

THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

Performance and Improvement Assessment

Cohort 2
April 2025



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
WELCOME TO HIGHLAND	4
PEER REVIEW WORKSHOP	6
COUNCIL STRUCTURE	7
PEOPLE	8
Attribute 1: The planning authority has sufficient resources and skills to maximise productivity.	8
Attribute 2: The planning authority has a valued and supported workforce.	12
Attribute Score and Improvement Actions	14
CULTURE	16
Attribute 3: This Planning Authority has embedded continuous improvement.	16
Attribute 4: This Planning Authority has sound governance	23
Attribute 5: This Planning Authority has effective leadership	25
Attribute Score and Improvement Actions	26
TOOLS	27
Attribute 6: The planning authority has a robust policy and evidence base.	27
Attribute 7: The planning authority makes best use of data and digital technology.	29
Attribute 8: The planning authority has effective and efficient decision-making processes.	34
Attribute Score and Improvement Actions	37
ENGAGE	39
Attribute 9: This planning authority has good customer care.	39

Attribute 10: The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities.	42
Attribute Score and Improvement Actions	45
PLACE	46
Attribute 11: The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.	46
Attribute 12: This planning authority supports the delivery of appropriate development.	47
Attribute Score and Improvement Actions	49
CASE STUDIES	50
Case Study 1 – Cable Manufacturing Plant, Nigg	51
Case Study 2 – Flow Country World Heritage Site, Sutherland	55
Case Study 3 – Archaeology, Dornoch North Housing	62
Case Study 4 – Riverside Way, Inverness Active Travel Link	65
Case Study 5 – The Storr, Isle of Skye	71
Case Study 6 – Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport	75
Case Study 7 – Opportunities for Staff Development	79

INTRODUCTION

This is our first National Planning Improvement Framework report covering the period 2023/24. The Highland Council has been partnered with Argyll and Bute Council for this pilot which, along with the work of other cohorts, has provided an opportunity to learn from others. This report has been developed through a process of self-assessment and peer review, with external facilitation provided by Planning Aid Scotland. It has considered our self-assessment findings and proposed areas for improvement.

The Highland Council delivers its statutory functions as planning authority within the wider umbrella of the Place Service Cluster. The planning function operates with close support from the Environment, Economy, Transport and Active Travel and Climate Change and Energy teams. This network creates a dynamic and responsive approach to service delivery, one that has been able to adapt to the demands of the new policy context of National Planning Framework 4 and the challenges and opportunities presented by significant inward investment in the area from renewable energy, grid reinforcement and development around The Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport.

The Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport presents a major opportunity to support the ambition set out within our Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy for Highland to be a global centre of excellence for renewable energy innovation and generation and assist in the delivery of many of the outcomes expected with the Scottish Government's Energy Strategy and Transition Plan and National Planning Framework 4. We seek to transition to a green, circular economy that maximises the value of existing core industries, helps attract new and emerging sectors and diversifies jobs and skills. We are working hard to ensure that our communities function as networks of locally resilient and self-supporting places with equality of access to housing, education, healthcare, work, food, energy, transport, culture, recreation, leisure and virtual connections. Optimising how we use our existing infrastructure to support and sustain this will be a priority.

This is all set within the context of Highland being one of the most attractive sustainable leisure, recreation and tourism destinations in the world. Our land, coast and water environment and our natural, built and cultural heritage, which defines the character of Highland, will continue to be safeguarded and enhanced to ensure that it remains internationally celebrated.

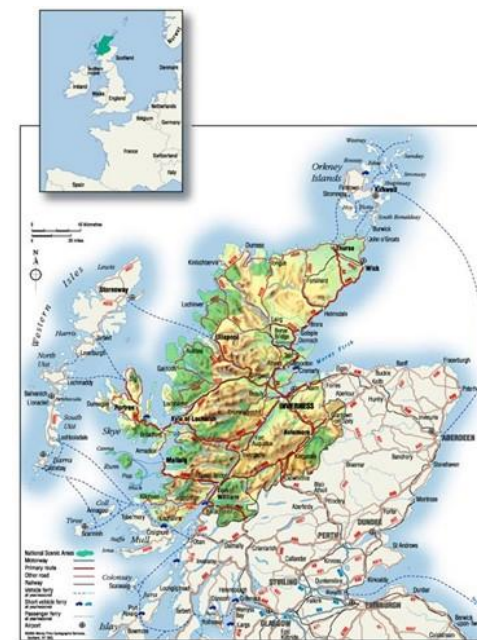
WELCOME TO HIGHLAND

The Highlands of Scotland are renowned for their beauty, hospitality and culture.

The geography of The Highland Council administrative area is diverse ranging from fertile farmland around the Black Isle and Cromarty Firth; dramatic seascapes on the west and north coasts and some of the tallest mountains in the British Isles including the tallest, Ben Nevis in Lochaber. We're home to the Cairngorms, Scotland's second National Park and the largest in the UK, and the largest blanket bog in Europe (Flow Country, Sutherland) which has become the UK's 35th UNESCO World Heritage Site and is the world's first ever peatland site to gain world heritage status. It stores more carbon than all the forests and woodlands in the UK combined.

Highland is also home to many lochs. This includes Loch Ness, which is the largest by water volume in the United Kingdom, containing nearly twice as much water as all the lakes of England and Wales combined; and Loch Morar which at 310 metres is the deepest.

There are 238,060 people living in The Highland Council administrative area, a land mass of 26,484 sq. km. This is the lowest population density (8 persons per square kilometre), out of the 32 local authorities in Scotland.



Inverness is the administrative and transport hub of the region. It is fast growing and ambitious with direct air links to Amsterdam and London. The Inverness Campus is home to one of the most ambitious projects in Scotland. It is a nationally and internationally significant location for business, research, education and a thriving life sciences community.

The Highland Council and partners signed a City-Region Deal worth £315 million delivering a range of existing projects over 10 years, which is set to see Inverness and the Highlands become a region of digital and economic opportunity. The Inverness and Cromarty Firth was also awarded Green Freeport status in January 2023, which is set to be transformational for the region, stimulating economic growth and prosperity.

The Highland Council area is divided into 22 wards, each served by either three or four councillors, depending on ward population. Regular ward forum meetings are held in each ward, where the public are encouraged to attend and participate in the development of their areas and improve service delivery.

“Our Future Highland” is this Council’s Programme which sets out our vision and key strategic priorities for the next five years (2022-2027) can be found here:

www.highland.gov.uk/programme2022-27-english www.highland.gov.uk/programme2022-27-gaelic

There are 74 elected Councillors and 156 Community Councils in the Highland Council area.



PEER REVIEW WORKSHOP

On Monday 24th March 2025, The Highland Council held a peer review workshop with key planning system stakeholders, facilitated by David Leslie from Planning Aid Scotland. The workshop aimed to examine the performance assessment report and review the scoring of attributes and identified improvement actions.

The Peer Review Group included representatives from:

- Argyll & Bute Council
- National Planning Improvement Service
- Scottish and Southern Energy Renewables
- Elected Member, Chair of South Planning Committee
- Ferintosh Community Council
- Spean Bridge, Roy Bridge and Achnacarry Community Council
- Highland Housing Alliance (Housing developer)
- SEPA
- Naturescot

Attendees prioritised themes and Attributes for discussion, focusing on Attributes 1, 10, 8, 4, 7, and 12.

Key themes discussed included:

- Recruitment of staff with appropriate skills
- Retaining and enhancing skills of existing staff
- Engagement strategy with development industry (engagement workshops/roadshows, consultee access)
- Decision-making process – enforcement and publishing statistics
- Training delivery for Community Councils (enforcement) and Elected Members (spatial awareness on plans)
- Scheme of Delegation

The Peer Review Group's feedback and suggestions have been integrated into the final performance assessment and improvement action plan. Three improvement actions were added and six were updated. Future improvement suggestions have been noted for the next reporting cycle. Attendees completed a follow-up survey, indicating the workshop was useful, open, and constructive. They felt they could contribute their thoughts and are willing to attend a follow-up workshop in six months. We are grateful to everyone who has taken the time to contribute to this process.

COUNCIL STRUCTURE

The Highland Council is currently undergoing a restructure. Services are being redesigned to sit within one of three service clusters; Corporate, People and Place.

The planning function falls within the Place service cluster, currently sitting within Infrastructure, Environment and Economy. This ensures that the Development Management and Development Planning teams are closely supported by the Environment, Economy, Transport and Active Travel and Climate Change and Energy teams and vice versa.

The strategic Committee is the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. There are two planning application Committees covering the two operational areas: North and South Highland.





A high performing planning authority needs to have the right number of people to do the work expected of it with the rights 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.

PEOPLE

Attribute 1: 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 receive responses from consultees within the prescribed timescale?*
- *Does the planning authority have the ability to access the appropriate advice, expertise, evidence and data it requires?*

Staff levels

Increased fees, the anticipated pipeline of both on and offshore renewable energy projects, as well as the associated electricity transmission projects and the planned inward investment in the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport, has provided us with the opportunity to recruit additional staff over the 23/24 period. Fee income plays a vital role in supporting the operation of the development management function, particularly in terms of current resources. It also provides us with more flexibility to increase resource within other teams.

There have however been challenges with the available resource, particularly staffing levels within Transport Planning, Forestry and Ecology, and managing to retain staff more generally, especially experienced staff, who have been attracted to other employers or have retired earlier than perhaps expected. Over the past 12–18 months, this loss of experienced senior staff has created a skills gap. This is beginning to be addressed through the appointment of a number of younger, less experienced, graduate planners. Awareness of this has meant that improved support structures are now in place whereby more experienced staff take on a mentoring and supervisory role in their development. Still, the combination of reduced capacity for taking on more complex proposals and the additional senior staff requirements has impacted on performance and to an extent morale in the period.

New application types have introduced additional challenges for the team, two in particular. A significant increase in applications for Battery Energy Storage Systems (BESS), where there is no national guidance, has required us to go into more detailed consideration of the potential impact of the technology than expected and to have to manage the increased public comment and Member expectation. Short-term lets, following introduction of the short-term letting licence legislation and the Short Term Let Control Area for Badenoch and Strathspey is another application type that has resulted in a substantial uptick in work and complexity.

A consistently high volume of work, challenging application types more generally and our geographical extent add further pressures. We have continued to build our resource within the service in the 24/25 period.

	RTPI Qualified Staff	Non-RTPI Qualified Staff
Head of Planning Service		1
Planning Manager	3	1
Planning Team Leader	5	
Principal Planner	11	
Planner	17	
Graduate Planner		10
Professional Support Officers		13
Information Analyst		1
Research Officer		1
Senior Planning Technician		1
Business Management and Systems		7
Specialist Advisors (Environment)		9
Transport Planning		4

**Position as of July 2024*

Staffing age profile	Number
Under 30	15
30-39	22
40-49	21
50 and over	26

We retain an agricultural advisor under contract to provide commentary on agricultural needs assessments and related matters.

Budget/Income

The statutory and non-statutory income is set out below in respect of the Development Management function of the Service. Income is monitored both monthly and quarterly, with annual targets increased generally to reflect statutory fee increases. Budget pressures relating to any of the new and unfunded duties identified through National Planning Framework and other Scottish Government initiatives, any increase in public inquiry expenditure, and Local Development Plan preparation are absorbed by planning fees that have been on an upward trend principally as a result on the significant interest in renewable energy development. Increasing the percentage of non-statutory income within the overall income figure has also assisted.

Staffing numbers are regularly reviewed against budgets. We continue to seek opportunities to ensure that there are the appropriate skills and adequate capacity to deliver the service.

Income from Statutory/Non-Statutory Fees

Total Income	2023/24
Planning Application Fees	£4,672,519.00
Discretionary Application Fees	£498,579.20



Image: River Ness from the North Tower by Ewen Weatherspoon

Consultation Responses

Improved response times, from both internal and external consultees, have been observed compared to previous years. Additionally, the number of requests has dropped during the same period. Several factors likely contribute to this improvement, including better access to relevant information by staff and the implementation of weekly surgeries with internal consultees. These surgeries allow for more immediate, verbal clarification of specific questions, reducing the need for formal processes where uncertainty might arise. More recently, we have been able to recruit extra resources to the Ecology Team, which should further reduce the impact on response times and overall efficiency.

Average Days from Consultation to Response

Consultations	Average Days 2021/22	Average Days 2022/23	Average Days 2023/24
Internal	36.72	29.39	22.73
External	20.15	11.95	10.96

Number of Consultation Responses

Number of Consultations	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Internal	2935	2548	2405
External	2014	2091	1943

** where consultation request is responded to*

Advice, Expertise, Evidence and data

The service is supported by several teams who, between them, have expertise in interactive web-mapping, GIS and spatial data; data management and reporting expertise giving an opportunity to enhance the delivery of the service and give insights to the service performance and delivery.

Working in close collaboration, and consultation with, the Policy and Environment Teams further reinforces the service's ability to tackle complex environmental and societal challenges. By harnessing specialised expertise in critical areas such as climate change, biodiversity, and heritage management, the service can contribute meaningfully to sustainable development in communities.

Attribute 2: 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?*

Workforce Planning Strategy

The [Infrastructure, Environment & Economy Workforce Planning 2022-2025](#) report was presented to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee on 2 February 2023 and covers a period of 4 years (2022-2025) to manage our workforce effectively.

The annual update [Service Workforce Plan Annual Progress Report](#) was presented to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee on 2 May 2024. This report highlighted the continuous improvement actions that were achieved by March 2024:

- Management and monitoring of structure and workforce
 - Corporate succession toolkit developed and implemented cross service
 - Summer Students securing employment within HC and the local area
 - Vacancies reviewed to determine impact on service objectives and delivery
- Staff Recruitment and retention
 - Recruitment campaigns including use of social media and specialist publications
 - Further consideration required to encourage internal staff development and promotion, which would assist with recruitment challenges.
 - Review of the Job and person specification, in addition to career pathways and training plans being created and established for roles and professions.

The commitment for 2023/24 was to review career progression within the Graduate Planner scale. That work had commenced and will be complete for April 2025. For 2025/26 a specific workforce plan will be required to seek opportunities for career progression and skills development, identify key competencies and training requirements.

Highland Council and UHI - Year in Industry and Student Employment Programme

We have teamed up with UHI to formalise an annual student recruitment scheme that had been in place for a number of years. To date the scheme has put 5 students into full time employment in land use and environmental roles in Highland, including one who has more recently secured their full professional qualification with the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI).

Based on its success the planning service made formal arrangements with UHI to allow students from their Geography, Environment and Land Use courses to apply through a streamlined recruitment process for a rolling annual programme that offers a sandwich year position and/or summer employment. This innovative approach has been recognised as an example of good practice by the Council's Talent Attraction team, enabling local students based in Highland to gain valuable working experience to complement their academic studies, and to transition to full-time work. It has also been recognised as a key measure in addressing critical issues affecting Highland such as retain young workforce, address ageing workforce and succession management.

Staff development and upskilling existing staff

We have provided examples in Case Study 7 – Opportunities for Staff Development to illustrate how staff members have been afforded opportunities to enhance their skills, obtain further qualifications and advance their careers with us. These examples demonstrate the council's commitment to investing in and supporting its workforce. The opportunity to study remotely has been transformational, particularly for women with children and people from rural areas.

Support staff health and wellbeing

The Council are committed to support health and wellbeing.

The Service Workforce Plan Annual Report emphasises the importance of Staff Wellbeing and Performance by:

- Ensuring that every employee has an up-to-date Employee Review and Development Plan.
- Promotions of staff are brought to the attention of the appropriate Committee.
- The introduction of a new community page has been established on Viva Engage for the Infrastructure, Environment and Economy Service, to encourage communication among staff regarding the extensive work being undertaken across the service.



We aim to ensure staff training needs are met. A recent example of this commitment is the improvements undertaken by our Business Management and Systems team to update the guidance manual used by both new and current Development Management staff. The manual outlines the step-by-step procedures for managing caseload in Uniform and has been positively received.

"I had used the previous version of the manual. Some of the links didn't work well, this is much improved in the latest version. Also, the inclusion of more detailed explanations on how to navigate the system and some tips have also been added, which again, is a great improvement."

Staff survey

We will conduct an annual survey to gather feedback from our planning and environment staff regarding their work experiences, opinions and any concerns they may have. The main aims will be to pinpoint areas that require improvement within the service, enable staff to raise any issues, and provide them with a platform to suggest improvements. Through the annual survey we will boost employee satisfaction and engagement through informed, data-driven decision-making. We are looking to explore and potentially roll out this approach to wider consultees and stakeholders.

Attribute Score and Improvement Actions

Scoring: (1=Making excellent progress, 5= No progress)

Attribute	Score
1. The planning authority has sufficient resources and skills to maximise productivity	3
2. The planning authority has a valued and supported workforce	3

Based on the scoring above, the following areas of improvement have been identified, categorised by their level of importance High/Medium/Low along with their timescale: Short Term – 1 year, Medium Term – 3 years and Long Term – 3+ years.

Improvement Action	Owner	Importance	Timescale	Resources
Attribute 1: Continue to build and monitor staff levels	Chief Planner	High	Short Term	Time All managers

Attribute 1: Seek appropriate opportunities to upskill existing staff.	Chief Planner	High	Short Term	Time All managers
Attribute 2: Conduct an annual staff survey so staff can share their work experiences, opinions and any concerns they may have.	Business Management & Systems	High	Short Term	Officers Time
Attribute 2: Implement wider corporate workforce planning strategy to create a service specific workforce plan. This plan will identify key competencies and training requirements; consider remuneration, career progression and skills development.	Chief Planner/ Planning and Environment	High	Short Term	HR Time
Attribute 2: Develop training programs in a digital format to support both new and existing staff.	Business Management & Systems	High	Medium Term	Time



Image: Kilt Rock, Skye by Ian Smith, Skye Photo Centre



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.

CULTURE

Attribute 3: This 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 cases?*

Annual Performance Assessment

We are confident that we are involved in a continuous process of improvement, as evidenced by our prior submissions of the [Annual Planning Performance Framework](#), which reflect our commitment to innovation and the modernisation of service delivery.

Our [Planning Performance Framework for 2022-23](#) outlined the improvement projects planned for 2023/24.

- **Review the appeals process for Enforcement Notices**

Due to staffing changes and the prioritisation of training, this work has not yet been completed in its entirety. However, as a step toward progress, new Enterprise tasks have been created for the Enforcement Officers to ensure target dates are met.

ENF1 – Allocation

ENF2 – Casework Task

ENF3 – Notice 31 Day Reminder Task
ENF4 – 6-week update to complainant
ENF5 – 4-month review and update to complainant

Additionally, we've resolved an issue where planning applications, submitted following the serving of an Enforcement Notice, are being stalled due to substandard applications and unresponsive applicants. These applications are now returned to the Enforcement Team to deal with to a satisfactory conclusion.

- **Review of Satisfaction/discharge of Conditions process**

In June 2019 we introduced a Premium 6-week service for the satisfaction and discharge of conditions for major planning applications. The introduction of this service highlighted the need to make improvements to our Section 36 application process to ensure a smooth transition into the satisfaction of conditions process.

Outcome: One of the main issues identified was the failure to record conditions for Section 36 applications in our Uniform system following notification from Scottish Government of their decision. To address this, new Enterprise tasks were created for Shared Business Support staff to undertake inserting conditions when the decision is received. A new set of letter templates was also developed to align more closely with this distinct process with the Council being a consultee rather than the decision maker. We also improved our webpages and letter templates to provide clearer guidance to the public, as officers frequently encountered challenges in explaining the process to individuals who had submitted representations on this type of application. After improvements, the original case file contained all the necessary information for the subsequent creation of the follow-up Satisfaction of Condition case for monitoring by the Council.

A new online digital form was also created for [Satisfaction of Conditions for Major Developments](#) to replace the paper version which allows payment to be made at the end of the form or later via BACS. This form requests detailed information upfront, to clearly indicate which conditions the applicant wishes to satisfy or discharge, provides a single point of submission rather than multiple channels, and ensures a smoother customer experience.

This project is ongoing with internal improvements identified to streamline the process which will enable case officers to closely monitor condition cases and identify these types of cases as part of their workload.

- **Identify and implement efficiencies through automation**

In our efforts to identify cost efficiencies and enhance productivity within the service, we explored the implementation of automated mail services for the delivery of neighbour notifications and renotifications for planning applications from our Uniform system.

Outcome: We collaborated with Glasgow City and Fife Council's to gain insights into their operational procedures and examined the cost savings they achieved. After a successful pilot in 2023, the hybrid mail system was subsequently rolled out to all Shared Business Support staff for issuing neighbour notifications and renotifications. The installation of a print driver on their device allows staff to generate, review and approve customised letter and envelope templates before they are sent for processing, printing and delivery by an external supplier.

In addition to eliminating the need for purchasing and storing paper, envelopes or toner cartridges, using hybrid mail has resulted in significant saving for the Council whilst providing efficiencies in administration time and resource. This has allowed Shared Business Support staff to undertake additional planning-related tasks. Furthermore, the introduction of hybrid mail has supported flexible working arrangements, whether from the office or home.

Staff feedback has been positive:

"I have been using it most days and have found it really easy to use - not encountered any issues with it"

"I have been using it most days and it's simple to use."

"I've been using it but not been in planning daily and it appears easy enough/straight forward even when not using daily."

The Shared Business Support team are now advancing the automated hybrid mail initiative to explore its potential for corporate-wide implementation.

- **Improving the validation process**

A significant proportion of applications are invalid upon receipt. This is often due to missing or incorrect information which impacts on our resources and delays the validation process for all applicants.

Outcome: Improvements were made to our [Application Checklist](#) and [Type of Permission](#) webpages, but we recognised the need for further efforts to educate the public on how to enhance the quality of their submissions to ensure successful validation.

A working group was established with our Professional Support Officers, who are responsible for validating applications, to identify, apart from the fee, the most common reasons they find an application is invalid. A comprehensive list of reasons and resolutions was developed which can be used by the PSO's to provide applicants with a clear understanding of the requirements needed for their applications to pass validation.

This project is ongoing, and we will focus on ways to get this information to applicants prior to them submitting their application.

- **Highland Historic Environment Record database, its associated digital file collections and SAQP award-winning website to move to a new externally hosted environment**

As part of planned changes to IT infrastructure it was agreed that the Highland Historic Environment Record database, its associated digital file collections and SAQP award-winning website would be moved to a new externally hosted environment with the system's software suppliers, exeGesIS ESDM (part of the Idox Group).

Outcome: We moved to a new GIS package, which provides greater user flexibility with reduced costs, and the system benefits from increased digital file storage space. The new arrangements are cheaper with specific regard to annual software licensing and to the council's overall IT costs. As the supplier will be the host, the migration allows software updates and maintenance to be carried out much quicker and more efficiently, reducing to a minimum or even eliminating IT-related delays to the advice given to the Planning authority by the Historic Environment Team.

- **DM/BS data uploads – take part in the pre-Alpha release of data hub gathering**

Outcome: This ongoing data feed which is facilitated by the Improvement Service now gives a daily extract of our planning information which is amalgamated it into a national dataset and is being used by an ever-increasing number of

organisations. Recent changes have seen, albeit in a restricted version, the data provided as an open data set giving users access to comprehensive and up to date information.

- **Identify extra resource for enforcement tasks**

Outcome: The role of the Council's Access Officers has been widened to include assisting the Enforcement Team with initial site visits and site investigations and some casework. This equates to one additional FTE post contributing to planning enforcement activities. With the Access Officers based in locations across Highland, this not only ensures that site visits are more efficient, combining both access and enforcement related issues, but frees up time for the full-time Enforcement Officers to concentrate on the more complex and difficult cases.

Awards/performance accreditation frameworks

During the timescale of this performance review, the awards listed below were achieved. We will make submission of awards a priority for our next assessment.

- The Flow Country Partnership – winner of Scotland's Nature of Scotland Awards 2024 under the 'Nature and Climate' Category.

Peer Review, good practice exchange or improvement activities

We have regular strategic meetings with SEPA and NatureScot to review our approach, in particular to the major application category of development. These discussions also include input from our environment team.

We are well represented on the Executive Committee of Heads of Planning Scotland with two senior managers currently in the chair of two of the sub-committees, the Climate Change, Energy and Resources Sub-Committee and the Development Management Sub-Committee. Officers also attend the Development Planning Sub-Committee and the Policy and Practice Sub-Committee. This provides us with the opportunity for regular engagement with other authorities and the opportunity to learn from best practice elsewhere.

Customer feedback

Our service delivery is centred around our customers. We focus on listening to our customers and use their feedback to make changes so that we can deliver improvements. Customers can express their concerns through feedback forms included in local and pre-application advice packs, as well as customer enquiries, compliments and complaints.

Customers can contact the duty planning officer via the Service Centre for assistance with queries. Calls are either connected directly or assigned through our CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system. For the period 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024, a total of 1044 cases were assigned to the duty planning queue through CRM, with 857 of these cases closed within 10 working days, representing an 82% closure rate.

Complaints

The Service works alongside the Customer Resolution and Improvement Team (CRIT) who manage the two stage Corporate Complaints process as laid down by the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and followed by all 32 Local Authorities. Customers are provided with a clear avenue to record their complaints on the Councils website - [How to make a complaint | How to make a complaint | The Highland Council](#)

Complaints received provide valuable insight into the Service and can identify where Service delivery has suffered or where improvements are required, equally it can also provide an opportunity to address how we communicate with our customers or make information available to them.

On closure, each complaint has the lessons learnt captured, and where trends are identified the Customer Resolution & Improvement Manager will discuss the matter with the relevant senior member of the service to identify improvements. Improvements in recent years have involved early resolution of complaints where there has been, for example, a lack of communication, by apologising immediately and ensuring the most appropriate member of staff within the Service contacts the customer to re-instate the relationships and progress the customer issues.

Between the dates 1st April 2023 to 31st March 2024 the following complaints were progressed by CRIT.

Planning (Development Management/Enforcement/ Development Plans)	Not upheld	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Resolved	Total
Frontline Complaints	1	4		4	9
Investigation	17	1	2	3	23
Escalated complaints	3	3	2		8
					40

Environmental	Not upheld	Upheld	Partially Upheld	Resolved	Total
Frontline Complaints			1	7	8
Investigation			2	1	3
Escalated complaints					0
					11

The complaints the Council receive represent a small proportion of the recorded contact through the CRM (Customer Relationship Management) system. Our Customer Service Centre and Customer Resolution & Improvement Team are updated with the latest information when webpages are improved which enables them to provide callers with the most up to date information.

Complaints referred to Scottish Public Services Ombudsman

From 01 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, the service recorded nine complaints that were subsequently referred to the Scottish Public Services Ombudsman (SPSO). However, none of these complaints were advanced by the SPSO for further examination.

Lessons learned and improvements on decisions from SPSO

In one case, the SPSO, while deciding not to take the complaint forward, highlighted that a condition relating to controlling noise from air source heat pump could have been made clearer by stipulating a dB value rather than referring to guidance. This is being reflected up in our conditions workstream.

In another, a complaint highlighted the difficulty in understanding why a developer contribution for affordable housing was required on an application within the Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) area and why a particular sum was requested where that information was not available neither on the CNPA nor Council webpages relating to developer contributions. While the SPSO did not find against the Council, it did highlight the need for this information to be visible. In response we updated the guidance on our website to make this clear. However, further work is required to ensure that relevant developer contributions within Highland are highlighted within CNPA policy and guidance. This will be finalised in the preparation of the new Development Plans.

Our staff regularly receive praise and expressions of gratitude from the public for their efforts. A notable instance during this period involved the assistance and guidance provided by our Corporate Address Gazetteer Team to a customer in navigating the steps to register a new address for their new home.

Attribute 4: This 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 evidence of ongoing training for members?*
- *Have more than x % of officer recommendations been overturned by councillors at committee or Local Review Body?*

Scheme of Delegation

The Highland Council has a published [Scheme of Delegation](#). The Scheme provides the framework and guidance and the powers given to Committees, Sub-Committees and to Officers. The Council review the Scheme each year, normally in the Autumn. In response to the increased level of activity in the Highlands related to infrastructure, energy production and transmission we are reviewing our Scheme of Delegation to help streamline and safeguard the Council's position in responding to Section 36 and Section 37 proposals. We are also seeking to refine our procedures to ensure that a proportionate approach is taken to decision making given the pressures on the Planning Committees. In doing so it is hoped to increase the availability of committee time to be directed on those proposals that generate the greatest level of public interest and will also allow officer time to be utilised as efficiently and as effectively as possible in achieving successful planning outcomes.

Delegated Applications	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
% of all applications delegated	96%	95.8%	95.7%

Member training

In 2021/22 we successfully introduced a self-service online training guide which is available internally for Elected Members which received positive feedback. The guide takes a topic-based approach to explain our process and policy framework within the current planning system, assisting Elected Members in comprehending their roles and responsibilities in the planning process. Using Microsoft Sway, the interactive storytelling presentation titled "The Planning System" is designed to provide Elected Members with insights into the objectives of the planning system, and an overview of the processes involved in the decision-making process.

The training guide incorporates text, images, videos, weblinks to additional resources, and audio recordings to enhance the interactivity and engagement of the advice and guidance provided. This training was updated in November 2023 to include advice and guidance on the process for Street Naming and Numbering.

Building on this success, and continuing our commitment to empowering local communities, last year we developed and published an [on-line self-service training guide for Community Councils](#).

In addition to this, a focused training session for Members on electricity transmission was provided within this period. The training was designed to give a comprehensive understanding and overview of electricity transmission in Scotland, including the key bodies involved and the relevant regulatory processes. The training was intended to offer insights into the wider context of electricity transmission as well as the role Members would play in the determination of future planning applications and consultations. Presentation was provided by OFGEM, NESO, Scottish Government ECU, the electricity network operator and legal counsel. This was followed by a question-and-answer session.

In addition to, and separate from, this a site visit was arranged for those members who wished to see a Battery Energy Storage Scheme (BESS) before it became operational. This allowed Members to get a better understanding of what is involved with such proposals.

Overtaken Recommendations

Our Planning Application Committees are led by two experienced Area Planning Managers and clerked by Planning Solicitors. The Planning Review Body (LRB) is clerked by Planning Solicitors with professional planning advice provided to Members by an independent Planning Advisor. We are pleased to note that the number of overturned decisions at Committee continues to be low which provides comfort that appropriate policy, guidance and advice is in place. The number of overturned decisions at LRB is largely consistent albeit a slight increase likely due to the interpretation of policy in respect of rural homes since the introduction of NPF4.

Applications overturned by Members at Committee or by Local Review Body

Planning Applications Overturned	2022/23	%	2023/24	%
Committee	18/116	15.5%	7/77	9%
Local Review Body*	8/28	28.5%	6/17	35%

* Refusal of application by appointed officer only

Attribute 5: This 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?*

Chief Planning Officer

In the 23/24 period, we had not yet appointed a Chief Planning Officer. The service was being managed by the Head of Planning, Environment and Low Carbon Transport with a significant proportion of their time spent on the transportation side. The planning and environment functions were largely managed by the four service managers. Recognising not only the statutory requirement to have a Chief Planning Officer but the advantages that may be had in coordination within and across the service, a decision was taken to appoint a Chief Planning Officer albeit on an interim basis until the service restructure is complete. This was appointed into in December 2024.

The Chief Planning Officer is on the Executive Committee of Heads of Planning Scotland (HoPS) and is Chair of the Climate Change, Energy and Resources Sub-Committee. They also Chair the ScotWind sub-group and Minerals sub-group. They currently represent HoPS nationally on the Scottish Government's Transmission Steering Group.

We have included this as an improvement action since this position was only filled in December 2024 and only then on an interim basis. At the time of writing this has already made a significant difference to corporate working and our ability to address improvement actions, particularly around meeting the housing challenge and on workforce planning.

Attribute Score and Improvement Actions

Scoring: (1=Making excellent progress, 5= No progress)

Attribute	Score
3. This Planning Authority has embedded continuous improvement	2
4. This Planning Authority has sound governance	2
5. This Planning Authority has effective leadership	3

Based on the scoring above, the following areas of improvement have been identified, categorised by their level of importance High/Medium/Low along with their timescale: Short Term – 1 year, Medium Term – 3 years and Long Term – 3+ years.

Improvement Action	Owner	Importance	Timescale	Resources
Attribute 3: Submission of awards/performance accreditation will be prioritised.	Chief Planner/ All Managers	Medium	Short Term	
Attribute 4: Seek to amend the Scheme of Delegation to allow for officers to Raise an Objection to Electricity Act applications.	Chief Planner/ The Highland Council	Medium	Short Term	Legal
Attribute 4: Consider opportunities for increasing productivity and proportionality by continuously reviewing the Scheme of Delegation.	Chief Planner/ The Highland Council	Medium	Medium Term	Legal
Attribute 5: Appoint Chief Planning Officer	Assistant Chief Executive	High	Short Term	Potential new post



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.

TOOLS

Attribute 6: The planning authority has a robust policy and evidence base.

- *Does the planning authority have an up to date Local Development Plan in place and/ or 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 Planning and Environmental Appeals Division (DPEA) 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 Development Plan

Our last “old-style” local development plan (the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan 2 (IMFLDP2)) was adopted in June 2024 and provides up to date policy coverage for Highland’s most populous and pressured area. It postdates National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) and provides more detailed policy on various topics covered within NPF4. For example, it provides a more exact policy on greenspace protection (than in NPF4) which has been applied by the DPEA on a recent appeal case. We have an approved indicative Regional Spatial Strategy and are awaiting Scottish Government guidance on how and when that can be formalised. In January 2025, we commenced a formal public evidence papers consultation that will be used in preparation of our “new style” single local development plan for all of Highland. This followed extensive stakeholder engagement during 2024. We will progress the Evidence Report and submit to Gate Check during 2025.

We continue to monitor appeal, Gate Check and Court of Session cases to formulate best practice planning policy. We continue to produce policy guidance to “fill the gaps” in NPF4’s coverage. For example, we have produced non-statutory guidance on biodiversity enhancement.

This provides more detail than NPF4 on this topic and is tailored to Highland circumstances. The guidance is available via our website [Biodiversity Enhancement Planning Guidance](#). Similarly, in 2024 our relevant committee approved an Explanatory Note that clarifies the Council's interpretation and application of NPF4 Policy 17 Rural Homes. It attempts to reconcile the potential conflicts between existing local development plan housing in the countryside policies and Policy 17 of NPF4. For example, it addresses the differences in definition of "accessible" rural areas. This clarification should assist applicants, consultees and objectors and allow more consistent decision making.

Focus on Delivery

Since adoption of the IMFLDP2 attention has turned to the Delivery Programme that supports its implementation. The Council hosted a Housing Summit during 2024 and is considering delivery mechanisms to accelerate housing development within Highland. We continue to investigate the potential application of Masterplan Consent Areas as a housing delivery mechanism with a report on this subject to committee in May 2024. We have established a productive dialogue with the development industry that operate within Highland and have ongoing discussions with Homes for Scotland about the latest Housing Land Audit and the definition of a Deliverable Housing Land Pipeline for Highland. We produced a draft Pipeline for the Inner Moray Firth area in September 2024. Better sharing of evidence between parties will improve the accuracy of this Pipeline help unlock allocated sites and expose the need for additional allocations through the new Plan process.



Attribute 7: The planning authority makes best use of data and digital technology.

- *Has the planning authority encouraged and promotes 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?*

e-Development Portal

Since inception of the eDevelopment Portal the number of planning applications and additional supporting documents submitted through the portal has increased year on year and we now have a consistent average of 94.38% of planning applications coming through the portal.

To add to this service, we have developed a suite of online forms, hosted on the Highland Council website, which enhances the digital process allowing applicants to submit further documents through the eDevelopment portal, reducing the need for manual administration and improving the turnaround of documents reaching the case officer.

Data Governance

The Highland Council has robust Information Management Policies in place, and that the Planning Service adheres to them. The oversight by the Information Governance Board (IGB) ensures that these policies are regularly reviewed and controlled, which is crucial for maintaining compliance with legislative requirements. Privacy Notices are available online, ensuring transparency and compliance with legislative requirements.

Interactive web-mapping, GIS and spatial data

We continue to improve the amount and quality of mapped and other “interactive” evidence that we make available to customers and the wider public. Our range of ArcGIS Online webmaps and StoryMaps include [house completions](#), our [Housing Land Audit](#), and [wind turbines](#). Our new Highland Local Development Plan evidence consultation has mapped all currently available, relevant evidence via an [Evidence Map](#). We have produced a StoryMap to make our [Inverness Strategy](#) more accessible and interesting to a wider audience. Perhaps most creatively, we have developed a [Local Living Tool](#) to apply NPF4 principles at the local level within Highland. This applies and maps real world 10-minute walking distances to local facilities and will be used to test applications and

Call for Development Sites submissions. We have made online commenting on our policy documents easier by streamlining the registration process and providing a more welcoming and interactive “landing page” for each consultation. Our new [Highland Local Development Plan Evidence Consultation](#) is an example of that approach.

Highland Historic Environment Record

For almost twenty years the Highland Council has been at the forefront of digital innovation and information accessibility with regards to the historic environment, not only in Scotland but the whole of the UK. The award-winning [Highland Historic Environment Record](#) is still the only such system in the UK which enables complete and free online access to its entire database, GIS-based feature mapping and digital document collections. These are available via full record and text searching and an interactive map interface, providing unparalleled access to up-to-date historic environment information to planning officers, developers, consultants, professional archaeologists, members of the public, researchers and students. The system allows the council’s Historic Environment Team to respond to planning applications with confidence, enabling better outcomes for planning officers and developers alike. Data can be provided to external users and the results of new projects, required to be supplied digitally, are entered back into the database creating a constant circular flow of data provision, enhancement and improvement.

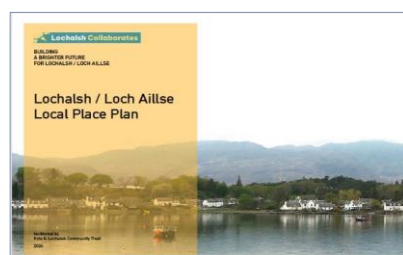
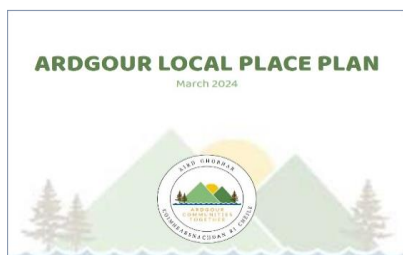
The dynamic link between the main underlying database and the website means that records are always as up to date as possible. New archaeological sites, reports and photographs are added on a daily basis and enhancements and amendments can be made available on the website instantaneously as soon as new information is received and entered. The database and website records also contain information for nationally designated sites, such as Scheduled Monuments and Listed Buildings and links are provided to the relevant external records on the Historic Environment Scotland Designations portal. The website also enables the Highland Council to fulfil its statutory duty to publish information on Conservation Areas within its boundaries, with full Character Appraisal documents published to read or download where available. The database, website and related systems receive regular updates and upgrades to take advantage of novel solutions and improvements in technology in order to continually drive forward the user experience. It was this that led to a Quality award in the 2019 SAQP in the Process category.

Coordinating the Council’s Place Based Approach

Successful delivery of development and placemaking depends upon successful delivery of the infrastructure and facilities that underpin development. In turn, successful delivery of infrastructure requires the spatial and temporal coordination of the capital programmes of all infrastructure providers. The Service continues to promote the [Highland Delivery Programme](#) as a single tool for that coordination. In August 2024, the Council approved a new single Delivery Programme for Highland which is now intended to be a live document. It provides accessible summaries of all the infrastructure required to enable growth in the area split by topic and

place. It also guides developers and communities on why, where and when developer contributions will be sought and spent. In updating the Delivery Programme, we continue better to involve internal and external infrastructure providers. For example, we have reached out to NHS Highland to gather evidence that may justify developer contributions for health facility improvements. Stakeholders are beginning to realise the benefits of involvement and having predictable developer contribution “income flows” in planning their infrastructure investments.

Separately, we are progressing Area Place Plans for Highland. These are led or enabled by the Council and its Community Planning Partnership partners. These are intended to provide a more local, place-based expression of outcomes and priorities from the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan. They will also “fill the gaps” where local communities have not had the inclination or resources to take forward a Local Place Plan (LPP) for their area. We continue to advise on LPP preparation and process and to date have registered 8 LPPs with Highland.



Business Intelligence/Data Visualisation

IDOX Insights – The Highland Council has invested in Idox Insights to effectively implement a data-driven reporting model with a robust analytics solution tailored for UK planning authorities which is seamlessly integrated with the existing back-office system.

A Cloud based platform, Insights offers comprehensive analytical features and tools that provide data visualisation and reporting by creating user-friendly dashboards that visualize key metrics, allowing case officers and managers to monitor performance in real-time.

Giving leadership the support to foster a data driven decision making process and review KPIs relevant to our service. By identifying and aggregating the relevant data the dashboard will evidence average processing time per application; number of applications processed per year/quarter/month; development type; case officer performance and percentage of applications meeting targets amongst other things.

Implementing Idox Insights will enable data-driven management tools, optimise operations, and ultimately enhance service delivery. We can gain valuable insights from our development management processes, empowering case officers and leading to improved outcomes for citizens. The focus on actionable insights will create a responsive, efficient, and effective planning environment that aligns with our organisational goals.

Real Time Mapping - Major Electricity Development applications

A Motion passed at Council recently has highlighted the need for a real time, publicly accessible map of Highland wide renewable energy developments. A visual representation of developments being considered across the entire Highland Council area in totality will give better engagement opportunity for our communities; show the impact on our environment; enhance transparency and provide essential information to stakeholders.

Biodiversity Net Gain

We will look at utilising the BNG Details tab currently available to us in Uniform in preparation for the fuller tabulated database being available to all Scotland planning authorities.

Digital approaches to engagement, website, social media and other platforms

In addition to engagement through our website <https://www.highland.gov.uk/> we are dedicated to ensuring that the decision-making process as open and transparent as possible. We provide Live webcasts of public meetings that are held in the Council Chamber, Inverness, accessible at <https://highland.public-i.tv/core/portal/home> Both the North and South Planning Committees can be viewed Live or accessed later, with recordings made available within 48 hours of the meeting and remaining online for 12 months.

We encourage participation via our Consultation Portal <https://consult.highland.gov.uk/kse/> throughout for all phases of the preparation of Local Development Plans. This platform allows individuals and developers to provide feedback on new guidance and share their views on emerging strategies.

The Council also offers interaction on the social networking sites below:

- X – (formerly Twitter) – <https://x.com/highlandcouncil>
- Facebook – www.facebook.com/highlandcouncil
- Flickr – <https://www.flickr.com/photos/highlandcouncil/>
- YouTube – www.youtube.com/TheHighlandCouncil

Instagram – www.instagram.com/highlandcouncil

TikTok – www.tiktok.com/@thehighlandcouncil

We frequently use interactive media such as YouTube or TikTok to present text, share videos and audio content, to encourage user engagement, learn and explain how various processes work. Below are examples of previous YouTube videos:

Local Place Plans learning event with communities in Highland on 28 May 2024 -

<https://youtu.be/Mu1cE-gdkXc>

Local Place Plans learning event with communities in Highland on 2 August 2024

<https://youtu.be/R1JYxUjTKVc>

Inner Moray Firth Proposed Plan Video -

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WV8Y2JAeQoI>

Inner Moray Firth Proposed Plan – How to Comment Video -

<https://youtu.be/A8kYIOrsI34>

Housing in the Countryside Supplementary Guidance -

<https://youtu.be/tcgonwyCRm8>



As indicated above, the Council has two planning application committees. These cover the north and south of the Council's area:

- NPAC (Caithness, Sutherland, Wester Ross, Skye and Lochalsh, Easter Ross & Black Isle) and;
- SPAC (Inverness, Lochaber, Badenoch & Strathspey, Nairn).

The Committees have returned to in-person meetings in the Council Chamber at Council Headquarters in Inverness but are able to operate in a hybrid fashion. We therefore continue to use MS Teams to present items to Committee and enable officer and Members to join the meeting remotely and participate without the need to travel. From a presentation perspective this makes it easier to present information from Google Street View and to use our own web-based Visualisation Viewer that we created to enable Members in the Chamber to experience the visual impact of vertical structures in the landscape as if they were viewing the application on site in full panorama. This is particularly helpful where there are cumulative issues that need to be considered. Council meetings are available to view either in real time or recorded on the i-public website.

We also make use of MS Teams to host our Major Pre-application Advice meetings, attend Ward Business Meetings and stakeholder engagement sessions.

Attribute 8: The planning authority has effective and efficient decision-making processes.

- *Does the planning authority 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?*

Decision Making

As explained under Attribute 6 above, the adoption of the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan 2 in June 2024 allowed the Council better to align its planning policy with NPF4. This allows for simpler decision making in most cases without the need to record and assess any incompatibility between national and Highland policy documents. In some cases, for example on greenspace, biodiversity, self-build, and accessible and adaptable homes, it has allowed the Council to adopt a more up to date, more exact and/or more detailed position on certain topics than is set out in NPF4. Also, we are making sure that decision makers within the Council are aware of Local Place Plan content and its relevance and implications for individual planning application decisions.

Decision-making timescales (based on "all applications") timescales	Processing Time (Weeks) 2021/22	Processing Time (Weeks) 2022/23	Processing Time (Weeks) 2023/24
Major Developments	56.7	75.2	59.9
Local Developments – Non-Householder	13.1	16.2	16.5
Householder Developments	8.3	9.6	8.8
Major – Housing	118.0	82.9	113.6
Local – Housing	16.9	20.7	20.8
Major – Business and Industry	17.8	58.6	42.0
Local – Business and Industry	13.6	18.4	15.3
EIA	21.9	32.4	30.5
Other Consents	9.9	12.1	8.4
Major Legal Agreements	100.4	113	82.9
Local Legal Agreements	19.5	30.3	37.1

We processed 2691 applications in the 2023/24 period, 128 less than the previous year (2819).

We determined 11 major scale applications in total during 2023/24. This was 13 less than the preceding year, 7 had processing agreements and we were able to determine 60% of these within the agreed timescales. The average time taken to determine those remaining 4 applications without processing agreements reduced from 75.2 weeks to 59.9 weeks in comparison with the preceding year.

The number of non-householder applications determined in 2 months increased from 44.8% in 2022/23 to 53.2%. The average time taken to determine these applications increased slightly from 16.2 weeks last year to 16.5 this year.

The number of householder applications determined within 2 months increased this year from 68.3% to 75.0%. The average time taken to determine these applications fell from 9.6 weeks to 8.8 weeks.

Although there has been a slight fall in the number of applications determined planning performance continues to be impacted through the backlog of work which has arisen in recent years. This backlog, coupled with delays in backfilling posts over this time period and the overall increase in workload for existing staff was previously recognised and although investment has been made in additional resourcing this was not realised within the affected financial year and has accordingly continued to impact on performance as is evidenced in these figures.

Going forward, we will continue to engage with agents to improve the quality of applications and review our online guidance to minimise the number of invalid submissions. We will continue to encourage HoPS to lobby Scottish Government to consider progressing validation at point of submission on the eDevelopment portal to align the process for all planning authorities. However, we are looking at opportunities to use third party software to carry out validation of our own (Highland Council) online forms. This is at very early stages of investigation.

Approval Rates	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Decisions Approved	95.9%	96.9%	96.6%
Decisions Refused	3%	2.6%	3.6%

Decisions overturned at Local Review or Appeal	2021/22	Original decision upheld (%)	2022/23	Original decision upheld (%)	2023/24	Original decision upheld (%)
Local Review	23	73.9%	33	69.7%	23	60.9%
Appeals to Scottish Government	23	34.8%	15	53.3%	17	47.1%

Enforcement Charter and Cases

Our [Enforcement Charter](#) was approved in August 2022 by the Infrastructure, Environment and Economy Committee.

There continues to be a high level of enforcement activity. The number of complaints taken up in 2023/24 was 513, well above that of the previous year. This was also reflected in the increase in the number of Notices served increasing from 68 to 117. The number of cases resolved increased significantly from 462 to 995 cases. The Charter was reviewed early in 2024/25 period but has unfortunately not been reported to Committee. This will be reported to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee in May 2025 and published thereafter.

Enforcement Activity	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Cases Taken Up ¹	284	242	513
Notices Served ²	49	68	117
Reports to the Procurator Fiscal	0	0	0
Prosecutions	0	0	0
Number of breaches resolved	561	462	995

¹ Record all cases in the period where parties were formally notified in writing that enforcement action may be taken by the authority under Sections 127-137 of the T&CP (Scotland) Act 1997.

² Notices Served include enforcement notices, breach of condition notices, planning contravention notices, stop notices, temporary stop notices, fixed penalty notices and Section 33 notices.

Extra resource for enforcement

We outlined under Attribute 3 as part of continuous improvement that we have allocated additional resources to the Enforcement Team by expanding the role of the Council's Access Officers. Access Officers now conduct initial site visits, site investigations and handle some casework effectively adding one FTE post towards planning enforcement activities. With the Access Officers located throughout Highland, this approach not only streamlines site visits by addressing both access and enforcement matters but also allows our full-time Enforcement Officers to focus on more complex and difficult cases.

We are increasingly aware of the expectation of our communities that the enforcement of planning control needs to be both timeous and robust. A number of ongoing complex cases have highlighted the need to build more capacity in the team. To that end we recruited an additional enforcement officer early within the 2024/25 period to assist with the enforcement caseload, we will look to do the same in 2025/26 when the opportunity arises. In addition, we will investigate how we can streamline the 'validation' of enforcement cases, to either automate or at the very least reduce the manual recording required by officers. While there are no updates proposed to the content of the Planning Enforcement Charter, we are aware that this requires to be updated which will take place at the earliest opportunity in 2025/26.

Attribute Score and Improvement Actions

Scoring: (1=Making excellent progress, 5= No progress)

Attribute	Score
6. The planning authority has a robust policy and evidence base	2
7. The planning authority makes best use of data and digital technology	2
8. The planning authority has effective and efficient decision-making processes	3

Based on the scoring above, the following areas of improvement have been identified, categorised by their level of importance High/Medium/Low along with their timescale: Short Term – 1 year, Medium Term – 3 years and Long Term – 3+ years.

Improvement Action	Owner	Importance	Timescale	Resources
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Attribute 6: A “live” Delivery Programme for Highland (excluding CNPA area). THC officers to update capital project costs and timescales and use projected developer contributions “income stream” in their infrastructure planning.	All Council Services External stakeholders	High	Medium Term	Corporate (CEO) leadership and commitment External stakeholder commitment
Attribute 7: Engage with agents to improve application quality, review online guidance to reduce invalid submissions. Explore third-party automation.	Business Management & Systems	Low	Long Term	Scottish Government Time
Attribute 7: Engage with Heads of Planning Scotland and Scottish Government to establish a single validation standard across Scotland.	Chief Planner/ Area Planning Managers	High	Medium/Long Term	Chief Planner
Attribute 7: Real Time Mapping - Major Electricity Development applications	Chief Planner	High	Short Term	Resource Time
Attribute 7: Encourage Idox to introduce Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) tabs to Uniform throughout Scotland.	Business Management & Systems	Medium	Medium Term	Supplier Funding Time
Attribute 8: Update our Enforcement Charter	Chief Planner/ Enforcement Team	High	Short Term	Committee
Attribute 8: Recruit additional resource for enforcement	Chief Planner	High	Short Term	Funding
Attribute 8: Streamline the ‘validation’ of enforcement cases, to either automate or reduce the manual recording required by officers.	Business Management & Systems	Medium	Medium Term	Resource Time
Attribute 8: Publish planning decision making statistics on our webpages.	Chief Planner/ Area Planning Managers	High	Short Term	Resource Time



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.

ENGAGE

Attribute 9: This 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?*

Customer Care

The Council has a corporate project, My Council Project, which includes the redesign and launch of a new website this year. The main aim is to ensure that all customers of The Highland Council experience a seamless, end-to-end customer experience. This will prioritise citizen's engagement by improving processes and approaches for all contact methods and increase customer satisfaction.

We are currently in the initial phase, focusing on evaluating and reviewing content. The key principles guiding this review include:

- A renewed focus on content
- Prioritising quality over quantity – ensuring information is both focused and accurate
- Content is accessible and complies with legal requirements
- Adopting a customer-first approach
- Mobile first approach (65-70% of our website visits originate from mobile devices)
- Reduce the number of files (PDFs, etc) and prioritise page content so it is accessible and searchable, while providing upfront explanations of processes.

Alongside this we will identify gaps for creation of new content. One service objective is to enhance the Planning and Environment homepage to better depict the customer journey and demonstrate how different disciplines interconnect. This will involve explaining progression from policy consideration, pre-application advice to the planning application stage, the commencement of the building phase (Building Standards), and the enforcement process.

We will review the My Council project, and if any gaps are identified, we will address them by developing our own Development Management Customer Charter.

Pre-application Advice Service

The Highland Council was one of the first Council's to offer [Pre-application Advice](#) and this remains a key component of our service delivery. This tailored service offers three categories of pre-application advice according to development type – [Local Small Scale](#), [Local Medium Scale](#) and advice for [Major Developments](#).

The major development pre-application process ensures that the contributions of all key consultees, both internal and external to the authority (including Naturescot, SEPA, Transport Scotland etc), is provided on prospective development proposals. These meetings are held monthly and this partnership working with key consultees and developers allow for a smoother process to identify key issues and concerns at an early stage. Discussions can also clarify the information needed for subsequent applications, help improve the quality of proposals and save time and money on working up proposals.

We issued 34 major development pre-application advice packs in 2023/24, slightly less than the previous year of 38. In addition, we issued in total 259 local scale pre-application advice packs and 783 permitted development enquiries.

Pre-application Advice Packs Issued	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Local Small Scale	321	222	196
Local Medium Scale	43	34	63
Major Developments	42	38	34

Our [Wind Farm Design Workshop](#) also offers a unique opportunity to participate in a collaborative process to examine the design, landscape, and visual impact of wind energy development at an early stage of the process. Pre-application advice is also offered for [Listed Buildings](#).

Engagement events with developers and the community

Our methods of public engagement have evolved as customer needs and preferences have changed. Many community councils and other community groups now find online meetings an acceptable alternative to in-person events. However, the Council has undertaken a series of in-person drop-in events over 2024 to raise awareness and seek input to the new Highland Local Development Plan process. To address consultation fatigue and to make the best of limited resources, these events have been combined with other public agencies so that the public can talk to whichever agency representative is relevant to them and find out about what interests them. This has also encouraged public agencies to coordinate their efforts in a place-based way.

More targeted online discussion forum meetings have taken place with developers. Typically, these take the format of a Council briefing followed by a Q&A session. Development industry attendance has been good and feedback positive albeit rival developers will share more in a private bilateral meeting than in a more public forum.



Ecology Strategy and Action Plan

The Council's first [Ecology Strategy and Action Plan](#) was developed during this reporting period. Stakeholder engagement was vital in drafting the Strategy and defining its scope. Consultation on early and developing drafts took place across Council services with Members contributing via a series of in person and virtual workshops. A second round of workshops enabled external partners, including Highland Environment Forum, NatureScot and Scottish Forestry to further refine the Strategy and help the Council identify the most effective areas to focus our resources. As part of the formal consultation process, a further round of workshops will take place with key agency stakeholders, Members and Community Councils. Subject specific workshops focusing on areas such as the marine environment will also be arranged.

Customer and Stakeholder Survey

A Customer and Stakeholder survey is underway by the Improvement Service. The National Planning Improvement team will publish the results of the survey at the beginning of 2025 and each planning authority will be provided with a breakdown for their area.

Attribute 10: 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?*

Community Engagement

We now (February 2025) have 8 registered Local Place Plans (LPPs) within Highland. Many more are awaiting validation and registration or are in preparation. The Council has set up a best practice process for guiding local groups through the steps necessary

to ensure their LPPs pass the validation checks required by legislation. We have also undertaken two online, evening engagement sessions with community organisations regarding LPPs. Recordings of the events are available from the [Local Plan Plans webpages](#).

Over the course of 2024 we undertook a series of public engagement events jointly organised with community planning partners so as to maximise the interest for public attendees. These all had a place-based focus and all those about the Highland Local Development Plan evidence gathering phase sought or included information about the Place Standard Tool. We received over 1,000 responses to our Place Standard Tool based survey and these results are incorporated within the [Area Profile evidence papers](#), which form part of the input to the formulation of the new Highland Local Development Plan. Our wider approach to community engagement is set out within our recently updated [Development Plans Newsletter](#).

Developer Engagement

We have well developed relationships with many investors with strategic projects within Highland. We hold regular meetings with a number of the key companies to discuss potential proposals at an early stage, the progress being made on projects within the system and any challenges that need to be resolved. We have been running our major application pre-application meetings since 2009.

A recent example of this working in practice, shown in Case Study 1, is the Sumitomo cable factory at Nigg, where the Planning Service was praised for its constructive pre-application engagement. Global Energy's Steve Chisolm said:

"I know Alan at G H Johnston has already reached out to thank you on our behalf for your ongoing advice and support in preparing and submitting our planning application. It would be remiss of us to not also thank you directly. We couldn't have asked for a more open and constructive dialogue guiding us through the necessary process and that is very much appreciated by Global Energy, our partners and the various Government and other stakeholders in our project.

This is a major milestone indeed and we now look forward to finalising funding and getting the project underway as soon as possible."

This positive feedback was also echoed in relation to the processing of the application itself thereafter:

"Arthian would echo our clients praise regarding the Highland Council's Planning Team. We've been delighted to be of assistance in securing this critically important factory for SEI and for Global Energy. I would like to thank Dafydd, Gillian, and the wider Highland Council Team for their professional approach in the handling of this EIA application and the timeous way in which it was dealt with. It was only with their proactive approach as part of the Team that the outcome was achieved within the statutory timescales, and we look forward to achieving similar outcomes in the future as the Green Freeport flourishes."

Kenny Shand - Arthian

It is recognised that overall, developer engagement has reduced over the last few years with in-person developer and agent engagement sessions unable to progress during the Covid pandemic. However, we had regularly updated our web pages to advise on new developments and changes to process and procedure and will continue to do this where opportunities arise. An engagement strategy will be developed to understand what method of engagement and topics for discussion are of most interest to industry and how we might implement this.

Integrated Housing Delivery Service

During the Housing Summit in October 2024, we committed to offer applicants, with applications that relate to housing, the opportunity to engage with senior staff to discuss any issues they may be facing through what we call the Integrated Housing Delivery Service. This new approach will allow applicants to participate in a roundtable discussion to address any challenges or delays that might be experienced. The principal focus is around interaction of planning and road construction consent. Nevertheless, other issues, such as flooding and/or noise etc. may also potentially slow down progress on a housing application and need discussion. If the applicant has concerns involving an application that has not already been resolved by the case officer and they think that a discussion could help resolve it, then we encourage the use of this service. The service, which was trialled in 2024, will be live from March 2025.

Consultee Access

Since 2019, the Council has progressively implemented the use of Consultee Access for all internal and external consultees, including organisations such as SEPA and Transport Scotland as an efficient and easy to use digital process to search for, track and respond to planning applications via the public access platform. This has been extended to Community Councils, resulting in a steady increase in registrations from both new and existing Community Councils, with 92 out of 152 currently using this digital approach for their planning responses. When submitting comments, consultees have the option to either type their feedback directly into a free text box or upload an existing document. Their responses are automatically uploaded into our Document Management System, processed and made public. Consultee Access is compatible with mobile and tablet devices.

Our Business Management and Systems team offer assistance and guidance to both internal and external consultees, as well as Community Council members, ensuring they are efficiently set up with Consultee Access and receive ongoing support if required on its use.

Attribute Score and Improvement Actions

Scoring: (1=Making excellent progress, 5= No progress)

Attribute	Score
9. This planning authority has good customer care	3
10. The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities.	2

Based on the scoring above, the following areas of improvement have been identified, categorised by their level of importance High/Medium/Low along with their timescale: Short Term – 1 year, Medium Term – 3 years and Long Term – 3+ years.

Improvement Action	Owner	Importance	Timescale	Resources
Attribute 9: Improve Planning and Environment webpages as part of redesign and launch of a new website.	Managers/ Business Management & Systems	Medium	Long Term	Resource Time
Attribute 9: Review My Council project, if any gaps identified, address them by our own Development Management Customer Charter.	Chief Planner/Business Management & Systems	Medium	Long Term	Resource Time
Attribute 10: Deliver the Integrated Housing Delivery Service	Chief Planner	High	Short Term	Resource Time
Attribute 10: Engagement strategy with development industry.	Chief Planner	High	Medium Term	Resource Time
Attribute 10: Review engagement with Community Councils to encourage the use of consultee access for planning responses.	Business Management & Systems	Medium	Medium Term	Time
Attribute 10: Review and update the Community Council training library to provide more specific elements of training, i.e. planning enforcement.	Business Management & Systems	Medium	Medium Term	Resource Time



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 well-being economy. The planning authority should seek to ensure that there are no impediments to delivering agreed development.

PLACE

Attribute 11: 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?*

Place and Wellbeing Outcomes

We are aware of the Improvement Service promoted Place and Wellbeing Outcomes and the indicators designed to assess delivery against these desirable outcomes. Our evidence gathering for our new Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP) is drawing together many of these datasets and applying them to each place. For example, our Local Living Tool and Place Standard Tool consultations have collated information on active pedestrian accessibility and local resident perceptions and needs. Our data collection also includes local greenspace, play space, public toilet provision and local community plan auditing. All this evidence will be used in formulating the new HLDP particularly at individual settlement level.

On a practical level, we continue to look for opportunities for place-based approaches to providing positive wellbeing outcomes for our communities. One such project is the Riverside way, Inverness Active Travel link, set out within Case Study 4, that embraces the principles of equality, net-zero emissions and sustainability to provide an enhanced environment that reduces motorised traffic and increases the ability of active travel, wheeling and walking.

Delivering sustainable, liveable and productive places

As explained above, we are gathering sufficient evidence to undertake a Placemaking Audit for each main settlement within Highland. Each Audit will take account of the Place and Wellbeing Outcomes and its related indicators. Each Audit will also consider outcomes, priorities and aspirations recorded within any registered Local Place Plan and similar requirements set out within any relevant community plan, locality plan or area place plan.

Attribute 12: This planning authority supports the delivery of appropriate 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?*

Section 75 Agreements

We have a well-developed approach to managing Section 75 legal agreements. The service has clear policy and guidance on the need for developer contributions that is regularly reviewed, particularly with regard to education contributions. Case officers can easily establish the requirements for each development. Reports of Handling set out the requirements for each development as an Annex and this then forms the basis of instruction to Legal Services. Our Legal Services have a number of standard format agreements. Once concluded, the obligations set out within the legal agreement are monitored by the case officer and our Developer Contributions Officer and where payments are due developers are invoiced, with any non-payment escalated and followed up as necessary.

Planning Conditions

We have standard suit of planning conditions that comply with the six legal tests and are generally applied consistently across the board. We are however aware that for many permissions that too many are applied. This may be a consequence of poor submission but can also be as a result of case officer's being overly cautious. We will look at how we can minimise our use of conditions and take a more proportionate approach to their imposition.

Local Housing Land

The Council's June 2024 adopted Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan contains a Local Housing Land Requirement (LHLR) that exceeds the Inner Moray Firth proportion of the Highland Minimum All Tenure Housing Land Requirement set out within NPF4. The Council has commissioned/produced a Local Housing Strategy and an Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport Study which outline the need for a far higher LHLR (than the 9,500 Highland figure within NPF4) within the new Highland Local Development Plan (HLDP), which is in its evidence gathering phase. The delivery of a far higher LHLR figure will depend upon: it being better justified by a new Housing Need and Demand Assessment (currently being commissioned by the Council); the figure clearing a DPEA Reporter's Gate Check; the successful allocation of additional sites within the new HLDP; the local construction industry increasing its capacity to build more houses than past completion trends; and, infrastructure providers (notably Scottish Water and Transport Scotland) increasing and coordinating (through the Council's Delivery Programme) their network investment in Highland.

Processing Agreements

The table indicates a decline in the number of applications with processing agreements. This trend mirrors the decrease in major applications as well. Additionally, it highlights the increased proportion of work now being handled as Section 36 applications under the Electricity Act 1989.

Processing Agreements	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24
Number of Decisions Issued	34	36	27

Delivery Programme

The Council hosted a Housing Summit during 2024 and is considering delivery mechanisms to accelerate housing development within Highland. We continue to investigate the potential application of Masterplan Consent Areas as a housing delivery mechanism with a report on this subject to committee in May 2024. We have established a productive dialogue with the development industry that operate within. We have ongoing discussions with Homes for Scotland about the latest Housing Land Audit and the definition of a Deliverable Housing Land Pipeline for Highland.

We produced a draft Pipeline for the Inner Moray Firth area in September 2024. Better sharing of evidence between parties will improve the accuracy of this Pipeline, help unlock allocated sites and expose the need for additional allocations through the new Plan process. Successful delivery of development and placemaking depends upon successful delivery of the infrastructure and facilities that underpin development. In turn, successful delivery of infrastructure requires the spatial and temporal coordination of the

capital programmes of all infrastructure providers. The Service continues to promote the [Highland Delivery Programme](#) as a single tool for that coordination.

In August 2024, the Council approved a new single Delivery Programme for Highland which is now intended to be a live document. It provides accessible summaries of all the infrastructure required to enable growth in the area split by topic and place. It also guides developers and communities on why, where and when developer contributions will be sought and spent. In updating the Delivery Programme, we continue better to involve internal and external infrastructure providers. For example, we have reached out to NHS Highland to gather evidence that may justify developer contributions for health facility improvements. Stakeholders are beginning to realise the benefits of involvement and having predictable developer contribution “income flows” in planning their infrastructure investments.

Attribute Score and Improvement Actions

Scoring: (1=Making excellent progress, 5= No progress)

Attribute	Score
11. The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places	1
12. This planning authority supports the delivery of appropriate development	2

Based on the scoring above, the following areas of improvement have been identified, categorised by their level of importance High/Medium/Low along with their timescale: Short Term – 1 year, Medium Term – 3 years and Long Term – 3+ years.

Improvement Action	Owner	Importance	Timescale	Resources
Attribute 11: Continue to support the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places	Chief Planner	High	Long Term	Officers
Attribute 12: Review the wording of the conditions and the reduce the number/extent on planning permissions to take a more proportionate approach.	Chief Planner	Medium	Medium Term	Time Officers

CASE STUDIES



CASE 1 – CABLE
MANUFACTURING
PLANT, NIGG



CASE 2 – FLOW
COUNTRY HERITAGE
SITE, SUTHERLAND



CASE 3 – ARCHAEOLOGY,
DORNOCH NORTH
HOUSING



CASE 4 – RIVERSIDE WAY,
INVERNESS ACTIVE
TRAVEL LINK



CASE 5 – THE STORR,
ISLE OF SKYE



CASE 6 – INVERNESS
AND CROMARTY FIRTH
GREEN FREEPORT



CASE 7 –
OPPORTUNITIES FOR
STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Case Study 1 – Cable Manufacturing Plant, Nigg

LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
Land east of Nigg Energy Park, Easter Ross extending to 15.35 hectares. Permission Granted 17.01.2024	Production of high-voltage (HV) submarine cables for supply to the offshore wind market	Gillian Pearson, Principal Planner
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
Attribute 4: This Planning Authority has sound governance. Attribute 10: The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities. Attribute 11: The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.	Applicant - Global Energy Group Nigg Ltd Agent - Mabbett & Associates Planning Officer - Gillian Pearson Area Planning Manager – Dafydd Jones	

OVERVIEW:

The applicant, Sumitomo Electrical Industries (SEI), sought permission for the construction and operation of a high-voltage cable manufacturing factory and ancillary facilities at Nigg in the Cromarty Firth. This is one of the first key projects to come forward as part of the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport.

The introduction of renewable energy and interconnected national and regional lines are being promoted worldwide and is aimed at achieving a decarbonised society which has accelerated the market demand for power cables. In particular, the UK is

expected to be one of the largest markets for high voltage power cables, to meet the growth in the number of offshore wind power projects to achieve the Scottish Government's Net-zero 2045 and UK wide Net-zero 2050 targets. SEI decided to establish a factory in the Scottish Highlands, east of the Nigg Energy Park, to capture the increasing demand for high-end cables in the region. It set up a new subsidiary company, Sumitomo Electric Industries UK Cables Ltd., to manufacture and supply cables for offshore wind farms and further grid connections to meet the demand from the renewable energy sector and to upgrade the country's electricity transmission system.

MAIN ACTIVITIES:

This was a Major scale development. The applicants sought advice using our Major Pre-Application Advice Service in December 2022, with the formal advice issued in February 2023. This enabled the Council to outline specific requirements that would be necessary with any planning application. This was particularly important due to the specific operational issues associated with the delivery of the facility. This allowed the subsequent planning application to be determined in just over four months in January 2024. The significance and importance of the project was recognised by the Council given the wider benefits that it offered to the wider Highland economy through the level of investment involved and the employment created both during construction and once it became operational. In recognition of this and the critical time pressures associated with the project, the Council agreed to convene a special North Planning Application Committee in January 2024. Following detailed consideration and an assessment of the application, it was granted permission subject to a number of conditions. Works have now commenced on site, and it is anticipated that the factory will be complete in the summer of 2026 with it operational in the autumn of 2026. There continues to be extensive discussion with the applicant and their agents in the satisfaction and discharge of the planning conditions.

OUTCOME:

The granting of permission within the agreed timescales has ensured that key timelines were met for the applicants to ensure investor confidence was maintained. Discussing and working through the issues ensured a good working relationship and allowed a better understanding of each other's roles resulting in a solution-based approach from all. Delivering permission within the agreed timeline has enabled works to commence on site, and it is anticipated that the factory will be complete in the summer of 2026 and will be operational in the autumn of 2026.



Image of Nigg Energy Park/Port of Nigg from the South East



Photomontage of site from core path at Dunskeath Castle

LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes:

The value of early engagement was ensuring there was a clear understanding of what the development entailed and the applicants' operational requirements. It also gave the applicants a clear understanding of the processes and regulations and the related concerns raised by consultees and an opportunity to revise their plans or mitigate the issues involved.

The application when submitted had addressed all the key issues and concerns raised by the consultees and in doing so ensured they were able to respond more quickly as it reduced the need for requesting further information etc.

Early identification of the issues and concerns allowed a constructive approach to resolving key issues to ensure the committee timelines were met to ensure the delivery of the project.

Challenges: Ensuring all involved were aware of the timelines involved and having a clearly defined objective and solution-based approach to resolving issues.

Committing time and resources to such an important project was hugely important but it is acknowledged this was prioritised ahead of other workstreams which were impacted.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARD DELIVERING OUTCOMES:

This example works towards these outcomes.

NPF4

- ☒ [Sustainable places](#)
- ☒ Climate change and nature crisis
- ☒ Climate mitigate and adaptation
- ☒ Brownfield, vacant and derelict land and empty buildings
- ☒ Coast development
- ☒ Energy

[Return to Case Studies](#)

Case Study 2 – Flow Country World Heritage Site, Sutherland

LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
The Flow Country, Caithness and Sutherland	Flow Country candidate World Heritage Site and Impact Assessment Toolkit	Nicole Wallace – Service Lead Environment, Development Management and Active Travel David Cowie – Principal Planner
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
<p>Attribute 6: The planning authority has a robust policy and evidence base.</p> <p>Attribute 10: The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities.</p> <p>Attribute 11: The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.</p>	<p>NatureScot</p> <p>Scottish Government</p> <p>Highland Council Planning</p> <p>Flow Country Partnership staff and partners</p>	

OVERVIEW:

In early 2023, and after many years of preparation, the blanket bog peatlands of The Flow Country was submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), as a candidate World Heritage Site.

In July 2024, UNESCO inscribed the site which means that The Flow Country is now seen globally as being as important as the Great Barrier Reef, the Serengeti, the Okavango Delta and the 160+ other World Heritage Sites inscribed on the World Heritage List for their outstanding natural values.

It was recognised that any proposals for development that would threaten the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) and integrity of the site between submission of the bid and UNESCO's decision on whether to inscribe it on the World Heritage list, could seriously undermine the bid and/or compromise the Site. Furthermore, this could cause significant reputational damage to the Highland Council, Scottish Government and the UK Government, all of whom had given their full support to the nomination.

To avoid this outcome a planning position statement (PPS) and Heritage Impact Assessment tool were prepared to help guide Highland Council, planners and developers.



MAIN ACTIVITIES:

The need for this statement arose due to the ways in which the planning policy context evolved during, and following, the consultation, compilation and submission of the proposed Site's nomination dossier and Draft Management Plan (submitted to

UNESCO on the 1 February 2023). NPF4 (adopted on the 13 February 2023) has lessened the protection provided to Wild Land Areas and carbon rich soils (peat) in respect of renewable energy developments.

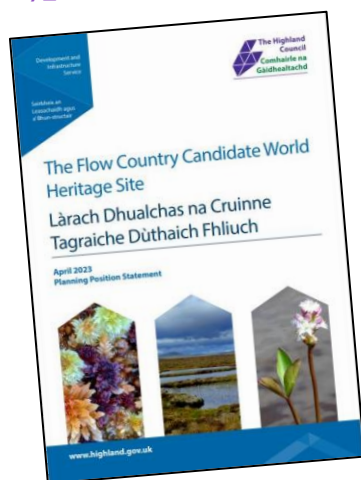
It was previously considered that these protections, together with existing SSSI/SPA/SAC/Ramsar designations (73% of the site), would provide adequate protection to the whole of the candidate site and its Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) during the period that UNESCO was considering the nomination. However, with the lessened protection now provided by Wild Land Areas and policy concerning carbon rich soils, the area of the candidate site not protected by existing designations (27%) in particular was under pressure from renewable energy developments.

There is no other site in Scotland nominated for solely natural World Heritage criteria.

In early 2023 and for the reasons stated above the Highland Council in close collaboration with the Flow Country Partnership (FCP) and Nature Scot recognised the need to put in place a planning position statement (PPS) to cover the period between submission of the nomination dossier and a determination of the success of the nomination in July 2024.

On 4 May 2023 the Highland Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee approved a PPS which provides clarity to developers in relation to the candidate Flow Country World Heritage Site. The approved PPS does not prohibit development within and around the candidate World Heritage Site, it instead provides a means by which development proposals can be guided, assessed and considered.

https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/27007/flow_country_candidate_world_heritage_site_planning_position_statement_-_may_2023



To aid in assessing the impact of developments on the Flow Country Candidate World Heritage Site, a tailored Heritage Impact Assessment (HIA) toolkit was also produced. The tools included in the toolkit have been modified from the Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context Resource Manual (2022) produced by UNESCO and its advising agencies. The tailored Toolkit, like the PPS, was developed rapidly to assist those involved to make headway with assessment and consideration of proposals, particularly ahead of inscription.

https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/28012/flow_country_candidate_world_heritage_site_impact_assessment_toolkit

OUTCOME:

The approval and application of the PPS and Heritage Impact Tool has meant that any complex and/or national/major Development proposals with the potential to affect the Site and its OUV that were at pre-application stage from February 2023 were required to take account of the planning position statement and undertake World Heritage specific impact assessment.

Also any planning application/application for consent under s36/s37 of the Electricity Act with the potential to affect the Site and its OUV, being determined from the date of the approved planning position statement until the date of UNESCO's decision on the Flow Country nomination, was considered by the Council in terms of its potential impact on the attributes of the Site and its integrity and, bearing in mind that at the time the Site was a candidate for World Heritage status, was also considered in the context of Policy 7I in NPF4.

On the 24th of July 2024 the Flow Country was inscribed on the World Heritage List. The site's status has therefore advanced from 'candidate' to 'inscribed'. The site has been inscribed under one of the two criteria for which it had been nominated. It has been inscribed under criterion ix but not under criterion x.

Protection will now be afforded by utilising existing policy within NPF4, the Highland-wide Local Development Plan, Caithness and Sutherland Local Development Plan, associated Supplementary Guidance documents. The Council considers policies in NPF4 relevant to the protection of the Flow Country World Heritage Site include, but may not be limited to, Policy 4 Natural Places, Policy 5 Soils and Policy 7 (specifically part 'I' concerning World Heritage sites). Impact on the Outstanding Universal Value of a World Heritage Site is, in any event, a very important material consideration.

The Council has not withdrawn the PPS following inscription of the site, it remains published and available for reference and appropriate use, subject to taking account of the fact that the site has advanced from 'candidate' to 'inscribed' and that, whereas the site had been nominated under World Heritage criteria ix and x, the site has been inscribed for criterion ix alone. We consider that the PPS continues to play a useful role, particularly in these early days following inscription. Within a brief and accessible document, the PPS provides a useful introduction to and overview of this 'new' consideration, being the first World Heritage Site in Highland and Scotland's first to be inscribed only under the 'natural' criteria.

The Planning Position Statement and Heritage Impact Assessment Toolkit will need to be updated and evolved. With the Site now inscribed, we will also continue to signpost (and will place particular emphasis on) UNESCO's Guidance and Toolkit for Impact Assessments in a World Heritage Context. The Draft Management Plan for the site will also be updated in due course. It will take

time to have that in place. A new Highland Local Development Plan (currently at Evidence Gathering stage) will also provide opportunity to reflect and include content on planning for the FCWHS but will not be available as a Proposed Plan before 2026.



With the FCWHS now inscribed, it is important that it is understood and taken into consideration by developers and decision-makers without delay and the PPS (including the forthcoming update and evolution of it) has a role in supporting that.

Developers continue to make use of and access the guidance and toolkit in taking forward their proposals.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes:

The PPS provided an opportunity to introduce and highlight the importance of the site (OUV), its special nature & integrity and described how the existing planning framework would be used to safeguard the site and its environs.

The PPS provided clarity on how the WHS aligns with current planning policies and objectives and emphasised the key policies relevant to the World Heritage site alongside the process that developers /planners were expected to follow/use at a time when the wider policy context had and was changing.

The provision of the Heritage Impact Assessment Toolkit further enhanced developers understanding of the requirements that were being placed on them to ensure that the OUV/integrity of the site was protected.

The PPS was informed by relevant stakeholders ensuring the statement was balanced and fit for purpose.

Challenges:

One of the key challenges was to provide a clear overview of the existing planning framework at a time that it had only recently significantly evolved with the emergence and adoption of NPF4. Planning authorities and developers alike had yet to gain experience of implementing NPF4's policies. Nonetheless swift preparation of the PPS was vital, particularly if it was (as intended) to serve its purpose of guiding developers, planners and decision-makers in the interim period prior to UNESCO's decision on the World Heritage nomination.

However, drafting the PPS was quite time consuming, with input needed from a number of key stakeholders, to draw in for example World Heritage expertise, as well as Development Planning and Development Management context.

The PPS needed to particularly respond to the pressure from renewable energy developments, though not exclusively so. It is envisaged that an updated and evolved version of the PPS now being prepared will need to continue to provide a clear context for such large-scale developments to be considered, whilst also explaining the planning context for smaller scale developments and explaining consequences of the FCWHS for permitted development rights, now that the Site has been inscribed.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARD DELIVERING OUTCOMES:

This example works towards these outcomes.

NPF4

- ☒ Sustainable places
- ☒ Climate change and nature crisis
- ☒ Climate mitigate and adaptation
- ☒ Biodiversity
- ☒ Natural Places
- ☒ Soils

- ☒ Forestry, woodland and trees
- ☒ Historic assets and places
- ☒ **Productive places**
- ☒ Community Wealth Building
- ☒ Rural development
- ☒ Tourism
- ☒ **Place and Wellbeing Outcomes**
- ☒ Resources
- ☒ Stewardship

[Return to Case Studies](#)

Case Study 3 – Archaeology, Dornoch North Housing

LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
Dornoch North Housing Watching briefs and excavations December 2023 to March 2024	Dornoch North Housing Phase 4 Dornoch North footpath and landscaping	Kirsty Cameron, Archaeologist
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
Attribute 11: The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.	Planning Officer Council Archaeologist Developer Developer's Archaeological Contractors	

OVERVIEW:

Archaeological work has been carried out in advance of, and during, every phase of works at a large housing site to the north of Dornoch. The most recent phase of housing (Phase 4) and associated infrastructure continued to expose and excavate buried prehistoric features across the site. In addition, the completion of a footpath/cycle path to the east of an earlier phase of housing included the retention and landscaping of two significant cist burials to create a feature within the new landscaping. The complex excavation and recording works on site were carried out in tandem with the site stripping and were completed on time and without delay for the development.

The features identified in the Phase 4 area clearly relate to those uncovered on earlier phases of development (particularly the adjacent Phase 2 site) and show the extent and continuity of settlement and activity in this part of Dornoch. This has not only

added to our baseline of knowledge but also contributed hugely to the story of this royal burgh and gives a historic depth to the new community who will live on site.

Images show the work in progress of the cycle/foot path with the prehistoric burial cist structures fully excavated but left in situ. The stone boxes are to be filled-in and landscaped with accompanying interpretation provided that will illustrate not only the features themselves but also an overview of all the archaeological remains found across the development site and their significance within this landscape. The archaeologists have also provided talks to the community to deliver additional public benefit and show the social value of the work carried out.



MAIN ACTIVITIES:

The programme of archaeological works carried out for this development itself is a fairly standard process. However, this case serves to illustrate the importance of this process, both in terms of recording the irreplaceable evidence of our shared past and of delivering sustainable development and maximising the positive contribution the development can make to local communities.

OUTCOME:

NPF4 defines the historic environment as “the physical evidence for human activity that connects people with place, linked with the associations we can see, feel and understand.” NPF4 Annex F (2023). The historic environment “...helps to create a sense of place, identity and physical and social wellbeing, and benefits the economy, civic participation, tourism and lifelong learning.” Our Place in Time, the Historic Environment Strategy for Scotland (2014).

The presence of the cists has been known about since 1938. They were able to be fully excavated as part of this development and the design allowed the stones to be retained in situ, designing the footpath around them and including them within as a visible element within the landscaping. By preserving and including this important site and by the sharing of the new knowledge gained from the archaeological programme, it is hoped to achieve an increased community pride and sense of place making the local area a better place to live/work/visit. The public benefit derived from this process aims to connect the new community with the history of the site and the retention of the most significant features found helps to embed the new development into the existing landscape.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes: Successful delivery of a complex archaeological programme.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARD DELIVERING OUTCOMES:

This example works towards these outcomes.

NPF4

- ☒ [Sustainable places](#)
- ☒ Historic assets and places
- ☒ [Liveable places](#)
- ☒ Design, quality and place
- ☒ [Productive places](#)
- ☒ Tourism
- ☒ [Place and Wellbeing Outcomes](#)
- ☒ Spaces

[Return to Case Studies](#)

Case Study 4 – Riverside Way, Inverness Active Travel Link

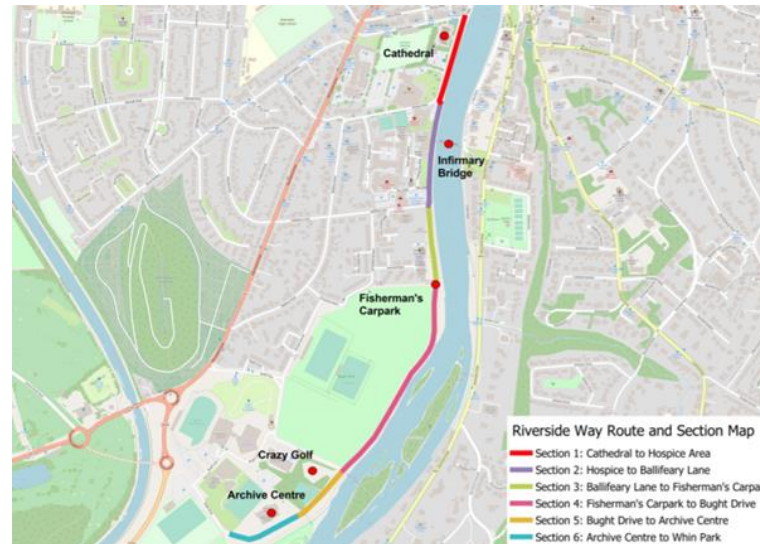
LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
Riverside, Inverness Design work started in 2018 with construction completed 2023 / 24	To improve active travel provision along the River Ness for those walking, wheeling and cycling.	Neil Young, Active Travel Manager
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
Attribute 10: The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities. Attribute 11: The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.	Highland Council Elected Members, Highland Council Officers, Highlife Highland, Emergency Services, General Public, Community Council, Business Owners, Access Panel and other protected characteristic groups.	

OVERVIEW:

The Riverside Way is a strategic walking, cycling and wheeling corridor through Inverness, and is one of the key projects as part of the Inverness City Active Travel Network, which is providing an East-West route through the city to enable modal shift to active modes of transport.

The Riverside Way links the expanding housing area of Ness-Side, along with the canal network and West Link active travel provision and provides a direct cohesive, attractive walking, cycling and wheeling route into the city centre. The route passes through and provides a key link to the leisure and recreational facilities in the Bught Park area of Inverness for the many local clubs which utilise the sports pitches and the use of the Ness islands for physical activity, health, and wellbeing. There are a number of key stakeholders

along this corridor including NHS, Care homes, hospice, sheltered housing, local community access and key strategic facilities such as Eden Court and Inverness Cathedral. It also provides a safe, attractive and cohesive active travel route from the new Torvean Mobility Hub to the city centre.



MAIN ACTIVITIES:

Previous Stakeholder consultations had revealed a number of concerns which included road safety - especially in relation to coaches passing each other along the route; vehicle speeds; and poor pedestrian infrastructure. This gave Officers a mandate to progress with the project.

A Landscape Architect consultancy was commissioned and a series of public facing events were organised to engage with local people and key stakeholders to seek their views on high level options for wayfinding, street furniture and landscape design options. The Community Activity day held on 19 October 2019 was structured into three events; a pop-up picnic, a walking workshop, and a postcard-making workshop. A tally of participation indicates that about 100 people attended across the 3 activities.

On 1 March 2020 the 20mph scheme, which was delivered as part of the Riverside Way project, went live within the Ballifeary and Riverside area. This included signage, a Speed Indicator Device on Ballifeary Road and speed cushions on Bught Road adjacent to Bught Pitches.

During March 2020 the UK went into lockdown with the Covid-19 Pandemic. Highland Council's focus was to enable social distancing on key routes within Inverness for people to walk and cycle safely and to enable people to safely reach healthcare and key amenities by foot and bike through the lockdown.

Spaces for People funding was successfully awarded for this, and Riverside Way was one of a series of interventions which the Spaces for People team delivered. This involved a (Coronavirus) Temporary Traffic Regulation Order (TTRO) to enable the one-way with cycle contraflow along Ness Walk and Bught Road.

Officers also installed a full-modal traffic counter at Ballifeary Lane / Ness Walk to understand transport movements within the Riverside and Ballifeary area. A further full traffic junction turning count for key locations along Riverside and Ballifeary was taken during March 2020.

A design consultant was appointed in February 2021 to update the feasibility and design work carried out in 2018 to reflect changes in design standards as part of an overhaul of grant funding across Scotland.

Consultation was undertaken with key stakeholders in the community and the wider general public through the following mediums:

- An Introduction Briefing session: This outlined the project to date, the different options for each section of the route and the Commonplace website where stakeholders were able to answer a questionnaire and provide feedback on the options.
- Commonplace Question: The online platform allowed stakeholders and members of the public to provide feedback on the proposals through an online questionnaire.
- Online Public Drop in Event: This event allowed members of the public to attend an Online Drop In Event where the project team provided information on the project and answer any questions/queries from members of the public.
- Stakeholder Workshop: The stakeholder workshops provided key stakeholders, situated along the route, with an opportunity to engage with the project team in small workshop groups to allow for a more in-depth discussion and engagement.



Section	Option 1	Option 2	Option 3
Section 1 - Cathedral to Hospice	Shared Use Path 39.6%	Riverside segregated Cycle Path 60.4%	
Section 2 - Hospice to Ballifeary Lane	Current Layout 32.6%	Moving footway to the riverside 67.4%	
Section 3 - Ballifeary Lane to Fisherman's Carpark	Current spaces for People 44.8%	Raised kerb cycle contraflow 55.2%	
Section 4 - Fisherman's Carpark to Bught Drive	Current spaces for People 19.3%	Bi-directional cycle lane (no parking) 28.4%	Bi-directional cycle route with parking 52.3%
Section 5 - Bught Drive to Archive Centre	Cycle lane and footpath next to skatepark 22.1%	Shared use path next to skatepark 25.8%	Segregated cycle lane opposite skatepark 52.3%
Section 6 - Archive Centre to Whin Park	Shared Use Path 32.6%	Cycle lane and footpath 67.4%	

OUTCOME:

The outcome has seen the delivery of a project that supports sustainable transport in Inverness aligning with the city's Active Travel Network plan. This has been through:

Enhanced Accessibility: Wider footpaths and a dedicated cycle lanes has made it easier and safer for pedestrians and cyclists to use this route whilst supporting diverse forms of mobility.

Improved Safety: The project incorporated design elements that reduced vehicle-pedestrian conflicts including a cycle path, improved and new crossing points and clearer signage. These will lower the risk of accidents and has created a safer environment for vulnerable road users.

Environmental Benefits: By promoting walking and cycling, this project contributes to reducing car dependency, which helps decrease traffic congestion and emissions. This aligns with The Highland Councils sustainability goals.

Community and Economic Impact: The improved active travel infrastructure will boost the local economy by making it easier for people to visit businesses and attractions along the Riverside. Additionally, the safer and more pleasant travel route will encourage community use, which will also increase footfall and support local businesses.

Public Health: The Riverside project will encourage physical activity, contributing to public health by promoting more walking and cycling, which can help address issues like obesity and cardiovascular diseases.

The images below represent the construction journey.



LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes:

Stakeholder Engagement: Early and consistent consultation with local communities, businesses, and advocacy groups was critical. Engaging stakeholders helped us to identify user needs, potential challenges, and areas for improvement and ultimately lead to higher project acceptance and better outcomes.

Flexibility in Design: The success of this project depended on being adaptive and flexible through the design phase. The introduction of a Temporary Traffic Order allowed Officers to trial the infrastructure before permanent construction which allowed for testing and adjusting layouts based on real user feedback.

Challenges:

Long-term Maintenance and Durability: Without proper maintenance, the new active travel infrastructure can deteriorate quickly. Issues like poor lighting, uneven surfaces, and inadequate winter maintenance (e.g. leaf, snow and ice removal) can discourage users. This requires committed resources and planning for ongoing maintenance and updates. Future projects will include a budget for maintenance.

Underestimating Behaviour Change: This Active Travel project, along with most others, assume a quick shift from car usage to cycling, walking or wheeling. However, behaviour changes has been slow in this car-centric community. Lack of funding has not allowed for investing in complementary measures, such as awareness campaigns and incentives. Future projects will include a budget for behaviour change initiatives for a period of time after construction has been completed.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARD DELIVERING OUTCOMES:

This example works towards these outcomes.

NPF4

- ☒ **Sustainable places**
- ☒ Climate change and nature crisis
- ☒ Sustainable transport
- ☒ **Liveable places**
- ☒ Design, quality and place
- ☒ Local living and 20 minute neighbourhoods
- ☒ Play, recreation and sport
- ☒ **Place and Wellbeing Outcomes**
- ☒ Movement

[Return to Case Studies](#)

Case Study 5 – The Storr, Isle of Skye

LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
<p>The Old Man of Storr, Staffin. Isle of Skye</p> <p>Jan 2023 (validation of planning application for new visitor centre) through to August 2024</p>	<p>Visitor Hub Development - Ionad an Stòir</p>	<p>Iain Robertson, Principal Project Manager</p> <p>Alastair Stewart, Project Officer Facilities</p> <p>Amy Smith, Project Manager</p>
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
<p>Attribute 11: The planning authority supports the delivery of sustainable, liveable and productive places.</p>	<p>Highland Council cross service collaboration. Local community councils and members, Skye Connect and Nature Scot. The site management plan includes ongoing partnership with Nature Scot. Local businesses will benefit from sales at Visitor Hub.</p>	

OVERVIEW:

As visitor numbers increased on the Isle of Skye and the use of motorhomes and camper vans became popular the pressure on iconic sites such as The Old Man of Storr threatened the quality of the site (SSSI) and was causing serious traffic congestion, damaging road verges and creating road safety concerns. The project sought to address and off-set visitor pressures by creating an off-road carpark, additional formal roadside parking spaces, toilets, black/grey waste collection facilities and a small visitor centre (Ionad an Stòir) providing retail and a multi-purpose event space.

MAIN ACTIVITIES:

The project provided visitors with a visitor hub, including a retail outlet staffed by a team of three and the creation of two Ranger positions.

Visitor Data Counter Figures for The Storr

Month	Year 2023	Year 2024
January	3716	3892
February	4751	5044
March	9457	15538
April	27113	27030
May	37377	42676
June	35514	36823
July	43769	43946
August	43657	40824
September	33175	36604
October	22651	25782
November	7563	7107
December	5305	5757
Total	274048	291023

OUTCOME:

Ionad an Stòir has been operational, and the site staffed for 2024. The building is supplied with an air source heat pump and solar array. Charging units are operational within the car park. Improved parking provision and traffic controls have cleared the carriageway and reduced the risk of traffic/pedestrian accidents. Income from the retail space and parking revenues support the employment of staff and contribute to the wider site maintenance.

Footpaths have been built and improved to protect the site from increased footfall and the regeneration of the native woodland is underway following the removal of a block of commercial forestry.



LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes:

Construction of a high-quality visitor centre and shop that positively integrates with the local landscape.

Reduced congestion on the main road.

A safer environment for visitors.

The promotion and sales of local high-quality products.

Working with the local community and across agencies.

Protection of site from overtourism and erosion.

Income generated through the visitor centre and car park will be reinvested into the site to help fund future management, including maintenance of the path network.

Challenges:

The site is operating at capacity for approx. six weeks of the year.

The site will require ongoing maintenance with hill paths being costly to repair.

The removal of waste and servicing the site is also costly.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARD DELIVERING OUTCOMES:

This example works towards these outcomes.

NPF4

☒ **Sustainable places**

☒ Natural Places

☒ **Productive places**

☒ Retail

☒ Rural development

☒ Tourism

[Return to Case Studies](#)

Case Study 6 – Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport

LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
Various sites in and around Inverness, the Moray Firth and the Cromarty Firth	Securing and Implementing the Inverness & Cromarty Firth Green Freeport	Scott Dalgarno Dafydd Jones
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
<p>Attribute 5: This Planning Authority has effective leadership.</p> <p>Attribute 6: The planning authority has a robust policy and evidence base.</p> <p>Attribute 8: The planning authority has effective and efficient decision-making processes.</p> <p>Attribute 10: The planning authority has effective engagement and collaboration with stakeholders and communities.</p>	<p>ICFGF Site operators</p> <p>ICFGF Delivery Partners</p> <p>Scottish Govt / UK Govt</p> <p>Key Agencies</p> <p>Local Communities</p>	

OVERVIEW:

Since a very early stage of the project officers have played a key role in a cross-sector partnership that has developed and successfully secured a Green Freeport in Highland and supported its subsequent implementation. This has brought a major project

of national and international significance to Highland, aligning with and driving forward the Council corporate priorities and Strategic Planning outcomes.

Over a number of years officers have helped develop the initial proposition and bid that led to the successful award of Green Freeport status, before representing the Council through the Business Case stages, whilst also providing planning advice on the planning issues to address and embedding the importance of the Green Freeport in emerging Development Plans.

Home - Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport



Image of Nigg Energy Park/Port of Nigg from the Southeast



Source: [46 Rishi Sunak Cromarty Port Stock Photos, High-Res Pictures, and Images - Getty Images](https://www.flickr.com/photos/number10gov/52624666569/in/album-72177720305205267)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/number10gov/52624666569/in/album-72177720305205267>

MAIN ACTIVITIES:

Key tasks in this activity have been:

- Planning service staff representing the Council in the ICFGF Delegated Action Group that oversaw the preparation of the Green Freeport bid, the Outline and Full Business Cases and the early stages of implementation.

- Overseeing the preparation of development plans and planning processes that helped create the rationale for the project, aligned it to planning objectives, policies and wider outcomes - which supported the principle of development and ongoing implementation.
- Coordinating with key agencies and private sector partners in liaising with Scottish Government and UK Government officials and arranging Council officer and Elected Member approval for a new Green Freeport Delivery Protocol and the detailed delivery arrangements and mechanisms.
- Playing a key role in identifying the projects required to enable the setup and operation of the Green Freeport sites and helping support the identification and enabling of seed funding projects.
- Preparation of an online map to share details of the new Green Freeport sites and help the process of identifying the delivery and policy requirements.
- Leading and supporting various engagements with the community, key agencies and wider stakeholders, and coordinating partners input to Area Place Plans that helped to shape and identify community priorities.

OUTCOME:

Planning staff, and the plans and processes they have shaped, have helped secure a transformational project for Highland that will have a significant, positive, multi-generational impact on Highland communities and businesses.

The planning service has sought to inform national policy and strategies and has optimised the development plan review process to create the conditions to support and deliver the Green Freeport, leading to over £700m of inward investment already secured to enable future jobs in the area and evolving Highland's ongoing contribution to renewables and national decarbonisation and addressing energy security. The first developments have subsequently been supported through the pre-application and application processes, with a new Cable Factory under construction and reestablished harbour area leading to commitments that will support offshore renewables.

Having identified the requirements for delivery the Council, the Council continues to work with partners on a delivery plan that will need cross-sector coordination to ensure the full range of developments can be supported.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes:

Good example of cross sector partners working proactively to unlock inward investment and address major regional and national challenges of delivering net zero, a green economy, and diversifying opportunities for workforce of the future. This work has aligned existing processes and practices with new requirements to show dynamism and flexibility to deliver, with the first Green Freeport developments already under construction.

Challenges:

The Green Freeport delivery plan will require significant ongoing coordination and collaboration across all sectors to ensure delivery. In particular, there is ongoing work to monitor the timing of projects on the ground and to identify opportunities for biodiversity enhancement, housing delivery and the transport infrastructure required to support each phase of the Green Freeport.

CONTRIBUTION TOWARD DELIVERING OUTCOMES:

This example works towards these outcomes.

NPF4

- ☒ Sustainable places
 - ☒ Climate change and nature crisis
 - ☒ Climate mitigate and adaptation
 - ☒ Biodiversity
 - ☒ Coast development
 - ☒ Energy
- ☒ Liveable places
 - ☒ Design, quality and place
- ☒ Productive places
 - ☒ Business and industry

[Return to Case Studies](#)

Case Study 7 – Opportunities for Staff Development

LOCATION AND DATES	PROJECT	NAME OF KEY OFFICER
Various	Staff members afforded opportunities to enhance their skills, obtain further qualifications and advance their careers with us.	Area Planning Managers
ATTRIBUTES	AREAS OF COLLABORATION	
Attribute 1: The planning authority has sufficient resources and skills to maximise productivity Attribute 2: The planning authority has a valued and supported workforce	Staff members Planning Team Leaders Area Planning Managers	

OVERVIEW:

We have included examples for Attribute 2 under main activities below to illustrate how staff members have been given opportunities to enhance their skills, obtain further qualifications and advance their careers with us. These examples demonstrate the council's commitment to investing in and supporting its workforce.

MAIN ACTIVITIES:

Kathy started with The Highland Council August 2016 as a Clerical Assistant for Planning, Building Standards and Environmental Health. Gaining knowledge of these services and looking to progress in her career, she then applied for the Professional Support

Officer for Planning role during the challenging period marked by COVID-19, lockdowns, and the transition to hybrid working. She successfully secured this position in July 2021.

She remains in this post, with the view to becoming a graduate planner on completion of her MSc in Spatial Planning and Real Estate Development which she is completing part-time through Heriot Watt University. The course has been conducted online since September 2023, and she aims to complete by mid-2026.

Kathy intends to keep progressing her career within the service and is eager to explore any suitable opportunities that may arise.

Pamela joined the Highland Council in 2022 as a Professional Planning Support Officer.

Based in Lochaber, she is part of the local team made up of planners, graduate planners and other PSOs, who inspired and encouraged her to enrol in the MSc Spatial Planning and Real Estate Development degree, as a distance learner through Heriot-Watt University. Pamela had previous experience in housing and community development and this degree was a good match for her interests and aspirations in Planning.

As a part-time employee, she has been able to study alongside work, balancing this with a busy family life. The opportunity to study remotely has been transformational for her as a young mum living in a rural area. She hopes to graduate in 2026 and, in the meantime, continues to explore new and improved ways of working with digital tools in her role as a support officer.

Ross started with the Highland Council as a clerical assistant in the legal service in July 2012.

A change in role took him to the EPC (electronic processing centre) where he was involved in the processing of planning and building warrant applications. He successfully transitioned into the planning technician team for 3 years; taking every opportunity to improve processes, implement system changes to streamline workflow for case officers, and develop and manage reporting streams for management. He then took on the new post of Developer Contributions Officer where he actively transformed the recording and monitoring of development contributions alongside taking his MSc in Rural and Urban Planning through Leeds Beckett University.

Ross has taken up a new role as Graduate Planner in the North area of the Council where he hopes to put his new qualification, and all his background knowledge, to work as a busy and inspirational planner.

Karolina started with the Highland Council in July 2007 when she joined as a Clerical Assistant in the Finance Team in Inverness.

After moving house in 2012, she took on the same role in Business Support in Dingwall. This is where she got her first glimpse into the world of planning while providing clerical support to the department. As she learned more, she stepped up into a Planning Support Officer role in 2017. She assists the area planning team by providing technical support, validating planning applications, and manages her own caseload.

She knew this was the career she wanted to pursue, so she started an RTPI-accredited planning degree at Heriot-Watt University in September 2020 and graduated in June 2023. The same month, she was thrilled to step into a Graduate Planner position. Committed to her professional development, she proudly achieved RTPI membership in September 2024.

Karolina adds *“Every day, I love that my job allows me to help shape and improve communities, making the best use of land to create better places to live and work. And getting to do this in such a stunning part of the world makes it even more special.”*

OUTCOME:

These examples demonstrate the council's commitment to investing in and supporting its workforce.

LESSONS LEARNED:

Successes: The opportunity to study remotely has been transformational, particularly for women with children and people from rural areas.

Challenges: Funding

[Return to Case Studies](#)

