



National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

Improvement Action Progress Update 2025

Fife Council



Fife NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

Foreword

As one of the first planning authorities in Cohort 1 of the National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF), Fife Planning Service has embraced the opportunity to reflect on and enhance its approach to service improvement.

A key milestone in our journey was the introduction of the peer review Stakeholder Group, supported by an external facilitator. This marked a significant shift in how we approached service improvement. While Fife Planning Service has long embedded lean methodologies, customer surveys, and engagement with agents and applicants, the peer review approach enabled us to sense-check our existing priorities and align them more closely with customer expectations.

The greatest challenge was integrating the NPIF process with our existing Service Improvement Plan, which already included a wide range of actions informed by years of customer feedback and internal review. The peer review workshop helped us to validate our direction and identify 14 priority actions across four key themes: customer experience, internal processes, staff skills, and digital innovation.

Over the past year, we have made strong progress in delivering these actions. Highlights include:

- The successful rollout of a staff skills survey, now informing our service review and CPD programme.
- A renewed focus on customer communication, with a shift toward improved responsiveness.
- Continued collaboration with internal services to address recruitment challenges, supported by process simplification and early engagement.
- Advancements in digital transformation, including the development of AI tools like FIONA, and the creation of online resources for customers, staff, and elected members.

We remain committed to transparency and accountability, demonstrated through our peer review feedback event and ongoing engagement with customer focus groups. These interactions continue to shape our service and ensure that improvement actions are embedded in team plans, service change programmes, and wider corporate performance frameworks.

Looking ahead, Fife Planning Service is undertaking a comprehensive service review to ensure we are equipped to meet the demands of a modern planning system over the next five years. The NPIF actions will play a central role in this process, helping us to build a service that is responsive, innovative, and aligned with the principles of NPF4 and the corporate Place agenda.



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.](#)

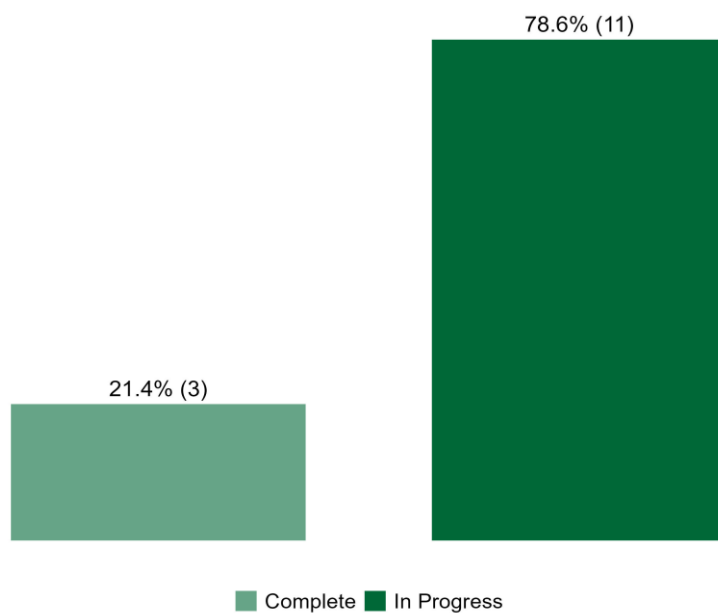
In year two of the NPIF the planning authorities are to update on their progress with the improvement actions. This report sets out the progress Fife has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.

Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

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



Fife has 14 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:



Action 1: Working corporately to ensure that systems and processes are in place to reduce the impact of recruitment difficulties into specialist services who are critical to determining planning applications.

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services has strengthened collaboration with internal teams like Environmental Health, Housing, and Structural Services to maintain effective application assessments despite recruitment challenges. Key improvements include streamlined processes through self-certification for drainage and flood risk, and enhanced partnerships, such as with Fife Coast and Countryside Trust.

The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is implementing several measures to improve efficiency and reduce delays, including encouraging early engagement between applicants and relevant services, addressing long-term recruitment challenges with HR, and training planning officers to better interpret technical information. These changes are being monitored to assess their impact on processing times.

Action 2: Develop and implement staff skills survey to identify transferable skills to meet aspirations and objectives of place-based agenda (NPF4)

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?



The staff skills survey conducted in early 2025 provided valuable insights into the strengths and development needs within Planning Services, revealing strong capabilities in areas like community engagement and design, while identifying gaps in climate literacy and digital innovation. In response, tailored CPD sessions have been introduced, and a broader Service Review has been initiated to align workforce development with NPF4 and Fife Council's Place agenda, ensuring the service is strategically positioned to deliver place-based outcomes effectively.

Action 3: Review and prioritise the actions identified in Planning Services existing Service Improvement Plan

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Service Improvement Plan is actively maintained as a dynamic PowerBI dashboard, regularly updated to reflect evolving priorities and legislative changes. It benefits from consistent leadership oversight, dedicated support from improvement staff, and flexible prioritisation of workload.

The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is committed to fostering staff engagement by involving them in shaping improvement actions, ensuring the plan reflects frontline experience. The Improvement Plan is aligned with corporate and national priorities such as the Place agenda and NPF4, and its effectiveness is regularly reviewed.

Action 4: Developing a suite of e-learning modules for local elected members

In Progress

Progress against this action: E-learning module development is progressing well, with a pilot version tested by elected members receiving positive feedback and suggestions for improvement. In response, additional content is being added and integrated into the council's existing e learning platform with a view to it being completed in 2025.

The following next steps are proposed: The full suite of e-learning modules for elected members is being finalised. It is scheduled for launch by the end of December 2025 ahead of expected legislative changes.

Action 5: Developing spatial analysis further to inform decision making

In Progress

Progress against this action: Spatial analysis is being actively integrated into the development of LDP2, supported by two dedicated GIS Technicians. A targeted staff skills survey is underway to identify gaps in spatial capabilities, and tailored CPD sessions are planned to build analytical skills and enhance the use of GIS tools in decision-making.



The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is using staff survey results to tailor training and development. Efforts are underway to embed spatial analysis into routine decision-making, ensuring it becomes a core element of planning, policy, and service delivery.

Action 6: Training for staff on the use of GIS

In Progress

Progress against this action: In March 2025, Planning Services received GIS training through the Improvement Service, focusing on foundational skills and practical applications. Our staff skills survey will inform GIS competencies and guide future training priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is analysing staff survey results to map current GIS capabilities and identify areas for improvement. GIS training will be expanded through the wider CPD programme.

Action 7: Horizon scanning of digital solutions which could enhance delivery of the planning service

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services is embracing digital transformation through collaboration with other local authorities and exploration of best practices, particularly in AI applications for planning. Development of the AI tool FIONA through fife.gov.uk is underway to streamline processes, supported by internal tech-focused CPD sessions that build staff confidence in digital tools. A culture of innovation is being actively fostered, with digital transformation regularly discussed in Agent Forum meetings to encourage stakeholder engagement and co-design opportunities.

The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is evaluating potential digital solutions, prioritising those that align with the change plan and enhance service delivery. Pilot projects are being considered for innovative tools such as AI-driven validation and summarisation of representations to test their effectiveness in the internal planning process.

Action 8: Continue to develop the Planning Services website to include more simplified guidance including video and visual demonstrations to help with reduction in invalid submissions

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Planning Services has significantly enhanced its website with clearer guidance, visual aids, and instructional videos to improve user understanding and submission accuracy. The AI tool FIONA which is embedded in our website provides real-time support, contributing to a



reduction in invalid applications. Early feedback has been positive, with users reporting improved clarity and ease of use.

Action 9: New invalid process being scoped out through process improvement event (LEAN) with agents to improve validation rates

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services is reviewing the invalid application process using lean methodology to identify inefficiencies and reduce errors. Ongoing engagement with agents through the Agents Forum is helping shape this process. We are now being more proactive with applications that are made invalid. Previously, reminders were sent to applicants and agents, but the process has been strengthened: letters have been updated to clearly state that applicants/agents have 30 days to submit the required documents, otherwise the application will be returned.

Common reasons for applications being made invalid include:

- Red lines not being marked on location plans
- Incorrect fees

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to engage with our customer and agents to gain feedback on the process and monitor the impact of these changes on validation rates.

Action 10: Further develop Planning Services customer survey to include selectable key areas (themes) where customers feel their experience fell short

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Planning Services has redesigned its customer survey to gather more targeted feedback by introducing selectable themes aligned with key stages of the planning process. The updated format includes distinct sections on the validation process, overall experience, and customer interaction, allowing users to highlight specific areas for improvement and helping the service better understand and respond to customer needs.

Action 11: Training programme to be developed to improve on how staff communicate more effectively with customers

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services has expanded customer contact responsibilities across the Development Management Team through the duty officer service to improve customer and engagement. A targeted skills survey is informing tailored training



in customer communication, supported by collaboration with Fife Council's Contact Centre and training from the Improvement Service. Website improvements based on feedback have enhanced clarity and navigation, while a cultural shift toward verbal communication is being promoted to foster quicker, more personal engagement.

The following next steps are proposed: We will analyse our skills survey addressing any gaps in knowledge to shape our training programme. We will continue to monitor customer satisfaction as well as celebrating examples of good customer service by promoting this through our staff newsletter.

Action 12: 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

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services has delivered CPD sessions to raise awareness of wellbeing and sustainability goals in NPF4, focusing on practical implementation and climate resilience. Carbon Literacy training has been expanded across the service.

The following next steps are proposed: Ensure all staff have access to and complete Carbon Literacy training, with follow-up sessions to reinforce learning and application. Identify and share examples of projects or decisions that demonstrate strong alignment with NPF4 objectives, helping to build confidence and momentum across the service.

Action 13: Regularly review new development schemes built on the ground and embed learning and training opportunities

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services has introduced a variety of team learning activities to support professional development and improve service delivery. These include site visits like the one to Dunfermline Learning Campus, regular discussions on planning appeal outcomes, collaborative reviews of challenging design cases, and cross-service shared learning and reflective practice.

The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is proactively identifying live and upcoming projects with strong learning potential, particularly in design, sustainability, and community engagement. These insights are being embedded into the annual Service Development Day to encourage cross-team reflection. A structured approach to knowledge sharing is being developed, linking learning from appeals, site visits, and case reviews to the CPD programme and service improvement efforts, while promoting a culture of reflective practice across the team.



Action 14: Work with Legal Services and associated services to identify opportunities to streamline the Section 75 legal process

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Services has implemented a revised Section 75 workflow that initiates legal drafting earlier in the planning process to reduce delays. Standardised templates, developed with Legal Services, improve consistency and clarity for applicants. Enhanced collaboration across departments such as Education, Housing ensures obligations are identified and communicated early, supporting more efficient and coordinated planning outcomes.

The following next steps are proposed: Planning Services is tracking the effectiveness of the revised Section 75 process through turnaround times and feedback, while regularly refining templates to stay aligned with policy and legal updates. Staff training ensures consistent application, and opportunities for digital integration, such as automating document generation and tracking agreement status are being explored to further streamline the process.

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 27 February 2025. The following organisations/groups/individuals were invited: Key Agencies Group, 2 Community Councils, Persimmon Homes, Montagu Evans, Homes for Scotland, Sinclair Watt Architects, Conveners of Planning Committees, Fife Council Protective Services, FC Customer Services and Online Services, North Lanarkshire Council (peer authority), Improvement Champion & Officers.

