



National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

Improvement Action Progress Update 2025 Orkney Islands Council



Orkney Islands NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

Foreword

Planning activity has continued apace throughout 2025 as we have engaged with a diverse range of major, national and EIA developments in addition to the steady stream of local developments across Orkney. We are a small team operating in a relatively small island community. However, the volume and complexity of the caseload that we manage exceeds this impression and maintains an exciting and challenging workload which we are proud to contribute. For example, the hosting of the International Island Games in the summer marked an increase in demand for a range of new sporting facilities. We have also seen progress with new care facility, town centre regeneration, aquaculture and wind energy developments; and made progress with multi-million projects associated with the £100M Islands Deal programme.

Notwithstanding this pressure, we have maintained good performance with application processing timescales and maintained an above the Scottish average rate for positive approval outcomes. On the policy side we have made excellent progress with our LDP review including progress with the Evidence and ongoing with engagement and the policy development phases of our Proposed Plan.

We have also played a leading role in collaborating with Housing Colleagues to deliver the Strategic Housing Investment Plan and working across Council services and with local industry to progress delivery of new houses in the context of the acute shortage and high demand across our communities.

We have made substantive progress on the delivery of the Orkney Regional Marine Plan which we are undertaking on behalf of Scottish Ministers. Once approved the Regional Marine Plan will provide a spatial and policy framework which will be relevant to a wide range of marine consenting and licencing authorities. We are also pleased that the collaboration between our Marine Planners and the Improvement Service to publish bespoke marine infrastructure data was outlined as a Key Achievement in the Improvement Service Annual Report 2024. This work allows members of the public and other organisations to find, access and use Orkney's marine data. This is first time this has been achieved through the Improvement Service.

We have been proud to acknowledge and where helpful support communities in progressing Local Place Plans; for which there has been high and growing interest across Orkney. This community led work is an exciting new method to contribute to our LDP development and delivery phases and we look forward to continuing to work with communities across Orkney to integrate Local Place Plans with our LDP into the future.

We have appreciated support from the Scottish Government Planning Hub to explore issues such as flood modelling and conservation and heritage skills development opportunities. We also welcomed the opportunity through the National Planning Skills Commitment Plan to



profile our five high performing early career planners working across Development Management, Development Planning, Rural Planning and Marine Planning specialisms.

For the first time in many years 2025 marked a year of near full establishment for the Planning Service and with a healthy profile of experienced and new talent within the Service we are confident of strong progress and team spirit in the coming years.

Finally, the beginning of 2025 marked the retirement of our long-standing Head of Service Roddy Mackay. Over many years Roddy made a strong and positive contribution to planning in Orkney and as a well-known member of the profession across Scotland. We wish Roddy well and will aim to continue his spirit of pride and positivity regarding the role that the planning profession can contribute to communities and quality of life in the years ahead.

Introduction

The National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) was piloted incrementally in three separate cohorts throughout the 2024/25 financial year. This was to test a new approach to measuring the performance of planning authorities. The pilot aimed to test the new framework, to explore what works and what doesn't. This resulted in each planning authority producing an improvement action plan and performance assessment.

Each improvement action plan sets out:

- What the planning authority has agreed as its priority activities
- Whether these have short-, medium- or long-term timescales
- The owner of the actions
- The resources needed

[Link to action plan for 2023/24.](#)

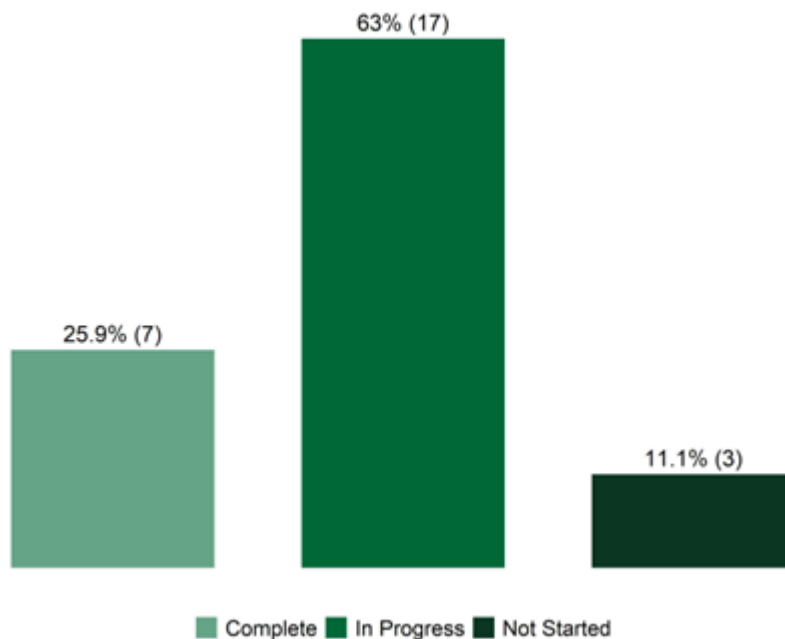
In year two of the NPIF the planning authorities are to update on their progress with the improvement actions. This report sets out the progress Orkney Islands has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.

Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

This section details each of the improvement actions and the progress the planning authority has made.



Orkney Islands has 27 improvement actions. The status of the actions after the first year of this 4 year programme is shown below:



Action 1: Investigate feasibility of charging for pre-application planning advice for larger scale development proposals in consultation with developers/agents (links with proposed action to provide tailored multi-disciplinary pre-application advice in Attribute 9 below)

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

We have investigated the feasibility of introducing charges for larger scale developments and concluded that the financial gain which may be achievable by this is outweighed by the risk of disturbing the productive relations we have built with local developers and agents regarding pre-application advice. This has taken many years to develop and it would be counterproductive at this time to risk turning applicants away with a charge. However, as an additional step we have recently established new monthly meetings with internal and external agents [those who manage multiple application caseload] which include advance notice of forthcoming work. This new approach to engagement will we expect further improve pre-application work.



Action 2: Continue to seek opportunities to establish a new post of Historic Environment Officer

In Progress

Progress against this action: We are currently engaging with HES regarding the establishment of a shared project and personnel resources linked to energy efficiency works to historic buildings. HES are keen to partner in piloting a shared resource in Orkney but collectively we lack funding.

The Orkney Fund Board have also identified Heritage and Conservation as within its priority areas for work over the next 10 years. It is hoped that this may include aspects which can support increasing resources towards this work moving forward.

The following next steps are proposed: Engagement with Planning Skills Hub regarding potential funding of joint HES-OIC project and also the Orkney Fund regarding conservation and heritage project work.

Action 3: Complete the Planning and Developer Guidelines setting out the key details and specifications required in respect of Roads and Engineering elements of planning applications

In Progress

Progress against this action: We have made initial start on scoping which has included input from Roads Authority colleagues. However, staff capacity to apply time to this has been more limited than hoped this year.

The following next steps are proposed: We now aim to commence work on brief Q4 Fy 2025-26 with a view to commissioning specialist work as required early Q1 FY 26-27. This will include exploring opportunities to integrate this work more closely with the LDP settlement statements which we intend to include more specific technical guidance.

Action 4: Explore and support measures to improve data collection, handling and analysis at a Council-wide level

In Progress

Progress against this action: Data collection for the LDP Evidence Base Report has highlighted challenges in accessing digital data across the Organisation in accessible formats. Gaps have also been identified in the consistency of use of data across Services in particular with Housing and also the level of adoption of the Gazetteer across the Organisation. However, close working with Housing colleagues has been hugely beneficial and improved our shared data handling for future. In addition, collaboration between OIC's Marine Planning team and the Improvement Service to publish bespoke marine infrastructure data was outlined as a Key Achievement in the Improvement Service Annual Report 2024. This



work allows members of the public and other organisations to find, access and use Orkney's marine data. This is first time this has been done through the Improvement Service. More generally, across the planning team there is good adoption of digital data inputs and information resources through the e-Planning system.

The following next steps are proposed: Engaging with Council Corporate Performance team to initiate a Corporate project on data management which will include particular focus on Gazetteer system as a system which is managed through PRS but has significant opportunity to develop as a corporate resource.

Action 5: Prepare a formal workforce strategy document as part of the NSI Workforce Plan detailing opportunities for staff training, development and progression, including exploring the scope for more competitive and proportionate career grades and salary levels

In Progress

Progress against this action: We have started to draft an updated workforce Plan which was prepared but not completed in 2022. This required substantial work to complete. However, the Council is currently working on review of workforce planning templates and processes. At present the PRS Service is in the positive position of full compliment and whilst we must ensure that this action is progressed, it is considered lower priority presently given this staffing position. It is therefore considered proportionate for us to time the next stage of this work with the corporate changes which is anticipated within the next year.

The following next steps are proposed: Target progression of work when new corporate templates/systems are established. Meantime, we will seek to stabilise current staff establishment across the Planning Service including making permanent currently temporary posts where possible.

Action 6: Ensure staff review and development engagement is undertaken in a timely manner

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Over the past year we have made significant progress in our Staff review process and by end of the year will be fully up to date. There is now a corporate team engaged to support managers in booking and recording outputs from annual reviews which should ensure this performance is sustained.



Action 7: Provide opportunities for new graduate planners to work in both Development Management and Development Planning functions

In Progress

Progress against this action: Initial engagement with staff indicates a lack of enthusiasm for this as staff are committed to their chosen specialisms within planning. However, this remains an important opportunity to provide broad experience of planning across the organisation so we are keen to continue to explore this further.

The following next steps are proposed: Establish 6 monthly joint DM-DMP planning team Practice sessions to share experience and stimulate cross team professional discussion and shared learning.

Action 8: Work with internal and external partners to tackle the impact of social/local media and online misinformation on staff health and well-being

In Progress

Progress against this action: Unfortunately, this remains a significant issue, not just for Planning but across the Council. To date there has been proactive work with our Communications colleagues to respond to press matters with provision of factual information and to challenge inaccurate reporting where this occurs and in this regard there has been some success. The impact on staff welfare has also been raised with the Corporate Director and Chief Executive who are supportive of beginning a more proactive approach to addressing these matters moving forward.

The following next steps are proposed: The Chief Planner will work with the OIC Communications team to develop a plan which will seek to build a more active profile for the HoS and the PRS services across local media. In addition, he is working with Human Resources team to hold a staff training event early in 2026 in conflict management which will include media relations content. The Chief Planner will also continue to actively represent and support Officers where and when any unacceptable media etc behaviours occur including engagement with the Council senior management team and with Elected Members as may be appropriate.

Action 9: Implement service improvement actions and the delivery of the National Planning Improvement Framework

In Progress

Progress against this action: This report presents evidence of progress made thus far which we consider to be strong progress in year 1 of the Plan.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to progress actions.



Action 10: Review Planning Scheme of Delegation, in particular, the level of delegation to officers to determine applications

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

We have agreed with Committee services that changes can be incorporated as part of a Corporate Review of the SoD which took place in November 25. This includes changes to the level of delegation to officers.

Action 11: Update Council Scheme of Delegation to reflect the statutory role of the Chief Planning Officer

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

We have agreed with Committee services that changes can be incorporated as part of a Corporate Review of the SoD which took place in November 25.

Action 12: Continue with training programme for Elected Members

In Progress

Progress against this action: Refresher training for all Elected Members in the role of a Planning Authority and the role of Members in the planning decision making process took place in October 2025.

The following next steps are proposed: Plan ahead for comprehensive in-house training of all Members for the start of the new Council in 2027 including specific training for LRB.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: Change to “Continue with training programme for Elected Members including specific training for Planning Committee and Local Review Body members” - to ensure clarity on the differing roles and governance.

Action 13: Appoint to and fully embed the role of Chief Planning Officer within OIC to ensure that the post-holder is fully involved in key strategic decision-making

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

New Head of Service permanently appointed with Chief Planning Officer established as core function in August 2025. During 2025 the Chief Planner has achieved increasing profile



across key corporate processes including invitation as a member the Council's capital programme board, Strategic Officers Oversight Team and assuming role as Local Review Body Planning Advisor.

Action 14: Implement electronic retention of records on the Uniform system

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

New contract in place which include engagement with the Data Governance officer to support contract scope.

Action 15: Implement the Idox Enterprise system to improve planning casework management

In Progress

Progress against this action: Good progress has been made with initial stages of implementation during summer 2025 which has included staff beginning to utilise new workload management systems.

The following next steps are proposed: Further commissioning of IDOX to deliver additional module development over the next few months.

Action 16: Investigate the implementation of digital solutions/technology to enhance delivery of the Planning service

In Progress

Progress against this action: Initial scoping meetings have been held with the Council's IT and Systems support teams regarding corporate use of the gazetteer system; and the implementation of Sharepoint.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to work with corporate systems team (who are to have additional staff resource availability over the next 12 months) to implement new digital systems. In addition, engage with the Improvement Service to participate in networking and experience sharing across Planning Authorities in order to learn of opportunities for improvement.



Action 17: Support work being undertaken by Heads of Planning Scotland to update national standards for the validation of planning applications in order to ensure consistency

In Progress

Progress against this action: Ongoing engagement with HoPS to support review as necessary/requested. Meantime have introduced revised process for validation – involving senior planners which will speed efficiency of process.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to implement the new senior planner-manager shared delegated structure for Validation.

Action 18: Review the process of checking planning applications to ensure it is carried out within five working days of receiving the application

In Progress

Progress against this action: As above, we have recently introduced new Enterprise Workflow Management system and a new approach to validation involving senior planners and Service Manager. These changes are having positive impact on performance which should continue to see improvement to timeframes. However, we will continue to face situations where applicants do not submit competent applications which require time to address.

The following next steps are proposed: Engagement with Planning Agents Forum (first meet October 25) to support improvements in application submissions.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: The 5 day target is considered unhelpful as we are not in complete control of this target where applicants submit poor quality applications. A revised target of 1 month from receipt is considered more achievable. Also to change the 5 day target to state “where a competent application is submitted”. So change to “Review the process of checking planning applications to ensure it is carried out within 1 month of receiving a competent application”

Action 19: Review legacy planning application cases to establish solutions that could enable speedier decision making

In Progress

Progress against this action: We have been engaging with Scottish Government Planning Hub regarding work required on flood modelling which may have impact on the future for legacy sites in central Kirkwall. The Planning Hub has provided funding which will support specialist flood modelling work which could unlock site potential within Central Kirkwall.



The following next steps are proposed: Complete Flood Modelling work with support from Planning Hub by March 2026. Include New action “Introduce new approach to managing establishment of legal agreements and bonded sums associated with decommissioning requirements for new developments, including review of legacy cases”.

Action 20: Review the process for local review cases in order to reduce the average timescales for determining reviews

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: We have not had the time to undertake this work this year given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: The Chief Planner and Solicitor to the Council are working on a programme which will seek to review the LRB structure, training and process for implementation after the next election in spring 2027.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: Change this action to “Undertake review of LRB structure, process and training in advance of the next Local Government Election.”

Action 21: Consider the provision of additional staffing resource to support the planning control function

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The Development Management Team is currently up to full strength for the first time in many years, which includes call off contract with external contractor for EIA process work. This contractor support model is considered fit for purpose to secure the necessary Enforcement resources for the present time and good progress is being made on backlog cases. We will continue to monitor performance with this new dynamic of a fully established team.

Action 22: Work with planning agents to improve validation rates

In Progress

Progress against this action: There is a growing number of professional agents working in Orkney with interest in increasing engagement with the Planning Authority. During this year we have established a new Agents Forum which is intended to grow a network and establish opportunity for shared learning and practice discussion. The first meeting of this group took place successfully in October 2025.



The following next steps are proposed: We have established an Agents Forum with the first meeting to take place in October 2025. Validation is expected to form part of the discussion at this group.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: include “relationship building” as part of the dialogue with Agents - in order to build a mutually respectful, professional relationships. Propose change this action to “Improve engagement and joint working with planning agents to include key process and practice briefing and training sessions”.

Action 23: Provide tailored in- person multi-disciplinary pre-application advice for larger scale development proposals (links with action to investigate feasibility of charging for this type of pre-application planning advice highlighted under Attribute 1 above)

In Progress

Progress against this action: Recently established a structured monthly engagement programme with the team progressing National Development project. This has proven helpful to improve communication and understanding of planning requirements. We have also established monthly meetings with larger design practices operating in Orkney which provide opportunity for project updates and exchange of information on a monthly basis. In addition, we have coordinated cross-council service meetings to discuss upcoming projects including those associated with the house build programme.

The following next steps are proposed: Maintain the monthly meetings with agents, internal council teams and establish dedicated progress meets for larger projects where appropriate. Particular focus expected in the coming years on the housing delivery programme – where we would intend to establish regular meetings with the main development agents and where appropriate Housing and property colleagues.

Action 24: Participate in the national customer survey and analyse the results to identify any improvement actions

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: We are relying on a partner or stakeholder to action this.

The following next steps are proposed: Await survey findings.



Action 25: Introduce a customer service survey measuring satisfaction with the pre-application planning advice service

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: Whilst we have a very active pre-application advice service (multiple pre-application advice issued a week) we have not as yet had the capacity to undertake a formal customer survey regarding this service.

The following next steps are proposed: We have a very open approach to pre-application advice which we do not charge and in general applicants are forthcoming at an early stage in projects. We have also established more structured approach to pre-application and application progress meetings with our National Developments and key agents. We will seek feedback from agents at as part of the Agents Forum as to whether they feel a more general survey would be helpful/add value during 2026.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: Possibly expand to more general customer satisfaction survey for all applicants which would be issued at the point of a decision in every case - rather than limited to pre-application advice. Will seek feedback at Agents Forum during 2026 and then possibly introduce this as a new action for the next NPIF update.

Action 26: Explore how to embed high-quality placemaking within Council decision-making and across the development industry, working collaboratively with developers/agents and drawing on national sources of support and guidance from the Scottish Government, Architecture & Design Scotland, Public Health Scotland and the Improvement Service

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Service has supported progress with a number of Local Place Plan initiatives which have proven popular with many of these being led by local community councils across Orkney. We have also engaged elected members in a design workshop as part of the LDP review process.

The following next steps are proposed: Place-making/masterplan will form core part of new LDP which will include specific work by the Service to establish outline masterplan/key development parameters for allocated sites in the Plan. We also have ongoing work with communities through Place Plans.



Action 27: Engage positively and work collaboratively with Housing Services to deliver adequate housing supply to meet local needs

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Development Planning Team has established a strong lead in regularly bringing together Housing, Property and other colleagues with a focus on delivering progress on housing delivery. We have also supported the preparation and delivery of the Strategic Housing Investment Plan. Regular meetings and engagement with Housing now embedded in team diaries.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue leadership in bringing together teams. This will include enhanced focus during 2026 to establish early dialogue and then ongoing communications with new Housing Delivery Partner Places for People in addition to other housing developer agents.



New Proposed Planning Improvement Actions

The table below details further improvement actions added.

Improvement action What action will you take? What will the outcome be?	Owner	Importance High Medium Low	Timescale Short term- 1 year Medium term – 3 year Long term 3+ year	Resources
Review Planning Service Letter templates to explore whether there are areas where we could lighten the language and improve accessibility to customers without impacting Regulatory requirements Outcome: Improved customer experience in engaging with formal planning processes Will know action is complete when: New letter templates in place and in use	Chief Planner	High	Medium	Staff time
Introduce new approach to managing establishment of legal agreements and bonded sums associated with decommissioning requirements for new developments, including review of legacy cases Outcome: Historic and future planning obligation requirements securely defined.	Chief Planner and Service Manager Development Management	Medium	Medium	Staff time and budget availability



Will know action is complete when: Legal agreements in place				
<p>Stabilise planning team staffing</p> <p>Outcome: Consolidate existing staffing structure which is supporting improved performance and delivery in line with demand.</p> <p>Will know action is complete when: Posts established as permanent posts across the team</p>	Chief Planner	High	Short	Self Financed Budge Pressure proposal (paid through fees)



Peer Collaborative Review Follow Up

As part of the pilot, each planning authority held a peer collaborative review workshop. This brought together key stakeholders and customers to discuss and provide constructive feedback on the improvement action plan.

Status of the peer review follow-up meeting: We are planning to organise a follow up meeting.

Additional information: Pending discussion with Improvement Service before the end of 2025

