



National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

# Improvement Action Progress Update

**Stirling Council**



# Stirling NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

## Foreword

Planning & Building Standards is overseen by the Head of Economic Development, Planning and Climate Change, with strategic support from Service Managers across Economic Development, Sustainable Development, Planning & Building Standards and Culture, Events and Tourism. This profile will specifically focus on the Planning & Building Standards function.

In relation to performance of processing planning applications, the planning team are in the top quartile for planning performance in Scotland. This is though counter acted by the cost of processing planning applications, which has increased over the last few years. The main reason for this increase has been down to the processing of large, complex applications such as major residential developments to the south of Stirling as well as applications in close proximity to historic assets, listed structures and battlefields. This takes more officer time and resources as well as external assistance to process these applications, therefore over the last few years this has meant an increase in costs overall in running the Planning Service.

The key challenges for Planning will be the increase in applications, purification of conditions and the monitoring of strategic development sites as these developments are implemented and delivered. This year, planning significantly over recovered in planning fees and these finances have been reinvested into the team by employing two new graduate officers for a temporary period of two years. The over recovery in fees is also going to be used in assisting the preparation of the next stage in the Local Development Plan, the Proposed Plan, where we will need assistance and support in various specialist assessments.

The preparation of the next Local Development Plan is a significant challenge over the next two years with the substantial amount of consultation and engagement required to ensure all views shape and inform the next local development plan. There will also require to be significant work to get the appropriate Spatial Strategy and Vision for the area as well as the right sites in the right locations. The Team is up to full complement, however, given the specialist nature of some areas of plan preparation, we will need external expertise to assist in plan preparation. The over recovery of fees from planning applications will assist in reinvesting in this area.

Enforcement of Planning is another area where there are challenges in keeping on top of the workload and demand. Stirling currently have two Enforcement Officers and a compliance officer, who aim to ensure the legislation and regulations are complied with and regulated in the long-term interest.

Our admin staff, known as the Gateway Team, is also fundamental to our efficiency and effectiveness in processing Planning and Building Standards activities. The current staff assist from beginning to the end of the process as well as assisting in the processing of correspondence, general enquiries and other checks and balances for the overall team.

To ensure efficient and effective processes and procedures for the Planning Service, a range of technologies are being considered to increase productivity as well providing checks and



balances in processes. The proposed transformation aims to address current challenges and improve service delivery over the next 12 months. Key areas of focus include:

### Digital Transformation

Exploring AI process and techniques to assist with procedural tasks such as the validation of planning applications. A framework set out from legislation can be created to which applications would filter through and correspondence immediately generated to the applicant/agent. This would deliver greater productivity improvements in relation to timescales, as well as allow for a reduction in the overall admin staff numbers, increase checks in the system which will lead to a consistent and proportionate response on all applications, along with ensuring less errors in processes.

It is also proposed to invest in new IT equipment to assist Planning staff with enforcement onsite. This will create a quicker, more responsive, accurate process to assist with any future legal processes.

AI or similar IT applications are also being explored for Planning frequently asked questions. A Chatbot application can be used with pre-programmed knowledge to provide quick, accurate responses. This would allow more time for the Duty Officers in both Planning & Building Standards to deal with the more complex and challenging queries.

AI or similar IT applications are also being explored for consultation reply summaries for the LDP at the Proposed Plan stage. This takes officers an incredible amount of time and can lead to delays in the overall presentation of the information. As well as a savings in time this would also allow for a consistent approach to the summaries.

## 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 Stirling has made, detailing any

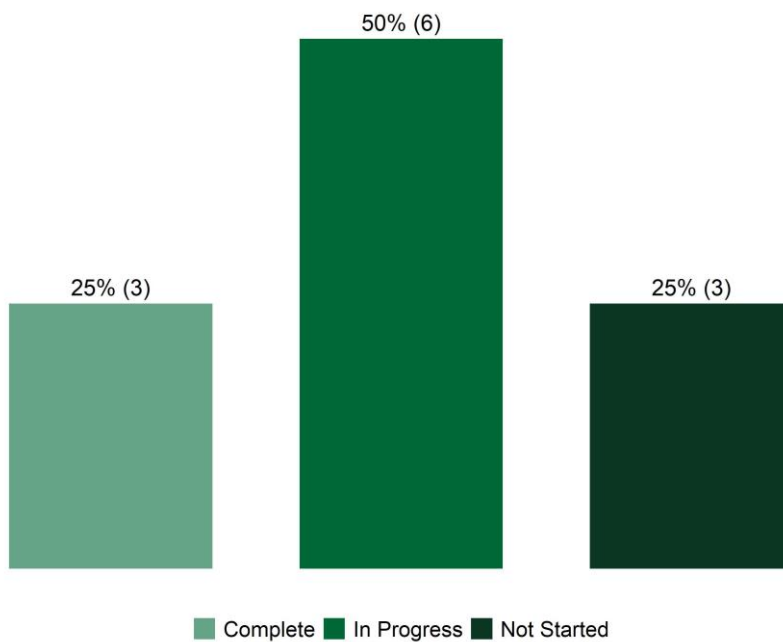


updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.

## Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

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

**Stirling has 12 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:**



**Action 1: Develop an ongoing Workforce Strategy and Training Plan, reviewed annual as the PGD cycle completed to support service and individual officer needs, both in terms of resources and skills. Action will include, but is not limited to: A review of application numbers/types to assess general trends and evidence base for staffing and skill levels require for service operation; A review of skill gaps (arising from PGD reviews) and opportunities suggested by officers; Using the evidence above to inform the training plan and how best the skill gaps can be filled, e.g. training or additional resource; A review of working arrangements in the service to ensure there is flexibility to meet demand across both DM and DP; and Consideration of a clear progression route from Graduate to Officer and support through the RTPi APC process**

### **Complete**

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Stirling Council Planning have work together with Human Resources and Finance colleagues to create a workforce strategy to ensure that the right staff are in the right positions in the right structure. In preparing this strategy we looked at where the areas of pressure were concentrated, the skills and experience in the team and then the structure of both Development Management and Development Planning Teams. All current temporary staff were made permanent to ensure certainty for all current staff. Two new graduate planners were recruited, on a temporary contract, as this was based on the potential income from planning fees over the next few years and the potential workload of the team, which is uncertain and therefore needs to continually be monitored. All of the structural changes were financed by the over recovery of fees from planning submissions.

Given the over recovery in planning fees, Planning worked with Finance colleagues to provide a sustainable structure which also considered the overall budget position of Stirling Council. This approach has been backed by our elected members and senior management to ensure that the performance in both the Local Development Plan and the processing of planning applications continues to progress well.

The implementation of the workforce strategy and new sustainable structure has also allowed flexibility in both Development Management and Development Planning Teams. For example, the compliance officer role in Development Management, although very important, has allowed for this officer to be involved in the processing of planning



applications when there is an increase in applications received, as well as assisting in progressing the Masterplan Consent Area programme for the large residential site at Durieshill, south of Stirling, along with assisting in the validation of Local Place Plans. This is allowing staff to gain a range of skills, have a varying workload, as well as assist in areas where there is high demand at particular periods of the year.

The new sustainable team structure has also allowed progression of staff through the team structure, which has already seen two planning graduates progress to planning officers, with one officer successfully gaining their APC and the other new planner preparing to submit to the APC process.

As the year progresses, this flexible structure will allow others to get involved in work within both the Development Planning and Development Management Teams to ensure that we have more rounded planners that have gained skills and knowledge from both sides of Development Management and Development Planning.

## **Action 2: Complete review of Scheme of Delegation**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action:

Planning has been working alongside our Legal colleagues to review of the current Scheme of Delegation to allow some of the larger sites which have gained Planning Permission in Principle to progress through the system more quickly. The revised scheme of delegation is to allow detailed MSC and Section 42 applications to be determined by an officer. This will improve the speed of decisions, as they would not require to go to the Planning & Regulatory Panel, as well as allowing more certainty for developers on these sites. This also allows a more straightforward report for planning officers to prepare and prevents the long lead in times for preparation of the reports to the Planning & Regulatory Panel.

Planning and Legal have discussed the new draft Scheme of Delegation with elected members. However, Stirling Council have recently undergone a change in administration and both Planning and Legal will now take the new administration through the proposals to ensure that they are comfortable with the proposed changes.

The review of the Scheme of Delegation has also enabled Planning to consider the Masterplan Consent Areas process and how this can be embedded into the Scheme of Delegation. Again, this will ensure certainty in the governance of any Masterplan Consent Area.

The following next steps are proposed: After presenting the updated draft Scheme of Delegation, officers will need to discuss these changes with the Chief Executive.



## **Action 3: Update service improvement plan with operational updates once NPIF process is complete to ensure that working practices are aligned with best practice and learning from other authorities. This could include further sessions with our Cohort partner and neighbouring authorities**

### **Complete**

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The preparation of the NPIF was an excellent base and framework for updating Planning's Service Improvement Plan (SIP) at Stirling Council with early consideration of the planning team requirements and what actions were required to be implemented into the day to day operation of the service.

Planning was also nominated as the first team in Stirling Council to go through the Public Service Improvement Framework (PSIF). Both the preparation of the NPIF and SIP meant that Planning was ideally prepared to be considered as the first team to go through the PSIF programme.

The advantage of the NPIF process when considered against the previous Planning Performance Framework process is that the NPIF steps involves good, constructive consultation and engagement with our peers, our communities as well as other key stakeholders early, as well as throughout the process. This added a huge amount of value to the actions contained within the delivery programme for both the SIP and the PSIF, which meant the Stirling Council Planning were more responsive to the needs of those involved and interested in the planning process. It highlighted the shortcomings as well as where Planning was doing things well and allowed the team and management to focus on these particular areas.

This annual review of the NPIF actions, also assists in the review of the delivery plan for the upcoming SIP and allows Stirling Council Planning to consider the actions achieved, those that are ongoing as well as those still to commence, along with the consideration of new actions.

## **Action 4: Complete digital end to end processing of LRB process**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action:

The requirement to consider this process was down to a recognised failing in the previous system which was reliant on one member of staff to manually process all LRB applications.



This single point of failure became apparent when there were budget savings and posts were lost, including this post.

In considering the LRB process, Planning worked alongside Governance colleagues as well as the Planning admin staff to produce a flow chart and process map of the steps in the LRB process from beginning to end and then consider what systems were already in place to assist with this process and ensure that there are no points of failure and that staff are trained on the system and where there are changes in any staff, that this could be picked up by other member of staff given the production of flow charts and process maps. Legal colleagues helped enormously with ensuring all processes, procedures and steps were considered and there were no gaps in the process.

Good progress has been made on this new end to end LRB process with only small number of admin tasks that require to be completed to ensure the system is fit for purpose.

The following next steps are proposed: Implement the final admin tasks.

## **Action 5: Investigate opportunities to improve digital engagement on general planning issues to ensure that the service is utilising emerging digital technologies effectively to aid the decision making process**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action:

Place profiles for areas across Stirling have been produced in collaboration by both Planning and GIS staff, with huge assistance and input from every team in Stirling Council. Place profiles were considered a good way to pull a summary of all of the data, information and facts that were informing the LDP Evidence Report. Story Maps were used to distil and present all of this data in an easy read and accessible format in order to share with all other Stirling Council Teams and our communities.

Using the themes from National Planning Framework 4, the Planning Team collated the information relevant to each place in the Stirling area and put them into themed story maps. This meant that communities preparing Local Place Plans could use the evidence, data and information that the Planning Team were using to produce the next LDP for their purposes of preparing their Local Place Plans.

Therefore, not only were the Place Profiles once source of the truth, it also allowed all information captured by the Council to be produced in an open and transparent manner. This allowed communities to access this information very easily and for them not to have to approach several services/teams to obtain information.

Information and training sessions were undertaken by both the Planning and Communities Teams in Stirling Council to show how this information could be easily accessed. As well as this, staff from the GIS team demonstrated how the public online mapping system could be



used to extract more information and maps for an individual area to feed into Local Place Plans or funding applications, etc.

Following the submission of the Local Place Plans to Stirling Council, a Showcasing Event is being organised early in 2026 for local communities to present their Local Place Plans and Action Plans to the Chief Executive, Senior Management and all Elected Members, so that the actions contained in LPP can be considered when producing budgets and service plans for the year ahead.

The following next steps are proposed: How AI could further enhance digital engagement and accessibility with our communities.

## **Action 6: To support the Councils Information Governance team in the preparation of an Information Strategy**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

Planning is currently working alongside colleagues in Governance to try and better co-ordinate FOIs/EIRs/complaints, etc, to ensure that there is a continual focus on better customer care and service. The aim is to try and shorten the time taken to respond and to flag any issues early with some of the information requests.

The processes that are being considered will be documented alongside a strategy and service standards.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to work alongside Governance to progress this strategy.

## **Action 7: Consider the need for a customer service satisfaction survey alongside the proposed national customer and stakeholder survey to be undertaken by the NPI team**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

Stirling Council is currently working with other partners to consider the pros and cons of the feedback from a stakeholder survey.

Feedback is recognised as being extremely important to understand the needs of our customers, improving service delivery, building trust and confidence in the system, with an aim of increasing satisfaction in the service.

Planning have been working with Building Standards to get an understanding of the feedback from the stakeholder survey that they undertake. Building Standards have



reported that the amount of feedback received over the last 5 years has dramatically decreased and the feedback that is received from stakeholders and customers is mainly emotionally, particularly when they have not received the outcome that they expected, which can be challenging to navigate.

Stirling Council have also been benchmarking with other Councils on this to understand lessons learnt in stakeholder surveys.

The following next steps are proposed: Stirling Council are going to hold off implementing this action and await the outcome of the national survey that is being carried out by the Improvement Service and then make a decision on whether to proceed or not with this Action.

## **Action 8: Organise an Agents and Architects Forum and seek feedback as to how best to engage with them going forward, and the frequency of such events/communications**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action:

Planning & Building Standards have set up monthly meetings with local agents/architects to provide updates from Stirling Council and to hear feedback on processes and procedures, updates on any actions discussed at meetings, hear positive and negative comments on recent experiences, as well as discussing consistency in the approach from both teams.

In preparing the next Local Development Plan, we have also been organising events online and in person with stakeholders to take them through the stages/milestones of the Local Development.

The following next steps are proposed: Continuation of good consultation and engagement at the appropriate stages in the LDP process and to widen the architects/agent meetings out to more local stakeholders.

## **Action 9: In tandem with the above actions, develop a communications strategy for the service**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action:

A communications strategy is already in place for the Local Development Plan. Planning meet with the Comms Team on a regular basis to ensure comms are going out on all social media platforms when appropriate, as well as ensuring that there are adequate briefings for senior management and elected members on the Local Development Plan.

The Development Management Team are currently working alongside the Comms Team to work up a strategy for when large and/or complex planning applications are submitted, as



well as applications which are likely to be of interest to the public, along with those applications that are to be presented to the Planning and Regulatory Panel. The Comms Team are keen to get out messages to promote the positive outcomes of planning along with good news stories to balance some of the negativity associated with development which can be reported in social media.

The Council's Comms Team are also working with developer's comms team on large sites in the Stirling area to ensure that important information such as road closures/diversions, service installations, particular activities and milestone on development sites are shared by the Council along with links to contacts for the relevant developers.

The following next steps are proposed: The process and procedures that we are setting out will be moulded into a communication strategy in due course.

## **Action 10: To issue a planning newsletter more frequently during the Proposed LDP stage**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action:

Frequent communication with stakeholders has happened at each stage of LDP process. An officer/elected members forum was set up and meets every two months to update senior officers and elected members on the LDP. The forum is used as a sounding board for up and coming ideas on communication, consultation and engagement. It was an action from the LDP Forum to issue a planning newsletter more frequently and we have sought views/feedback from elected members on how to get the planning newsletter out to a wider audience.

Elected members have also volunteered to issue the planning newsletter with their own councillor newsletter and to give out the newsletter at their surgeries.

Given the frequency of these forums, Planning also use the forum meetings as training sessions for elected members, to ensure that when the LDP Evidence Report and Proposed Plan is presented to full Council that they have a good understanding of all issues and significant matters related to the LDP.

There is also frequent contact with elected members on planning applications and enforcement matters. The Chief Planning Officer is the single point of contact for all planning matters which allows a good understanding of issues arising and potential areas where elected members may need some more guidance and training. This continual contact and updates also assist elected members when they are talking to their constituents on planning related matters.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to ensure enhanced accessibility for all stakeholders and to work with others to get a wider reach on planning related matters.



## **Action 11: Implement recording of added value on applications to reach, or exceed, policy/guidance requirements to create an evidence base to assess performance against place and wellbeing outcomes. This evidence base will then inform a monitoring and evaluation process to ensure these are being effectively embedded into decision making and review processes**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time to implement this action given the other priorities that we have focused on through this period.

Stirling Council already outline in Reports of Handling where planners have asked for alterations and/or enhancements to proposals, in order to inform the reader, and those that made relevant representations, of where changes have been made to ensure good placemaking in planning. Although these changes are documented in reports, this information is not recorded in any way to show how many applications are changed and what difference that has made to the outcome of the decision. This information would be really useful to add to Stirling Council's Annual Report where many of the good news stories are presented, it would also be good to outline this to our stakeholders through the Architects/Agents Forum and the Planning Newsletter.

The following next steps are proposed: We will work with other Council's to see how best to record this information.

## **Action 12: Complete the review of the standard conditions to ensure that conditions are legally adequate and that all conditions are proportionate and risk based.**

### **Complete**

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Planning and Legal worked together with our internal consultees such as Roads and Environmental Health on appropriate/relevant consultation comments and associated conditions/informatives that can be applied to the consultation responses. This discussion provided education and guidance on the remit of planning as well as the legality and enforcement of conditions when considering planning proposals. A standard set of conditions related to both Roads and Environmental Health have been prepared alongside a set of informative guidance. Now our internal consultees simply need to choose from the list of conditions that apply. This not only provides legal conditions, it also saves on resources



and time for the consultees as well as having more accuracy and consistency in conditions for planning decisions.

There has been early feedback from the Agents/Architects Forum that they are delighted with this approach and consider that this will provide more certainty and a better understanding for them and their clients.

Given the success of this process, Planning and Legal are currently looking at all other conditions to apply a consistent and legal approach to all conditions used by Stirling Council.



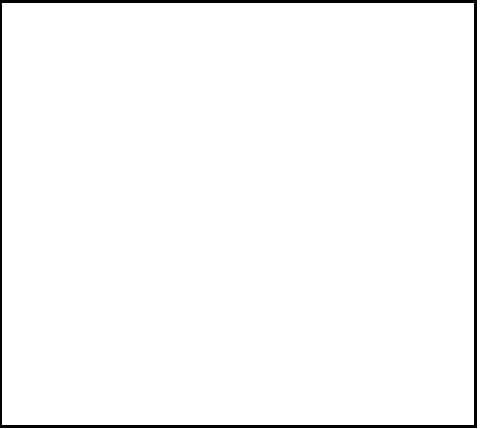
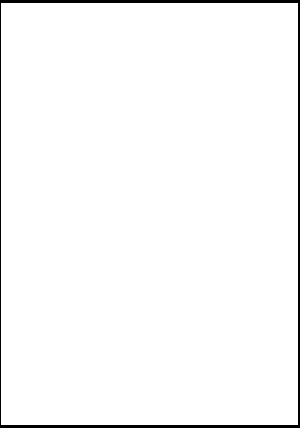
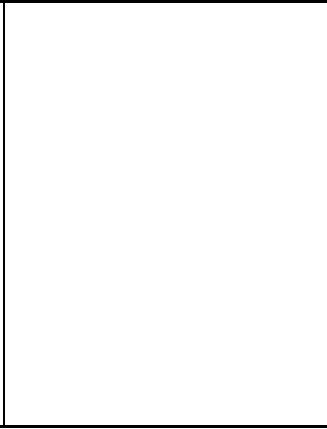
# New Proposed Planning Improvement Actions

The table below details further improvement actions added.

<b>Improvement action</b> What action will you take? What will the outcome be?	<b>Owner</b>	<b>Importance</b> High Medium Low	<b>Timescale</b> Short term- 1 year Medium term – 3 year Long term 3+ year	<b>Resources</b>
Action 13: With the aim of producing a place-based visual LDP, which is more accessible to a range of stakeholders, there will a focus on upskilling the majority of Development Planning staff within Planning to enable the production of the next LDP in 2026.	Mark Laird	High	Short Term	Working with the Improvement Service on resources as well as use the resources we have from the over recovery of fees.
Action 14: In considering Planning’s role in assisting with the Housing Emergency, looking for innovative ways to encourage a range and choice of homes across the Stirling	Sharon Marklow	High	Short to medium term	Use existing resources in the team



Area including implementing Masterplan Consent Areas to encourage flexibility on residential sites, encouraging a more relaxed approach to housing in the rural areas and countryside and considering free pre-applications discussion for residential developments over the next two years.



# 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 already held a peer collaborative follow-up meeting.

The peer review collaborative follow-up meeting was held on: 2025-09-16. The following organisations/groups/individuals were invited: East Lothian Council

