



Comhairle nan Eilean Siar



National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

Improvement Action Progress Update 2025

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar



Comhairle nan Eilean Siar NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

Foreword

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Planning Service is entering a very challenging period as £6.2bn of Renewable Energy build-out contracts go through the Planning system (Grid upgrade, Onshore Wind and Offshore Wind). This coincides with a time when there is a shortage of Planners available to take up roles in Local Authorities. Despite these considerable resource constraints, the Comhairle has remained focused on delivery of NPIF actions and, although there is much to do, much has already been achieved. NPIF has proved to be a good mechanism for identifying improvement measures which translate into real service improvements and the Comhairle looks forward to participating in the next stage of the NPIF process.

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.](#)

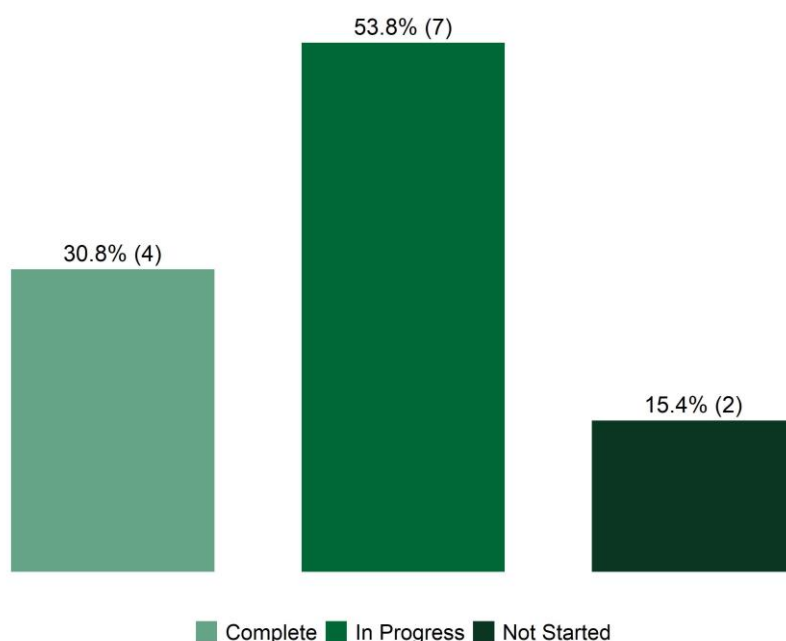
In year two of the NPIF the planning authorities are to update on their progress with the improvement actions. This report sets out the progress Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.



Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

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

Comhairle nan Eilean Siar has 13 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:



Action 1: In view of the approaching Renewable Energy Major Projects challenge, work with the Planning Hub and a peer Local Authority to ensure that sufficient Planning resource is in place through secondment, outsourcing etc

In Progress

Progress against this action: Two failed attempts at recruitment of a Major Projects Planning Officer (no suitable applicant) and going back out to advertisement in January.

The following next steps are proposed: Working with Aberdeenshire Council who provided valuable peer-review support for our first Major Project application and hopeful of some Service Level Agreement work in 2026 once Aberdeenshire Council resources free up.

Third attempt at recruitment of a Major Projects Planning Officer to take place and Post Establishment processes are underway for recruitment of a new Marine Planning Officer.



Action 2: Through Skills Audit and building on the existing Workforce Strategy, develop the skills required for NPF4 delivery

In Progress

Progress against this action: Skills Audit yet to be carried out but there has been renewed focus on learning opportunities for Planning staff.

The following next steps are proposed: Carry out Skills Audit but can't be a priority until we see a gap in Major Project applications.

Action 3: Raise awareness of NPIF outcomes and actions across the Comhairle and embed NPIF led improvement culture within the Planning Service

In Progress

Progress against this action: NPIF outcomes have been discussed with the Chief Executive and, following the Year 2 Meeting (and peer-review meeting, if required), a full report on NPIF outcomes and future requirements will go to the Council. Planning Service staff are working to the NPIF Improvement Plan although wider service demands are constraining delivery in some lower priority areas.

The following next steps are proposed: NPIF outcomes will be reported to Full Council once Year 2 meetings are complete.

Action 4: Offer Planning training to all Elected Members given their decision-making role at Full Council

In Progress

Progress against this action: Planning Training Day offered in Summer 2025 but limited take-up outwith Planning Applications Board members. Given Full Council determination of Major Project applications (first determination on 19/11), a detailed report was submitted to the Sustainable Development Committee of 25/11 outlining Elected Members' role in Planning Permission (in principle and matters specified by condition), Ministerial intervention in Planning Permission, Section 36, Section 37 and Marine Consent applications

The following next steps are proposed: Further Planning Training to be provided but appointment of Chief Planning Officer and determination of Major Projects by Full Council has naturally elevated the profile of Planning with Elected Members.

Experience in delivery of SSEN-T's initial consent has led to a report to the Comhairle seeking some revisions to the Comhairle's Pre-Determination Hearing Protocol, ensuring that the Protocol remains current and fit for purpose.



Action 5: Introduce monthly Chief Planning Officer briefings for Sustainable Development Committee Chair and Vice Chair

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Regular briefings now taking place and proving very helpful for Committee leadership and the Planning Service.

Action 6: Monitor impact of NPF4 on island communities and identify areas for island proofing and refinement for action by Scottish Government

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.
- We do not have the resources we need to do this.

The following next steps are proposed: Address this action once there is a gap in Major Development applications coming in.

Action 7: Develop the use of GIS in spatial analysis

In Progress

Progress against this action: New GIS Officer appointed but fallout / re-build from 2023 cyber incident still taking up much time.

The following next steps are proposed: Focus on developing wider use of GIS once cyber incident work has been cleared.

Action 8: Review the Committee reporting process to reduce report length and rationalise the number of conditions attached

In Progress

Progress against this action: Reports now more succinct and in a more readable format but further work required. Successful introduction of drone footage for large applications as an alternative to time and resource intensive Member site visits.

The following next steps are proposed: Review thinking behind "rationalise number of conditions attached" - experience with SSEN-T application suggests there should be no short



cuts with Conditions. Robust, detailed and adequate-in-number conditions now viewed as the main safeguard against inappropriate development.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: Remove reference to “rationalising the number of conditions”.

Action 9: Explore the potential for Major Project developers to jointly fund a post-consent Conditions Discharge and Enforcement post

In Progress

Progress against this action: Agreement in principle secured from SSEN-T and five Wind Farm developers to contribute to this post over a four year period. Job Description and Person Specification completed and post currently being graded for release in New Year.

The following next steps are proposed: Formal commitment from developers now required.

Action 10: Work with IT colleagues to develop the Comhairle website Planning area, including guidance on submitting a valid Planning application

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.
- We do not have the resources we need to do this.

The following next steps are proposed: Keep under review but not being treated as a priority at the moment.

Action 11: Introduce a Consultees Forum for statutory Planning consultees, internal and external, to share information on pipeline projects, provide support at particular pressure points and maintain good response times

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Consultee Forum has met but need to look at more regular meeting. A new, Government-driven Key Agency Group for major aquaculture projects is taking up a lot of time and, to an extent, is overlapping with this action given that many of the Consultee Forum members are present.



Action 12: Chief Planning Officer to chair Strategic Local Partnership for Housing Group, aligning Government Housing allocation with local delivery on a place-based basis

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Local Housing Strategy now progressing well under the direction of the Chief Planning Officer and a new Housing Services Manager. Legacy Housing is now one of the success stories of the SSEN-T Transmission Link project with SSEN-T funding the building of over 150 new houses for SSEN-T use 2026 to 2030 then donated to a range of local tenures at no cost. Chief Planning Officer led negotiations with SSEN-T on this provision.

Action 13: Introduce regular meetings between the Chief Planning Officer and construction sector representatives

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Chief Planning Officer has met with construction sector leaders individually and made a detailed presentation on pipeline developments to a roundtable of construction sector representatives. Close engagement continues.

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: The Comhairle's peer-review partner was Cairngorms National Park Planning Authority. Direct follow-up discussions have taken place between the respective Chief Planning Officers for both Planning Authorities but distance between the Authorities and the cost of travel / accommodation mean that no face-to-face meeting is envisaged. We await guidance on follow-up procedures from NPIF staff.

