

THINK PIECE

Identifying Areas of Improvement

Analysis of the improvement actions identified through the National Planning Improvement Framework and approaches to taking them forward

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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 second 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 piloted 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.

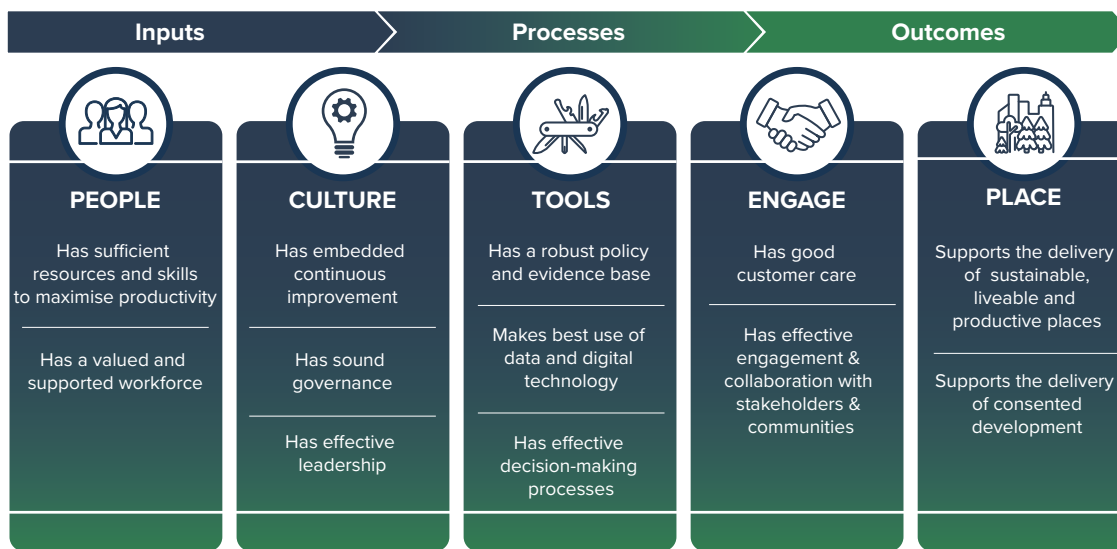
32 planning authorities have now published a [Performance Assessment and Improvement Action Plan](#). The Improvement Action Plans provide evidence on the key issues planning authorities are looking to improve on. This think piece will reflect on how the improvement actions were developed, discuss how we undertook an analysis of the actions, and share the findings of this.



Context

Developing the Improvement Action Plans

The planning authorities undertook a self-assessment based on the 12 attributes of a High Performing Planning Authority. No one attribute is the measure of the planning authority’s performance. It is important to bear in mind that performance is best represented by looking at the combination of the 12 attributes and to recognise the dependencies and connections between each of them.



Planning authorities were then asked to score themselves against these 12 attributes, the scoring was split into 5 options:



The attributes where they scored, Build Upon, Develop, Review or Prioritise, we asked the planning authorities to determine what improvement actions they were going to take forward in these areas. From this, they developed an Improvement Action Plan.



The planning authorities then took the action plan to a 'Peer Collaborative Review'. This is where the customers and stakeholders of the planning authority fed into discussions on whether these were the right actions to be taken and if there was anything missing. The NPI team also fed in comments as a critical friend.



We published a Think Piece reflecting on the [Peer Collaborative Review process](#).

We provided a template for the planning authorities to follow when populating the action plan. The image below shows an example of Aberdeen City's Improvement Action Plan. .

Improvement Action	Owner	Importance	Timescale	Resources
What action will you take? What will the outcome be?		High Medium Low	Short term - 1 year Medium term - 3 years Long term - 3+ years	
<p>Action: Preparation of a workforce planning strategy including consideration of team reorganisation, skills audit, career progression pathways, succession planning, enhancement of service resilience, vacant post redesign</p> <p>Outcome: Improved service capacity, resilience. and adaptability</p>	Chief Officer SPP	High	Short term for preparation but medium term for delivery	All planning staff and corporate business support

Each planning authority was asked to determine what the action will be, what the outcome will be, who the owner is, its level of importance, the timescale for completion, and the resources needed to deliver.

We published the Improvement Action Plans on our webpages, sent them to the chief executives of the council or national park authority, and sent them to the Minister.



The number of improvement actions per planning authority ranged from 9 to 34. Some authorities listed fewer but more complex actions with multiple steps, while others broke down larger actions and listed them as multiple actions. For this reason, we won't be comparing the number of actions across planning authorities.

Year two updates

In year two 2025/26 of the NPIF, the planning authorities were asked to update on the progress they have made in implementing the actions. They filled out an online survey updating whether the action was complete, in progress, not started or not feasible. Some planning authorities also identified new actions they are looking to take forward.



[Year two Improvement Action Progress Reports](#) have been published on our webpages.

This Think Piece does not include the updates made in year two. We will look to undertake a similar analysis for the updates made in year two.

Attribute scoring

Before looking at the improvement actions, it is worth noting the scoring of the 12 attributes of a High Performing Planning Authority from the self-assessments. As mentioned above, these were self-assessed by the planning authorities. Then discussed with customers and stakeholders and the NPI acting as critical friends during the peer collaborative review process.

Most planning authorities scored themselves in the middle (score of 3) across the attributes. However, based on the other scores we can pull out which attributes scored highest and lowest.

The highest scoring attributes were:

- **Attribute 10:** Has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities – with 66% scoring themselves a 1 or 2
- **Attribute 5:** Has effective leadership – with 56% scoring themselves a 1 or 2
- **Attribute 11:** Supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places – with 53% scoring themselves a 1 or 2

The lowest scoring attributes were:

- **Attribute 1:** Has sufficient resources and skills to maximise productivity – 31% scoring themselves a 4 or 5
- **Attribute 7:** Makes best use of data and digital technology – 19% scoring themselves a 4 or 5

As this was a self-assessment, there are a number of factors that will affect the scoring. However, by looking at the scores, we can get a general picture of how planning authorities are performing across Scotland.



Approach taken to the improvement action analysis

We undertook an analysis of the improvement actions that were identified as part of the pilot process. The aim of this analysis was to support the following:

- Identify where planning authorities had similar actions
- Improve coordination of improvement actions and identify where planning authorities can work together on key challenges
- Ensure alignment across planning authorities in taking forward improvement actions
- Help identify key topics where we can take forward training and skills development at the Improvement Service
- Provide peer support and skills development
- Faster implementation of the improvement actions identified through NPIF
- Shared learning, reducing the burden on planning authorities to find solutions individually

Below are the steps taken to the analysis of the improvement actions:

Step 1: All improvement actions listed in a spreadsheet.

To note: these are the actions identified through the pilot; a number of these were updated or completed as part of year two.

Step 2: Categorise the actions under the 5 themes of the NPIF: People, Culture, Tools, Engage and Place.

To note: several actions fit across a number of themes; a pragmatic approach was taken to where the actions fit best.

Step 3: Qualitative analysis of the actions under the 5 themes, to identify sub themes.

Step 4: Document these sub themes in separate sheets within the spreadsheet.

Step 5: Further 'sub headings' were then introduced to the 'sub themes' where appropriate.

Step 6: A quantitative analysis of the sub themes to determine the number of actions under each.

As stated above, the approach to writing the actions differed across authorities. It was therefore important that we didn't compare numbers of actions across authorities. The findings can also be influenced by researcher bias.

The information gained from this analysis has been used alongside other evidence we have been gathering as part of our wider analytical strategy. We have also gained insights from:

- [Call for ideas](#)
- [Annual National Customer and Stakeholder survey](#)
- [Workforce and Capacity Survey](#)
- Discussions at the Peer Collaborative Review meetings



Key areas identified for improvement

Overall, there were 646 actions identified in the pilot of NPIF, across 32 planning authorities. The table below illustrates the percentage of these under each theme of the NPIF.

Theme	Number of actions
People (resources/ skills and workforce)	22%
Culture (leadership, improvement and governance)	18%
Tools (development plans, development management and data/digital)	24%
Engage (customer care and collaboration)	21%
Place (quality of place and delivery)	15%

As noted above, we need to take caution when comparing numbers of actions due to the different approaches to writing them. However, overall, where the planning authorities have scored the attributes higher, there are less actions, and in the areas, they scored lower, there are a higher number of actions.

The below table details the sub themes that were identified where there were more than 10 improvement actions.

	Subtheme	Number of actions
People	Undertaking workforce planning	26
	Developing training opportunities/ undertaking skills audit	22
	Supporting early career development	16
Culture	Delivering elected members training	25
	Revising their scheme of delegation	14
Tools	Making best use of digital and data	52
	Improving approaches to development management	29
	Enhancing enforcement	19
	Producing a Local Development Plan (LDP)	20
	Developing approaches to pre-application engagement	12

	Subtheme	Number of actions
Engage	Organising forums with developers, community councils etc.)	25
	Undertaking customer surveys	23
	Updating websites	18
	Taking forward LDP consultation	13
	Developing approaches to pre-application engagement	12
	Supporting Local Place Plan engagement	10
Place	Taking a place-based approach to support health and wellbeing	24

From this, we can see that the top six sub themes which have the most improvement actions are:

- Making best use of digital and data
- Improving approaches to development management
- Undertaking workforce strategies
- Delivering elected member training
- Organising forums with developers, community councils etc
- Taking place based approaches

Below sets out some examples of actions under these six sub-themes.

Making best use of digital and data

- **Aberdeenshire Council:** Examine opportunities for increased use of digital platforms and technology: Contribute towards corporate review of GIS systems and storage procedures to ensure systems meet the needs of the planning system and support digital modernisation. Pursuing and finalising roll out of site visit technology use of tablets & associated site visit application for officer use on site. Implement the conditions module within Uniform Key Plan Database Development. Power BI - to provide real-time monitoring for planning performance and income.
- **South Ayrshire Council:** Explore greater use of the GIS maps including input training for all planning staff.



- **East Ayrshire Council:** Explore further opportunities to use digital solutions to increase automation and improve workflow and provide seamless communication with other systems where relevant e.g. Implement electronic Enforcement forms and Mailbox Planning Service High Short Planning Staff and IT to focus delivery and reduce timescales and handling.

Improving approaches to development management

- **Argyll and Bute Council:** Better integration of back office DM Systems for casework workflow document management, and enhancement of Public Access functionality.
- **Glasgow City Council:** Improve planning application guidance documents to increase number of applications validated first time.
- **Orkney Islands Council:** Review legacy planning application cases to establish solutions that could enable speedier decision making.

Undertaking workforce planning

- **Aberdeen City Council:** Preparation of a workforce planning strategy including consideration of team reorganisation, skills audit, career progression pathways, succession planning, enhancement of service resilience, vacant post redesign. Improved service capacity, resilience, and adaptability.
- **City of Edinburgh Council:** 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 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.
- **East Renfrewshire Council:** Encourage new systems and processes to reduce recruitment difficulties in development management and strategy teams. This includes contributing to work force planning efforts across the Council e.g. Service Improvement Planning, participating in career fairs in schools working with Heads of Planning and the Scottish Government to attract more planners.



Delivering elected member training

- **Falkirk Council:** Deliver a programme of non-mandatory training for all Elected Members on specific planning topics. Members are better equipped to make informed decisions related to planning.
- **Scottish Borders Council:** Extend Elected Member training for decision-makers, both as formally required by regulation and informally on current topics and service themes.
- **Dundee City Council:** Provide councilor briefings and training on specific topic matters e.g affordable housing, short term lets.

Organise forums with developers, community councils etc.

- **Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority:** 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 and communication.
- **North Lanarkshire Council:** We will host an Agents forum to allow us to have an open discussion around new legislation and policy, and of how that impacts planning applications in North Lanarkshire. We will ask developers to guide the topics to be covered in future forums.
- **Cairngorms National Park Authority:** Reconvene the Planning Representatives Networks, in an updated format, to provide a more effective mechanism for regular engagement with community council representatives to identify and address common issues and target further service improvements, and explore other methods for increasing planning knowledge and engagement at the local community level.

Taking a place-based approach to supporting health and wellbeing

- **West Dunbartonshire Council:** Explore how 'Added Value' can be better captured and reported on.
- **Aberdeen City Council:** Building on the health in policies approach taken in LDP3, consider how to incorporate local work on the social detriments of health and the Marmot City Principles into the next LDP. A strong Local Development Plan, grounded in prevention.
- **Fife Council:** 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.

If you would like to see what specific actions planning authorities are taking forward. You can read their individual [Improvement Action Plans](#).



Next steps

Over the next year, we are going to be leading on taking forward these six identified sub themes, working with colleagues at the Improvement Service to deliver support.

The table below details the work we will take forward.

Key area for improvement (identified through improvement action analysis)	Support from Improvement Service
<p>Making best use of digital and data</p> <p>(Power BI, GIS, e-development, IDOX, AI etc.)</p>	<p>NPI identified “data and digital’ as a key challenge in the NPI annual report and set out a number of recommendations regarding taking forward the national APPLY and PAY systems, planning authorities exploring how their business needs can be supported by data and digital based tools, and the need for a consistent approach to managing data on planning applications.</p> <p>The National Planning Improvement Champion is sitting on the HOPS Short Life Working Group on Digital Planning.</p> <p>The Spatial Information Service is providing support to planning authorities through the provision of training, guidance, and data support. In 2025, the team delivered two “GIS training for Planners” sessions and published technical guidance on assessing the existence of 20-minute neighbourhoods using analytic tools. They also delivered housing land audit dashboards for a range of authorities.</p> <p>In addition to this, they also engage with the HOPS digital planning working group, supporting local authorities and chair a sub-group focused on the standardisation of energy related planning applications.</p>

Key area for improvement (identified through improvement action analysis)	Support from Improvement Service
Improving approaches to development management	<p>NPI identified “processes and proportionality” as a key challenge in the NPI annual report and set out a number of recommendations covering approaches to achieving efficiency, including approaches to undertaking assessments and planning conditions.</p> <p>NPI will undertake a review of planning authority development management approaches to identify how best to learn from those who are performing most efficiently</p>
Undertaking workforce planning	<p>NPI identified “resources and skills” as a key challenge in the NPI annual report and set out a number of recommendations covering the need to reinvest the planning fees to support planning services, where this is possible; the importance of the National Planning Hub, and the need to continue to support pipeline initiatives.</p> <p>NPI are planning to host a learning event to share best practice gathered from the NPIF on workforce planning and continue this work through the Improvement Leads Network.</p>
Delivering elected member training	<p>IS Democratic Governance are supporting the delivery of the National Elected Member training.</p>
Organise forums with developers, community councils etc.	<p>NPI has undertaken a Customer Care Rapid Review and published a report setting out the findings. It lists a number of recommendations for planning authorities, customers, and stakeholders. NPI and Planning Skills are hosting a follow up Customer Care webinar to discuss the report.</p>
Taking a place-based approach to supporting health and wellbeing	<p>IS Planning for Place will be supporting planning authorities with place-based approaches to planning.</p>

Improvement Leads Network

We have established an Improvement Leads Network that will bring together representatives from all the planning authorities to share learning, discuss



challenges, and collaborate on solutions arising from the key challenges identified by the National Planning Improvement Framework.

A dedicated Microsoft Teams group will act as the main communication platform. This space will allow for informal conversations, sharing resources, and ongoing engagement between authorities. All the Heads of Planning and leads in taking forward the National Planning Improvement Framework are members of the group.

The network will be aligned with a series of Planning Skills webinars. These webinars will cover the key topic areas identified above. Following each webinar, the network will hold deeper-dive discussions, enabling further conversations to co-develop actionable ideas and improvement approaches.

Over time, we will support the network to produce practical guidance, recommended approaches, case studies, and reports.



