

THINK PIECE

National Planning Framework

Reflections on the second year of the National Planning Improvement Framework.

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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 part of 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 National Planning Improvement team since September 2023 has been engaging collaboratively with stakeholders on the development of the new National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) and the approach we have taken is a creative and relatively new way of working.

We have now come to the end of the second year of the NPIF. We sent a survey around all the planning authorities to gather their feedback on the process and how we can improve for the next year. 20 out of the 34 planning authorities responded.

This Think Piece reflects the second year of NPIF; it shares our reflections on the process that we undertook, the feedback we have received from planning authorities and what learning we will be taking into future years.

You can find the final outputs of the NPIF [on our webpages](#).

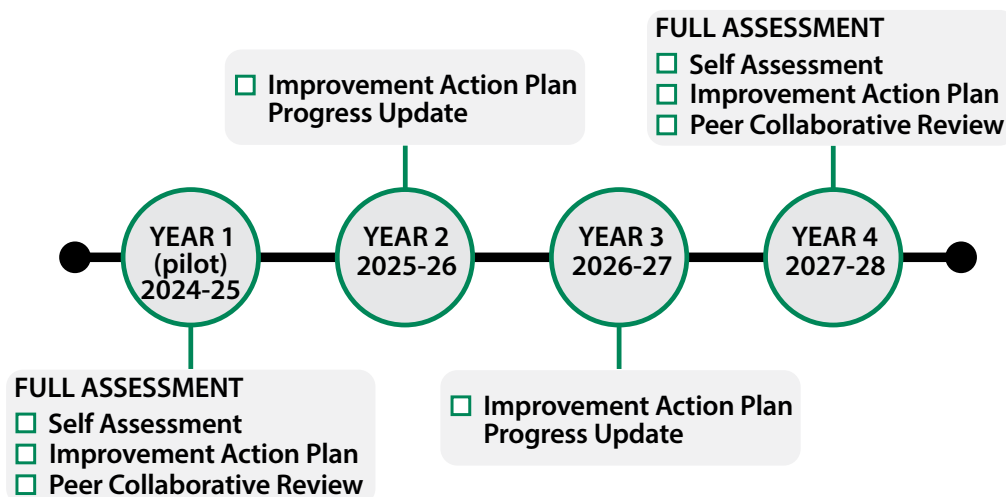
You can find an evaluation of the pilot [on our webpages](#).



Process taken to reporting in year 2025/2026

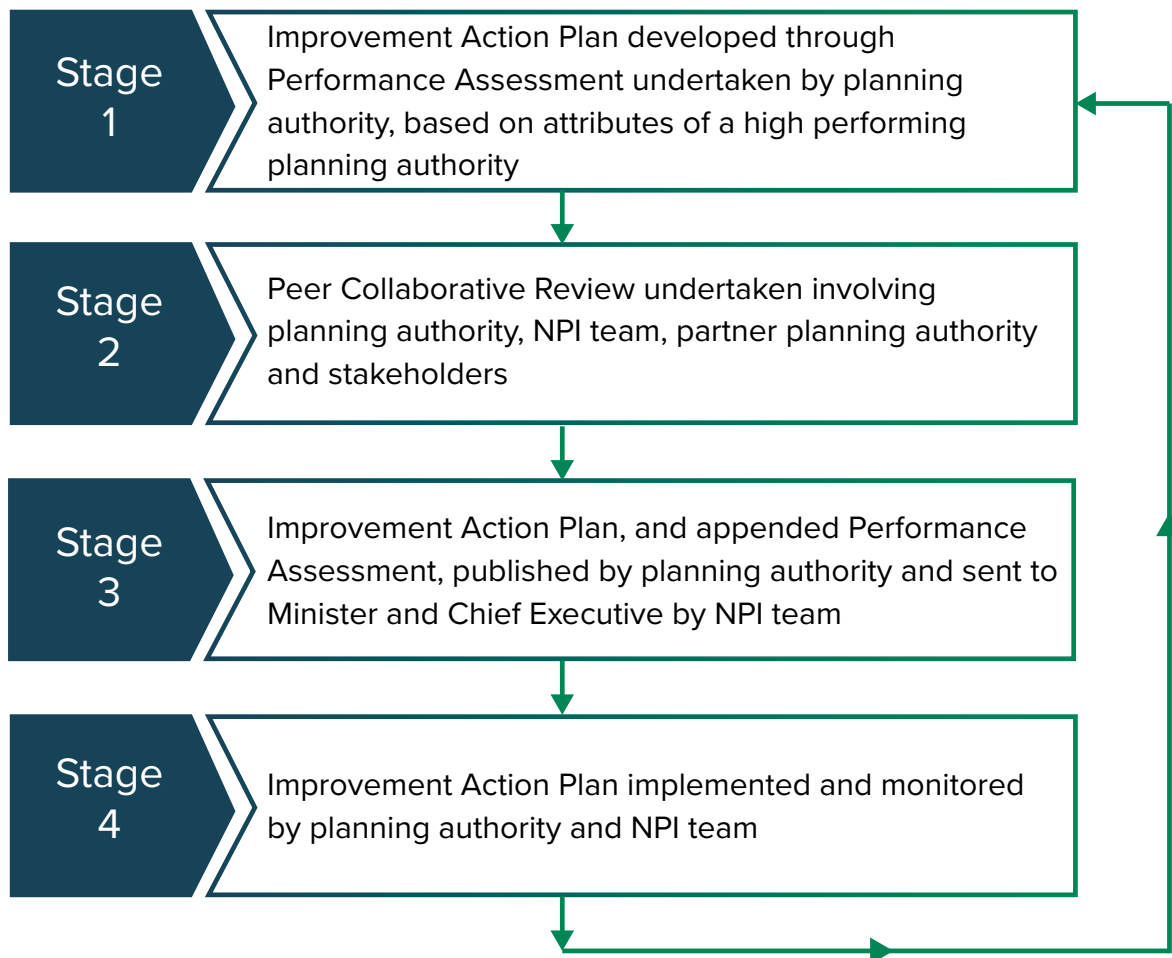
One of the key learnings from the pilot was around the time and resources needed to complete the process. From this, it was agreed by the High Level Group for Planning Performance that planning authorities will only undertake the NPIF full assessment process every three years. This allows time for the planning authorities to focus on taking forward the improvement actions that they have identified in the pilot.

The diagram below sets out the timescales for the NPIF. The second year was completed between July 2025 and March 2026.



In the second and third year of the NPIF we were looking for planning authorities to provide an update on progress they had made with their improvement actions. This is stage four of the NPIF process - “Improvement Action Plan implemented and monitored by planning authority and NPI team”.





We published [guidance](#) for the planning authorities on the process they were to take.

The diagram below sets out the four stages the planning authorities were to follow in the second year. We first asked the planning authorities to ‘check in’ with their partner authority and peer collaborative review group. This could be through a meeting or an email update. They were then to complete a survey updating on their improvement action progress. Following this, meet with the NPI team to discuss progress and next steps. The NPI team then desktop published the report.



4a	Planning authority 'check in' with partner authority and peer collaborative review group	Jun-Sept
4b	Planning authority completes NPIF year 2 survey	Deadline 30 Sept
4c	Planning authority pairs meet up with NPI to discuss IAP progress and next steps	Oct-Nov
4d	Year 2 Performance Action Assessment report published and sent to CEO and Minister	Jan

Learning for future years

In terms of the time, it took the planning authorities to complete the process, 85% said they would need the same amount of time to complete the third year.



“It has been much easier and taken less resource to complete year 2 feedback.”



“We found the year two process to be reasonable and proportionate in terms of resource implications and timescales. The focus on reporting progress against the improvement actions identified in year 1, rather than completing another full assessment (as with the former PPF process), was a significant improvement in terms of resource / timescale demands. This approach also allows for / supports work on longer term improvement actions spanning more than one year (whereas the previous PPF processes tended to focus attention on short term actions and deliverables).”



“Only completing the self-assessment every three years and providing an update in the interim years has/will allow us to focus on the delivery of the actions with the limited resources we have in the service. It allows sufficient time for the actions to be delivered in a meaningful way to deliver improvements and change where required.”

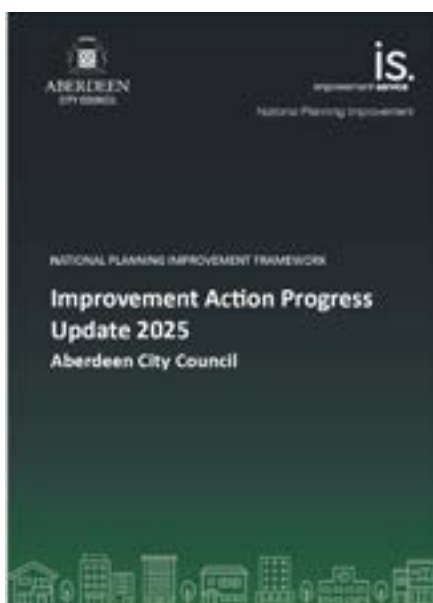
Improvement Action Progress Update Survey and Report

During the pilot, we asked each authority to create their own reports with the templates provided. We were told that this could add pressure on already stretched teams, whilst it also made the resulting data harder to compare. Given this, in the second year, when we asked for an update on their progress with the improvement actions, a more standardised and efficient approach was needed. To achieve this, the NPI team collaborated with the IS digital planning team and leveraged their data collection, analysis and automation experience.

KOBO ODK data-collection tools were used to collect data in a consistent, analysis-ready format. Using Kobo allowed each planning authority to submit information in a structured way, making the results directly comparable. It also enabled the integration of contextual data—such as each authority’s existing planning improvement actions—so respondents could review and comment on their own progress as they completed the survey.

The planning authorities were to simply fill out the online survey that detailed all their improvement actions, and it asked if each action was complete, in progress, not started, or not feasible. There were a number of follow up questions based on their answers.

Once all survey responses were gathered, **R Markdown** was used to transform the raw data into a complete suite of reports—one for each of Scotland’s 34 planning authorities.



Using R Markdown for automated reporting

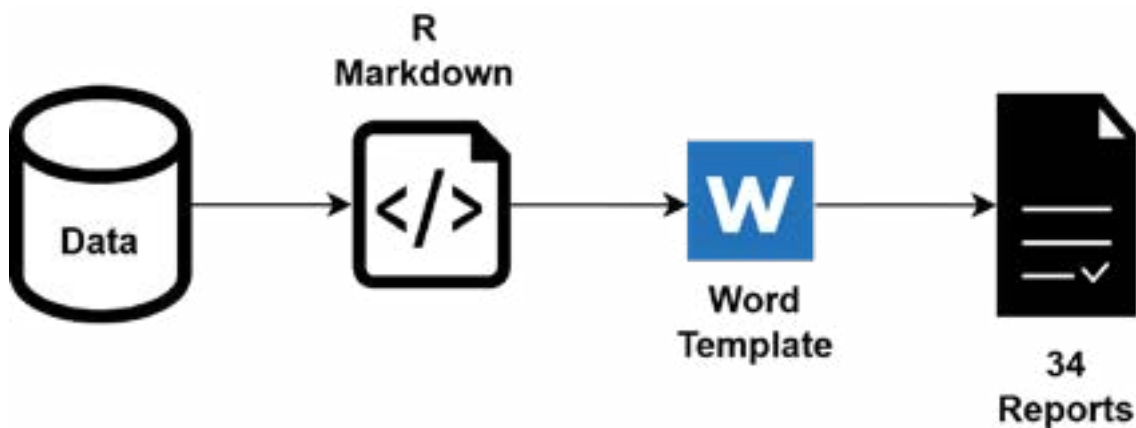
Creating the automated reporting pipeline involved four key steps:

Step 1: Reorganise and clean the data, and add introductory text to provide context for the survey results.

Step 2: Create a Word template with the required styling, including headers, footers, and brand-appropriate colours.

Step 3: Build an R Markdown document that pulls in the relevant survey results, structures them into a report, and generates the necessary charts.

Step 4: Develop a rendering script to cycle through all 34 authorities, producing a tailored report for each one based on its submitted data.



Benefits of the automated approach

- Planning authorities no longer need to produce their own reports - just complete a survey.
- Reports are now fully standardised, making them easier to read, compare, and share.
- Data can be reviewed and analysed far more efficiently for a range of purposes.
- The entire process is repeatable, providing a sustainable reporting method for future years.

When we surveyed the planning authorities, **55% found the survey useful and 45% very useful.**

There were a number of suggestions to improve the survey, such as getting a PDF return of the responses, greater clarity on the amount of information needed, bigger text boxes, and allowing a number of people to edit and view the survey.

All of these will be incorporated into the next survey.



“The process worked well for us. Removing the need for in-house desktop publication was a significant benefit. The ability to make minor changes to the final version of the report was also welcome, as this gave us the flexibility to reflect changes in circumstances since submitting our initial survey response.”



“We like that the Improvement Service creates and publishes the reports - this does free up a lot of desktop publishing and resource (both within our team and other departments) and we like that there is consistency now between the format, content and appearance across planning authorities.”



Meeting between planning authority and NPI

The NPI team plays a ‘critical friend’ role in the process. In doing this, we probe and challenge the progress being made by the planning authorities.

After they completed the survey, we read through the answers. This helped us to understand where planning authorities are struggling to take forward actions and where support might be needed.

We then invited the planning authorities to meet with us to discuss their progress and next steps in an hour and a half long meeting via Microsoft Teams. During the meeting we:

- Acknowledged any actions that they have completed and discussed the outcomes of these.
- Discussed the actions that are in progress or where they hadn’t made any progress, to identify where support is needed.

When asked in the feedback survey, **100% of those planning authorities who answered found the year two meeting very useful or useful.**



“the review meeting was very useful and helped us to see we were on track and had made progress.”



“The year 2 meeting was helpful and productive - a similar approach in year 3 would seem appropriate.”



“The setup, tone and organisation of the meeting with Susan and Craig worked very well and there are no suggestions at this times.”



“Useful to have a critical friend approach and also have a constructive conversation with the NPIF Team – welcome this as part of the process.”

Final reflections

Overall, the feedback we have had on the second year of NPIF has been very positive. We will continue to improve the process going into the third year.

Contacts

The NPIF will be project managed by the National Planning Improvement team (NPI), based in the Improvement Service.

The key contacts are:

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