning authorities' broader work.
- The importance of communication with customers and stakeholders on what planning is trying to achieve, how the process works more widely, and the wider benefits planning can secure regarding climate, health and biodiversity. This links back to the resourcing issue and how we can promote planning as an attractive career.
- The value of planning authorities hosting developer and stakeholder forums.
- The new demands on planning authorities to engage with different groups, set out in the 2019 Planning Act and NPF4. Most planning authorities have set out community engagement as an area in need of improvement.

North Lanarkshire improvement action:



Looking at feedback given through peer collaborative review, we will engage further with applicants, consultees and community organisations to develop an engagement strategy that will help us ensure we can share information, advice and feedback in a way that is tailored to suit customer and stakeholder needs and expectations.

Edinburgh improvement action:



Carry out customer engagement via customer forums – exploring future strategies for engagement/communication/consultation with a range of stakeholders.



Actions:

-  We recommend that HOPS work with NPI to explore ways forward in the light of the national customer and stakeholder survey and explore how the National Planning Improvement Hub may be able to support this going forward.
-  We recommend that all members of the High Level Group on Planning Performance continue to promote what the positive benefits that effective planning can have for achieving net zero, economy and equality.
-  We recommend that Planning Aid Scotland continues to work with planning authorities in providing advice, guidance and support on approaches to community engagement across all aspects of the planning system.

What we will do



NPI will undertake a national customer and stakeholder survey, provide the planning authority with the results for their area and publish a national report on the broader trends.

NPI will use the National Planning Improvement Hub to explore approaches to communicating the value and benefit of effective planning.



Emerging themes so far: place



The points that have been identified so far are:

Measuring outcomes: The complexity of measuring outcomes in our places was highlighted in the 'call for ideas' and we recognise that this theme in the NPIF will develop over time.

In the pilot we asked if the planning authorities are aware of the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes and whether they are embedding them into decision making processes, and what tools they are currently using to measure outcomes. Overall, we felt that the planning authorities need more support in this area and there could have been further detail on:

- The approaches taken and tools used to deliver sustainable, liveable and productive places.

- The collaborative working approaches used and how planning is supporting biodiversity, community wealth building, 20 minute neighbourhoods, and climate ambitions.
- Further awareness raising of the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes and how to measure them using the indicators and to track progress over time.

The potential to use **Evidence Reports** to support new Local Development Plans embed a place-based approach was highlighted by some planning authorities.

Delivery has also been discussed with key issues being:

- The need to look at what proportionate approaches look like in terms of the number and depth of impact assessments, conditioning and delivering Section 75 agreements.

Fife improvement action:

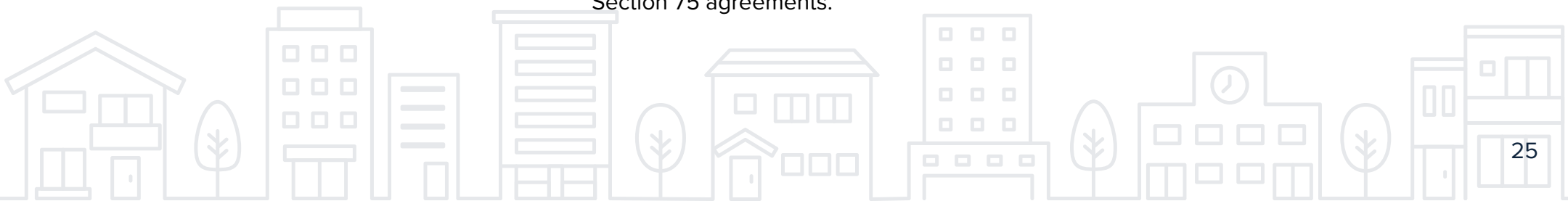


Delivery of training and project work relating to the identification of how the planning service will meet the Wellbeing and Sustainability objectives set out in NPF4.

East Lothian improvement action:



Explore using tools such as the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes for the Proposed LDP.



Actions

- ✓ We recommend that the Planning and place-based approaches cluster at the Improvement Service explore how to further share best practice at a national level on place-based approaches.
- ✓ We recommend that the learning and resources emerging from the Key Agencies Group Local Development Plan pilots, led by Architecture and Design Scotland, be promoted to encourage other planning authorities to adopt collaborative, place-based approaches to evidence gathering for LDP Evidence Reports.
- ✓ We recommend that Place and Wellbeing Collaborative group continue to develop and populate the indicators for the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes so as to provide an evidence base across Scotland.



What we will do

NPI will share resources developed through the Shaping Places for Wellbeing programme to support planning authorities to embed place-based approaches.

NPI will aim to further develop the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes and Indicators with the Place and Wellbeing Collaborative group.

NPI will continue to work with the Proportionality Short Life working group convened by the Chief Planner and explore what support can be given to advance this into practice.

NPI will explore the scope to develop risk-based approaches to development management including conditions.

NPI will work with industry and planning authorities to explore the skills and capacity needs on planning for housing delivery and onshore wind and possible support that can be offered through the National Planning Improvement Hub

NPI will support the roll out of work being undertaken by Heads of Planning Scotland on aligning planning consents and Section 75 templates.



National Planning Improvement Hub

In September 2024 the programme for government announced the Planning Hub. The National Planning Improvement Team will be hosting this.

The National Planning Improvement Hub will provide planning authorities with access to specialist expertise, to upskill their staff and to prepare their workforce for the future. Its initial priority will be to help planning authorities make quicker decisions on hydrogen planning applications, with a plan to extend the service offered by the Hub in 2025-26 to support wider development including for example, the delivery of more good quality homes and onshore wind.



News: [Improvement Service to host National Planning Improvement Hub](#)

FAQs: [National Planning Improvement Hub: FAQs](#)

Blog: [A new National Planning Improvement Hub](#)



National Planning Improvement Hub

The NPIH will provide planning authorities with access to specialist expertise, support upskilling and help prepare their workforce for the future. It fits well with our work with planning authorities helping them to assess their performance and identify the action they should take to improve.

The hub will comprise a small and agile team that will collaborate with others to deliver its work and to embed learning. They will provide expertise such as learning and project management, rather than drawing on Scotland's small pool of planning professionals.

The hub's work will focus on a number of streams. It will work with stakeholders to identify the pipeline for hydrogen projects,

gaining an understanding of the operational barriers to their delivery and agreeing the support required. It will:

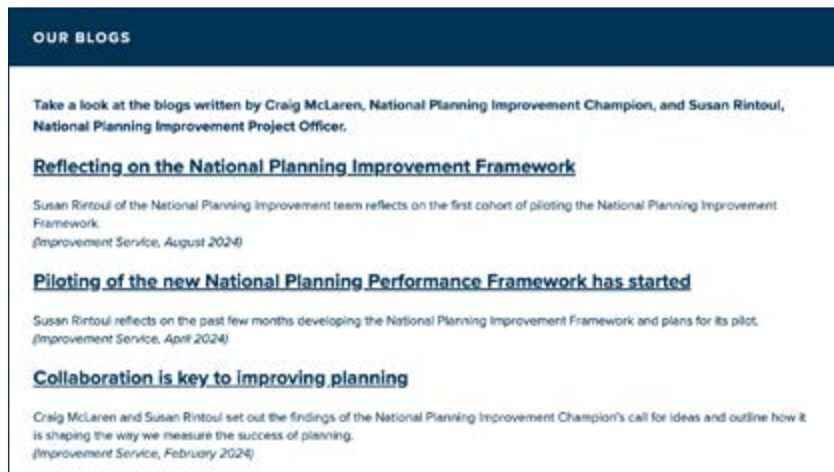
- support planning authorities to access the specialist skills and expertise that they need
- work with planning authorities to see what specialist expertise they have that could be shared with others
- support planning authorities to improve their understanding through action learning, learning resources and events and training modules
- undertake scoping, research and analysis to help provide a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by planning authorities.



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