



Cairngorms
National Park Authority
Ùghdarras Pàire Nàiseanta a'
Mhonaidh Ruaidh

is.
improvement **service**

National Planning Improvement

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

Improvement Action Progress Update 2025

Cairngorms National Park Authority



Cairngorms National Park Authority NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

Foreword

The Cairngorms National Park Authority is delighted to share this annual progress update, which outlines the strides we have made in delivering against the commitments in our Planning Improvement Action Plan, as part of the National Planning Improvement Framework.

Over the past year, we have made substantial progress across a range of priority areas, including enhancing operational resilience, skills development relative to the new requirements of National Planning Framework 4, and establishing forums to better engage with developers and other key stakeholders. These improvements reflect the dedication of our planning team and the effectiveness of our collaborative approach to working with key stakeholders. The actions completed to date have already begun to deliver benefits for service users and stakeholders, reinforcing our commitment to continuous improvement.

Nonetheless, we recognise that our planning service must remain responsive to evolving demands and policy expectations. Work is ongoing to consolidate the gains achieved and to address the remaining elements of our Improvement Action Plan where further enhancements are required. The Park Authority remains firmly focused on delivering a planning service that is efficient, transparent, and aligned with the needs of our service users and communities.

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 Cairngorms National Park Authority

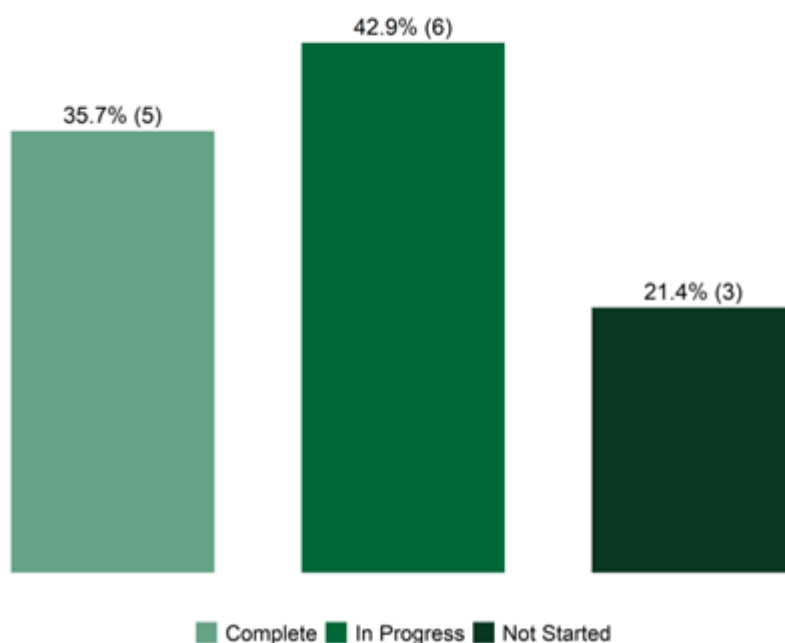


has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.

Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

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

Cairngorms National Park Authority has 14 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:



Action 1: Work with the human resources team in their update of the current Workforce Management Strategy to consider and review the specific challenges around recruitment to the planning service, and develop further measures to address this within the context of current recruitment constraints

In Progress

Progress against this action: Significant progress has been made over the last year, in the context of the existing Workforce Management Strategy, with successful recruitment to several posts within the planning service. This includes two Graduate Planners, a new Planning Assistant post, and an Ecological Advice Officer. Recruitment to these posts has



significantly enhanced the resilience of the planning service and our ability to manage current workloads.

The Graduate Planner posts form part of a strategy to ‘grow our own’ experienced planning professionals, and the post holders will be given the opportunity to work across planning policy and development management to help them develop a broad range of skills and experience. The Planning Assistant post has been designed to provide enhanced technical support and expertise within the planning service – most notably in relation to GIS.

As the UK’s largest protected area, home to one quarter of the UK’s rare and endangered species, successful recruitment of our in-house Ecological Advice Officer has also ensured that we have the necessary skills and expertise to secure high quality developments that conserve and enhance nature in the National Park.

A review of the Workforce Management Strategy is now underway, and this will reflect and build upon the positive steps that have been taken to address recruitment challenges within the planning service.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue working with the human resources team to complete their review of the Workforce Management Strategy, building on and consolidating the success of recent recruitment experiences.

Action 2: Monitor and review the effectiveness of the Graduate Planner posts as part of the ‘grow your own’ approach to addressing planning recruitment challenges

In Progress

Progress against this action: As identified above, two Graduate Planners have been recruited into the planning team over the last year. They are being given the opportunity to work across both planning policy and development management. As well as helping the post holders to develop a broad range of skills and experience early in their careers, this provides flexibility to assign the post holders to different tasks across the wider planning service in response to changing workload pressures. For example, both Graduate Planners are currently working in the policy team, and this additional resource has helped to accelerate progress of the Evidence Report for our next Local Development Plan. Early experience of the effectiveness of these posts within the wider planning service is therefore positive.

The following next steps are proposed: We will continue to monitor and review the effectiveness of the Graduate Planner posts over the next few years.



Action 3: Carry out skills audit within the planning team, relative to the new expectations and requirements in NPF4, to identify gaps in knowledge and inform specific training programmes, and to identify any areas where additional external support may be required

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

A skills audit has been undertaken across the wider planning service to identify gaps in knowledge relative to the new expectations and requirements of NPF4. This has identified a number of topic areas where it is considered that training is required for all team members. These topic areas include biodiversity and ecology, carbon literacy and whole life carbon emissions, and community wealth building. Training sessions are now being planned to address these areas.

Action 4: Undertake an annual review of projects to identify potential candidate submissions for relevant award schemes to achieve wider recognition of the high quality work undertaken by the planning service

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- The action was set as a low or medium priority.
- We have not had the time given the quick turnaround for cohort two and three.

The following next steps are proposed: We will commence work on this action as soon as reasonably practicable.

Action 5: Continue to plan and deliver an ongoing programme of member training, in agreement with the Convener and Deputy Convener of the Planning Committee

In Progress

Progress against this action: We have an ongoing programme of member training. Introductory planning training has been given to one new Board member, and further training sessions will be programmed for all members during the remainder of this year.

The following next steps are proposed: Agree appropriate training topics for the remainder of this year in conjunction with the Planning Committee Convener and Deputy Convener.



Action 6: Working in conjunction with colleagues at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority, complete the migration of our IDOX system to the cloud to ensure consistency and resilience of service provision

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The migration process was completed successfully in October 2025. Whilst it required our public ePlanning and internal IT systems to be offline for around 10 days, a robust business continuity plan was put in place to manage the short-term implications on this. The migration process ensures long term consistency and resilience within our IDOX planning systems.

Action 7: Liaise with Scottish Government to explore whether the e-development portal could be adapted to accept additional supporting information post call-in

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed:

- The action was set as a low or medium priority.
- We have not had the time given the quick turnaround for cohort two and three.

The following next steps are proposed: We will commence work on this action as soon as reasonably practicable. In particular, we will explore whether this can be integrated into the development of the new 'Apply' service which Scottish Government is developing to replace the e-Development system.

Action 8: Implement a project to ensure effective monitoring of compliance with planning permissions for major developments in line with Section 44 of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019

In Progress

Progress against this action: Work has commenced on developing a monitoring process for major planning permissions. This will involve regular proactive monitoring of sites, including through site visits, during the pre-commencement and construction phases to ensure all pre-commencement conditions are satisfactorily discharged and all other construction related conditions are appropriately adhered to.

In response, the following changes to the action are proposed: Given that Section 44 of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 has not yet been brought into effect, we intend to change this



action from a high to a medium priority, and from a short to a medium term delivery timescale.

Action 9: Reconvene the Developers Forum, in an updated format, to provide a more effective mechanism for regular engagement with development industry representatives to identify and address common issues and to target further service improvements

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The Developers Forum was reconvened at a meeting in mid-August 2025. This initial meeting of the Forum focused on delivery and implementation of the policies in our existing Local Development Plan. The session provided developers, planning agents and other key stakeholders with an opportunity to share their experiences of the way in which existing policies are operating in practice and to make comments on their overall effectiveness in delivering plan outcomes. This feedback will be used as an important part of the evidence base for our new Local Development Plan. In particular, it will help to identify which policies are working well and which might need to be updated and, significantly, to help identify areas and topics for which locally-specific policies will be required to supplement the national suite of planning policies set out in NPF4. The initial session was also used to seek feedback on the range of topics that members would like to cover at future Forum meetings. This feedback will directly influence future meeting content.

Action 10: Reconvene the Planning Representatives Networks, in an updated format, to provide a more effective mechanism for regular engagement with community council representatives to identify and address common issues and target further service improvements, and explore other methods for increasing planning knowledge and engagement at the local community level

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: We have not had the time given the quick turnaround for cohort two and three.

The following next steps are proposed: We will commence work on this action as soon as reasonably practicable.



Action 11: Reconvene regular planning protocol meetings with relevant local authority colleagues, in an updated format, to identify and address common issues and to target further service improvements

In Progress

Progress against this action: Officers of the Park Authority have contacted relevant local authority colleagues with a view to reconvening the former planning protocol group, and it is anticipated that an initial meeting will be held in Winter 2025. In the meantime, Park Authority officers have proposed a minor change to existing protocol arrangements in relation to the timing of recovery of planning fees for the applications that the Park Authority calls-in for determination. This intends to align fee recovery with the financial year and, if implemented, should make accounting processes more straightforward for both the Park Authority and our local authority colleagues.

The following next steps are proposed: Hold an initial meeting of the planning protocol group in Winter 2025.

Action 12: Overhaul the planning web pages as part of a wider redevelopment of the Park Authority's website to ensure greater use of accessible language, clearer advice and guidance, and enhanced visibility of planning content

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The National Park Authority's website has been completely overhauled, with a new version of the website being launched in June 2025. As part of this process, our planning web pages have been overhauled and streamlined to provide more accessible and user-friendly planning advice and content. Further updates to existing planning advice notes and guidance documents are now planned for the near future.



Action 13: Carry out a review of s75 processes and procedures to include greater alignment with local authority developer obligations teams and relevant services, introduction of clearer heads of terms documentation in conjunction with local authority legal teams to streamline s75 drafting process, and implement processes for enhanced monitoring of s75 agreements post approval

In Progress

Progress against this action: Initial meetings have taken place with colleagues responsible for managing the developer obligations function within The Highland Council to explore opportunities for greater alignment and consistency. Wider engagement with colleagues from developer obligations teams in the local authorities covering the National Park has also been undertaken during the preparation of a new-style Delivery Programme for our current Local Development Plan (published in March 2025), and as part of the preparation of the evidence base for our next Local Development Plan. The Delivery Programme provides updated developer contribution information for all settlements within the National Park, identifying where contributions will be sought towards education and healthcare infrastructure. Internal processes have also been updated to ensure enhanced and more effective monitoring of s75 agreements post approval. This responsibility is now assigned to a specific officer within the team, whereas it was previously the responsibility of individual case officers. As a result, there is now a more consistent and proactive approach to monitoring which helps to ensure that s75 obligations are satisfied within agreed timescales.

The following next steps are proposed: Further work will be undertaken on developing clearer heads of terms documentation for proposed s75 agreements, including collaboration with relevant local authority legal representatives as appropriate.

Action 14: Develop and implement standard planning conditions to ensure consistency where possible across all decisions, streamline decision making, and to enable easier and more effective monitoring and enforcement

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

A suite of standard planning conditions has been implemented. As anticipated, this is helping to ensure consistency and increase efficiency in decision making. It is also expected to enable easier and more effective monitoring and enforcement in the future - particularly in combination with Action 8 above.



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 send an update email to all the stakeholders that attended our peer review workshop. The email will provide a brief summary of our progress in delivering the commitments set out in our Improvement Action Plan 2024. We will invite comments from stakeholders to see if they think any refinement of our improvement actions is necessary.

