

THINK PIECE

Peer Collaborative Review in Planning Improvement

Reflections on the peer collaborative review workshops from the first 10 planning authorities to go through the process.

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Think Piece series

With the National Planning Improvement team focusing on improvement, it is important for us to reflect on our own learning and learning from others. This is the first in what will be a series of ‘think pieces’, where we will be sharing reflections on the work of the team.

We will also be sharing other documents:

- Our annual report
- Insights papers: these will focus on research, scope and analysis
- Guidance: to provide support
- As well as blogs and case studies to share best practice.

We will use the IS website and newsletter to publicise and provide access to the think pieces.

Introduction

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 sets out that planning authorities must prepare a report on the performance of their functions which is to be submitted to ministers and published. It also introduced the role of the National Planning Improvement Champion.

This led to the development of the National Planning Improvement team. Over 2024/25 we have been piloting a new approach to monitoring performance through the National Planning Improvement Framework. This is where planning authorities are to undertake a self-assessment of their performance and develop an improvement action plan.

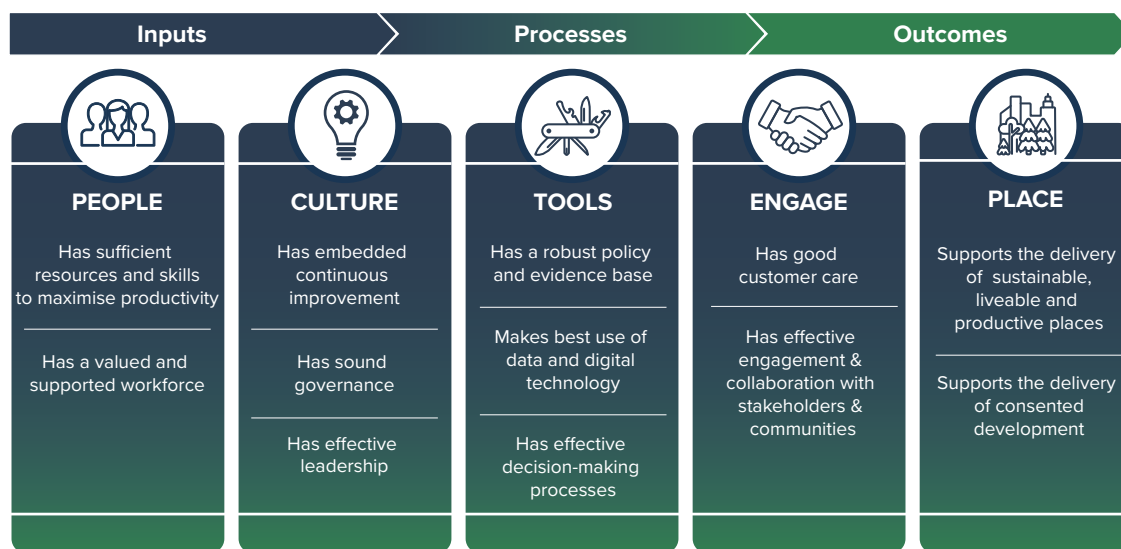
When designing the new National Planning Improvement Framework, the need for more collaboration was a key message that emerged from across all sectors, organisations and disciplines we engaged with.

This led us to incorporate a peer collaborative review process into the new process. With 10 planning authorities now completed the process, this think piece shares what the peer collaborative review involves, the approach taken, the feedback we have received from participants in the process, our reflections and the impact the process has made.



What is a peer collaborative review?

The peer collaborative review is a workshop which allows for constructive discussion on what improvement actions the planning authority should put in place. The conversation is based around the assessment they have undertaken of how they feel they are performing against the [12 attributes of a high performing planning authority](#).



It is a chance to support one another in addressing common issues across the sector and improving overall performance. It brings together a range of stakeholders, users, and customers of the planning authority to share their insights.

This process was a new untested approach. The meetings were not to be used to discuss individual planning applications or development plan policies. The workshops were to be forward looking, allowing participants to contribute ideas and solutions that support the planning authority to improve. It was encouraged that where there were criticisms, a solution should be discussed. It was not for the planning authority to 'defend' its Improvement Action Plan but to provide the reasoning behind the actions, listen to the feedback and discuss ways forward.

After the workshop, the planning authority takes away all the comments and makes any adjustments to their improvement action plan. This results in a document that has been 'tested' with users and stakeholders.

Approach taken

In our [guidance note](#) to the planning authorities, we set out the key principles of the approach, who should be invited, and the different roles and responsibilities of those involved. We wanted to empower the planning authorities to have ownership of their peer collaborative review. Our guidance aims to steer them in the right direction but not dictate how the workshops were to be run. Our role as NPI is to provide guidance on how the peer review process should work, attend the workshop to provide our advice on the draft improvement action plan and performance assessment and work collaboratively with the planning authority to identify areas of improvement.

The sessions were to be supportive, robust and provide constructive challenge. The tone was therefore really important, emphasising the need for constructive engagement and focusing on providing solutions and problem solving.

Participants

In the guidance we made suggestions about who should be invited but left it up to the planning authority to decide. Those invited were chosen to provide a particular perspective on how to support the planning authority to improve, based on their experience and knowledge, providing the role of a critical friend.

Each of the planning authorities were paired up with a peer authority. This allowed them to advise and learn from each other.

Each session has had a good representation, including local authority staff, key agencies, developers, elected members, community representatives, local agents and architects, and the National Planning Improvement team.

Facilitators

The planning authority decided who should facilitate the session. All we asked was that they weren't part of the planning authority and were 'content neutral'. Of the 10 that have taken place so far, we've had planning consultants, ourselves in the National Planning Improvement team and other local authority internal staff facilitate the sessions.

A [guidance note](#) was put together for the facilitators.

Agenda

In the guidance we asked for the workshops to consider the question:



What improvement actions should the planning authority take?

The different facilitators used their own techniques to lead the discussion around this. All have worked well.

In the Improvement Action Plans, the actions are split into five themes, some asked the participants to rank their importance and structure the conversation around that. Others worked through them one theme at a time.

In some sessions the participants were split into breakout groups to have discussions, in others it was a whole table discussion. Both worked well and were tailored around how many participants there were.

Impacts

Feedback from participants

Following each workshop, participants were sent a survey asking for their feedback. We had **45 respondents**.

When asked, *do you have a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities the planning authority faces?* 32 said yes, the process challenged or changed my thinking and 13 said no, I had a good understanding before the workshop. This illustrates that the workshops are having an impact on raising awareness about what the planning authority does.

We asked participants if they felt *they were given the opportunity to contribute their thoughts on the Improvement Action Plan* and everyone responded yes.

Many of the participants commented that they felt the sessions were constructive, well run, supportive, honest, interesting, inclusive, informative, and the conversation focused on what the planning authority could do better.

There were comments highlighting that it was good to hear the views of other stakeholders that had interacted with the planning authority and the forum allowed for collaboration and to share experiences.



“I thought the peer review workshop was really worthwhile and it was good to hear the views of other stakeholders that interact with the planning authority and hear also the planning authorities plans for the improvement of the service.”

Fife 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 Participant



“This seemed like a very good opportunity for ELC to consider its performance and take soundings from key partners and customers.

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.

While resources and staff capacity will no doubt be challenging, there were useful points made in the workshop and the next steps and what will be done with the information will be very interesting..”

East Lothian Participant

We asked everyone if they would be *prepared to come back in 6 months for a follow-up survey*. Everyone said yes. This will allow the planning authority to share feedback on how they are progressing. Fife was one of the first to go through the process and they have planned a follow-up session.

Lessons learned: feedback from the planning authorities and facilitators

When we initially spoke to the planning authorities about the process, some expressed their unease in bringing together all the stakeholders into the same room. Nick Wright, who has facilitated a few of the workshops reflects on this:



“One thing I’m learning from facilitating this and other peer review workshops is - local authority planners are often nervous before the workshops, but developers, agents and community reps are overwhelmingly supportive and understanding of the constraints that you work under. They all want to help make the system work better, rather than engage in old-school planner-bashing. That said... approaching these discussions with modesty and in listening mode helps immeasurably to create that positive atmosphere!”

Nick Wright facilitator of North Lanarkshire, Orkney, East Dunbartonshire, and Inverclyde peer review workshops

At the end of the process, we asked the planning authorities for their feedback. Many expressed that they found the process positive:



“[The] peer review was valuable and worthwhile, enhancing the assessment to validate the authority’s self-assessment, discuss and assist in agreeing improvements.”

Fife planning authority.



“Our peer review session was positive and it was encouraging to have so many people interested in contributing constructively as to how we should progress.”

North Lanarkshire planning authority.



“The peer review workshop was very useful to gather a range of views on the challenges we are facing and to discuss Scotland wide issues.”

Glasgow planning authority.

We also received reflections on how to improve the process going forward. Some highlighted that it takes time to set up the workshops to make sure all stakeholders can attend. This was important to ensure that it was a meaningful discussion.

The planning authorities were to attend their own peer review and their peer partner’s workshop. It was therefore reflected that it can take some time and staff resource to attend both the sessions.

Some planning authorities mentioned that they found organising the workshop difficult due to the lack of interest from stakeholders. With one highlighting that their community councils didn’t accept their invitations.

Many have commented on the value of having an external, trained facilitator, who was content neutral. With some planning authorities recommending that the authorities remain impartial and take a back seat during the discussions.

So far, we can see that the peer collaborative reviews have resulted in a number of the planning authorities changing or adding to their improvement action plans. The impact of the session has meant there has been more collaboration between the different stakeholders who have an interest in planning.

Conclusion and next steps

Overall, the feedback we have had so far on the peer collaborative review process has been very positive. The learning was shared with the remaining planning authorities, who are starting to go through the process, and we will be looking to reflect again and analyse the impact the workshops are having once all 34 have completed their peer reviews.

