



**Shetland  
Islands  
Council**

**is.**  
improvement **service**

National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

# **Improvement Action Progress Update 2025 Shetland Council**



# Shetland Islands NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

## Foreword

We are currently making progress on most of our actions, working with colleagues across the Council and the development industry to improve the service we give to all our customers and the community as a whole. This is despite several vacancies and ever-increasing workloads, primarily related to energy developments.

## 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.](#)

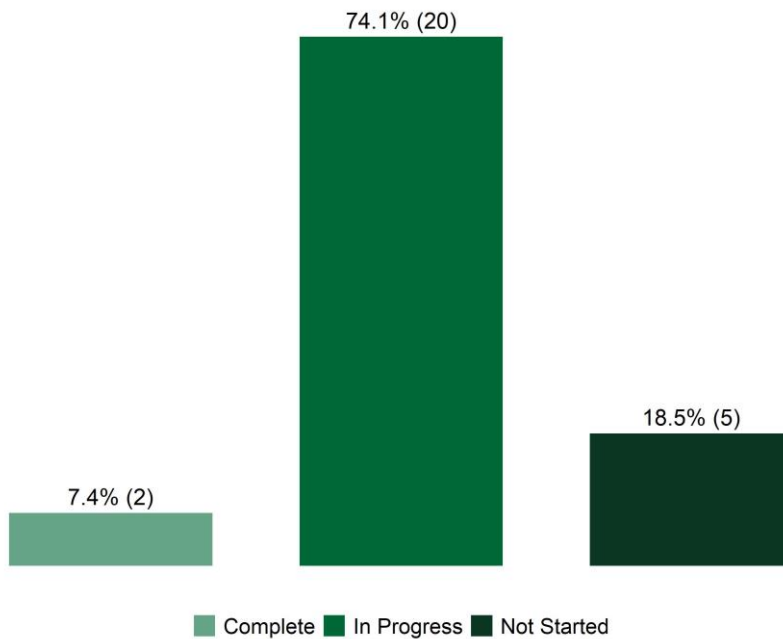
In year two of the NPIF the planning authorities are to update on their progress with the improvement actions. This report sets out the progress Shetland Islands has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.

## Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

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



Shetland Islands has 27 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:



## Action 1: Continue to support and encourage our non RTPI chartered officers to obtain RTPI chartership

### In Progress

Progress against this action: Continuing to work with and encourage officers through the process. We have one officer currently applying and have a pipeline of officers heading towards membership in the long term. We have appointed new graduates, taken on a business support officer as a trainee planner, and created opportunities with vacant posts to support non-planners to embark on a planning career.

The following next steps are proposed: The following next steps are proposed: continued support through Chief Planner and team Leaders, maintain flexibility of career grade and appoint trainees to vacant posts where applicable.

## Action 2: Support Mentoring of Staff within the service, including opportunities for cross service working

### In Progress

Progress against this action: We have regular meeting within Teams and one to ones with individual officers to identify support and training needs. This includes monthly meetings with business support officers to ensure staff are trained on current and changing practices.

The following next steps are proposed: continue our themed liaison meetings with all planners - so far, we have focused on biodiversity and energy with housing next.



## **Action 3: Continue to develop our strategy for recruitment and professional development and examine additional methods including exploring the potential for apprenticeships and graduate placements**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: As above, we will continue to grow our own. We have a history of supporting summer students to move up through the profession and their career, up to and including Team Leader level. We continue to support officers to become qualified planners through distance learning.

The following next steps are proposed: We have looked at the council's graduate placement scheme, from which we successfully recruited to permanent posts in the past. Changes to the scheme means we cannot source planning graduates for placement in the Planning Service in the same way. However, the next intake is 2027, and we will seek to engage in that process.

## **Action 4: On completion of the Development Services Strategic Framework, we will align with it and seek to use this to prioritise workloads within the Planning Service**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: The Strategic Framework is not completed yet but is now nearing completion. The development of the Framework has helped to encourage better working relationships across Development Services (Planning, Housing, Economic Development, Transport and Community Planning). The framework will be presented to Councillors in February alongside budget proposals.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to contribute to the development of the Strategic Framework, ensuring the role of Planning is well referenced throughout.

## **Action 5: Encourage a greater take up of the continuous conversations offer.**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Continuous conversations is a corporate approach to engagement with officers and relies on officers approaching their line managers. This has happened at different levels within teams and is supplemented by regular meetings with teams including monthly Planning Service Team meetings, fortnightly Team Leader meetings and regular team meetings.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to promote the take up of the offer.



## **Action 6: Continue to promote the culture of improvement and shared learning, giving officers opportunities for upskilling**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Attendance of webinars and courses is supported by management in terms of time and funding. Training has included sessions provided by the Improvement Service and approaches have been made to the Planning Hub for support. Recent sessions include Planning for Hydrogen, the use of AI in back-office systems, and built heritage courses.

The following next steps are proposed: Ongoing support to identify the most useful cases to support upskilling across the teams.

## **Action 7: Explore stronger relationships with Planning Schools to support professional Development and recruitment**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Working through HOPS to look at opportunities for closer working with universities.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to respond positively to any requests received for placements or project support.

## **Action 8: Continue to be actively involved in promoting Planning is a profession by supporting school visits, providing work experience opportunities and attending jobs fairs. Subject to staff availability and capacity**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We have worked closely with our colleagues in the Councils Youth Services team to put together a programme for visiting schools. We have now welcomed 2 school groups into the Planning Service for educational visits which has involved a combination of meet the planner type learning and some practical 'day in the life' type exercises. The content of the sessions is adaptable based on the age and experience of the young people visiting. We welcome request for work experience and have in the past hosted many school pupils for a week, or for more senior pupils ½ day a week for a term or more.

The following next steps are proposed: We will continue to work with our Youth Services Colleagues to programme in further school visits. We will continue to welcome requests for work experience and work directly with those young people to establish the best experience based on their area of interest / study.



## **Action 9: Recognise the work of officers on projects by entering awards. Gaining National recognition for work achievements**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: To be proactive in submitting completed projects for awards.

## **Action 10: Appoint a Chief Planning Officer as required by the Act**

### **Complete**

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Chief Planner appointed 24 July 2025. The Chief Planner now meets on a regular basis with the other Council officers who hold statutory posts. The meeting is Chaired by the Chief Executive.

## **Action 11: Continue to engage in Planning Policy at National Level, feed information on particular Shetland constraints on development and implementation of NPF4 up to Scottish Government**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We continue to work with HOPS and Scottish Government Planners. We have officers who sit on the HOPS Executive Committee, the Development Plans Sub Committee. We are also active members of the North of Scotland Development Plans Forum which continues to meet regularly.

The following next steps are proposed: We respond to consultations through SIC Corporate Management Team where there is a particular emphasis on raising issues that specifically relate to our local circumstances. For example, the housing crisis in Shetland takes a very different form from the situation in the central belt of Scotland. We are land rich, but construction is even more difficult in the Shetland context, and we continue to ensure solutions are not just focused on central belt issues.



## **Action 12: Continue work with the Scottish Government to pursue adoption of the Shetland Islands Regional Marine Plan in 2025 for the benefit of Shetland’s communities, environment and economy**

### **Complete**

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The Regional Marine Plan was formally Adopted in December 2025.

## **Action 13: Engage in the Development Framework related to Energy Process to provide a strategic spatial direction for Energy growth in Shetland**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: It is critical we continue to work with developers in the energy sectors to reduce impacts, ensure maximum benefit for Shetland whilst meeting climate change targets. We are active members of the Development Framework working group which while developer led also has membership from SIC and a number of Key Agencies.

The following next steps are proposed: We continue to engage in the Development Framework Process, providing Place Making and Planning related input.

## **Action 14: Make full use of UNIFORM IT casework management system. This shall include using AI and data visualisation through Microsoft Power BI and the use of AI. Subject to Council permissions and staff resource**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We continue to work with ICT team of SIC, who are looking for partners keen to identify where and how we can best make use of AI. We have identified volunteers from the Planning Service to work on project relating to our back-office system.

The following next steps are proposed: On-going

## **Action 15: Develop the scope for improved data handling, sharing and analysis between Council Services**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: A data sharing working group has been established within the Council Development Services Department. We are actively involved in promoting data sharing, with a particular focus on sharing our Environmental Baseline Data. We are also



investigating applications such as Power BI and CoPilot to enable quicker data sharing, processing and analysis.

The following next steps are proposed: Initiate Team training opportunities to ensure staff are able to effectively use Microsoft applications available to us such as Power Bi, Co-Pilot etc.

## **Action 16: Explore the potential for the Scottish Government's e- portal to accommodate submission of aquaculture planning applications**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We are relying on a partner or stakeholder to action this.

The following next steps are proposed: We haven't progressed this specifically, but we continue to raise the issue of lack of provision for aquaculture related developments in terms of the portal, the HOPS validation process and other back-office system issues. When Salmon Scotland produce a report stating that salmon is a billion pound a year industry, we must try harder to get our basic systems right.

## **Action 17: Review and implement ways to obtain greater and more meaningful customer feedback.**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: We will consider this internally, but we are assessing the feasibility of reinstating the Developers' Workshops with the Service and the development sector. This was highlighted by developers during the NPIF stakeholder session.

## **Action 18: Better record and monitor pre- app correspondence**

### **Not Started**

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: We do record all pre-applications on our back-office system, and the offer of free pre-application discussions is welcomed by developers. We need to look at ensuring consistency of responses, and the best use of that information.



Ongoing Freedom of Information requests on aquaculture developments may lead to a review of the way we provide this service.

## **Action 19: Work collaboratively with stakeholders to examine the potential for introducing fees for pre-application advice and works licences**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: Discussions with Legal Services are ongoing and we continue to monitor activity elsewhere. With pre-applications, we don't want to inhibit engagement at the early stages of projects when we have an opportunity to steer projects in the right direction before significant costs have been incurred by developers. With Works Licences under the Zetland County Council Act (1974), we have never charged fees, even though the types of development include multi-billion pound inter connectors. It would be hard to charge fees for pre-applications for works Licences when there are no actual fees for the application.

The following next steps are proposed: We continue to wait on Legal Services input.

## **Action 20: Be more proactive in setting up regular key agency engagements meetings. Aim to meet quarterly**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We have regular meetings with some key agencies, other Council Teams and external Trusts scheduled in the diary. Some of these are instigated by the organisations themselves and some of these have been irregular particularly in Development Management team terms, and we need to work on that.

The following next steps are proposed: We have started having regular meetings with our Legal colleagues, are setting up meetings with HR to discuss issues, and have started a series of meeting with our Asset and properties team so that we can understand plans for the Council Estate including housing and education provision.

## **Action 21: Continue to support communities to develop local place plans and aim to investigate ways to support issues with community capacity**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We have been actively supporting Communities to develop Local Place Plans; we now have around 12 Committed Communities with the potential for more. We have engaged PAS to support Communities to compliment the in-house officer support we are offering. This is working well and we have been able to establish a website portal, produce a number of dedicated resources, hold regular meeting / training /support / events.



The following next steps are proposed: Continue to support the LPP groups as they develop their plans.

## **Action 22: Continue to provide input into improvement projects and pilots for the Consenting Task Group for Aquaculture**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We have been actively supporting Communities to develop Local Place Plans, we now have around 12 Committed Communities with the potential for more. We have engaged PAS to support Communities to compliment the in-house officer support we are offering. This is working well and we have been able to establish a website portal, produce a number of dedicated resources, hold regular meeting / training /support / events.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to support the LPP groups as they develop their plans.

## **Action 23: Hold regular meetings with development industry stakeholders (both terrestrial and aquaculture planning) and explore more effective ways of working together**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: This is ongoing. A live application for one of the biggest fish farms in the country is our contribution to the pilot project.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to participate though departure of Team Leader to Scottish Govt will be a hindrance. Once this application is determined, we will review the successes of this aspect of the project, and identify lessons learned with the developer for further discussion with the Consenting Task Group.

## **Action 24: Develop a programme of youth engagement on placemaking**

### **In Progress**

Progress against this action: We are nearing the end of a project working with school age children across the entire School Estate which aims to produce Young Peoples Living Well Locally Plans for every cluster school group in Shetland. We have contracted APIC to undertake the work for us, supported by our own officers and other Council staff working within the education and community sectors.

The following next steps are proposed: We hope to secure funding for the final school cluster groups early in 2026 and hope to complete the project within the first half of 2026.



## Action 25: Promote the use of Processing agreements in Marine Development pilot projects

### In Progress

Progress against this action: Updated website and highlighted on our Planning News pages. we have developed a new template for developers.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to promote through the future industry meetings and monitor use of new forms.

## Action 26: Undertake a review of conditions

### In Progress

Progress against this action: A start has been made on this, with a small team looking at existing conditions on land and sea.

The following next steps are proposed: a draft is with officers, prior to roll out.

## Action 27: Convert Action Programme to Delivery Programme

### Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: In 2026 we need to make producing a Delivery programme a priority Action, this will involve a re-allocation of resources within the Development Plans & Heritage Team.

## 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 organise a follow up meeting.

Additional information: to be confirmed.

