



National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

# Improvement Action Progress Update 2025

## Scottish Borders Council



# Scottish Borders NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

## Foreword

The past year has been a busy, yet productive, year for the service. Financial and resourcing pressures remain and the teams that deliver our services continue to work hard to meet service objectives within that challenging context. That makes it even more important to review service delivery to become more efficient and to improve the quality of the service we provide.

One of the key benefits to the NPIF process has been the partnership working it encourages and, to that end, we valued the continuing relationship and sharing of experience with our partners at Aberdeenshire Council, which is reflected in the actions we report here.

The following provides a summary of progress in the last twelve months:

### Local Development Plan (LDP) 2024 – 2029

- The Local Development Plan (LDP) was adopted in August 2024.
- The Delivery Programme to support and set out how the adopted LDP will be implemented was published in December 2024.

### New style Local Development Plan

- Work has commenced on the Evidence Report.
- The 2025 Development Plan Scheme sets out how the next LDP will be prepared, including a timetable of key stages of preparation for our new LDP and includes a Participation Statement explaining how we will engage.

### Monitoring

- The Housing Land Audit 2023 was published, detailing an established housing land supply of 8225 units.
- The Employment Land Audit 2024 was published, detailing 91.64 ha of available land.
- The Town Centre 2024 Survey was published, highlighting an overall Scottish Borders vacancy rate of 12%.
- The annual Vacant and Derelict Land return continues to survey and monitor opportunities for development on brownfield sites across the Scottish Borders.
- Update to the interactive Wind Energy map, used to monitor developments.

### Placemaking



- Work continues to support communities in the preparation of both Borderland Plans and Local Place Plans.
- 4 Borderlands Plans endorsed by the Borderlands Partnership.
- 13 Local Place Plans registered.
- Local Place Plan webpages have been set up containing a suite of resources and links to assist communities.
- Financial support, including a consultancy framework made available to support communities with the preparation of Plans.

### **Housing Delivery**

- Declaration of Housing Emergency and development of Action Plan.
- Work progressing to progress the strategic housing site at Tweedbank, part of the Edinburgh City Region Deal.
- Collaborative partnership working on-going across the South of Scotland, between South of Scotland Enterprise (SOSE), SBC and D&G through the established the strategic action group on housing.
- South of Scotland Housing Action Plan published in July 2024, setting out 10 key housing actions to be taken forward over a 2-year period.

- **Historic Environment**

- Doors Open Day 2025 was held in early September and proved a success with some significant participation by both properties and visitors.
- The Council hosted the Design Awards for its 40th year in December 2025, in celebration of quality design and placemaking in the Scottish Borders.
- The Hawick CARS programme reached conclusion with key projects and priority building work nearing completion.
- The Council has played an important role in securing a future for the Category A Listed Bernat Klein Studio in Selkirk.

### **Development Management**

- Planning application determination rates remain good, despite increasing numbers, particularly across the renewable sector, where new technologies are beginning to establish.



- Planning consent was granted in December 2025 for a significant application from Centre Parcs, to develop their first Scottish resort in the region.

### **Customer Service**

- Website and webpages updated.

### **Recruitment, Training and Development of Workforce**

- Webinars, workshops, training opportunities to upskill staff on NPF4 policies and key topics.
- Four members of staff pursuing RTPI accreditation.
- Collaborative working with other Planning Services, sharing of best practice examples.

## **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.](#)

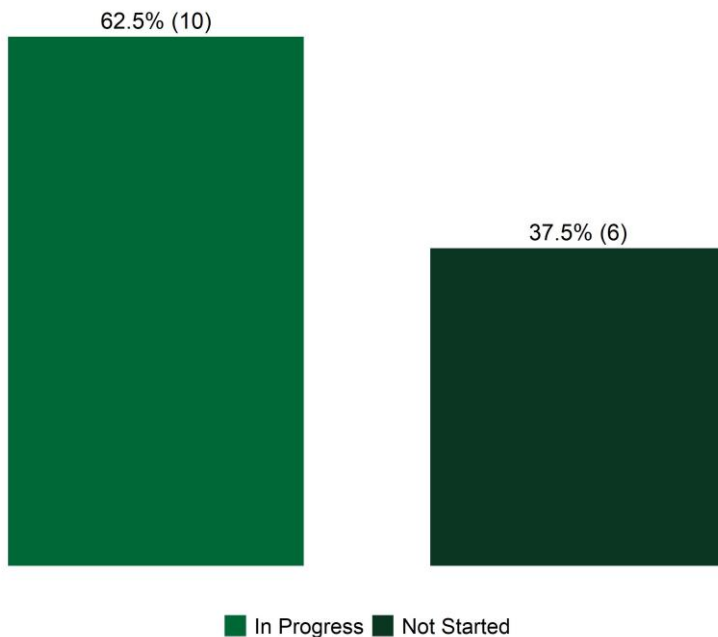
In year two of the NPIF the planning authorities are to update on their progress with the improvement actions. This report sets out the progress Scottish Borders has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.

## **Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update**

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



**Scottish Borders has 16 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:**



## **Action 1: Workshop to review service structure, involving key leads across all services; More efficient service delivery**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Workshop discussions have taken place involving all key service leads, following the retirement of the previous Chief Planning & Housing Officer.

A proposal for restructure has been developed and is currently being implemented across the wider service. The proposal uses fee income to reinvest on a temporary arrangement for two years.

Two Deputy Chief Planning and Housing Officer positions have been recruited, providing additional capacity at the senior management level. These positions will provide additional oversight and succession planning opportunities across the wider service, further assisting the Chief Planning and Housing Officer in the strategic management of the wider Planning and Housing Related Service.

It has been a key challenge to get this proposal in place over the last year, and the additional capacity these posts will bring is very much welcomed.

The following next steps are proposed: Complete the service restructure backfilling, as a result of the appointments into the Deputy Chief Planning and Housing Officer positions.



## **Action 2: Further work to improve consultee liaison to streamline processes and protocols to enable improved consultation**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: On-going discussions taking place with internal consultees and Development Management Officers. Opportunity to consider good practice with other Local Authorities, including Aberdeenshire.

The following next steps are proposed: Consider Aberdeenshire consultation process and set up 1-2-1 meetings with internal consultees to discuss consultation process in more detail.

## **Action 3: Implementation of succession plan and workforce strategy to ensure continued service and individual development**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Work continues at a corporate level in relation to workforce and succession planning, with dialogue between the Council's HR Shared Service providing support to enable career pathways and opportunities for succession planning within and beyond services, including by identifying key training requirements.

Service planning is being developed through digital resources, including the use of Power BI as a means of developing service objectives and performance monitoring.

A dedicated RTPI Training, CPD, and APC SharePoint site has been set up, offering resources and links to help staff with their APC submissions as they work toward becoming chartered planners. The site also supports staff with their continuing professional development (CPD).

In addition, a peer support network has been formed, bringing together staff beginning their APC journey and experienced members of the Planning Service who can mentor and support them. This network enhances support for Officers throughout the wider Planning Service.

A member of the Planning Service is currently attending the Planning MSc course at Newcastle University on day release. This helps staff gain the necessary qualifications and skills for potential future opportunities, whilst working within the Planning Service.

The following next steps are proposed: Further development of systems to support service and workforce planning. Continue helping staff gain the qualifications, skills, and experience needed for succession planning and workforce strategies in the Planning Service.



## **Action 4: Training and development of staff to upskill team members on key topic areas, including those emerging through NPF4, and create opportunities for skill sharing within service; Specialist transferrable skills available within service**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Staff attended the Planning Skills series of events and webinars hosted by the Improvement Service. These support the learning and development needs of staff within the wider Planning Service, delivering collaborative and cost-effective training. These have recently included a variety of topics; Forestry and Woodland, Electricity Act Cases with DPEA and ECU, Flooding, Biodiversity Metric, Climate Mitigation and Adaptation, Key Agencies Group Collaboration, SEPA, Developing with Nature and Planning Appeals and Embedding Customer Care.

The Planning Service have been in discussions with and exploring opportunities, as to how the National Planning Hub can provide additional support through brokerage, surge capacity and expertise, professional capacity and practice and efficiency. Discussions are currently on-going regarding potential support for key pieces of work. The Service has been involved in discussions led by the Scottish Government, identifying stalled sites and any potential brokerage that the Planning Hub can offer. More recently, Scottish Borders Council presented, as part of the Place Promotion and Housing Delivery webinar, on the South of Scotland experience. This was the first webinar hosted by the Planning National Hub, sharing good practice and examples across Scotland. The webinars and publications contribute to upskilling team members on key topic areas, such as hydrogen, battery storage, onshore wind and housing, creating opportunities for skill sharing between Planning Services.

The Planning Service has also been proactive in working collaboratively with South of Scotland Enterprise and other Planning Authorities, in taking forward pieces of work, sharing templates and best practice. This collaborative approach is also supporting through HOPS and sub-committees.

Scottish Borders Council and Aberdeenshire Council, as NPIF partners, are working closely together on any shared actions, sharing best practice and examples with each other. This collaborative approach not only contributes to the development of staff but contributes to working more efficiently and effectively as Planning Services.

The following next steps are proposed: Staff will continue to attend training sessions and webinars on offer, from the Improvement Service (Planning Skills Series) and through the National Planning Hub. This will ensure that staff are upskilling on key topics, relevant to NPF4 and specifically the Scottish Borders.

Continue to contribute to national discussions and training opportunities, sharing examples from Scottish Borders Council, and learning good practice and examples from other Local Authorities.



Continue to work in a positive and collaborative way with other Planning Services, sharing best practice, templates and resources that contribute to improving the efficiency of Planning Services.

Create opportunities for providing updates on key pieces of work and work streams across the Planning Service, that will contribute to creating opportunities for skill sharing across the wider Service.

## **Action 5: Review and update the Scheme of Delegation for planning applications to create clear and efficient planning application process**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.
- The action was set as a low or medium priority.

The following next steps are proposed: Commence discussion with Executive Member for Planning. Review and update the Scheme of Delegation for planning applications, consider best practice and examples from other Local Authorities.

## **Action 6: Extend Elected Member training for decision-makers, both as formally required by regulation and informally on current topics and service themes.**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.
- The action was set as a low or medium priority.
- We are relying on a partner or stakeholder to action this.

The following next steps are proposed: Await guidance from Scottish Government on process and expectations on Elected member training. Continue to support Elected Members in the decision-making process, by organising formal training and ensuring Members are kept informed on current topics/service plans and themes.



## **Action 7: Monitor the implementation of NPF4 policies, identifying areas where further clarification/ interpretation/guidance/ Chief Planner letter is required from either Scottish Government or by planning authorities**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: The Planning Service has been monitoring the implementation of NPF4 policies, identifying areas where further clarification, interpretation or guidance is required, either through a Chief Planner letter or some form of guidance.

This is also being monitored through HOPS sub-committees, which provides a forum for Planning Authorities to raise any such matters. Examples, specific to the Scottish Borders, included the need for further guidance in relation battery storage proposals and climate mitigation and adaptation.

The Scottish Government has since published guidance on Climate Mitigation and Adaptation, specifically in relation to Policy 2 in NPF4. The National Planning Hub are currently working on resources to support Planning Services in the assessment of battery storage proposals.

The HOPS sub committees have also been key to contributing to this piece of work. Planning Services worked and inputted into discussions with the Scottish Government on the recent Housing Land Audit guidance.

The National Planning Hub have produced a suite of resources, to assist Planning Services with the implementation of NPF4, which includes recently published guidance on hydrogen proposals.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to monitor the implementation of the policies within NPF4 and identify additional areas for further clarification/interpretation/guidance required, in the context of the Scottish Borders.

Continue to work collaboratively with HOPS, Scottish Government and National Planning Hub, to identify what is required and input into any guidance published.

Continuing to identify where guidance is required at a local level, that will assist Officers in the assessment of planning applications.

## **Action 8: Identify opportunities and new ways of working using GIS, to enable the Planning Service to be more efficient and effective**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: An ArcGIS working group was established to facilitate the move from Desktop ArcGIS to ArcGIS Online, which was completed in early October. As part of this



shift, all internal and external WebMaps have been updated. Combined with the shift to ArcPro, it allows for more efficient and smarter working. Move to producing outputs for audits and surveys in WebMaps, rather than PDF maps. This is much more user friendly and a lot more efficient for Officers to update. Examples of this include the production of WebMaps for the annual housing land audit, retail survey and employment land audit. The Planning Service has also produced an interactive WebMap for Wind Energy, which maps scoping, screening, planning applications and Section 36 applications.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to develop the interactive Wind Energy map, into a Renewable Energy map, with additional layers to include Battery Storage and Solar initially. This will be a phased approach to developing the existing WebMap.

Continue to explore opportunities to utilise GIS in presenting information and outputs, both internally and for the public/stakeholders. Exploring opportunities to produce a Local Housing Prospectus, that presents the allocated housing sites within the Local Development Plan in a user-friendly manner.

Continue to explore and learn from other Planning Services who already have a housing prospectus, including Aberdeenshire Council. Explore ways that GIS could be used, to make the LDP preparation and engagement more efficient and effective. Explore opportunities with the Improvement Service and National Planning Hub, re sharing best practice GIS examples. This includes exploring presenting the Housing Land Audit in a Power BI dashboard format. Plot the housing sites contained within the Strategic Housing Investment Plan (SHIP), to enable the layers to be added to existing WebMaps. Also provides the potential for WebMaps to be produced in the future as an output for the SHIP.

## **Action 9: Develop a process to examine LRB and DPEA appeals, to identify any areas where further policy/guidance is required**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Identifying areas where new or expanded policy is needed to support decision-making. The Housing in the Countryside Supplementary Planning Guidance is being updated to align with the adopted LDP and clarify existing policy.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to identify additional areas where further policy/guidance is required. Discuss with Executive Member for Planning.



## **Action 10: Review of reports of handling and planning conditions to streamline processes and reduce length of reports and number of conditions**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Consideration of reports of handling and review of standard conditions to streamline the planning application process is on-going and has been a regular and recurring improvement action for some time.

The following next steps are proposed: Streamline the existing reports of handling and planning conditions, in consultation with internal consultees. Review good practice from other Local Authorities, including Aberdeenshire Council, who have recently streamlined reports of handling and revised model conditions.

## **Action 11: Update DM Charter**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: Review and update the DM Charter, reflecting on good practice from other Local Authorities, including Aberdeenshire Council.

## **Action 12: Review and update planning pages of website to encourage more customer self-service and promotion of national planning portal, particularly in relation to householder developments. To make the required information more accessible and easier for customers to navigate**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Improvements have been made to the planning applications and pre-planning application pages of our website to encourage customer self-service and to make information, particularly in relation to permitted development rights and the need for planning permission, more accessible to our customers. Weblinks have been updated and additional information made available to better inform our customers.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to review and update the planning pages to encourage self-service and promotion of national planning portal. Learn and share best practice from other Planning Services, including Aberdeenshire Council.



## **Action 13: Consider tools to improve performance in the pre-application advice service**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Within the service, we have begun to discuss and give consideration of how we might improve the efficiency of pre-app advice at team meetings on a regular basis. Officers are encouraged to provide a high-level assessment of development proposals but are often restricted by the capacity and performance of consultees, which will require further consideration.

The following next steps are proposed: Review and streamline pre-application consultation responses and reports for pre-application process. Continue to consider tools to improve the performance in the pre-application advice service. Consider Aberdeenshire Council's pre-application advice processes and reflect on good practice in other Local Authorities.

## **Action 14: Build upon existing tools and develop new ways to undertake customer and community engagement, ensuring that it is collaborative, meaningful and proportionate, utilising digital technology where possible**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: Build upon existing tools and develop new ways to undertake collaborative, meaningful and proportionate engagement with customers, communities, stakeholders and Community Councils, utilising digital technology where possible.

## **Action 15: Regularly review new development schemes built on the ground and embed learning and training opportunities.**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: Review new development schemes built on the ground, identifying good practice and examples of regeneration/place making/good design etc. Embed this into learning and training opportunities for the wider Planning Service, which could include CPD sessions that bring together the wider Planning and Housing Related Services.



## **Action 16: Review the Section 75 process and procedure with aim of streamlined more efficient and clear process for all.**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- The action was set as a low or medium priority.

The following next steps are proposed: Consider the recent review undertaken by Aberdeenshire Council and any other examples of good practice, to streamline the Section 75 process, making it more efficient. Discuss actions and possible improvements/solutions with SBC Legal Services.



# 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>
Continue engagement with national Planning Hub to explore experience and opportunities to facilitate improvement at a regional level.  Outcome trying to achieve: to better share experience and resources at a regional level as part of a broader commitment to improvement.  How will you know this has been achieved: Use and	Chief Planning & Housing Officer/ Lead Officer (Planning Policy & GIS)	Medium	Long	Existing



implementation of shared resources and experience.				
<p>Continue to explore and develop the use of digital technology, including AI, to support and enhance service delivery.</p> <p>Outcome: to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the Planning Service.</p> <p>How will you know this has been achieved: Efficiency gains evidenced through measurable time savings and improved service processes.</p>	Chief Planning Officer/Lead Officer (Planning Policy & GIS and Development Management)	Medium	Long	Existing



# 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 send an email to update on progress.

Additional information: We will be issuing an update to stakeholders who previously participated in the peer collaborative review sessions and will touch upon the same content in the forthcoming stakeholder event as a means of sharing the detail more widely.

