

NATIONAL PLANNING IMPROVEMENT FRAMEWORK

Improvement Action Progress Update 2025

Aberdeenshire Council



Aberdeenshire NPIF Annual Report (Year Two - 2025)

Foreword

Planning Service: Supporting Sustainable Growth and Future Development

2024–25 has been a productive year, with a clear focus on supporting sustainable growth, economic development, and meeting housing and employment needs across Aberdeenshire.

Local Development Plan (LDP) 2029–2039

- The Evidence Report was approved by Full Council June 2025 and was submitted for Gate Check assessment.
- The Evidence Report was returned in September 2025 with the Reporter concluding that it contained insufficient information to proceed with preparing the local development plan. Work continues to fulfil the recommendations for improvement set out by the Reporter.
- The Call for Sites launched July 2025, inviting developers to propose land for future development. It closed on 31 October 2025 with approximately 380 proposals for future development sites submitted.
- The Call for Ideas, also launched July 2025, encourages input from communities, stakeholders, and partners. It will remain open until 16 March 2026.

Community-Led Place Making

- Work continues to support the development of Local Place Plans, with 6 plans now completed and registered.
- A toolkit is in place to help communities collaboratively shape the future of their towns and villages.

Delivering Development

- The Housing Site Prospectus has been published, detailing 60 available housing sites, including key site information.
- The Employment Land Prospectus has also been completed, highlighting opportunities for business and economic growth.

Historic environment

- Continued work to review 40 conservation areas, including the de-designation of two, thus ensuring that all designations remain relevant to the outcomes conservation area status is designed to achieve.



- The Historic Asset Management Programme continues to deliver a comprehensive programme of repair and maintenance, with works undertaken at 14 sites – key highlight was the successful completion with external funding of ‘The Repair and Rebirth of St. Brandon’s’.

Development Management Performance and Workforce Development

In 2024–25, Development Management determined 1,658 planning applications and 583 pre applications, compared to 2023–24 where 1861 planning applications were determined and 595 pre applications. Decision-making timescales have improved and continue to perform above the national average.

This success is attributed to:

- Streamlining processes for example, revised templates and reducing paperwork to committee.
- An effective staff training programme

While recruitment remains challenging, proactive engagement with Aberdeen and Robert Gordon Universities - through work experience days and summer placements - has helped generate interest in careers in Planning and build future capacity.

Energy Team Development and impact in response to the growing volume of enquiries and applications for large-scale energy infrastructure projects - a dedicated Energy Team has been established. This strategic investment has enabled the development of specialist expertise within the team, allowing for a more responsive and efficient approach to managing the increasing demand.

As a result, the Energy Team is now recognised as a leading authority in Scotland, actively supporting other Local Authorities in processing energy applications. This collaborative approach is instrumental in progressing towards the national net zero target by 2045, while ensuring a just transition for communities. To further support transparency and community engagement, an interactive energy map has been launched online. This tool allows users to monitor energy applications, assess cumulative impacts, and stay informed about evolving legislative frameworks.

Customer Service Excellence

As part of our commitment to continuous improvement, Customer Service Excellence remains central to Development Management and at the recent audit, the service was recertified, demonstrating sustained high standards and progress.

- Partial Compliance results were reduced from 3 to 2, with the remaining area focused on improving response rates to surveys and feedback.
- Compliance Plus results increased from 4 to 5, reflecting learning from feedback and implementing improvements. This progress highlights the team’s dedication to delivering a responsive, high-quality customer focused service.



In summary it's been a productive year, responding to differing demands along with budget and resourcing pressures especially in digital which is a key area to realise efficiencies and streamline processes.

Introduction

The National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) was piloted incrementally in three separate cohorts throughout the 2024/25 financial year. This was to test a new approach to measuring the performance of planning authorities. The pilot aimed to test the new framework, to explore what works and what doesn't. This resulted in each planning authority producing an improvement action plan and performance assessment.

Each improvement action plan sets out:

- What the planning authority has agreed as its priority activities
- Whether these have short-, medium- or long-term timescales
- The owner of the actions
- The resources needed

[Link to action plan for 2023/24.](#)

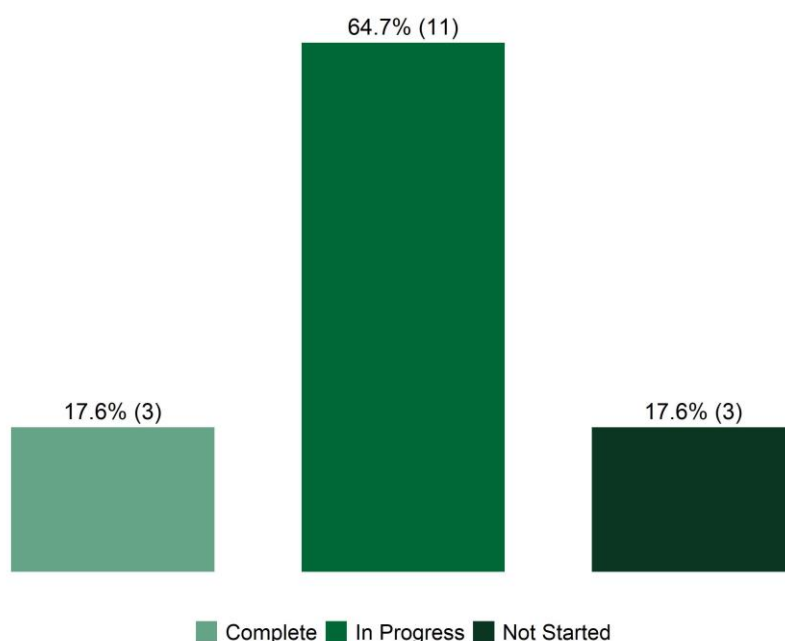
In year two of the NPIF the planning authorities are to update on their progress with the improvement actions. This report sets out the progress Aberdeenshire has made, detailing any updates to actions, any further actions and plans for further collaboration with peer partners.



Planning Improvement Actions Progress Update

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

Aberdeenshire has 17 improvement actions. The status of the actions is shown below:



Action 1: Examine opportunities for a more progressive discretionary charging framework to enable service investment, cost recovery and provision.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The pre app working group is building on the discretionary charges already implemented for energy planning and is expanding on the work completed for charges required for cost recovery. A baseline review of all charging across Local Authorities has been completed and 7 Local Authorities have been identified to investigate further in terms of charging and associated processes. Agreement has been reached to implement a fee structure for Non Material Variations and Retrospective Planning Permission. A review of waived fees has also been conducted and a discount of 25% has been agreed for social & community enterprises. Charter text for reduced fees has been drafted and the process of agreeing reduced fees up front with the applicant is currently being developed.



The following next steps are proposed: The next steps for introducing discretionary charging will be to reach agreement on a timeline for implementing a selection of charges, drafting procedures and updating the Charter. For reduced fees the next steps will be to draft a procedure for reduced fees including the supplementary information that needs to be included as part of the validation process to allow the decision of reduced fees to be processed and agreed upfront.

Action 2: Further work to improve consultee liaison to streamline processes and protocols to enable improved consultation timelines.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Flood Risk and Water Management protocol is complete, and the Historic Environment protocol is out for consultation. The Idox consultee module has been rolled out and adopted by all internal consultees. This has helped to streamline the consultee administration processes.

The following next steps are proposed: Protocols to be reviewed going forward are: Natural Environment, Roads Development, Environmental Health and Developer obligations. The next step for the Idox consultee module is to roll this out to external consultees to encourage sign up and streamline processes.

Action 3: Examine ways to improve collaborative working and develop timelines for provisions of key pieces of work between services i.e. open space strategy and local housing strategy.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Open Space Strategy is complete. The Local Housing Strategy is moving to consultation in partnership with the Housing Team. The call for ideas and sites was launched on the 16th of July 2025. Details and relevant forms for submitting prospective sites (bids) are available on a dedicated webpage. The Call for Sites closed on 31st of October 2025 and the broader Call for Ideas closes on the 16th of March 2026. The evidence report has been returned as insufficient and work continues to fulfil the recommendations for improvement with the intention to resubmit to Scottish Government in January 2026.

The following next steps are proposed: Review Reporter recommendations, amend Evidence Report and resubmit.



Action 4: Review and update the Career Development Scheme to ensure staff development, retention and succession planning.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The creation of generic planning job profiles has been completed including job analysis. The agreed job profiles have been inserted into a progressive revised career progression scheme which has been through a formal staff consultation period, including a staff workshop to allow opportunities for review and discuss feedback. The consultation period has now closed, feedback has been received and collated into the career progression scheme.

The following next steps are proposed: The next phase involves final approval prior to adoption of the new career progression scheme and the schedule for this is December 2025. Once implemented a review will be conducted in 6 months.

Action 5: Develop the work experience partnership with Universities and the Education service, promoting a career in planning as well as an understanding of the planning system.

In Progress

Progress against this action: Attended a career fair at Aberdeen University for all Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Schools and ran 3 x planning workshops. The Planning Service has provided work experience for an Aberdeen University Student. Over the summer holiday period the planning service recruited 4 x University students for a work placement to conduct the facilities monitor survey. Development Management and Policy training days were organised to ensure that the summer students increase their understanding of career opportunities within Planning. Worked with Robert Gordon University Architectural School to help MSc students explore a fresh perspective on Peterhead's potential through thoughtful & creative urban design. This involved a number of presentations to Council staff and taking their exhibition to Peterhead to share with the community. The designs formed the backdrop to a collective community feedback week incorporating, call for sites and ideas, community safety and Peterhead 2040. Planning Policy will be providing work experience for a Dundee University student between December 2025 and March 2026.

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to support career fairs and student work experience and placements.



Action 6: Consider further review with Elected Members of Part 2C (Planning Delegations) to streamline to find ways of improvement in planning application determination timescales.

In Progress

Progress against this action: Corporate & Legal Services have commenced a review of options for the Area Committee & Committee structures which has involved a corporate Committee survey, and the results are currently being collated. A new Councillor Ward Pages IT system for Member Notification of planning applications is being developed to take account of the current provisions in the Scheme of Governance. The project is in progress and the expected roll out will be 2026.

The following next steps are proposed: Further proposals following the survey outcomes will be presented to various Committees (Procedures) then once agreement on a new committee structure has been approved this will be reported to Full Council, ultimately forming part of the Council's Scheme of Governance. Work will continue on the Councillor Ward Pages system due to be completed by 2026.

Action 7: Reviewing further legislation Part 2A – ensure that approval of the Proposed Delivery Programme is sought from Full Council.

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

The Scheme of Governance was amended to include approval of the proposed delivery programme at full Council Committee.



Action 8: Examine opportunities for increased use of digital platforms and technology: Contribute towards corporate review of GIS systems and storage procedures to ensure systems meet the needs of the planning system and supports digital modernisation. Pursuing and finalising roll out of site visit technology – use of tablets & associated site visit application for officer use on site. Implement the conditions module within Uniform Key Plan Database Development. Power BI - to provide real time monitoring for planning performance and income.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The cross service corporate working group has been meeting regularly to review the current mapping system and procure and develop the process to migrate to ArcGIS. Implementing site visit technology has involved site visit staff training workshop delivered by Scottish Borders Council which included staff from Development Management and Building Standards. Mobile technology has been purchased, and testing has now moved to onsite. Participating in the Heads of Planning national working group on the review of conditions which has led to an internal review of model conditions. This has also included a review of the Uniform conditions module and its capabilities and due to no option to add payment a decision has been made to monitor conditions and to allow for potential future payment to be done via the planning application module. Maximising the use of Power BI for performance management has involved energy pre application costings and performance has been mapped within a Power BI dashboard. Further work has involved dashboards being developed to monitor income and workload management.

The following next steps are proposed: ArcGIS project migration, implementation and staff training and development. Site visit technology – collate feedback from testing onsite and move to implementation with staff training. Continue to participate in the Heads of Planning (HOPS) national working group on the review of conditions and develop a process within the planning application module on Uniform to monitor conditions. Further Power BI dashboards to be developed to measure performance on validation, planning process agreements, extension of time agreements and pre applications.

Action 9: Development of Enforcement digital systems to meet Audit outcomes re customer services.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Enforcement Team has continued to work towards a fully automated case management system, whilst acknowledging the limits and capabilities of the current Uniform System and the decreasing IT resource to provide additional integration of public facing and back-office systems. Nevertheless, the following has been and is being



carried out to implement further digital system integration and use of new technologies to streamline the investigative and case management process:

- Use of dedicated enforcement case overlays on the Councils GIS mapping system.
- Improvement of the online mapping tool on the Councils website allowing customers to drop a pin on a map allowing for precise locations of alleged breach sites, particularly in remote locations.
- Roll out of assistive site visit technology such as cellular enabled tablets with built in cameras to allow for case notes and site photos/videos to be upload directly to back-office case management systems while on site.
- Use of a drone to gather evidence from large and complex sites. It also allows officers to gather evidence at a distance where site access is limited, or officer safety is a concern. This allows for the efficient and prompt gathering of evidence leading to a more streamlined investigatory process and case conclusion.
- Greater use of AI technology (e.g. Copilot) for correspondence and research purposes

The following next steps are proposed: Continue to work towards full automation of the Enforcement case management systems and investigate how to do this within the capabilities of the current Uniform System and decreasing IT support.

Action 10: Develop a more detailed process for monitoring appeal decisions across the service resulting in overturned decisions by reviewing decision reports.

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: Set up working group to review appeal decisions and set up process for real time monitoring.

Action 11: Member Training on reasonable and robust decision making. Understanding of the Local Development Plan, NPF4, Policies and interpretation, material planning considerations.

In Progress

Progress against this action: Community Council Forum & Members Training on the Planning System has been delivered. Facilitated specific large scale energy infrastructure training for Community Councils collectively in Partnership with Angus Council and Planning Aid Scotland. This was delivered as a result of customer feedback to help communities



understand the legislative framework and how they can be involved in the decision-making process. Facilitated specific large scale energy infrastructure training for Councillors. Facilitated member training and information sessions on Local Development Plan topic papers.

The following next steps are proposed: Update the Community Council internal online planning training which is a resource that is made up of a number of learning modules.

Action 12: Review the requirements for developer obligations within settlement statements working collaboratively with agencies about the infrastructure required.

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: We have not had the time given other priorities.

The following next steps are proposed: Set up working group with stakeholders to review developer obligations within settlement statements and work collaboratively to find solutions.

Action 13: Consider tools to improve performance in the pre-application service set against targets and encourage through website information more standing advice and self-help information for customers.

In Progress

Progress against this action: Implemented a revised streamlined report for pre applications and process for householder applications and locals for 3 houses or less. Updated online pre application forms for householders and locals. Investigating costs and implementation for an Idox connector to allow the forms to populate automatically into Uniform & the Document Management System. Updated the pre application website text and continue to update additional standing advice when available from consultees. Implementation of pre application energy charging completed. Review of Pre-application process for Major Development proposals is also underway which will run alongside the pre-app charging strategy work.

The following next steps are proposed: Create a Power BI dashboard for monitoring pre application performance. Assess the costings and benefits of utilising an Idox connector to streamline the administration required for the pre application forms. Continue to progress the development of standing advice from consultees. Building on the charges implemented for energy pre application, continue with the review of roll out of charging for pre applications.



Action 14: Community Engagement Toolkit physical equipment and resources which can be made available to communities to enable them to undertake engagement activities.

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Toolkit complete and available for communities to utilise.

Action 15: Community Guide to Planning Brief written guide aimed at individuals and communities to help in understand the planning system.

In Progress

Progress against this action: The Community guide to planning is in draft format with research being done in different teams within the Planning Service to ensure the guide includes all aspects of the Planning Service.

The following next steps are proposed: Develop user friendly guide and improved website information. Implement a timeline for planning applications to allow customers to understand and track the process in detail.

Action 16: Create an Aberdeenshire Employment Site Prospectus.

Complete

What was the outcome of completing this action?

Developed the employment land prospectus which identifies longer-term available employment land sites across Aberdeenshire. The prospectus has been developed in a story map format and shows key information on individual sites. It is divided into two sections: sites ranging from 2ha to 20ha and those above 20ha.

[Link to employment land prospectus](#)

Action 17: Review monitoring of Planning Process Agreements and extension of time recording and processes.

Not Started

Reason(s) action has not been progressed: We have not had the time given other priorities.



The following next steps are proposed: Create a Power BI dashboard to assist with monitoring PPAs & extension of time statistics.



New Proposed Planning Improvement Actions

The table below details further improvement actions added.

Improvement action What action will you take? What will the outcome be?	Owner	Importance High Medium Low	Timescale Short term- 1 year Medium term – 3 year Long term 3+ year	Resources
Review website text on planning advice and the step-by-step guide to the planning process. Outcome: To create accessible information that customers can easily navigate and understand. This will help customer self-serve and have a greater knowledge of the planning process and available guidance. Will assess the action is complete by: Revised and updated website with review from customers and peer Local Authority.	Policy, Place Information and Research and Development Management	Medium	Medium term – 3 year	Service Managers, Team Managers, Business Support Team, Website working group and Web Team
The rationalisation and de-designation of conservation areas to ensure the positive outcomes of conservation area status can be achieved in Aberdeenshire.	Historic Environment Team	Medium	Medium term – 3 year	Team Leader, Environment Planner, Graphics, Web Team



<p>Outcome: This will ensure that only settlements which genuinely have a unique character with special architectural and historic interest are retained as conservation areas. So that policy can be effectively applied to achieve the desired outcomes and benefits of conservation area status and where communities support the designation</p> <p>Will assess the action is complete by: The identified settlements will have been reviewed and de-designated in line with the Historic Environment Team Strategy</p>				
<p>Review Reporters recommendations following Gate Check Assessment, amend Evidence Report and resubmit in January 2026.</p>	<p>Policy, Place Information and Research</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Short term - 1 year</p>	<p>Service Managers, Team Managers, Policy, Place Information and Research Teams</p>
<p>Response to the Housing Crisis.</p> <p>The Town and Country Planning (Notification of Applications) (10 or more homes on non-allocated land) (Scotland) Direction 2025 - requires planning authorities to notify Scottish Ministers of any application for 10 or more homes on land not allocated for housing within seven days of validation. Authorities must submit documentation upon determination. Implementation of guidance and procedure.</p>	<p>Development Management</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Short term - 1 year</p>	<p>Service Managers, Team Managers, Policy, Place Information and Research and Development Management Teams</p>



<p>Review Scottish Governments ‘Action and Implementation Plan”, due for publication by the end of 2025. This is anticipated to consider regulatory controls which exist in sectors including housing.</p> <p>Respond to anticipated Scottish Government public consultation on planning measures to accelerate the build out of new homes.</p> <p>Review of ongoing actions and processes to facilitate development</p>				
<p>Investing and creating digital capacity to implement improvements through the development of a business case.</p>	<p>Policy, Place Information and Research and Development Management</p>	<p>High</p>	<p>Short term - 1 year</p>	<p>Service Managers, Team Managers, Policy, Place Information and Research and Development Management Teams</p>



Peer Collaborative Review Follow Up

As part of the pilot, each planning authority held a peer collaborative review workshop. This brought together key stakeholders and customers to discuss and provide constructive feedback on the improvement action plan.

Status of the peer review follow-up meeting: An update on the Action Plan has been presented at the Agent Forum held on the 25th November 2025 and a recording of the Forum has been circulated to Agents and Developers.

Additional information: A summary of the Action Plan update for year 2 will be circulated to the peer review group for information and comment.

