

GUIDANCE

National Planning Improvement Framework

Updated June 2026



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What is the National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF)?

The National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) supports the improvement of planning authorities. It was tested incrementally in three separate cohorts throughout the 2024/25 financial year.

The planning authorities undertake a self-assessment to determine how they are performing against the '12 attributes of a high performing planning authority'. These attributes outline what a planning authority needs to perform well. They are split into five themes and incorporate the inputs, processes, and outcomes of the service. In the lower scoring attributes, improvement actions are agreed to take forward.

This guidance sets out the process for the NPIF. It firstly provides some context and background on the pilot and how the NPIF was developed, followed by the process undertaken for the full assessment of NPIF, then goes into the details on how planning authorities update on their progress with their improvement actions.

How was the NPIF developed?

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced a new approach to measuring the performance of planning authorities. It made it mandatory for planning authorities to prepare a report on their performance as soon as reasonably practical after the end of each financial year. The report is to be published and submitted to Ministers.

A new role of the National Planning Improvement Champion was introduced in the Act to monitor the performance of planning authorities and provide advice to them, and other persons considered appropriate, on the steps that might be taken to improve. From this, the National Planning Improvement (NPI) team at the Improvement Service was established.



Collaboration with stakeholders

The NPIF was developed in collaboration with stakeholders from a range of perspectives and interests in planning covering different sectors. An open call for ideas took place in September 2023 and asked three questions:

- What are the outcomes we need the planning system to deliver to have impact?
- What makes a high-performing planning authority?
- How can we measure this?



[Report outlining findings of call for ideas.](#)

The information from this was fed into discussions with key stakeholders. The process was supported and guided by the High Level Group on Planning Performance, which comprises Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS), SOLACE, the Royal Town Planning Institute, the Key Agencies Group, and SOLAR. The High Level Group has an applicant sub-group comprising ‘customers’ of the planning service feeds into it. There were regular discussions with the Heads of Planning Performance and Planning Sub Committee. This led to the development of the NPIF that was piloted in 2023/24.

Learning from the Planning Performance Framework Model

The NPIF builds upon the learning gathered from 12 years of Planning Performance Frameworks, delivered by planning authorities and the subsequent marking undertaken by Scottish Government.

The NPIF aims

The NPIF aims to support a planning authority to assess their performance, identify areas of improvement, and ascertain how best to take action to maximise their effectiveness and efficiency. The renewed focus on improvement and the robustness of the new NPIF process aims to provide the range of organisations with a stake in planning with confidence that the planning authority is fully committed to, and ambitious in, continuing to improve their performance.

The NPIF aims to support the purpose of planning to “manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest through” ensuring that:

- The **planning system** enables the delivery of sustainable, liveable, and productive places.



- **Planning services** are equipped to work effectively and efficiently, embedding continuous improvement.
- **Users** are able to engage constructively with the planning system and planning service.

Link with National Outcomes

The NPIF recognises the need for a mix of qualitative and quantitative indicators to measure planning authority performance more effectively. This has led to a shift incorporating more outcomes-based measures. By way of context, there are a number of ambitions for planning and the outcomes it should be seeking to achieve.

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced a purpose of planning to “manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest”. It also contained 6 outcomes for planning:

- Meeting the housing needs of people living in Scotland including, in particular, the housing needs for older people and disabled people.
- Improving the health and wellbeing of people living in Scotland.
- Increasing the population of rural areas of Scotland.
- Improving equality and eliminating discrimination.
- Meeting any targets relating to the reduction of emissions of greenhouse gases, within the meaning of the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, contained in or set by virtue of that Act.
- Securing positive effects for biodiversity.

The 4th National Planning Framework (NPF4) sets out the need to plan future places in line with six overarching spatial principles:

- **Just transition.** We will empower people to shape their places and ensure the transition to net zero is fair and inclusive.
- **Conserving and recycling assets.** We will make productive use of existing buildings, places, infrastructure, and services, locking in carbon, minimising waste, and building a circular economy.
- **Local living.** We will support local liveability and improve community health and wellbeing by ensuring people can easily access services, greenspace, learning, work, and leisure locally.



- **Compact urban growth.** We will limit urban expansion so we can optimise the use of land to provide services and resources, including carbon storage, flood risk management, blue and green infrastructure, and biodiversity.
- **Rebalanced development.** We will target development to create opportunities for communities and investment in areas of past decline and manage development sustainably in areas of high demand.
- **Rural revitalisation.** We will encourage sustainable development in rural areas, recognising the need to grow and support urban and rural communities together.

These principles will play a key role in delivering on the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Scottish Government's national outcomes and through these spatial principles NPF4 will support the planning and delivery of:

- Sustainable places, where we reduce emissions, restore, and better connect biodiversity.
- Liveable places, where we can all live better, healthier lives.
- Productive places, where we have a greener, fairer, and more inclusive well-being economy.

Given this, the NPIF assessment of planning authority attributes is contextualised within broader outcomes-based frameworks. It highlights an important role for the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes in linking planning authority performance with the quality outcomes. They have a good 'read-across' with the Place Standard and therefore support the implementation of the Place Principle.

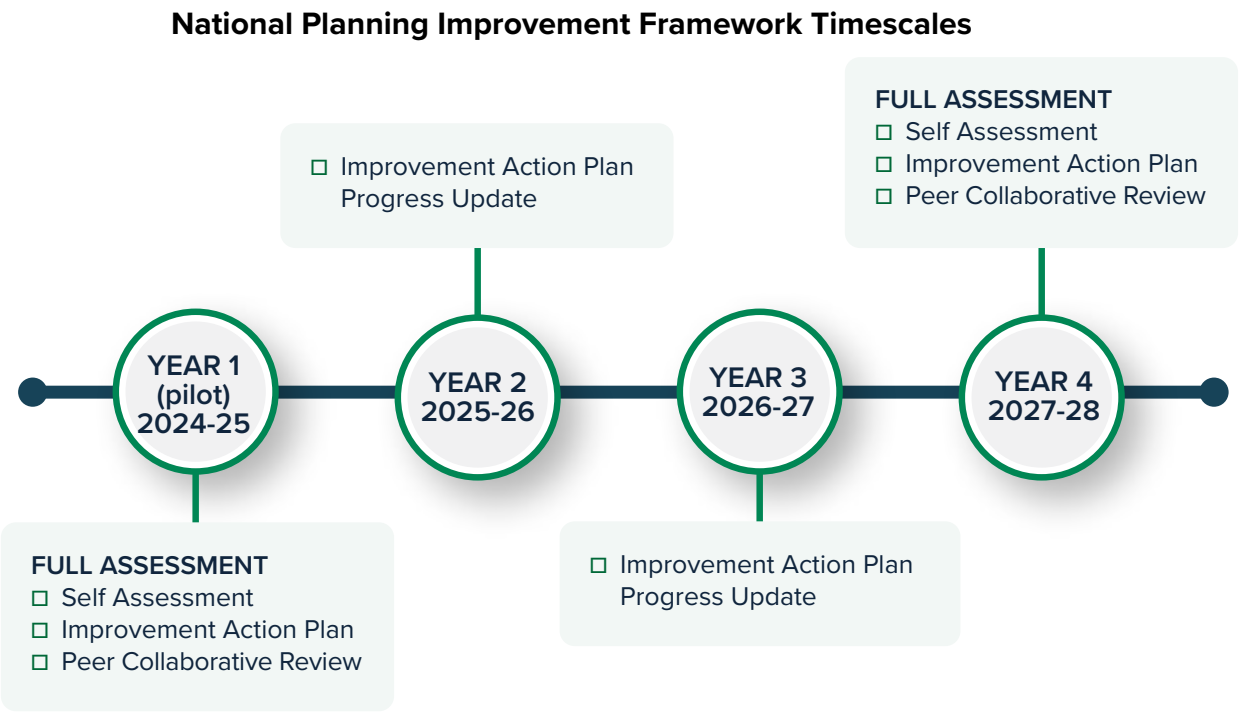


The diagram below sets out the relationships between key measures including the UN Sustainable Development Goals, the Scottish Government’s National Performance Framework, NPF4 and the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes.



How does the NPIF work?

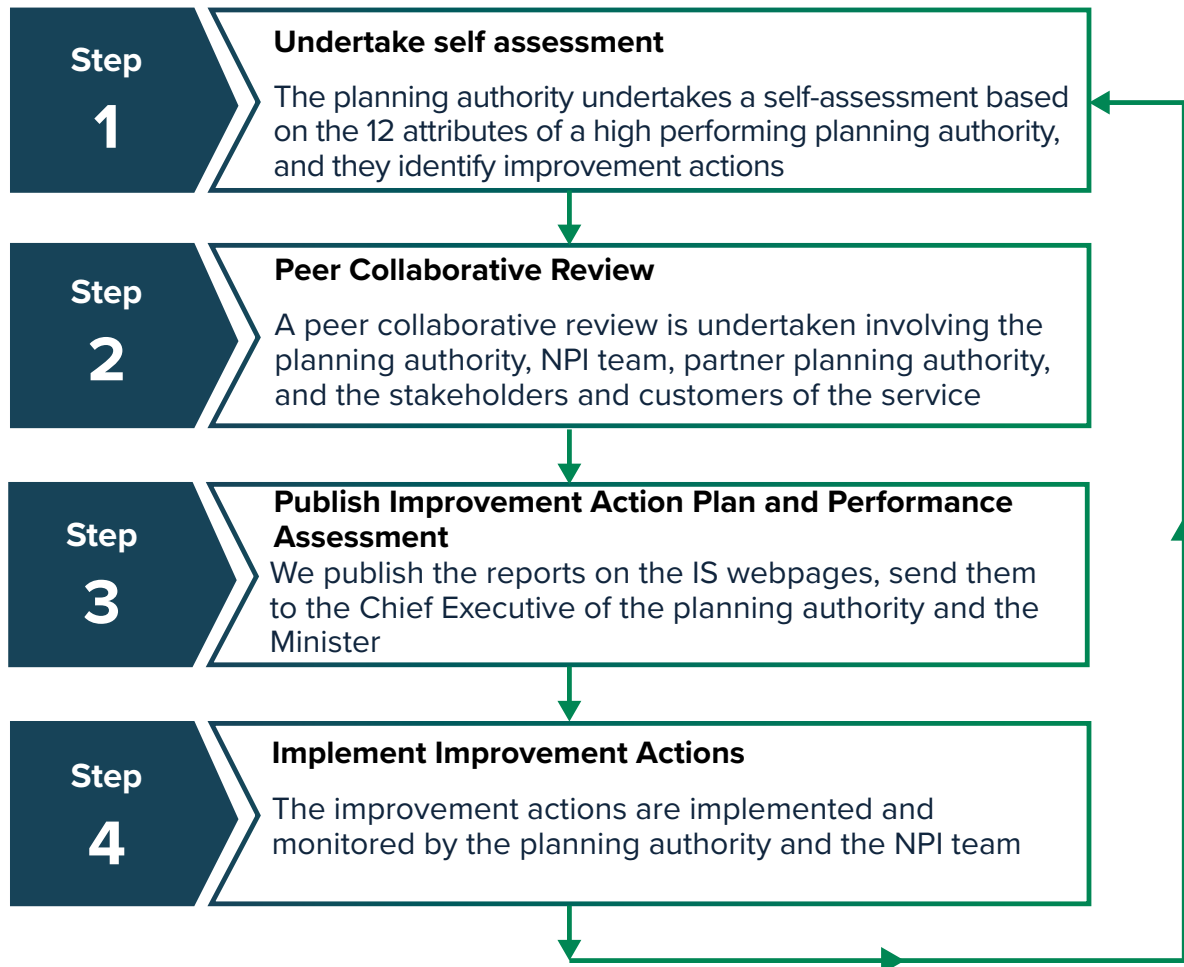
The NPIF full assessment is undertaken every three years, with an Improvement Action Plan Progress Update taking place in the years between the full assessment. This allows time for progress to be made on the improvement actions. The below diagram illustrates the timescales for the first round of NPIF.



The NPIF full assessment process

This section outlines the process for full assessment that the planning authorities undertake every three years.

The process for the full assessment comprises of four stages:



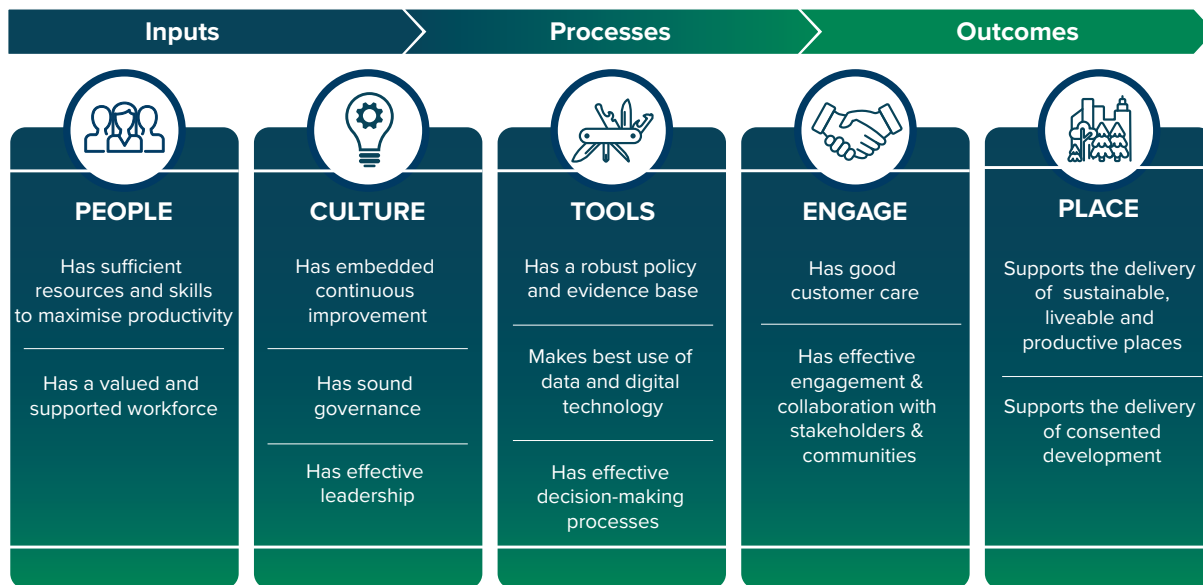
Step 1: Undertake self-assessment

Step one supports planning authorities to:

- Self-assess their performance.
- Identify areas of activity that they should improve and the steps they will take to do this.
- Identify and provide details of examples of good practice.

The 12 attributes of a high performing planning authority

The self-assessment is focused on the 12 attributes of a highly performing planning authority, which are grouped into five themes; people, culture, tools, engage and place.



Under the five themes, there are 12 attributes. No one attribute is the measure of the planning authority's performance. It is important to bear in mind that performance is best represented through looking at the combination of the 12 attributes to recognise the dependencies and connections between each of them.

Under each attribute are the contributory factors. These are questions for the planning authorities to consider. They assess themselves against all these factors to determine how they are performing in this area.

Below illustrates the contributory factors that were used in the pilot. These will be updated slightly for when the planning authorities go through the full assessment again, based on feedback we had from the planning authorities.



People

A high performing planning authority needs to have the right number of people to do the work expected of it with the right skills set. It also needs to have a strategy to ensure that it retains and recruits the right staff in the future. It supports staff to upskill and to be prepared for changes in policy, legislation, and new circumstances.

The planning authority has sufficient resources and skills to maximise productivity

- Does the planning authority have the sufficient level of staff to carry out all activities within the required timeframes?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to carry out all activities within the required timeframes with its current budget?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to carry out all activities within the required timeframes with its current income?
- Does the planning authority received responses from consultees within the prescribed timescale when assessing planning applications?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to access the appropriate advice, expertise, evidence and data it requires?

The planning authority has a valued and supported workforce

- Does the planning authority have a workforce planning strategy in place?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to support staff development and upskilling and send staff on relevant courses?
- Does the planning authority have a deliverable commitment to support staff health and wellbeing?



Culture

A high performing planning authority has a positive culture through ensuring it has sound governance, effective leadership and a commitment to continuous improvement. The authority has an identified chief planner, who is supported by a strong leadership group to advise on decision-making, policy and operational management.

The planning authority has embedded continuous improvement

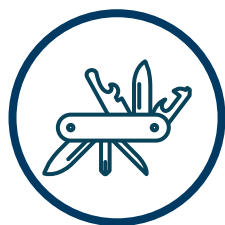
- Has the planning authority undertaken an annual assessment of its performance and acted upon areas previously identified as in need of improvement?
- Has the planning authority achieved recognition at relevant awards or through performance accreditation frameworks?
- Has the planning authority engaged in peer review, good practice exchange or improvement activities?
- Has the planning authority addressed any complaints upheld by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and have evidence of this and that it has learned from valid case?

The planning authority has sound governance

- Does the planning authority have an effective scheme of delegation in place?
- Have all councillors who exercise a planning function undergone statutory training and is there is evidence of ongoing training for members?
- Have more than x % of officer recommendations have been overturned by councillors at committee or Local Review Body?

The planning authority has effective leadership

- Does the planning authority have an identified Chief Planning Officer in place?
- Does the Chief Planning Officer advise on corporate decision making and policy within the broader organisation?
- Is the planning authority's Chief Planning Officer a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute?
- Does the Chief Planning Officer advise and support external bodies through engagement in organisations' committees, advisory groups or working groups?
- Does the planning authority have a strong leadership team that supports a culture of continuous improvement?



Tools

A high performing planning authority needs to have an effective local development plan and other strategies in place to provide a vision for the future of the area. It needs to be able to set and deliver on policy ambitions and priorities by clearly informing decision making and providing certainty and predictability for communities, developers and investment. The authority's development management systems need to be effective in making the right decisions about development and be efficient as possible in doing this. The planning authority makes best use of digital technology and how it manages and uses data.

The planning authority has a robust policy and evidences base

- Does the planning authority have an up to date Local Development Plan in place and/or is on track to adoption?
- Does the planning authority have an up to date Regional Spatial Strategy in place/or on track to adoption?
- Has the planning authority's Local Development Plan Evidence Report been approved by the Department of Planning and Environmental Appeals and/ or on track for approval?
- Have the application of the Local Development Plan's policies been found to be deficient at appeal or judicial review?

The planning authority makes best use of data and digital technology

- Has the planning authority encouraged and promoted planning applications to be submitted through the e-development portal?
- Does the planning authority have a data governance strategy in place for the management of planning data?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to use interactive web-mapping, GIS and spatial data?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to use digital approaches to engagement, including website, social media and other platforms?

The planning authority has an effective and efficient decision making process

- Does the planning authority planning have the ability to make decisions on planning applications within the required timeframes?
- Are less than x% of planning decisions overturned at appeal or judicial review?
- Does the planning authority have an up to date Enforcement Charter in place?
- Does the planning authority have the ability to resolve enforcement cases?



Engage

A high performing planning authority should ensure a wide range of people are involved in shaping their future places. Engagement should be fair and inclusive, early, collaborative, meaningful and proportionate and should include difficult to reach groups. The authority should engage with a wide range of partners at a national, regional and local level to ensure a joined-up approach and that links are made across policies and programmes. The planning authority should demonstrate good customer care, transparency and effective communication.

The planning authority has good customer care

- Does the planning authority have the ability to offer pre-application advice where it is requested?
- Has the planning authority held regular engagement events with developers and communities?
- Do the results from the customer and stakeholder survey show that customers are satisfied with the service offer by the planning authority?

The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities

- Does the planning authority have a community engagement strategy and infrastructure in place to ensure engagement is early, collaborative, meaningful and proportionate?
- Has the planning authority undertaken community engagement, for example consistent and effective use of the Place Standard Tool, to inform decision-making processes?
- Has the planning authority engaged with a good representation of the community including young people, gypsies and travellers, people with protected characteristics, including disability, race, age, sex and sexual orientation, and including people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds?
- Has the planning authority supported the production of Local Place Plans when requested?
- Do the results from the customer and stakeholder survey show that stakeholders are satisfied with their collaboration with the planning authority?



Place

A high performing planning authority should demonstrate place leadership by taking a collaborative place-based approach in line with the Place Principle. It should use the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes in decision-making processes, to achieve the three spatial principles outlined in NPF4: Sustainable places, where we reduce emissions, restore and better connect biodiversity; Liveable places, where we can all live better, healthier lives; and Productive places, where we have a greener, fairer and more inclusive wellbeing economy. The planning authority should seek to ensure that there are no impediments to delivering agreed development.

The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places

- Is the planning authority aware of the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes, the evidence that sits behind them and is it using them in decision-making processes?
- Has the planning authority identified tools and approaches to delivering sustainable, liveable and productive places and is implementing them?

The planning authority supports the delivery of consented development

- Has the planning authority provided clear and proportionate expectations of Section 75 agreements and set these out in the LDP and pre-application discussions and they are concluded within 6 months of resolution to grant?
- Does the planning authority take a proportionate approach to imposing conditions?
- Does the planning authority have an ambitious local housing land requirement that exceeds the Minimum All Tenure Housing land requirements in NPF4 and is it on track to support delivery?
- Are the number of processing agreements the planning authority has agreed with applicants increasing?
- Does the planning authority have an effective delivery programme in place that supports the delivery of development on the ground?

Once the planning authority has outlined the evidence under each attribute, answering the contributory factors, they use the following scoring matrix:

 PRIORITISE	 REVIEW	 DEVELOP	 BUILD UPON	 CONSOLIDATE
No progress	Making limited progress	Making fair progress	Making good progress	Making excellent progress
5	4	3	2	1
Prioritise fundamental review and revisit approach taken. Engage with NPI Learn from others	Review ambition Review approach taken Inform NPI Learn from others	Increase ambition in targets Review and improve implementation	Increase ambition in targets Share learning with others	Share learning with others

They grade the 12 attributes from ‘making excellent progress’ to ‘no progress’. The scoring matrix was designed to encourage the planning authority to think about what actions they may need to take to tackle the issues identified in the assessment. The scores themselves are not the focus, and the aim is not to get all 1’s, as there is always room for improvement. It’s there to help stimulate thinking around actions to take forward.

If a planning authority score ‘making excellent progress’ or ‘making good progress’ on the scoring matrix, we ask that an example of good practice is provided. If a score of ‘making good progress’, ‘making fair progress’, ‘making limited progress’, or ‘no progress’ is given, then we are looking for the planning authority to consider what improvement actions they will take.

From this, the planning authorities develop an action plan for the areas of improvement identified. It should specify the action and outcome expected, the owner of that action, priority, timescales, and the resource required. The improvement action plan gives an opportunity to outline the ambitions for the planning service in the short, medium, and long term. Some actions are within the control of the planning authority, and other actions may involve partners.

Step 2: Peer Collaborative Review

The Peer Collaborative Review aims to provide constructive challenge on the improvement action plan and performance assessment that has emerged from step one. It offers a chance to support one another in addressing common issues across the sector and improving the overall performance of the sector. It facilitates a ‘deep dive’ identifying areas of progress and areas where improvement is required.

Peer Review Partner

Each of the planning authorities has been paired with another. They are to be a source of advice for one another and will be part of the peer collaborative review process. Each planning authority supports the other by:

- Commenting on and constructively critiquing the self-assessment and action plan.
- Advising possible improvement actions that could be taken based on experience or knowledge of others tackling similar challenges.
- Helping draw out examples of good practice that others would find useful.
- Generally providing support through acting as a critical friend that the planning authority can call upon.

It is up to the planning authorities how often they would like to meet, how they plan to support one another, who will be involved from each authority, and arrangements for keeping in touch.

Peer Collaborative Review Workshop

The Peer Collaborative Review is a workshop held face to face or online. They are half-day sessions.

Aims of the workshop

The workshop aims to bring together the key stakeholders of the planning authority to discuss the self-assessment and improvement action plan. This is to 'sense check' the self-assessment with those who interact with the planning authority the most. The key question to be considered at the workshop is:

What improvement actions should the planning authority take?

The meetings take place under the Chatham House Rule, which means that anything said in the meeting should not be attributed publicly to the person who said it without their permission. The meetings are not used to discuss individual planning applications or development plan policies but rather focus on the proposed Improvement Action Plan.

The workshops are to be forward looking, allowing participants to contribute ideas and solutions that support the planning authority to improve. The workshops are the chance to support one another in addressing common issues across the sector and improving the overall performance of the sector. All involved will respect the confidentiality of all documentation provided and the content of the meeting.

Benefits of the approach

- Provides focused, specific support and challenge around those services or areas which have been identified as in need of development or improvement, from external colleagues with understanding and expertise in the local context and landscape.
- It provides an opportunity for the host authority to engage in a ‘deep dive’ on its performance and opportunities for improvement.
- It provides value-for-money, with planning authorities, and others, helping each other to provide improvement support at a lower cost than is available through external consultancy.

The peer collaborative review process is led by the planning authority undergoing assessment.

The planning authority will:

- Undertake necessary and relevant preparatory work, organising the date, time and place and deciding who will facilitate the workshop.
- Provide the draft improvement action plan and draft performance assessment, and best practice case studies to all participants a week before the meeting, stating that you are willing to accept written comments in advance.

Participants

The participants are chosen by the planning authority. A group of at least 12 people is advised to allow for a balance of considered perspectives and to make the workshops manageable.

The peer collaborative review workshop could, for example, involve representatives from:

- The host planning authority.
- The partner planning authority.
- Other relevant functions within the host local authority or national park authority that have a bearing on how the planning authority works or for example community planning or public health colleagues.
- Partners and stakeholders such as statutory consultees and Key Agencies.
- Users and beneficiaries of the planning system such as community councils and groups, developers, local agents and architects, and appropriate NGOs. It may be useful to use umbrella groups to help identify appropriate people

to take part such as Homes for Scotland, Scottish Property Federation, Scottish Renewables, Scotland's Towns Partnership, and the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland. You may also want to look for participants from any local engagement groups you have with, for example, local planning agents' groups or community forums.

- The NPI team.

Peer reviewers shall:

- Engage in purposeful discussion which supports peer collaborative improvement, for example, through reflective questioning to determine and or confirm the evidence base in the host planning authority's self-assessment.
- Facilitate change by helping the host planning authority identify areas for improvement and aid its capacity to change.
- Adopt the role of critical friend, providing supportive, robust, and constructive challenge to help drive improvement.
- Apply their specialist knowledge and expertise to the host planning authority, sharing examples of good practice for their own experience, and providing an external perspective.
- Focus contributions on the planning authority's assessment of the 12 attributes contained in NPIF and its identified actions for improvement. They should not discuss individual planning applications or development plan policies.

Facilitator

It is up to the planning authority to decide who would be best placed to facilitate the peer review workshop. The role could be undertaken by someone from the planning authority, someone else from the local or national park authority, another stakeholder, or an independent facilitator. In some circumstances, a member of the NPI team may be able to help. In making that decision the host planning authority should consider the ability of the chair to:

- Ensure that the workshop is inclusive.
- Allow participants to engage constructively.
- Keep the discussion focused upon the draft improvement action plan and performance assessment.
- Have good knowledge of the planning authority, its work and circumstances it works within.



- Have the confidence of the participants.

We put together guidance for facilitators of the peer collaborative review.



[Link to facilitators guide](#)

Outputs

After the workshop, the planning authority will have a document that has been ‘tested’ with users and stakeholders. The planning authority will then update the draft improvement action plan, performance assessment, and good practice case studies in the light of the peer review discussion.

A final decision on the improvement action plan and performance assessment lies with planning authority, though their report should highlight if any areas of major disagreement have been discussed at the peer review workshop.

Step 3: Publication and Sharing

Step three of the process is where the agreed improvement action plan and performance assessment are published on the Improvement Service webpages and sent to the Minister and the Chief Executive responsible for the planning authority.

The planning authority will send the plan to peer review participants for information.

The NPI team will draft a cover letter to be sent to the planning authorities Chief Executive and the Minister endorsing the improvement action plan and performance assessment, or where we do not endorse if this is the case. It is intended to only use the latter option in very exceptional circumstances. This communication from NPI will comprise:

- A cover letter from the NPI team providing comments on key areas of improvement required.
- The improvement action plan.
- The performance assessment.

It is anticipated these documents will stimulate discussion between the planning authority and the Chief Executive on:

- The ambitions of the service in the short, medium, and long term.

- The improvement actions required to achieve these ambitions.
- Priority action and associated support that is required and made available.

Step 4: Implementation and Monitoring

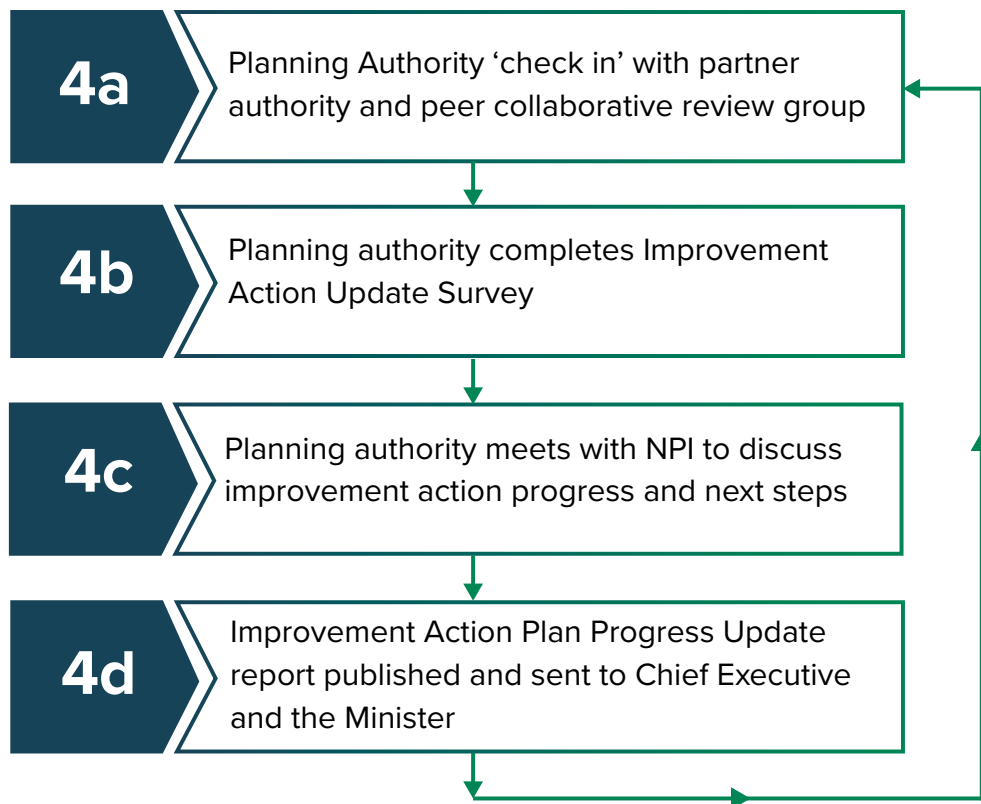
Stage 4 is where the improvement action plan is actioned and monitored. As set out in the timescales section, this will be the focus for the following two years. Please see the next section of this document for details of the process.



Improvement action plan progress update process

In the years between full assessments, the planning authorities focus on the improvement action plan and updating on what progress they have made with their actions.

This section outlines the process for this. It is split up into four sections:



4a Check in with partner authority and peer collaborative review group

We recommend that the planning authority checks in with their peer partner authority to discuss progress and use them as a critical friend. This will be an opportunity to share learning on taking forward actions.

We recommend that they check in with their peer collaborative review group, to update them on progress with the actions.

4b Complete Improvement Action Update Survey

The planning authorities complete an online survey to update their progress with the actions. The survey asks:

- For an update on progress with the improvement actions.
- If there are any changes to the actions based on progress.
- For reflections on progress made, new actions, and any milestones.

The information from this populates a report template.



link to [think piece](#).

4c Planning authority meets with NPI to discuss improvement actions

After reading the survey submission, the NPI team meet with the planning authorities individually to discuss progress made, the meeting looks to:

- Acknowledge any actions that have been completed and discuss the outcomes of these.
- Discuss actions that are in progress or where progress hasn't been made and identify what support is needed to take these forward.
- Highlight any issues being raised nationally or that have been identified through our analysis across NPIF returns.

4d Improvement Action Plan Progress Update report published and sent to Chief Executive and the Minister.

The planning authorities update their reports based on the discussion with the NPI team. The same process is then followed as with the full assessment. The report is published on the Improvement Service webpages, sent to the Chief Executive of the planning authority and the Minister.

Further Resources

We have a National Planning Improvement Microsoft Teams group to provide a space for planning authorities to ask questions and start conversations with other planning authorities. Please email npi@improvementservice.org.uk if you wish to be added to this group.

The NPI team has published several useful reports, think pieces, case studies and blogs on [our webpages](#) that will help provide the background and context to the NPIF, including:

- [NPIF self assessments and improvement action plans for 2023-24](#)
- [Annual reports](#)
- [Think pieces](#)
- [Case studies of best practice](#)
- [Insights papers: these will focus on research, scope and analysis](#)
- [Evaluation of the pilot report.](#)
- [National Planning Improvement Hub](#)



Support

The National Planning Improvement team provides a wide range of support to planning authorities. They provide a critical friend role throughout the NPIF process, share best practice and learning, and communicate key issues facing planning authorities.

The NPIF is project managed by the NPI. The key contacts are:

Craig McLaren, National Planning Improvement Champion

Susan Rintoul, Improvement Lead

Nino Shanshashvili, Analytical Support Officer

If you have any questions for the team or would like more information on the NPIF, please contact us via npi@improvementservice.org.uk.



