

The Highland Council

Planning Performance
Framework 2022-23

Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Frèam Dèanadas
Dealbhaidh 2022-23

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Welcome to Highland

The Highland Council serves 33% of the Scottish land area, including some of the most remote and sparsely populated areas. There are 238,060 people living in the Highlands, which has the lowest population density (8 persons per square kilometre), out of the 32 local authorities in Scotland. Highland covers a total land area 26,484 square kilometres (10,226 square miles) at low water.

The geography of the Highlands is diverse ranging from fertile farmland around the Black Isle and Cromarty Firth; dramatic seascapes on the west and north coasts; some of the tallest mountains in the British Isles (including the tallest, Ben Nevis, Lochaber); and the largest blanket bog in Europe (Flow country, Sutherland).



Introduction

As Chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee of The Highland Council I have great pleasure in submitting the Planning Performance Framework for 2022 – 2023.

The Planning Performance Framework outlines our continued commitment to delivering high quality development across the Highlands. This submission reflects the good work of the Service over the course of this last year highlighting the progress made on key improvements, our commitment to engagement, collaborative working and our impact on the Highland economy.

In November 2022 the Council became a signatory of the Edinburgh Declaration, joining c.300 governments, cities and local authorities across the world who are concerned with the loss of biodiversity and climate change and setting out our intent on tackling this.

The introduction of National Planning Framework 4 in February 2023 has provided a firm foundation to ensure the implementation of this commitment in all land-use planning decisions as striving towards meeting our key service objectives outlined with [Our Future Highland 2022/27](#).

This includes:

- supporting economic development;
- creating a place-based approach to sustainable development, with housing at its core, working with communities, partners and the private sector; and
- working to achieve A Net Zero Highland through initiatives such as Scotwind and Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport and ongoing developments around renewable energy and hydrogen, promotion and delivery of active travel, tackling and reversing biodiversity loss through habitat creation, restoration and strengthening our nature networks.

I am very pleased with the efforts that officers have made in achieving these aims as is evident from this submission, which provides a number of examples of projects and work streams that have, and continue to, achieve many of the positive outcomes that benefit our communities.

While key performance indicators have not recovered to expected levels this year, the service has been effective in recruiting staff on the back of the fee increase in April 2022, which has assisted with relieving pressures with addressing a backlog, the implementation of NPF4 and the introduction of the short-term let control areas.



Ken Gowans

Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee
The Highland Council

Performance Markers

1. Decision Making

We processed 2288 applications in the 2022/23 period, 255 less than the previous year (2543).

We determined 24 major scale applications in total during 2022/23. This was 6 more than the preceding year, 15 had processing agreements and we were able to determine 60% of these within the agreed timescales. The average time taken to determine those remaining 9 applications without processing agreements increased from 56.7 weeks to 75.2 weeks in comparison with the preceding year.

The number of non householder applications determined in 2 months fell from 44.9% in 2022/23 to 35.2%. The average time taken to determine these applications rose from 15.4 weeks last year to 18.9 this year.

The number of householder applications approved within 2 months also reduced this year from 80.4% to 68.3%. The average time taken to determine these applications moved from 8.3 weeks to 9.6 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.

A contributory factor impacting on performance are those applications which could not be progressed and determined, which have had to be paused due to the uncertainty and a lack of relevant guidance and clarification on key considerations linked to short term lets. What is particularly noticeable is the significant increase in the number of undetermined applications which has risen by 30.6% from 816 in 2021/22 to 1176 at the end of 2022/23. A significant portion of this increase is directly related to those short term let applications which have had to be held whilst legal advice, clarification and guidance is received in relation to how these can be progressed. The publication of NPF4 at the end of the year also had some impact on performance given the requirement to ensure compliance with the additional relevant considerations and duties. The introduction of new staff is very welcome, but the benefits of their appointment will take some time to be realised due to training requirements.



2. Processing Agreements

We continue to promote processing agreements to all applicants for major applications and those that are locally significant. Our intention is to clearly set out expectations for all parties and to ensure clarity and certainty in relation to the timescales in the determination of applications. Over the previous year we agreed processing agreements for 36 applications, 2 more than the preceding year, 15 of which were major applications.

All the relevant information relating to our [processing agreements](#) is publicly accessible through our website. We provide a link with each advice pack that is issued for all major pre application submissions. All signed processing agreements can be viewed electronically on our public register.

In addition to processing agreements other project management tools are promoted where appropriate to assist in the consideration of large scale (not major) developments such as Extension of Time in relation to Section 36 agreement in discussion with the Energy Consents Unit and developer. Similarly stop the clock may also be utilised where appropriate in agreement with the applicant.

3. Early Collaboration

Pre-application Advice

A key component of our service delivery is providing [Pre-application Advice](#). We offer a tailored service that includes three categories of pre-application advice according to development type – [Local Small Scale](#), [Local Medium Scale](#) and [Major](#).

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.

Our [Wind Farm Design Workshop](#) also offers developers with a unique opportunity to participate in a collaborative process to examine the design, landscape, and visual impact of wind energy developments at an early stage of the process.

In total we issued 45 major development pre-application advice packs in 2022/23, similar to the number received last year. In addition, we dealt with 472 local pre-application advice applications and 1032 permitted development enquiries. This is an increase on previous year.

Design Review Panel

The Inverness Design Review Panel did not meet in the 2022-23 period. While there has been a general trend of increasing application numbers in recent years, there has been a noticeable reduction in the number of significant non-housing development proposals within the Inverness area for the Review Panel to consider. We continue to promote the

value of the Inverness Design Review Panel in all relevant pre-application advice that is provided and are hopeful that 2023-24 will see an upturn in interest.

Inverness Cromarty Firth Green Freeport

Officers from the planning service have played a key role in representing the Council and working with public and private sector partners in developing the Opportunity Cromarty Firth bid for Green Freeport status that was submitted to UK and Scottish Governments in mid-2022. On 13 January 2023 it was announced that the Inverness and Cromarty Firth was successful in being awarded Green Freeport status by Scottish and UK Governments. Having previously identified the project as a vital component of the Council's Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy, significant work is now underway for the business case and ensure that the project has an impact on including setting out how the planning process will be managed. When operational, the Green Freeport will offer a package of tax and customs incentives to attract inward investment and stimulate innovation and growth. More information on the Green Freeport announcement and framework can be found on the [Scottish Government website \(external link\)](#).

Officers have contributed to the ongoing working group providing advice on the potential planning process and requirements but also the alignment with the place-based approach outlined separately in this PPF report. A series of Council reports have also been prepared with updates on the next stages of the process and the Council agreeing its backing of and commitment to the Green Freeport. The latest update report prior to submission of the PPF was at Council on [29 June 2023](#). The partnership will also be undertaking a series of engagement sessions over the weeks and months ahead with communities, businesses and other partners. A recording of our first community webinar that was held on Wednesday 22 March 2023 is now available to view at <https://youtu.be/bSPjpV2tUHE>

It is anticipated that the Green Freeport will become operational by Spring 2024 at the earliest.

A. National Treatment Centre, Inverness

Inverness Campus is a regional centre for innovation and lifelong learning in the Highlands and Islands specialising in the provision of life sciences, research and academia, and is now home to NHS Highland's new National Treatment Centre.

The £48.6m Centre was completed in 2023 with its first patients admitted in April this year. The Centre provides orthopaedic and ophthalmology healthcare to the people of the North of Scotland. The state-of-the-art facility houses 24-bed inpatient rooms, five operating theatres, 13 consultation rooms, clinics, and outpatient departments in a unique, purpose-built facility. When fully operational, it is expected to treat over 900 outpatients a week. It will offer the opportunity, beyond the regional delivery of clinical services, to promote innovation and research through connections with the University of Highlands and Islands, and Highlands and Islands Enterprise, across the wider campus and with existing facilities at Raigmore Hospital. It is part of a national network of 10 treatment centres funded by the Scottish Government.

Planning permission was originally granted in February 2019 for the construction of a Centre for Health Science 2 building: a collaboration between NHS Highland, the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI), and Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and comprising an Elective Care Centre, Health Innovation Facility, and Life Science Business Incubator. It was subsequently decided that the Health Innovation Facility and Life Science Business Incubator would be delivered by UHI and HIE as a stand-alone facility on a separate area of the campus.



This change of direction provided several challenges for NHS Highland. The development had to be substantially redesigned, including not only the building but also the site layout and landscaping proposals. Whilst the original design approach to provide a high-quality development remained, it necessitated the submission of a revised planning application. We worked closely with the design team and key consultees to agree the extent and nature of changes required, the collaborative approach of which resulted in a new planning permission being granted just over seven weeks from submission.

Off-site infrastructure improvement works to mitigate transport impacts arising from the development of the National Treatment Centre include construction of a new bus gate at the nearby Raigmore Hospital which will help prioritise more sustainable travel on the existing road network with work due to commence shortly.

Now known as the Life Sciences Innovation Centre, the £9.5m partnership project between UHI and HIE also opened in April 2023 at the campus and provides facilities for businesses to work collectively with academia and healthcare professionals on innovative life sciences projects. The National Treatment Centre provides a significant improvement in healthcare facilities for the North of Scotland and will be a key asset in healthcare provision for the wider region.

B. Noss Head Switching Station, Caithness

The Noss-head Switching Station was completed in 2022. A world first outside of China, this acts as a junction point, collecting energy from Shetland and Spittal HVDC circuits and then transporting that energy via subsea and land cables to Blackhillock in Moray to allow further transmission to areas of demand across Britain.

The scale of development was classed as 'national' as the development involves electricity transmission. As such the applicant sought advice using our Pre-Application Advice Service at early stage, with advice issued in July 2016. This enabled the Council to outline specific requirements that would be necessary with any planning application. This was particularly important as, due to the internal requirements of the building, it necessitated being of a substantial scale. This allowed the subsequent planning permission in principle application to be determined in just over 4 months in 2017, including referral to the Full Committee of Highland Council. The applicant again sought formal pre-application advice in 2019 regarding the detailed design of the building which enabled a subsequent Matters Specified in Conditions to be determined within a 3-month period therefore within Scottish Government timeframes.



Image credit: ROAVR Group

Landscaping bunds have been constructed around the building to help screen the development and lessen the visual impact of the new building. Since their development, over 20,000 native species of trees and shrubs have been planted on and around these areas, with a further 15,000 to be planted once the site is cleared and office areas removed. Native wildflowers have also been seeded around the site to help encourage biodiversity by attracting insect and bird species to the area.

C. Rewilding Education and Visitor Centre, Dundreggan, Glenmoriston

The site forms part of the wider Dundreggan Estate, which has been acquired by Trees for Life with a focus on protecting and expanding the surviving remnants of the Caledonian forest. Their vision includes encouraging education and research into 'rewilding'. To facilitate this, a visitor (rewilding) centre has been erected, including education and interpretation facilities for the public as well as a café. In addition, a separate residential accommodation unit has been built, to be used by groups and students who are visiting the site for education and research purposes.

The rewilding centre is a bespoke building, with sculptured roof and timber colonnades to form a transition between inside and outside spaces for the user. It is designed to be at the heart of the wider estate, and this is reinforced by its elevated position, which forms a gateway through which visitors cross into the 'wilderness' of the wider landscape setting. The material palette has been chosen to reflect the natural colours of the surrounding landscape.



Image credit: Paul Campbell Photography

The accommodation block is a separate building towards the west of the farm and has been designed to reflect the domestic scale of adjacent buildings, whilst utilising the material palette of the rewilding centre to provide a visual association between them.

The access off the A887 trunk road has been improved to accommodate the additional traffic generated by this proposal, and substantial areas of visitor parking formed (including cycle parking and electric vehicle charging points), all with footpath links to the rewilding centre. A previous seasonal pond has been repurposed as a SuDS pond immediately to the rear of the building. It has been designed to form an attractive space for a picnic area and adjacent 'squirrel' themed children's play area and includes a pond dipping jetty to facilitate safe access to the water.

Renewable power has been incorporated in the form of a free-standing solar array, solar panels on the roof of the accommodation building, and air source heat pump enclosures.



Tree and shrub planting has been carried out using native species which have been grown at Dundreggan from seeds collected locally.

Footpaths around Dundreggan Estate are now being formed/upgraded to encourage public access and foster an appreciation of 'rewilding' in association with the 'rewilding' visitor centre.



Image credit: Paul Campbell Photography

This project brought together a number of teams within The Highland Council, in addition to collaboration with a number of external bodies, both during the processing of the application and during the actual construction process.

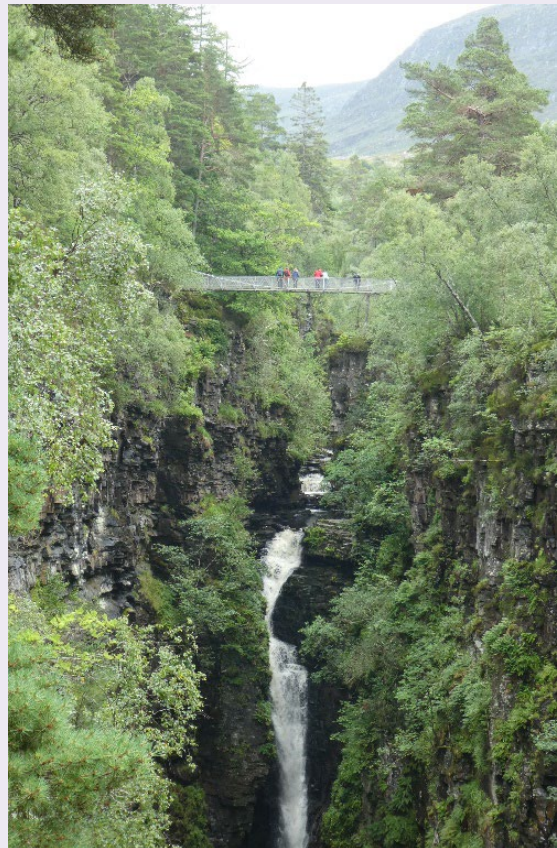
D. Corrieshalloch Gorge Visitor Centre, south of Ullapool

In April 2023 a new visitors centre and footpath network opened to the public at the Corrieshalloch Gorge. The Gorge is a National Nature Reserve which attracts thousand visitors per year. It is a popular attraction on the North Coast 500 tourist route. The site is located 12 miles south of Ullapool at the Braemore Junction with the A832.



The National Trust for Scotland, who own and manage the Nation Nature Reserve took advantage of our pre application service, submitting their initial enquiry in December 2020. This early engagement allowed the Council to progress the planning application submitted in May 2021 timeously. The development includes a number of new footpaths as well as the reconfiguration of the original car park that serves the site.

The development has successfully addressed problems associated with the increasing visitor numbers and lack of facilities which included parking congestion, a lack of toilets, camper van fouling caused by black water dumping and pedestrian congestion around the gorge viewing points.



E. Active Travel Delivery in Highland

Background

Council officers prepared a prioritised list of active travel infrastructure for delivery, based on an objective, evidence-led approach that follows a Multi-Criteria Assessment (MCA) of potential routes identified to deliver improvements as, jointly, the Inner Moray Firth Active Travel Network and the Highland-Wide Active Travel Network (which covers 10 settlements outwith the IMF area). A paper to this effect was agreed by the ECI committee in November 2022.



Criteria used within the MCA include potential catchment of users, SIMD rating, connectivity to public transport, connectivity to other existing active travel infrastructure, connectivity to key trip generators such as healthcare provision or employment, deliverability (including potential landowner issues), and of course cost.



The methods involved applying weighted scores to a range of factors to identify what routes will deliver the greatest impact, based on factors including potential volume of users, anticipated level of modal shift, deprivation, health benefits, enhancement of the existing network, benefits and costs, and deliverability.

Case Study Cùis Sgrùdaidh

This work is based on the Scottish Government's Travel Hierarchy (Fig 1). This recognises the multiple benefits to health, communities, the economy, the environment, and from reducing inequalities, of a significant modal shift from car-based travel to active and sustainable modes:

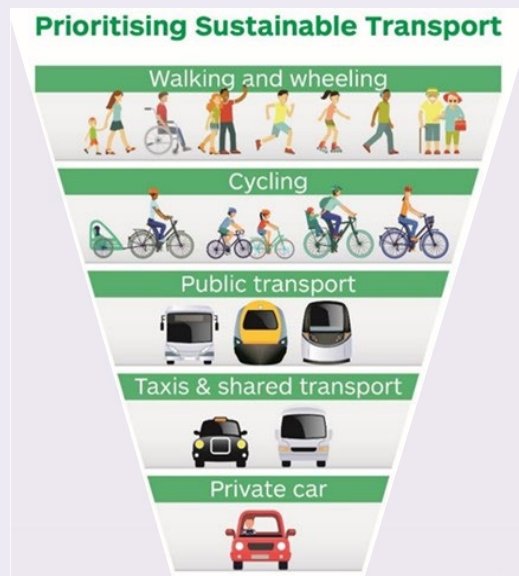


Figure 1 image: The Travel Hierarchy, Strategic Transport Projects Review 2 (Transport Scotland)

It should also be noted that improvements in walking, wheeling and cycling infrastructure support uptake of public transport and ease congestion, freeing space for essential car journeys.

The Active Travel team are working closely with colleagues across the Council to ensure that the multiple benefits of decarbonising the transport network can be realised.

This evidence-led and strategic approach is key to attracting funding in what remains a very competitive environment, notwithstanding the Scottish Government's commitment to 10% of the annual Transport budget going to Active Travel by 2024/25. The Highland Council has already secured £10.6M for the Inverness City Active Travel Network; £1.6M for Cycling, Walking and Safer Routes for 2022/23, and £109M for transport through the City and Region Deal; initial funding of £2.7M to unlock up to £50M for public transport through the Bus Partnership Fund; £600k through the Active Travel Transformation fund for HWATN work and (pending final confirmation) around £500k from Sustrans' Places for Everyone fund for the first IMFATN interventions. However, like other LAs, we have only received a portion of our bids.

The £650K Capital Programme funding allocated for Active Travel Transformation for 2022-23 has been committed to deliver a range of short-term improvements across the region, and an additional £860k has been awarded to the Council from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund to support the delivery of active travel infrastructure.



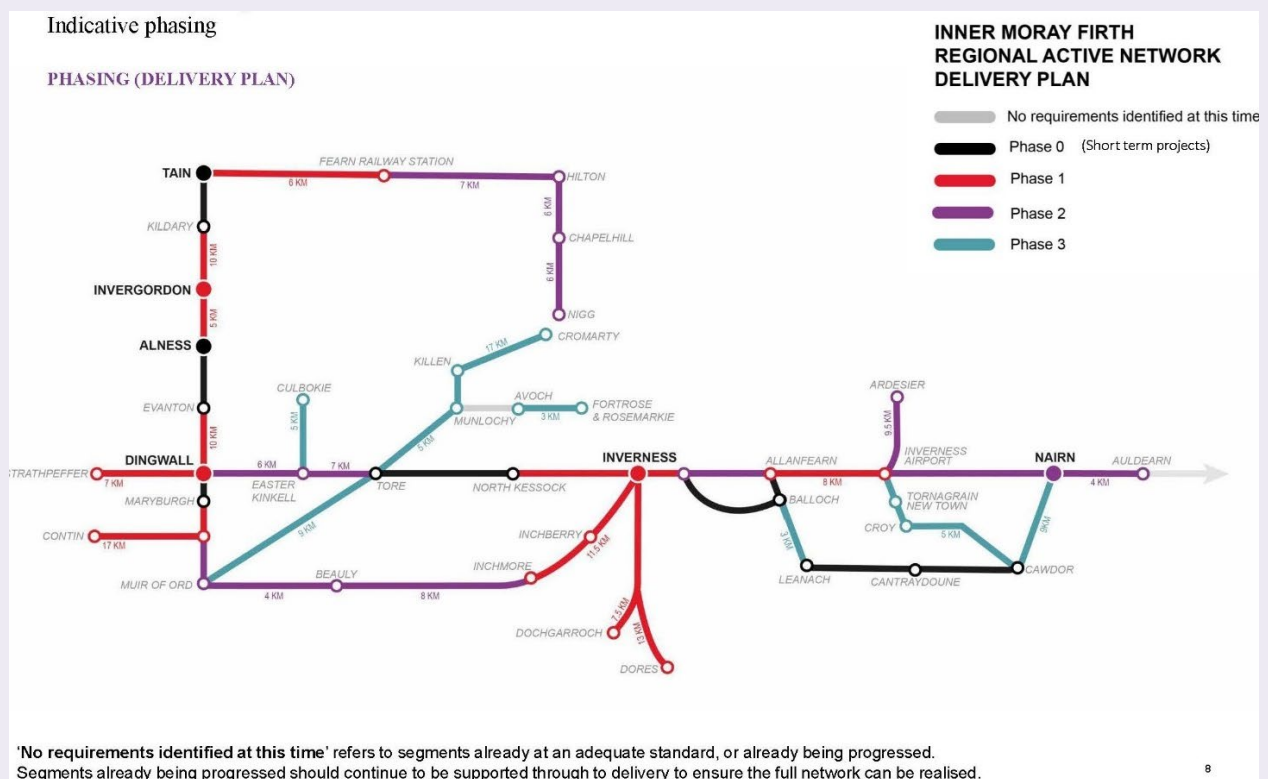
This work sits in synergy with THC's Road Safety Team's delivery of 20 mph speed limits across settlements in Highland by summer 2023, funded and supported as a Scottish Government pilot.

A crucial factor is rising costs, which means that any increase in budget is barely keeping pace with existing projects rather than enabling delivery at pace of an expanded AT network.

The IMF ATN, the Highland-wide ATN, and the bigger picture

The prioritisation work forms the basis of THC's Active Travel Strategy (ATS). In turn, the ATS is a fundamental part of THC's Local Transport Strategy (LTS). The LTS provides the foundation for decisions about how we manage, maintain and improve the entire transport network. It was last published in 2010 and is currently being updated, with public consultation on the Case for Change closing on May 29th and the draft new LTS scheduled to go out for consultation later in 2023.

The IMF Active Travel Network is planned over three phases:



The Highland-wide Active Travel Network covers a number of interventions across the Highland communities which have an Active Travel Masterplan in place from previous work: Alness & Invergordon, Aviemore, Dingwall, Inverness, Fort William, Nairn, Portree, Tain, Thurso and Wick. Short-term improvements are identified, followed by three phases of prioritised interventions across settlements, based on impact, including for Academy Street. The prioritisation process identified interventions in Thurso, Alness / Invergordon and Inverness as those to be delivered first with around 30 proposals across the settlements.

Whilst the outcome of these two processes proposes the future direction for the team to prioritise delivery of active travel, including short-term improvements and comprehensive new infrastructure, they do not exist in isolation, but rather sit alongside other work including live and committed projects, and community-led projects.

F. Former Arnotts Building, Union Street, Inverness

The Category 'B' listed former Arnotts store building was recently redeveloped to provide 53 residential flats and six ground floor commercial units in the heart of the city centre. It represents a major urban regeneration project bringing back into use a key landmark building that had lain largely vacant since 2003 and had fallen into a poor state of repair.

Key elements of the development include a landscaped central courtyard feature; a new active frontage along an important pedestrian route to the rear of the building at Baron Taylors Street; and the sympathetic restoration of traditional shopfronts onto Union Street.

The applicant engaged with us early in the project's design by utilising our Major Pre-Application Advice Service, enabling us to highlight a number of key issues to be considered at the planning application stage, including the requirement for developer contributions; the need for a Transport Statement; and a sympathetic and sensitive approach to development, which also included substantial demolition and replacement buildings works on a secondary frontage at Baron Taylors Street.

The applicant also engaged with the Inverness Design Review Panel prior to submission of the planning and listed building consent applications, who stated at the time:

"The Panel welcomes the opportunity to comment at an early stage of design for adaptive re-use of this important city centre landmark. It recognises the significant benefit of bringing a large area of vacant space back to active, mixed use while also increasing the number of people living in the city centre. The proposed approach to preserving the Listed Building, while enhancing Baron Taylor's Street is strongly supported, in particular the proposal to introduce a new active frontage to Baron Taylor's Street. The Panel welcomes the engagement of a heritage consultant, whose analysis should be a starting point for refining the design. Other priorities for design development include simplifying the elevation to Baron Taylor's Street, making the central courtyard an attractive space to visit and overlook, and addressing appropriate safety measures set out in Secured by Design."

This early collaboration resulted in the subsequent major planning application being presented to the South Planning Applications Committee three months after the date of submission, where the Committee agreed to grant planning permission subject to the conclusion of a Section 75 Agreement.

The resulting £12.5M redevelopment has significantly enhanced and revitalised a key city centre site, bringing an important listed building back into use and enhancing the character of the Inverness (Riverside) Conservation Area and enabling more people to live and work in the city centre.



Former Arnotts Building, Inverness - Union Street frontage - before and after



Rear of building, Baron Taylors Street - before and after

G. Victorian Market, Inverness

The Victorian Market is a B-listed complex within the Inverness Riverside Conservation Area, which is largely 'internal' to an urban block, bounded by Union, Church, Queensgate and Academy Streets; each street has an entry into the Market but only Academy Street has a formal entrance. The eastern half of the Market comprises two 'arcade streets' with decorative shopfronts and open volume up to the roof-trusses; the western half was the Market-hall which was packed with small units and narrow access corridors, an unpleasant and poorly functioning space.

This project by Highland Council (the Market owners) was to strip-out the Market Hall to create a central space for circulation and dining, surrounded by new units on the periphery, and a new area for servicing/storage. The project was an ambitious modernisation of an out-dated and uneconomic space, which went through a preliminary pre-app process to ensure that the heritage and planning issues could be addressed without compromising the listed building and its neighbouring uses/residents. Planning permission and Listed Building Consent were granted in 2020 with project completion in late 2022.

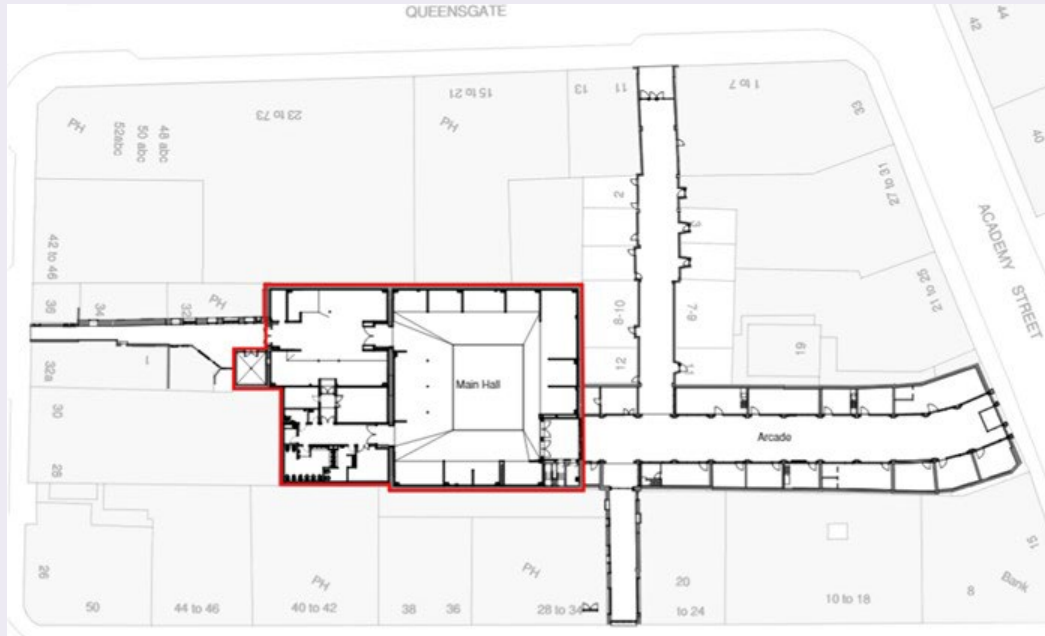


Market Hall outlined in Red

In terms of built heritage, the shop-units were not of historic age or value, therefore the strip-out was not problematic. A fire-separation lobby was however required at the link into the arcade-streets, which was formed by an original archway with timber fan-light and clock; the new lobby was designed with a matching glazed arch-window, to minimise any visual and physical impacts upon the heritage detailing.

The fit-out to the re-designed hall was intended to be modern in form and aesthetic, but with material and colour finishes which would complement the heritage building. The central space was defined by a steel-framed 'pergola' structure, reflecting the roof-structure above. The surrounding shop-units were provided to tenants as a simple structure which they would then fit-out and decorate, in compliance with a 'Tenant Design Guide' which would maintain a level of aesthetic consistency.

The project was fully supported by the Planning Authority and was seen as vital to the sustainable future of the wider heritage Market. The revitalised Market Hall is now a destination space which complements the more historic 'arcade streets', providing food and drink outlets, and eating space as well as new toilet facilities (as well as storage for the units). 12 units now surround the hall, with a further 4 on the access to Church Street. The phased project for upgrading the Victorian Market is on-going, with focus now on enhancing the 3 minor access points onto the surrounding streets.



H. Glen Ord Distillery and Visitor Centre, Muir of Ord

The visitor centre occupies the southern end of the long run of stone warehouses which overlook the car park, with the main distillery complex located beyond and to the west.

The works involved alterations and improvements to the existing buildings and immediate environs. In particular, the existing distillery visitor centre and attached warehouse have been modified and the external car parking and entrance environment upgraded, to facilitate an enhanced visitor experience. This is part of a wider initiative to transform the Scottish whisky experiences and increase whisky tourism across Scotland.



The revamping of the visitor centre includes the repositioning of the visitor entrance, with the new entrance being inset and detailed in copper to provide a contemporary intervention which both compliments the existing warehouse building and reflects the copper stills within the still house. This combines with the new hardstanding area and amendments to the car parking area to lead visitors into the building.

Most of the works are internal, to improve the general flow of visitors and tour route flows. External alterations are more minor in nature, generally fabric repairs and window openings, designed to maintain and enhance the character of the original building.

The roof has also been altered to create a double height internal centrepiece. However, bats were found in the roof space leading to a restriction in the timing of the planned works and the installation of bat boxes on nearby trees within the site. An ecologist was employed by the applicant to advise how to minimise and mitigate the impact on bats, and an arboriculturist to advise on works to trees within the car park.

Several teams within The Highland Council were involved in providing expertise to facilitate the processing of the application.

I. Affordable housing, Meiklefield Road, Dingwall

This development forms phase 1 of an overall partial redevelopment of the Meiklefield Estate in Dingwall to replace substandard housing with new fit for purpose sustainable homes. The existing houses were circa 1960s two storey hipped roof council tenanted “four in a block” housing.

The development provides a mix of 6 x 2 bed houses and 8 x 2 bed flats built to current standards; better able to meet a variety of housing needs. The individual design and layout accords with Council’s “Firm Foundations” housing design guide.



The development results in a more attractive and diverse streetscape, incorporating the principles of Designing Streets by replacing the existing homogenous design with a variation in setbacks from the pavement line, mixed render colours, considered landscaping and garden placement to create individual identity.



Evidence Checklist

| Marker Topic | Evidence | Marker Topic | Evidence |
|---|--|------------------------------|--|
| Design | Case Study F Former Arnotts building, Inverness Case Study I Affordable housing, Dingwall | Interdisciplinary Working | Case Study B Noss Head Case Study H Glen Ord distillery |
| Climate Change | 9. Early Engagement Elected Members - Species Champion Initiative 11. Policy Advice - Edinburgh Declaration | Collaborative Working | 3. Early Collaboration - Inverness Cromarty Firth Green Freeport Case Study C Visitor Centre, Dundreggan |
| Conservation | 10. Early Engagement of Cross Sector Stakeholders - Flow Country 10. Early Engagement of Cross Sector Stakeholders - Public consultation for Strathpeffer conservation area and Grantown | Community Engagement | 6. Continuous Improvement - Online Community Council Training 10. Early Engagement of Cross Sector Stakeholders - Public consultation for Strathpeffer conservation area and Grantown |
| Biodiversity | 11. Proportionate Policy Advice - Edinburgh Declaration 11. Proportionate Policy Advice - Thurso Conservation Area & Tree Management Strategy 9. Early Engagement Elected Members - Species Champion Initiative | Placemaking | 12. Place Based Approach |
| Regeneration | Case Study F Former Arnotts Building, Union Street, Inverness Case Study G Victorian Market, Inverness Case study I Affordable housing Dingwall & | Design Workshops/ Charrettes | |
| Environment | Case study D Corrieshalloch Visitor Centre, Dundreggan 11. Proportionate Policy Advice - Thurso Conservation Area & Tree Management Strategy | Place Standard | |
| Greenspace | | Performance Monitoring | 16. Performance Information |
| Town Centres | Case Study F Former Arnotts Building, Union Street, Inverness Case Study G Victorian Market, Inverness 10. Early Engagement of Cross Sector Stakeholders - Public consultation for Strathpeffer conservation area and Grantown | Process Improvement | 6. Continuous Improvement - Online Request copy documents & NIDs & NOC's |
| Masterplanning | | Project Management | |
| Local Develop Plan & Supplementary Guidance | 8. Development Plan 11. Proportionate Policy Advice - Progress of IMFLDP 12. Corporate working across Services - Place Planning | Skills Sharing | 12. Play Sufficiency Assessment 13. CPD knowledge and practice training sessions |

Evidence Checklist

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|--|--|----------------------|---|
| Housing Supply | Case Study F Former Arnotts Building, Union Street, Inverness Case Study I Affordable Housing, Dingwall | Staff Training | 13. CPD knowledge and practice training sessions 13. Member Training |
| Affordable Housing | Case Study F Former Arnotts Building, Union Street, Inverness Case Study I Affordable Housing, Dingwall | Online Systems | 6. Continuous Improvement - Online Request copy documents 11. Online Objective workspace |
| Economic Development | 3. Inverness Cromarty Firth Green Freeport | Data and Information | 6. Continuous Improvement - Improving data entry 6. Continuous Improvement - FAQ's |
| Enforcement | 5. Enforcement | Digital Practice | 11 Online Objective workspace 12 Play Sufficiency Assessment |
| Development Management Processes | Case Study B Noss Head Case Study F Former Arnotts Building, Union Street, Inverness Case Study G Victorian Market, Inverness Case Study I Affordable Housing, Dingwall | Transport | Case Study E Active Travel Delivery in Highland |
| Planning Applications | 16. Performance information | | |
| Other: please note Short Term Let Policy | | | |



4. Legal Agreements

Over the last 12 months, 11 applications were determined with legal agreements, 6 of which were major and the remaining 5 were local in scale. The appointment of a second planning solicitor has created capacity to allow additional support.

We have also been actively promoting to planning officers the need to ensure they provide all the relevant instructions to legal colleagues in the report of handling to ensure the process is as streamlined as possible to avoid any unnecessary delays.

5. Enforcement Charter

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

There are two substantive changes in the 2022 Charter. As required by the provision of the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, there is now a commitment to monitoring of the implementation of planning permissions for major developments. Also, an amendment is proposed to the Council's approach to Freedom of Information and Environmental Information requests related to enforcement cases to ensure investigations which may lead to court action are not prejudiced by the release of information until investigations into the potential breach of planning control are completed.

There continues to be a high level of enforcement activity. Although the number of complaints lodged in 2022/23, 447 was below that for the previous year, 539, the number of breaches identified rose from 305 to 383. This was also reflected in the increase in the number of Notices served increasing from 49 to 68. There was also an increase in the number of cases resolved going up from 152 to 191 cases.

6. Continuous Improvement

Service Improvements Delivered 2022/23

Online Planning Training for Community Council members

COMPLETE

Last year, we successfully launched a self-service online training guide for Elected Members, which received positive feedback and helped them understand their roles and responsibilities better within the planning process. Building on this success, and continuing our commitment to empowering local communities, this year we developed an [on-line self-service training guide for Community Councils](#).

This new guide aims to provide Community Councils with the essential knowledge and resources they need to make meaningful contributions to our current planning system. Covering chapters on policy documents, the planning process, enforcement, reviews, appeals, listed buildings and conservation areas, the guide aims to ensure that Community Council members understand how decisions are made and how they can actively participate.

It emphasises their crucial role as representatives of local communities and highlights the importance of effective communication and collaboration with other stakeholders, such as local authorities, developers, and community members.

We hope this training guide becomes a valuable resource for Community Councils members so they can make meaningful contributions, ensuring that decisions reflect the aspirations and needs of their local community.

Positive feedback has already been received:

Secretary of Ferintosh Community Council

"At our FCC meeting last night, we welcomed the arrival of your online training manual. We realise that creating that document between you and your colleagues must have involved a fair body of work and we just wanted you all to know how much we appreciated your efforts to help us interact with the planning system effectively."

We are actively promoting the planning training guide and aim to publish an online video as a follow-up initiative.

Frequently Asked Question (FAQ's) published

COMPLETE

The Council has dedicated Planning and Building Standards Officers who handle daily inquiries from the public regarding various queries. To enhance our services and improve customer satisfaction, we initiated a data gathering exercise in 2019. Our duty officers and service centre staff collected information to gain insights into the commonly requested information by the public. This valuable information was used to enhance the layout and design of our webpages, making it easier for both customers and service centre staff to access the relevant information efficiently.

This data was utilised again to continue improving our webpages by publishing the [most frequently asked questions on planning](#) and [building standards](#). Aimed at reducing the number of calls and duplicate enquiries, the questions, in plain English, explain the process, common terms, and provides an expectation of performance and timeframes. By referring to this webpage, individuals can gain a better understanding of the various regulations and requirements involved in planning and building projects and gain good insight of the process.

The Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) webpage is an easily accessible resource that can be found on our main [Planning, Environment and Building Standards homepage](#). As a follow-up, we are planning to create a webpage dedicated to frequently asked questions about listed buildings and conservations areas. This new webpage will provide more in-depth information to aide users in understanding the intricacies involved in working with listed buildings and protected areas.

Notices of Initiation and Notice of Completion tasks

COMPLETE

To enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of our Planning Case Officers, we introduced two new Enterprise tasks called DCD7 Notice of Initiation Received and DCD8 Notice of Completion Received.

For the DCD7 Notice of Initiation Received Enterprise task, our eProcessing Centre Team will update the Notice of Initiation Date field with the date recorded on the Notice of Initiation document by the Agent or Applicant of the Planning case. This will create the Enterprise Task for the Planning Case Officer to alert them that the development has started. Once the Planning Case Officer has reviewed the case, they can mark the Enterprise task as completed by right-clicking on the task and selecting Task Complete.

For the DCD8 Notice of Initiation Received Enterprise task, our eProcessing Centre Team will update the Completion Date field with the date recorded on the Notice of Completion document by the Agent or Applicant of the Planning case. This will create the Enterprise Task for the Planning Case Officer to alert them that the development has been completed. Once the Planning Case Officer has reviewed the case, they can mark the Enterprise task as completed by right-clicking on the task and selecting Task Complete.

For both of these new Enterprise tasks, criteria was added on the allocation of this task to the Case Officer to appear for Planning Team Leaders to pick up and allocate as appropriate if the Case Officer has been marked as “historic” (meaning that the original Case Officer on the planning case is no longer an acting Planning Officer for The Highland Council) on our planning case management system.

These tasks will give greater visibility to case officers on the permission stage and allow easier time management for site visits to check the works have started/been completed in line with the planning permissions.

Improving data entry at validation and enhanced data monitoring **ONGOING**

We have begun investigating how to better utilise the Forward Planning 2 and 3 tabs within the Development Management module to enhance the data entry process during the validation stage. Our aim is to tailor categories to fit the types of development for evidence-based collection and monitoring in line with NPF4 i.e., affordable housing numbers; land use; Photovoltaic Units; Air Source Heat Pumps; Hydro Schemes; Electric Charge Units; Wind Farm information etc.

To date, the reliability of data has often been an issue due to inconsistent data entry for several reasons. We will improve the current process to allow officers to input additional information not currently being collected and implement training measures to ensure current and new staff are properly trained and understand why data entry is necessary.

Develop position statement on planning and adopted roads **ONGOING**

Our roads and transportation guidance require private roads serving 5 or more houses to be upgraded to a standard capable of adoption. While our planning policies at one time contained a similar requirement, they have not done so for some years. As development pressure increases within the hinterland of our larger towns and City so do the calls for such roads to be adopted when they are part of a new development.

Restructure of teams within the Roads Service has meant that these discussions have not yet taken place but will be progressed.

Report of Handling - good practice **ONGOING**

A piece of follow up improvement work has been identified to ensure continuity and good practice across case officers to ensure the Report of Handling is easily available for shared business support when preparing the decision notice post Committee.

Wind Farm Design Workshop

COMPLETE

In 2021/22, we embarked on the launch of the Wind Farm Design Workshop, a service that was created as a valuable addition to our existing Major Pre-application Advice Service. This workshop focuses on addressing the design, landscape, and visual impact aspects associated with wind energy development by engaging in a collaborative and solutions-based approach with applicants.

During this year we evaluated the process in more depth. Following this review, it was determined that only a single minor adjustment was necessary. Analysis revealed that the process is highly effective and successfully accommodates the needs of both applicants and Council officers.

Online form to request copies of planning documents

COMPLETE

For customers who wish to [request copies of planning](#) or [building warrant](#) drawings and documentation, we have developed and implemented an online request form. In the past, requests were submitted by email/telephone/CXM (Customer Management System) and could involve a lengthy, time-consuming exchange of correspondence before all the necessary information was provided to begin the search.

We now ask the requester for detailed information upfront, making it easier for us to identify the application or site and find the requested information more quickly. Payment is taken at the time of submission, and a summary of submission is provided to the requester. The system also sends a summary to our Virtual Business Support team so they can locate the documentation. Requested documents are then sent electronically whenever possible.

As a result of the online form, we have been able to save time, utilise resources more efficiently, ensure consistency of charging, and simplify the customer experience.

The new online form can be accessed via our website where customers are informed they can view and download copies of planning applications from 2010 onwards free of charge by using our public access - [Planning - search on Public Access](#)

Service Improvements 2023/24

Review of planning process

As part of our continual review of our planning process we will be looking at:

- Review the appeals process for Enforcement Notices
- Review of Satisfaction/discharge of Conditions process
- Identify and implement efficiencies through automation by streamlining the mailing process from Uniform to drive down costs and enhance productivity.
- Improving the validation process.

Service Improvements 2023/24 cont/..

- Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) webpage for Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas to help the public better understand the intricacies involved in working with listed buildings and protected areas.
- Highland Historic Environment Record database, its associated digital file collections and SAQP award-winning website to move to a new externally hosted environment.
- DM/BS data uploads – take part in the pre-Alpha release of data hub gathering.
- Identify extra resource for enforcement tasks.

7. Local Development Plan

The average age of our adopted Local Development Plans at the end of the 2022/23 financial year was 6 years and 6 months, as follows:

- HwLDP (April 2012) – 11 years 0 months
 - IMFLDP (July 2015) – 6 years 8 months
 - CaSPlan (August 2018) – 4 years 7 months
 - WestPlan (September 2019) – 3 years 6 months
- = AVERAGE – 6 years 6 months

Whilst the average age of our development plans has now exceeded an average of 6 years, our DPS reports to Committee over the last few years have confirmed the Council's approved position to await the publication of NPF4 before embarking. It will also be noted that two of our four plans fall within the 5-year target that was in place until recent updates to legislation. The Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plans – which was submitted to Scottish Ministers for Examination in the reporting year – has commenced its Examination in line with the DPS. Focus has turned to building the evidence for the new Local Development Plan, in line with new development planning regulations, and this includes the launch of our Local Place Plan.

8. Development Plan Scheme

The [2023 Development Plan Scheme](#) was considered and approved by our Economy and Infrastructure Committee in February 2023 allowing people to be kept up to date on the arrangements for preparing and contributing to a new style development plan in Highland.

The review of the Inner Moray Firth LDP has progressed well, with the Examination having been commenced during the reporting year. Meanwhile, the agreed DPS enabled arrangements to be made for an invitation to be issued to communities to prepare their own Local Place Plan and, in doing so, to contribute to the evidence for the new style development plan.

9. Early Engagement of Elected Members

Short Term Let Policy

Following Badenoch and Strathspey Elected Members concern over the number of houses within their Ward being lost to the secondary letting market, it was agreed in late 2021 that the Council would pursue the establishment of a Short-term Let Control Area for the Badenoch and Strathspey wards.

As this project was essentially Member led, officers engaged extensively with the Ward Members, including hosting a round table discussion in August 2022, running a workshop for all Elected Members in October 2022 and then engaging with the Convener and Committee Chair on a regular basis to discuss progress and the project direction.

Additionally, in accordance with the requirements of the Short-term Let Control Area legislation, stakeholder engagement was undertaken. This included a 6-week engagement exercise in early 2022, with the Council making direct contact with all Ward 20 Community Councils, the relevant trade bodies, major market players and various press adverts. The engagement was primarily conducted online and included an online video outlining the purpose of the engagement and how to get involved. Over 330 responses were received to this initial engagement, and it attracted local and national news coverage.

In late 2022, a second 8-week online engagement exercise was carried out to seek views on the proposed non-statutory planning policy which had been developed to determine the planning applications the short-term let Control Area would create. Again, direct contact with all Ward 20 Community Councils, the relevant trade bodies, major market players and various press adverts was made and again the engagement attracted local and national news coverage.

The Council's Economy and Infrastructure Committee agreed to the final establishment of the [Short-term Let Control Area for Ward 20](#) on 4th May 2023. This was due to have commenced in the summer of 2023, however this is currently paused pending clarification following recent legal decisions and further examination of the related planning issues.

Species Champions Initiative

The Species Champions initiative was launched in 2014, updated in 2019 and relaunched again in 2023 following the intake of new Members. Members were invited to support one or more species threatened by a combination of factors, including climate change, habitat loss, persecution, and pollution. The initiative focuses on those species that are currently struggling to survive in a changing environment and are at significant risk, where a continuation in declining numbers may lead to unviable populations and ultimately extinction.

The initiative seeks to create a strong connection between an elected Member and one or more of our most threatened species, ensuring it is properly considered in Council decision making. The [Member becomes an advocate for their chosen species](#) and champion its cause whilst carrying out their work, during debates, public meetings and when interacting with Council officers, constituents, colleagues and politicians.

To date 43 species have a champion in the Highlands.

National Park engagement with Members

Given the significant potential within Highland to put forward strong nominations for a new national park, it was important that early engagement with Members took place. As part of the New National Park stakeholder consultation led by NatureScot, NatureScot's Head of the People and Places Activity gave a presentation to the Climate Change Committee outlining the background and rationale to the consultation and desired outcomes. In addition, Members were invited to take part in a workshop to discuss and debate the role, aims and functions of national parks as well as criteria that may be considered for the nomination and evaluation of potential new national parks in Scotland.

The workshop was led by officers from the Environment and Planning teams with expert assistance provided by NatureScot. This workshop was instrumental in informing the Council's response to the consultation and setting out the Council's position in relation to the creation of a new national park in Scotland.

10. Early Engagement of Cross Sector Stakeholders

The following are examples of where we have worked collaboratively with internal and external partners and our communities to achieve outcomes:

Aviemore – Grampian Road/Dalfaber Road Junction Improvement

The Active Aviemore project was reported in last year's PPF. Its objective was to promote the use of walking and cycling for everyday journeys, to improve the ease of access for non-motorised users and to improve the health and wellbeing of the residents and visitors to the Aviemore area. This work is now complete, greatly improving access for walking, wheeling and cycling on a key route to the new hospital.



The Flow Country UNESCO World Heritage Bid

The Flow Country peatlands are being nominated to become Scotland's only UNESCO World Heritage site inscribed for purely natural criteria, only the second in mainland Great Britain (for natural criteria) and the first site listed internationally for the exceptional value of its peatlands.

December 2022 saw the completion of and submission of the nomination dossier to Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), alongside extensive consultation on the proposed site boundary and management plan. Public consultation (16 in-person events and an online portal) on the site boundary concluded in August whilst consultation on the management plan concluded in September 2022. Useful input has been gained through this process, with the majority of contributions on the management plan coming from the renewable energy sector.



The nomination has secured the endorsement of MPs, MSPs and Councillors from across the political spectrum, culminating in a parliamentary reception hosted by the Secretary of State for Scotland at Dover House which was attended by Highland Council Members.

DCMS submitted the nomination to UNESCO in February 2023. The project team are currently planning for a UNESCO/IUCN site visit August 2023. A decision will then be made by mid-2024. In the intervening period significant work is required to prepare for inscription, particularly in terms of potential economic benefits which World Heritage inscription can bring to the region.

Public consultation for Strathpeffer conservation area and Grantown

A conservation area appraisal and management plan for Strathpeffer - the first prepared since its designation in 1970 - was released for 6-week public consultation in January 2023. This included a public engagement event at the Strathpeffer Spa Pavilion during which the proposals (including amendments to the statutory boundary) were discussed in detail with residents of the conservation area and other interest individuals. Feedback received during the consultation has been carefully digested and has influenced the final appraisal, the conservation area boundary and management plan. The final Strathpeffer conservation area appraisal and management plan will be presented to Members at the Area Committee in June 2023.

In June 2022, instigated by the Grantown Society, a conservation partnership/stakeholder group was formed between the planning authority, local community groups, the community council and the Cairngorms National Park Authority to consider how the issues and opportunities identified in the 2019 Grantown-on-Spey conservation area appraisal could be addressed. It was agreed that a consultant (funded jointly by the Council and National

Park) would be engaged to work with the stakeholder group to develop a Conservation Area Management Plan. The management plan has been informed and influenced by the stakeholder group as well as extensive public consultation and a public engagement event held in February 2023. It is planned to present the final management plan to Members at the Area Committee in May 2023.

11. Regular and Proportionate Policy Advice

In addition to the regular pre-application advice service, examples of proportionate policy advice can be found in the following specific aspects of the Service's work:

Progress with Second Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan

The April 2022 to March 2023 financial year saw considerable progress in advancing the Highland Council's last "old-style" local development plan. Scottish Government's deadline for progressing this type of plan to "Proposed Plan" publication was 12 February 2023. The Council published its Inner Moray Firth Proposed Local Development Plan 2 (IMFpLDP2 or "the Plan") on 25 March 2022 – 46 weeks prior to deadline. Indeed, the Plan was submitted to Scottish Ministers and the Government's Planning and Environmental Appeals Division (DPEA) on 24 March 2023.

This progress was achieved despite the complexity and long duration of the Council's governance process for a local development plan, which, in this case, involved 7 committee reports and 7 separate but interdependent approvals. Given the delay in the publication and approval of the Scottish Government's revised National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) document, officers decided to take advantage of the Council's process by prompting early decisions on place-specific matters (at the 6 area committee meetings in November 2022) and then delaying decisions on strategic matters until the final strategic committee meeting in February 2023 at which time the final content of NPF4 was known. This allowed officers to incorporate a Council view on NPF4 matters into the Council's case to Examination. This measure made efficient use of officer, councillor and now DPEA time in progressing the Examination process.

During the last year, the Council has continued its commitment to more efficient, digital methods of Plan production and process. One additional innovation in the last year was the use of an online Objective Connect workspace, shared with DPEA, where the Council has uploaded all its Examination documentation. Previously, hundreds of electronic files were burnt to disk and posted to the DPEA. This time, a folder structure was agreed and created with the DPEA with both parties able to upload and download files from the workspace. We believe that this is the first time in Scotland that such a shared electronic filing system for Examination documentation has been used. Ideally, this innovation could be extended so that all Examination participants can, with appropriate (different level) permissions, view and share all Examination material.

Thurso Conservation Area – Tree Management Strategy – Policy development

Two consultation events (in April and May 2022) were held for residents and other interested parties to discuss the draft Thurso Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan and proposals to amend the conservation boundary. Both sessions were successful and well attended with feedback instrumental in informing the final documents. Local area Members approved the Appraisal and management plan in August 2022 with changes to the statutory boundary adopted by E&I Committee in November 2022.

In February 2022 the Council adopted a new Tree Management Strategy. The Strategy was written by and in consultation with services across the Council that own or have responsibility for trees and reflects the Council's position on this important resource. The Strategy recognises the many important roles trees in public spaces play from sequestering carbon, providing shade and supporting biodiversity to contributing to amenity, reducing noise pollution, screening and softening development and improving mental health and wellbeing.

The Strategy includes a suite of policies that will ensure the appropriate and consistent management of Council-owned trees and woodland and that trees continue to be recognised for the vital contribution they make to the public realm.

Edinburgh declaration – support biodiversity guidance

On 3 November 2022 the Council joined c.300 governments, cities and local authorities in becoming a signatory to the Edinburgh declaration demonstrating, on a global stage, its commitment to tackling the nature crisis and reversing biodiversity loss.

The [Edinburgh Declaration](#) was signed at a meeting with the Council's Chief Executive, Leader and Chair of the Climate Change Committee and NatureScot's Chief Executive and Director of Nature and Climate Change.



12. Corporate Working Across Services

Play Sufficiency Assessment

In preparation of the commencement of a new-style local development plan to replace the Council Highland-wide Local Development Plan, the Council has started the evidence gathering phase. As part of this work, the Development Plans Team has been working with the Council Amenities Team to undertake the Play Sufficiency Assessment of the Council owned play areas.

This project started with Development Plans Officers and the Play Strategy Coordinator within the Amenity Services, identifying a set of questions needed to conform with the emerging legislation on undertaking Play Sufficiency Assessments. These questions were then developed, in-house into a digital mapped based data collection 'app' hosted within

the ARCMAP FieldMap application. Once tested, tweaked and finalised, the app was uploaded onto the Council Play Technicians tablets and mobile phones, all of whom were already employed within the Amenity Team and work remotely across the Council region.

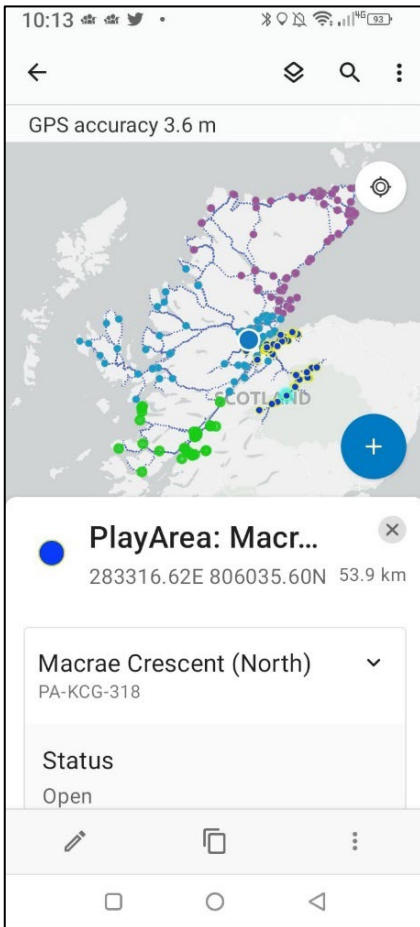


Image: Screenshot of software

This 'app' then allowed each Play Technician, and with the minimum of training, to complete the Play Sufficiency Assessment on behalf of the Development Plans Team, by completing a series of intelligence-led questions and prompts whilst at the individual play area, which they are required to visit as part of their normal maintenance and inspection routine. The app also promoted and required the Play Technicians to uploading multiple photos and videos of the play equipment and offers the ability to record voice files of the characteristics of the play area, all of which is encapsulated within the FieldMap application.

Once the survey is completed, the data is automatically uploaded either through the device 3G connectivity or a Wi-Fi network, back to the central database and is then available for interrogation within the Council GIS mapping system.

The utilisation of this software has allowed over 350 play areas to be assessed without significant resource allocation within a short timeframe and has provided a consistent approach to data collection. The success of this approach has been noted by other Local Authorities across the whole of the UK, with officers from both the Amenities and Development Plan Team being asked to cascade how the system was designed and worked.

Ash Dieback Planning added to Corporate Risk register

Ash dieback, an infection that has been moving northwards across the UK, is now becoming increasingly prevalent in Highland. The disease can result in the catastrophic failure of ash trees without warning. Given the number of ash trees in and around Council assets, Council developments and the road network for which the Council is responsible, ash dieback was recognised as a Corporate Risk on 23 March 2023.

Getting a more detailed understanding of the scale of the issue and starting to tackle ash dieback in high-risk areas will be a cross-service operation that will start to be delivered in 2023/24.

Place Based Approach

To respond to the unique challenges and characteristics of the diverse set of communities across Highland officers have previously secured approval from Full Council to apply a place-based approach to all sub-regions across Highland. This involves better coordinating the full range of activities across land use planning, community planning and within communities themselves. This was supported by the outcomes based approach that has been taken to the preparation of Development Plans in Highland for a number of years. It also represented an evolution of the flagship Fort William 2040 project, and more recent

place-based work in Skye & Raasay and community led examples in NW2045 which the Council is supporting. Two Project Managers were recruited in November 2022 with the aim of leading this place-based work across all Highland sub-regions, in partnership with key public agencies, communities and other stakeholders.

During the 4 months of their work in the reporting period significant progress was made in supporting a new community led plan for the Black Isle, and establishing a steering group for a similar place-based plan to be prepared in Nairnshire. Meanwhile preparatory work was being carried for events and partnership engagements in Dingwall, Inverness and Easter Ross. In the latter two areas this place-based work has been timed to align with emerging Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport allowing for opportunities to engage with communities on a major series of developments that are likely to emerge.

This work demonstrates how the planning service is playing a key role in coordinating partners and communities, drawing on the strengths of each sub-region and applying a tailored place-based approach. It is also hoped to set the framework and share evidence for the new styles Local Development Plan and Local Place Plans.

13. Sharing Good Practice, Skills and Knowledge

CPD knowledge and practice training sessions

The Service has always been acutely aware of the difficulty in delivering CPD training for staff, particularly given their relative professional isolation within various dispersed offices across the Highland Council area, and the Council's geographic distance from other CPD opportunities in central and north-eastern Scotland. The disruption caused by COVID-19 has exacerbated this professional isolation and following a significant number of new officers across various teams, and feedback from and analysis of officer personal development plans, and discussion between officers and managers, it was identified that there were gaps in practical and theoretical knowledge relating to various built and natural heritage interests. Accordingly, it was agreed that CPD knowledge and practice training sessions should be undertaken across a range of key themes.

The first of these was held in Inverness in November 2022 and focussed on Built Heritage, particularly in relation to Listed Buildings and the Inverness Riverside Conservation Area.

The interactive day was held in the recently refurbished Category A Listed Inverness Town House, the seat of local government in Inverness, and was led by our specialist officers from the Environment team, and Planning case officers.



Around 35 officers from across Highland attended the day and were taken on an interactive journey through national policy, including the (then) soon to be introduced National Planning Framework 4, as well as the Highland Council's own Development Plan policies and associated guidance. Officers considered various case studies and then undertook a walking tour of recent key development sites within the Conservation Area, understanding the challenges of each and the lessons learned during the processing of Planning and Listed Building Consent applications.

The highlight of the day was a tour around the iconic Inverness Castle redevelopment, which is currently in the middle of a 3-year project to change the use of the building from Courts and associated public offices to a visitor hub and tourist attraction with associated venue, exhibition and café spaces. This provided an opportunity to see works in progress and hear from the architects and Planning case officer of the various technical and practical challenges which had to be resolved for the successful delivery of the project.

The second CPD day was held in the warm spring sunshine of late May 2023, focussing on arboriculture, and was led by the Environment Team's specialist forestry officers, and Planning case officers. Around 30 staff attended.

Again, the initial discussions related to overview and review of the relevant NPF4 and Highland Council planning policies and associated legislation, along with examination of arboricultural worst and best practice on development sites.

Following this, practical walking tours were undertaken around the Council's headquarters building on Glenurquhart Road in Inverness, and the nearby Ness Riverside area, and then onto the Torvean area on the southern edge of the city. During the walking tours, the key matters that were examined were species identification, hedging, tree protection during construction, survey work, and landscaping measures.

The positive feedback from attendees of the first two days, and previously identified training opportunities, are to be explored with further CPD sessions, focussing on protected species, drainage, access and roads. It is anticipated that these CPD days will have a similar structure, drawing on practical experience from specialist officers, reflecting on current and recently determined casework.

Member Training

Following the local government election in May 2022 we ensured all members of both the North and South Planning applications committee and their relevant substitute received mandatory training prior to taking up their roles. This training was run in conjunction between Planning Aid Scotland and Highland Council officials as part of a blended package of training.

In addition to this mandatory training programme, a selective and discretionary teams training was also promoted including a recent aquaculture event. This comprised representatives of the fish farm industry, policy and regulatory bodies, as well as relevant interest parties who contribute to the statutory process, who gave a short presentation. This also included speakers from Fisheries Management Scotland who represented the views of the fisheries boards. There was a question and answer session afterwards to allow all sides an opportunity to be better understand their respective roles.

In addition to, and separate to this, a site visit was arranged for those members who wished to visit a working fish farm to get a better understanding of what this entailed off the west coast of the mainland.

14. Stalled and Legacy Cases

The number of legacy cases determined in 2021 rose from 89 to 151 from the preceding year. Although we determined 62 more legacy cases, the number that remained undetermined rose from 102 to 154. In part this is linked to the desire to be solution focussed and where possible secure resolution to planning issues to allow development to progress where possible through mitigation and the use of conditions. Some cases have suffered due to delays in gathering information over this period related to COVID at an earlier stage in their consideration where essential survey work could not be undertaken which was necessary prior to the determination of the application and which in some cases have only subsequently been issued due to the associated requirements for bonds and section 75 agreements.

| | 2022/23 | 2021/22 |
|--|---------|---------|
| Number cleared during reporting period | 151 | 89 |
| Number remaining | 154 | 102 |

15. Developer Contributions

Developer Contribution Forecasting

Further work has been carried out to improve our Developer Contribution Forecasting, allowing us to create a dynamic view of required funding for infrastructure projects to be provided by The Council. This is being rolled out corporately to allow us to more accurately identify funding gaps, improve the ability to secure match-funding for projects, and hopefully allow a more informed and accurate Capital Programme. It also allows us to provide relevant information to external community groups to allow them to identify potential funding options and bring community facility projects not delivered by The Council to fruition.

In addition to the Council-led projects that have been allocated Developer Contributions, we have also worked in conjunction with several Community Groups to assist delivering Community projects throughout The Highlands. Developer Contributions towards Community Facilities have been allocated to several projects in the Dornoch Area (A Multi-Use Games Area in Dornoch, a museum extension and a Community Hub), and a commitment has been made to allocate funds to Mallaig Swimming Pool in Lochaber in order to allow the Swimming Pool to continue to provide vital community facilities to the local area for the foreseeable future. Through experience and good practice, we are building stronger relationships with Local Community Groups to allow us to assist with Community-led projects in the future.

Finally, we have undertaken a review of the costs involved in School Estate Extensions and Community Facilities projects and have approved new rates for contributions sought for these purposes. This will allow The Council to deliver the necessary infrastructure required for new development and help create well-appointed, vibrant, and rewarding neighbourhoods throughout Highland.

16. Performance Information

| Key Outcome | 2022-23 | 2021-22 |
|---|------------------|------------------|
| Development Planning | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Age of local/strategic development plan(s) at end of reporting period (Requirement: less than 5 years) | 6 years 6 months | 5 years 5 months |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Will the local/strategic development plan(s) be replaced by their 5th anniversary according to the current development plan scheme? | N | N |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the expected date of submission of the plan to Scottish Ministers in the development plan scheme changed over the past year? | Y | Y |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Were development plan scheme engagement/consultation commitments met during the year? | Y | Y |
| Development Management | | |
| Project Planning | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> percentage and number of applications subject to pre-application advice | 14% 315 | 20.5% 534 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> percentage and number of major applications subject to processing agreement or other project plan | 60% 15 | 81.8% 11 |
| Decision-Making | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> application approval rate | 96.6% | 96.6% |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> delegation rate | 95.9% | 96.6% |
| Validation | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> percentage of applications valid upon receipt | 43.25% | 63.96% |
| Decision-Making Timescales | | |
| Average Number of weeks to decision: | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Major Developments | 82.9 | 50.66 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Local Developments | 16.2 | 15.98 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Householder Developments | 9.6 | 8.48 |
| Legacy Cases | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number cleared during reporting period | 151 | 89 |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Number remaining | 154 | 102 |
| Enforcement | | |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time since enforcement charter published/reviewed (Requirement: review every 2 years) | 7 months | 34 months |

Decision-making timescales (based on “all applications” timescales)

| Category | 2022-23 | Average timescale (weeks) | |
|------------------------------------|---------|---------------------------|---------|
| | | 2022-23 | 2021-22 |
| Major developments | 24 | 75.2 | 56.7 |
| Local developments | 2247 | 16.2 | 13.1 |
| • less than 2 months | 1006 | 6.9 | 6.9 |
| • more than 2 months | 1241 | 23.7 | 21 |
| Householder developments | 649 | 9.6 | 8.3 |
| • less than 2 months | 443 | 6.8 | 6.7 |
| • more than 2 months | 206 | 15.5 | 15 |
| Major housing developments | 3 | 82.9 | 118.0 |
| Local housing developments | 794 | 20.7 | 16.9 |
| • less than 2 months | 237 | 7.1 | 7.2 |
| • more than 2 months | 557 | 26.5 | 22.7 |
| Major business and industry | 2 | 58.6 | 17.8 |
| Local business and industry | 124 | 18.4 | 13.6 |
| • less than 2 months | 54 | 6.9 | 7.0 |
| • more than 2 months | 68 | 27.5 | 20.0 |
| EIA developments | 11 | 25.6 | 21.9 |
| Other consents | 298 | 12.1 | 9.9 |
| Planning/legal agreements | 152 | 33 | 20.4 |
| • Major | 5 | 113 | 100.4 |
| • Local | 147 | 30.3 | 19.5 |
| Local reviews | 33 | 12.3 | 12.2 |

Decision-making, local reviews and appeals

| Type | Original decision upheld | | | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|------|---------|----|
| | 2021-22 | | 2020-21 | |
| | No. | % | No. | % |
| Local reviews | 33 | 69.7 | 23 | 74 |
| Appeals to Scottish Ministers | 15 | 53.3 | 23 | 35 |

Enforcement activity

| Key Outcome | 2022-23 | 2021-22 |
|------------------------------|---------|---------|
| Enforcement | | |
| Complaints lodged | 447 | 539 |
| Cases taken up | 242 | 284 |
| Breaches identified | 383 | 305 |
| Cases resolved | 191 | 152 |
| Notices served | 68 | 49 |
| Reports to Procurator Fiscal | 0 | 0 |
| Prosecutions | 0 | 0 |

Committee information

| Committees and site visits | Number per year |
|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Full Council | 9 |
| Strategic Committees | 3 |
| Planning Committees | 14 |
| Area Committees | 16 |
| Area Committee site visits | 0 |
| Local Review Body | 7 |
| LRB site visits | 0 |

Staff structure documents

Infrastructure and Environment Service



Infrastructure and Environment Bun-structair agus Àrainneachd



Tracey Urry

Interim Executive Chief Officer of Infrastructure and Environment

Address: The Highland Council Headquarters, Glenurquhart Road, Inverness IV3 5NX

Bus Service Improvement Partnership. Car Parks & Parking Enforcement. Corran Ferry Operations. Cycleways and Footpaths. Environment. Harbours & Piers. Infrastructure. Planning and Building Standards. Public, Community and School Transport. Radio Communications. Roads & Bridges Maintenance. Street Lighting. Traffic Management & Orders. Winter Maintenance.

Planning, Environment and Active Travel

Nicole Wallace

Service Lead -Environment, Development and Active Travel

Active Travel and Safer Routes to School. Building Standards. Development Planning. Development Plans. Long Distance Routes. Natural and Historic Environment. Planning Enforcement. Research and Information. Transport Strategy.



Photo by Ewen Weatherspoon

Area Management

Dafydd Jones

Area Planning Manager (North)

Development Management. Planning Applications. Planning enforcement.

Area Management

David Mudie

Area Planning Manager (South)



FUNCTIONS

- Building Standards
- Business Development & Systems Support
- Capital Schemes – infrastructure
- Car Parking
- Environment
- Ferries
- Flood Act Duties
- Harbours and Marine Facilities
- IT Infrastructure (fire, 5G mobile) external
- Laboratory and Quarry
- Planning
- Public and School Transport
- Roads & Winter Maintenance
- Safety Inspections – bridges & other structures, drainage & other restraint systems
- Street Lighting
- Transport Planning



Roads and Infrastructure

Garry Smith

Service Lead -Infrastructure

Design and Construction of Capital Funded Infrastructure: Roads, Bridges, Culverts and Retaining Walls. Rock Slope Stabilisation. Flood Alleviation Works. Flood Risk Assessment and Strategy. Roads Network Management. Coast Protection. Streetscaping. Transport Planning (Development Management).



Photo by Ewen Weatherspoon

Contact Us

Roads, Flooding and Street Lighting: **01349 886601**

Make a payment by Debit or Credit Card: **01349 886605**

| RTPI Qualified/non-qualified Staff | Headcount | Qualified Number |
|------------------------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Director | 0 | 0 |
| Head of Planning Service | 1 | 0 |
| Manager | 3 | 3 |
| Development Management | 43 | 22 |
| Development Planning | 12 | 5 |
| Enforcement | 3 | 1 |
| Specialists | 3 | 0 |

| Staffing age profile | Number |
|----------------------|--------|
| Under 30 | 4 |
| 30-39 | 16 |
| 40-49 | 13 |
| 50 and over | 27 |

On 2 February 2023, the [Workforce Planning 2022-2025](#) report for the Service was presented to the Economy and Infrastructure Committee. It identified the following:

The Infrastructure and Environment Service will aim to ensure they have the appropriate workforce going forward.

This will be achieved through the following actions:

- continue with the development of an affordable and sustainable workforce;
- identify synergies both within the Service and between Services;
- continue to utilise Modern and Graduate Apprenticeships to support succession planning;
- explore mature digital approaches to service delivery/identify business e-processes to be developed and reviewed; and
- establish training action plan

Supporting Evidence

Below is a list of all the web links that support evidence presented in this report:

| | Title | Web Link |
|----|---|---|
| | Introduction - Our Future Highland | https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/4611/programme-of-the-highland-council-2022-27-english |
| 1. | Decision Making – Scottish Government Planning Application Statistics- | https://www.gov.scot/collections/planning-statistics/ |
| 2. | Processing Agreements | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/180/planning-applications-warrants-and-certificates/579/major-developments/2 |
| 3. | Early Collaboration | |
| | Pre-application Advice | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice |
| | Three categories of pre-application advice according to development type: | |
| | Local Small Scale | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice/2 |
| | Local Medium Scale | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice/3 |
| | Major | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice/4 |
| | Street Design Review - provide detailed feedback on the road layout at the pre-application stage for Road Construction Consent | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice/5 |
| | Wind Farm Design Workshop - Examine the design, landscape, and visual impact of wind energy developments at an early stage of the process | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice/6 |
| | Inverness Cromarty Firth Green Freeport – Recording of first community webinar held on Wednesday 22 March 2023 | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/20023/green-freeport |
| 5. | Enforcement Charter | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/180/planning-applications-warrants-and-certificates/170/planning-enforcement/6 |
| 6. | Continuous Improvement | |
| | Service Improvements 2022-23 | |
| | Online Planning Training for Community Council Members | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/772/politicians-elections-and-democracy/364/community-councils/5 |
| | Frequently Asked Question (FAQ's) Planning | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/1054/planning-advice |
| | Frequently Asked Question (FAQ's) Building Standards | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/162/building-control-building-regulations/171/building-regulations/8 |
| | Wind Farm Design Workshop | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning-policies-advice-and-service-levels/785/pre-application-advice/6 |
| | Online form to request copies of planning documents | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/180/planning-applications-warrants-and-certificates/143/planning-permission/9 |

| | | |
|-----|--|--|
| 7. | Local Development Plan | |
| | Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan - submitted to Scottish Ministers for examination | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/178/development-plans/202/inner-moray-firth-local-development-plan |
| 8. | Development Plan Scheme | |
| | Approved by our Economy and Infrastructure Committee in February 2023 | https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81051/item-8-inner-moray-firth-proposed-local-development-plan-2 |
| 9. | Early Engagement with Elected Members | |
| | Short Term Let Policy | https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81485/item-14-establishing-a-short-term-let-control-area-for-ward-20-badenoch-and-strathspey |
| | Species Champions Initiative | https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/15103/council-confirms-new-list-of-species-champions-as-part-of-fight-against-biodiversity-loss |
| 10. | Early Engagement of Cross Sector Stakeholders | |
| | The Flow Country UNESCO World Heritage Bid | https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/80726/item-9-flow-country-world-heritage-site-nomination-update https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81483/item-12-the-flow-country-candidate-world-heritage-site-planning-position-statement |
| | Public Consultation for Strathpeffer conservation area and Grantown | |
| 11. | Regular and Proportionate Policy Advice | |
| | Progress with Second Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/178/development-plans/202/inner-moray-firth-local-development-plan |
| | Tree Strategy – new Policy development – Thurso Conservation Area | https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/80728/item-11-thurso-conservation-area-appraisal-and-conservation-area-management-plan https://consult.highland.gov.uk/kse/event/36828 |
| | Edinburgh declaration – support biodiversity guidance | https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/14890/members-agree-council-will-sign-edinburgh-agreement-to-underline-commitment-to-climate-change-action |
| 12. | Corporate Working Across Services | |
| | Place Planning | https://www.highland.gov.uk/localplaceplans |
| 15. | Developer Contributions | |
| | Developer Contributions Forecasting | https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81052/item-9-developer-contributions |
| 16. | Performance Information | |
| | Committee Information | https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/695/council-information-performance-and-statistics/526/meetings-and-minutes |
| | Workforce Planning | https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81050/item-7-infrastructure-environment-and-economy-workforce-planning-2022%E2%80%932025 |



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