



For information

Title: National Planning Improvement Framework –
Improvement Action Plan Progress Update

Prepared by: David Berry, Head of Planning and Chief Planning
Officer

Purpose

This paper provides an update on progress with delivering the Park Authority's National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) Improvement Action Plan.

Recommendation

The Committee is asked to:

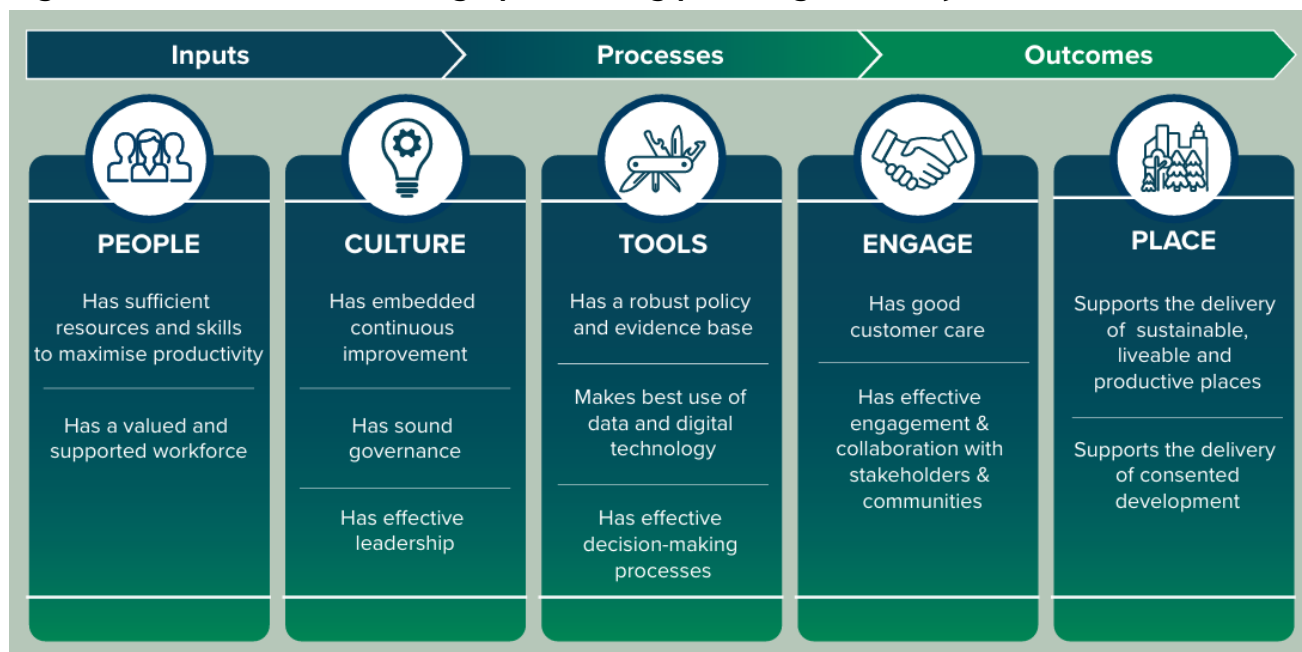
- a) Note the Park Authority's progress in delivering our National Planning Improvement Framework Improvement Action Plan.

Background and strategic context

1. The National Planning Improvement Framework (NPIF) is a new approach to support the improvement of planning authorities. It was introduced in response to the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, which sets out that planning authorities are to prepare a report on their performance annually. It replaces the former, voluntary Planning Performance Framework (PPF) reporting process.
2. The NPIF process is led by the National Planning Improvement team, who sit within the Scottish Government's Improvement Service. The NPIF reporting process was introduced in a phased manner from 2024, with the Park Authority forming part of the third cohort of planning authorities to implement it in 2025.
3. Under the NPIF process, planning authorities undertake a self-assessment to determine how they are performing against 12 key attributes. The 12 attributes are outlined in Figure 1 and are grouped into five themes which incorporate the inputs, processes and outcomes of the planning service.



Figure 1: 12 attributes of a high performing planning authority



4. Having undertaken the self-assessment, each planning authority then produces an Improvement Action Plan. This is subject to peer review by a partner local authority and through a peer collaborative review workshop comprising representatives of the Improvement Service and stakeholders / customers of the planning service. Members will recall that the Park Authority's NPIF self-assessment and draft Improvement Action Plan was discussed with Planning Committee on 25 April 2025. The finalised [Improvement Action Plan](#) was published thereafter in early May 2025. It contains 14 specific improvement actions.
5. Following publication of their Improvement Action Plan, planning authorities are required to provide the Improvement Service with annual progress updates on their implementation and delivery of the identified improvement actions. Progress updates are provided via an online survey, and the Improvement Service use the information supplied to produce an Improvement Action Progress Update report for each planning authority (using a standardised template). The update reports are then published on the Improvement Service's website and copied to Scottish Ministers as well as the Chief Executive of each planning authority.
6. Officers provided an initial update to the Improvement Service in September 2025 as required, although given the limited time that had passed following publication



of the Improvement Action Plan it contained limited detail in terms of progress. This paper provides Committee Members with information on the Park Authority's first substantive progress update since our Improvement Action Plan was finalised.

Progress in delivering improvement actions

7. Table 1 below shows progress against each of the 14 improvement actions outlined in our Improvement Action Plan.

Table 1: Summary of progress against improvement actions

Improvement Action	Status	Commentary
Action 1 – Work with the HR team in their update of the current Workforce Management Strategy to consider and review the specific challenges around recruitment to the planning service, and develop further measures to address this within the context of current recruitment constraints.	Complete	Work with the HR team on reviewing and updating the Workforce Management Strategy is complete. It builds on the recent positive steps to address recruitment challenges within the planning service and the success of recent recruitment experiences, including recruiting Graduate Planners on a career-grade basis to help with succession planning and growing in-house professional expertise.
Action 2 – Monitor and review the effectiveness of the Graduate Planner posts as part of the 'grow your own' approach to addressing planning recruitment challenges.	Complete	Initial monitoring and review of the effectiveness of the Graduate Planner posts has been undertaken and has demonstrated the significant benefits of this approach. Since taking up their positions in early 2025, both post holders have been given the opportunity to work across planning policy and development management. As well as helping to develop a broad range of skills and experience early in their planning careers, this has provided flexibility to assign the post holders to different tasks across the planning service in response to changing workload pressures.



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		For example, both Graduate Planners were initially assigned to the policy team, and this helped to significantly accelerate production of the Park Authority's Local Development Plan Evidence Report. They are now increasingly helping with development management casework in response to spikes in workload in that part of the planning service.
Action 3 – Carry out a skills audit within the planning team, relative to the new expectations and requirements in NPF4, to identify gaps in knowledge and inform specific training programmes, and to identify any areas where additional external support may be required.	Completed in 2025	A skills audit was undertaken across the wider planning service to identify gaps in knowledge relative to the new expectations and requirements of NPF4. This identified a number of topic areas where it was considered that training was required for all team members. These topic areas included biodiversity and ecology, carbon literacy and whole life carbon emissions, and community wealth building. Training sessions were planned and delivered to address these areas.
Action 4 – Undertake an annual review of projects to identify potential candidate submissions for relevant award schemes to achieve wider recognition of the high-quality work undertaken by the planning service.	In progress	<u>Progress against this action:</u> Initial reviews have been undertaken to identify potential candidate submissions for relevant award schemes. A range of high-quality development proposals have been granted planning permission by the National Park Authority recently. These include significant housing and affordable housing projects, locally important economic development proposals, enhanced facilities and infrastructure for visitors to the National Park, community led flood protection measures, and river restoration schemes aimed at delivering nature-based solutions to enhance biodiversity and increase natural flood resilience. Innovative work has also been undertaken during the early stages of preparing our new



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		Local Development Plan, including developing gamification techniques in partnership with researchers at the University of Edinburgh to increase public engagement. We will aim to submit applications to relevant awards schemes in the coming months with a view to achieving wider recognition of this high-quality work. <u>The following next steps are proposed:</u> Submit applications to relevant schemes such as the RTPI Scotland Awards for Planning Excellence over the coming months.
Action 5 – Continue to plan and deliver a programme of Member training, in agreement with the Convener and Deputy Convener of the Planning Committee.	Complete	We have an ongoing programme of Member training, which has been planned and delivered throughout the NPIF monitoring period in agreement with the Convener and Deputy Convener of the Park Authority's Planning Committee. This year, Member training has been delivered on developer obligations, and introductory planning training is scheduled for one new Board Member later this Autumn. The ongoing training programme ensures Members have a detailed awareness of up-to-date planning issues, contributing to our sound governance and decision-making processes.
Action 6 – Working in conjunction with colleagues at Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park Authority, complete the migration of our IDOX system to the cloud to ensure consistency and resilience of service provision.	Completed in 2025	The migration process was completed successfully in October 2025. Whilst it required our public ePlanning and internal IT systems to be offline for around 10 days, a robust business continuity plan was put in place to manage the short-term implications of this. The migration process ensures long term consistency and resilience within our IDOX planning systems.
Action 7 – Liaise with Scottish	In progress	<u>Progress against this action:</u>



Improvement Action	Status	Commentary
Government to explore whether the e-Development Portal could be adapted to accept additional supporting information post call-in.		Initial discussions have taken place with Scottish Government with a view to ensuring that the Park Authority's unique call-in arrangements and our associated user requirements are fully integrated into the new 'Apply' service, which is being developed to replace the current e-Development system. <u>The following next steps are proposed:</u> Continue to work alongside the Scottish Government team tasked with delivering the Apply service to ensure it is designed and built to meet the Park Authority's unique user requirements and reflects our specific call-in arrangements.
Action 8 – Implement a project to ensure effective monitoring of compliance with planning permissions for major developments in line with Section 44 of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019.	Complete	A monitoring process for major planning permissions has been developed and has been integrated into our Planning Enforcement Charter, which was updated in December 2025. The process explains that the Planning Officer handling a major planning application will initially receive, discharge and monitor conditions prior to and post development, and is the main point of contact for the development. However, if the Planning Officer is unable to resolve issues surrounding conditions within a reasonable timescale, or if development commences before all relevant pre-commencement conditions have been discharged, the planning officer will advise the developer that the matter is being referred to the Park Authority's Monitoring and Enforcement Officer for further action. The Planning Officer will then notify the Monitoring and Enforcement Officer, and an enforcement case will be created and investigated. If there are specific conditions that the Planning Officer considers require regular monitoring during development (eg landscaping works, environmental or biodiversity mitigation measures etc), the Planning Officer will notify the



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		Monitoring and Enforcement Officer, and the development will be monitored at regular intervals. This may involve site visits undertaken with specialist consultees (eg in landscape, natural heritage etc) as well as consulting the Planning Officer if there are any significant changes from the approved drawings. This ensures compliance with the requirements of Section 44 of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 with respect to major planning applications. However, the process is also now being applied to all planning permissions that have been granted by the National Park Authority, as all planning applications called in and determined by the Park Authority are considered to raise issues of significance to the overall aims of the National Park.
Action 9 – Reconvene the Developers' Forum, in an updated format, to provide a more effective mechanism for regular engagement with development industry representatives to identify and address common issues and to target further service improvements.	Completed in 2025	The Developers' Forum was reconvened at a meeting in mid-August 2025. This initial meeting of the Forum focused on delivery and implementation of the policies in our existing Local Development Plan. The session provided developers, planning agents and other key stakeholders with an opportunity to share their experiences of the way in which existing policies are operating in practice and to make comments on their overall effectiveness in delivering plan outcomes. This feedback will be used as an important part of the evidence base for our new Local Development Plan. In particular, it will help to identify which policies are working well and which might need to be updated and, significantly, to help identify areas and topics for which locally-specific policies will be required to supplement the national suite of planning policies set out in NPF4. The initial session was also used to seek feedback on the range of topics that members would like to cover at future Forum meetings.



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		This feedback will directly influence future meeting content.
Action 10 – Reconvene the Planning Representatives Network, in an updated format, to provide a more effective mechanism for regular engagement with community council representatives to identify and address common issues and target further service improvements, and explore other methods for increasing planning knowledge and engagement at the local community level.	In progress	<u>Progress against this action:</u> Representatives of the planning team are attending a Communities Gathering Event, organised by the Park Authority, in October 2026. The event is aimed at representatives of Community Councils and other community groups within the National Park. During the event, the planning team will be hosting a workshop session to explain how the Local Development Plan is produced and how planning applications are determined, and to highlight opportunities for community groups to engage in both processes. As part of the session, we will explore with attendees what other methods we could use in the future to increase planning knowledge and support engagement at the local community level. <u>The following next steps are proposed:</u> Host a planning workshop session at the Cairngorms Community Gathering event in October 2026.
Action 11 – Reconvene regular planning protocol meetings with relevant local authority colleagues, in an updated format, to identify and address common issues and to target further service improvements.	In Progress	<u>Progress against this action:</u> Officers of the Park Authority have contacted relevant local authority colleagues with a view to reconvening the former planning protocol group, and it is anticipated that an initial meeting will be held in Winter 2026. The initial meeting will focus on a review of the current protocol agreement to ensure it reflects changes in national planning legislation and guidance since its previous review. In the meantime, a minor change to existing protocol arrangements in relation to the timing of recovery of planning fees for the applications



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		that the Park Authority calls-in for determination has been brought into effect. This aligns fee recovery with the financial year in order to make accounting processes more straightforward for both the Park Authority and our local authority colleagues. <u>The following next steps are proposed:</u> Hold an initial meeting of the planning protocol group in Winter 2026.
Action 12 – Overhaul the planning web pages as part of a wider redevelopment of the Park Authority's website to ensure greater use of accessible language, clearer advice and guidance, and enhanced visibility of planning content.	Completed in 2025	The National Park Authority's website has been completely overhauled, with a new version of the website being launched in June 2025. As part of this process, our planning web pages have been overhauled and streamlined to provide more accessible and user-friendly planning advice and content. Further updates to existing planning advice notes and guidance documents are now planned for the near future.
Action 13 – Carry out a review of s75 processes and procedures to include greater alignment with local authority developer obligations teams and relevant services, and implement processes for enhanced monitoring of s75 agreements post approval.	Complete	As part of the preparation of the Evidence Report for our new Local Development Plan, we have engaged with key stakeholders to develop a more detailed evidence base on the condition and capacity of existing infrastructure within the National Park (particularly in relation to schools and healthcare facilities). This improves our understanding of the circumstances in which developer obligations are likely to be required in the future. As well as supporting preparation of the new Local Development Plan, this also simplifies and streamlines the process of securing such obligations through the development management process. The improved information on likely developer obligation requirements has also been incorporated into the Delivery Programme for our current Local Development Plan, which increases clarity for prospective applicants and enables



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		them to better understand expectations from an early stage. Internal processes have also been updated to ensure enhanced and more effective monitoring of the s75 agreements entered into by the National Park Authority. This responsibility is now assigned to a specific officer within the team, whereas it was previously the responsibility of individual case officers. As a result, there is now a more consistent and proactive approach to monitoring, helping to ensure that existing s75 obligations are satisfied within agreed timescales.
Action 14 – Develop and implement standard planning conditions to ensure consistency where possible across all decisions, streamline decision making, and to enable easier and more effective monitoring and enforcement.	Completed in 2025	A suite of standard planning conditions has been implemented. As anticipated, this is helping to ensure consistency and increase efficiency in decision making. It is also expected to enable easier and more effective monitoring and enforcement in the future - particularly in combination with Action 8 above.

8. As can be seen from the table, the Park Authority has made positive progress in delivering against the NPIF Improvement Action Plan. Of the 14 improvement actions originally identified, 10 (71.4%) are now complete, and 4 (28.6%) are in progress. Officers will continue to work on delivering the actions that are not currently complete and remain committed to learning from experience, working collaboratively with our partners, and delivering a high-quality planning service that meets the needs and expectations of our service users and communities.

Next steps

9. Details of the Park Authority's progress in delivering our Improvement Action Plan (as outlined in Table 1 above) will be provided to the Improvement Service via their online survey. The Improvement Service will then use this information to produce



an Improvement Action Progress Update Report, which will be published on their website and copied to Scottish Ministers and the Park Authority's Chief Executive.

10. Having worked on delivering the Improvement Action Plan during the latter half of 2025 and throughout 2026, the NPIF cycle will begin again in 2027 with an updated self-assessment and the identification of a new Improvement Action Plan.

David Berry

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davidberry@cairngorms.co.uk