

ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

BULLETIN ITEM

Subject: 2020/21 Planning Performance Framework (PPF)

Date: 1 September 2021

ECO: Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 This report presents the 2020/21 Planning Performance Framework (PPF). All Planning Authorities in Scotland are required to submit an annual Planning Performance review to the Scottish Government, setting out how they have performed over the previous financial year.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Note the 2020/21 Planning Performance Framework (PPF) for publication and submitted to the Scottish Government.

3 Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - the delivery of the services outlined within this report are contained within the overall Service budget.
- 3.2 **Legal, Community (Equality, Poverty and Rural), Climate Change / Carbon Clever, Risk, Gaelic** – There are no implications arising as a result of this report.

4. Planning Performance Framework

- 4.1 Every year we submit a Planning Performance Framework to the Scottish Government which sets out how we have performed against a series of agreed categories.
- 4.2 The Planning Performance Framework for 2020/21 was submitted to the Scottish Government for assessment on 6 August 2021 (in compliance with an extension agreed by Scottish Government) and is available [here](#).
- 4.3 This Framework reflects the good work of the Service over the course of the last year, illustrated through case studies, and highlights some key improvements the teams will be progressing during this year. The Planning performance Framework (PPF) outlines our continued commitment to improving performance, meeting customer needs, trialling innovative approaches and helping deliver high quality development across the Highlands.

- 4.4 The focus of the PPF this year has been around the Service's response to the impact of COVID. Our staff have made a significant contribution in responding to the immediate impacts of the pandemic and also in supporting the economic recovery phase which very much remains ongoing. The impact of the pandemic has resulted in a dip in some of our key performance indicators, and in the reduction of income.
- 4.5 As we continue to plan for Highland's future there has been wide-ranging engagement on the new National Planning Framework (NPF) and the significant contribution that Highland can continue to make to national outcomes. We have secured cross-partner buy-in on the Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy, including refinement of our candidate National Developments and this work will continue and will reinforce the role of planning in the corporate structure of the Council. Meanwhile, we are also evolving our corporate, place-based approach for engaging and working with communities to shape and invest in their future.
- 4.6 The focus for 2021/22 will be around economic recovery both in terms of strategy and enabling development with the aim of returning performance and income to pre-Covid levels.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Infrastructure, Environment & Economy

Date: 17 August 2021

Author: Nicole Wallace, Acting Head of Planning & Environment
Dafydd Jones, Acting Head of Development Management

Background Papers: The Highland Council PPF 2020-21

The Highland Council

Planning Performance Framework 2020-21

Comhairle na Gàidhealtachd

Frèam Dèanadas Dealbhaidh 2020-21

July 2021



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Welcome to Highland

Highland covers 26,171.13 square kilometres (10,104.73 square miles), making it the largest region by area in Scotland. In 2019, the population was estimated at 235,830; the 7th largest Scottish local authority by population. There are about 4.5 dwellings for every square kilometre, reflecting the sparsely populated rural areas of the region. The largest settlement in the region is Inverness with a population (2017) of 63,949, next is Fort William with 10,201 people followed by Nairn with 10,148.



Introduction

As Chair of the Economy and Infrastructure Committee of The Highland Council I am pleased to submit the Planning Performance Framework for 2020 – 2021.

The Planning Performance Framework outlines our continued commitment to improving performance, meeting customer needs and helping deliver high quality development across the Highlands. Our 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 and our impact on the Highland economy.

Of course this year has been a particularly challenging one due to the Covid-19 pandemic and it is only right for us to reflect on how we have responded to this within our submission. There is no doubt that the impact of the pandemic has been significant. This is evidenced in the dip experienced in our key performance indicators, in the reduction of income and in our ability to progress, as much as we would have wished, many of our improvement projects identified in the previous year. Having said that, I am immensely proud of the significant contribution that our staff have made in responding to the immediate impacts of the pandemic, supporting people's health and well-being and also in the economic recovery phase which very much remains ongoing.

The decisions made in previous years to invest in ICT and mobile ways of working has enabled the Service to continue to operate effectively during this year, with only limited impact on our ability to process planning applications, progress with our development plans and to support our corporate outcomes.

The Service has assisted in the realisation of a number of quality developments on the ground as well as innovative initiatives; important not only in managing the direct challenges that Covid-19 have presented but also that will assist in bringing about a green and just transition to economic recovery. As evidenced within this submission it is clearly the case that we continue to work collaboratively and efficiently with our partners and communities and take every opportunity to share good practice.

As we continue to plan for Highland's future there has been wide-ranging engagement on the new National Planning Framework (NPF) and the significant contribution that Highland can continue to make to national outcomes. We have secured cross-partner buy-in on the Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy, including refinement of our candidate National Developments and this work will continue and will reinforce the role of planning in the corporate structure of the Council. Meanwhile, we are also evolving our corporate, place-based approach for engaging and working with communities to shape and invest in their future. We look forward to seeing how the new NPF/SPP supports a more coordinated approach to investing in our communities.



Trish Robertson

Chair of Economy and Infrastructure Committee
The Highland Council

Performance Markers

1. Decision Making

We dealt with 2249 applications in the 2020/21 period; only 51 fewer than the previous year.

We determined 21 major scale planning applications in total during 2020/21, two more than the preceding year, of which 10 had processing agreements with 50% of these determined within the agreed timescale. The average time taken to determine those remaining 11 applications without processing agreements was reduced from 33.3 weeks to 27.8 weeks in comparison with the preceding year.

The number of non-householder applications determined in 2 months dropped slightly from 58.1% for 2019/20 to 56.8% for 2020/21. The average time taken to determine these applications increased marginally to 13.4 weeks from 12.3 weeks for the same period. Where stop the clock is accounted for the number of non-householder applications determined in 2 months rose to 62% an improvement on last year.

The number of householder applications approved within 2 months increased from 85.5% for 2019/20 to 86.8% for 2020/21. The average time taken to determine these applications rose marginally from 7.5 weeks to 7.6 weeks over the same period. Again, where stop the clock is accounted for this rises to 88% which is also an improvement on last year.

It is undoubtedly the case that planning performance was impacted as a consequence of the pandemic. The primary factors for this were due to a large portion of staff being redeployed for a significant period of the year to assist with other duties and the disruption caused through limited IT accessibility initially to allow home working. In addition, the restrictions on travel adversely impacted on the ability of developers and consultees to visit sites to undertake survey work required prior to the determination of number of planning applications during the course of the year.



2. Processing Agreements

We offer processing agreements to all applicants for major applications and those that are locally significant. In doing so we clearly set out the expectations for all parties to facilitate certainty in the timescales for determination and decision. Within the last year we agreed processing agreements for 26 applications, 10 of which were major scale developments.

Information on our approach to processing agreements is available on our [website](#)¹. A link is provided in all major application pre-application advice packs. All completed processing agreements are available on the electronic case files and are publicly available.

Other project management tools available to non-major (and not local) applications are Extensions of Time which, on occasion, may be necessary to seek further time to allow for full assessment and consideration of S26; Conservation/LBC; Advertisement applications where there have been delays with advertising requirements; further information/consultations from 3rd parties; Committee site visit requirement; Legal issues; referral to committee or delays suffered by the applicant supplying requested information. This allows for controlled stop the clock protocol to be followed in agreement with the applicant and favours the applicant and not the planning authority.

¹ https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/download/222/planning_applications_-_delivering_major_developments



3. Early Collaboration

We firmly believe that early collaboration on individual projects are the key to successful outcomes and good quality decision making. We continue to do this effectively through provision of formal pre-application advice as well as the support we offer to the Inverness Design Review Panel.

Pre-application Advice

The provision of [Pre-application Advice](#)¹ remains a key component of our service delivery. We are now offering a more tailored service that includes three categories of pre-application advice according to development type – [Local Small Scale](#)², [Local Medium Scale](#)³ and [Major](#)⁴. The major development pre-application process ensures that the advice 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 allows for a smoother process to identify key issues and concerns at an early stage. Discussions can also clarify the information needed for subsequent applications, help improve the quality of proposals and save time and money on working up proposals. We also introduced Pre-application Advice applications for [Listed Buildings](#)⁵.

In total we issued 28 major development pre-application advice packs in 2020/21, down slightly on the previous year (12.5%). In addition, we dealt with 363 Local Pre-application Advice applications and 832 Permitted Development Enquiries.

As a further development of the pre-application advice service offered, we have undertaken several Street Engineering Reviews on housing developments. The aim of this is to ensure compatibility between detailed street design and development layout thereby reducing uncertainty at Road Construction Consent approval. This is offered for all developments that has come through the pre-application process.

Design Review Panel

The Inverness Design Review Panel met three times during the 2020-21 period. The most significant projects reviewed include a redesigned hotel development at Academy Street, Inverness and one of the Council's key priorities for the City of Inverness, the Inverness Castle project following the departure of the Scottish Courts Service. The number of major projects coming to the DesignPanel has remained low this year. However, the Panel continue to look at ways in which to expand its remit, geographic spread, its membership as well as the scale of development that this body will provide advice on.

1 https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning_-_policies_advice_and_service_levels/785/pre-application_advice

2 https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning_-_policies_advice_and_service_levels/785/pre-application_advice/2

3 https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning_-_policies_advice_and_service_levels/785/pre-application_advice/3

4 https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/205/planning_-_policies_advice_and_service_levels/785/pre-application_advice/4

5 https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/192/planning_-_listed_buildings_and_conservation_areas/174/listed_buildings

A. Our Covid-19 Response

Like all organisations the Covid pandemic has had a significant effect on the business as usual approach. Nonetheless, we have continued to operate effectively during this period and doing so has not only required considerable resilience but also adaption to a new way of working.

Investment in ICT

For the majority of this year staff were of course required to work from home, with all of our area offices closed during this time.

Investment over recent years in ICT, intended to allow for mobile working, came into its own during this time; particularly with the acquisition of laptops for most staff in mid-2019. This made the transition to home working far easier. MiFi boxes were issued to all business support staff to allow desktop PCs to adapt and connect to home WIFI and to staff with poor internet connection.

While access to our IT network was initially restricted, given the volume of users trying to access from home, by May 2020 significant efforts had been made to increase the available capacity resulting in a much more stable and effective platform.

A switch from fixed telephone lines to the AVAYA phone app allowed calls to and from laptops using the existing office Avaya telephone infrastructure.

Video calling using the existing Skype for Business app was further enhanced with the roll out of MS Teams.

Procedural and Administrative Adaptations

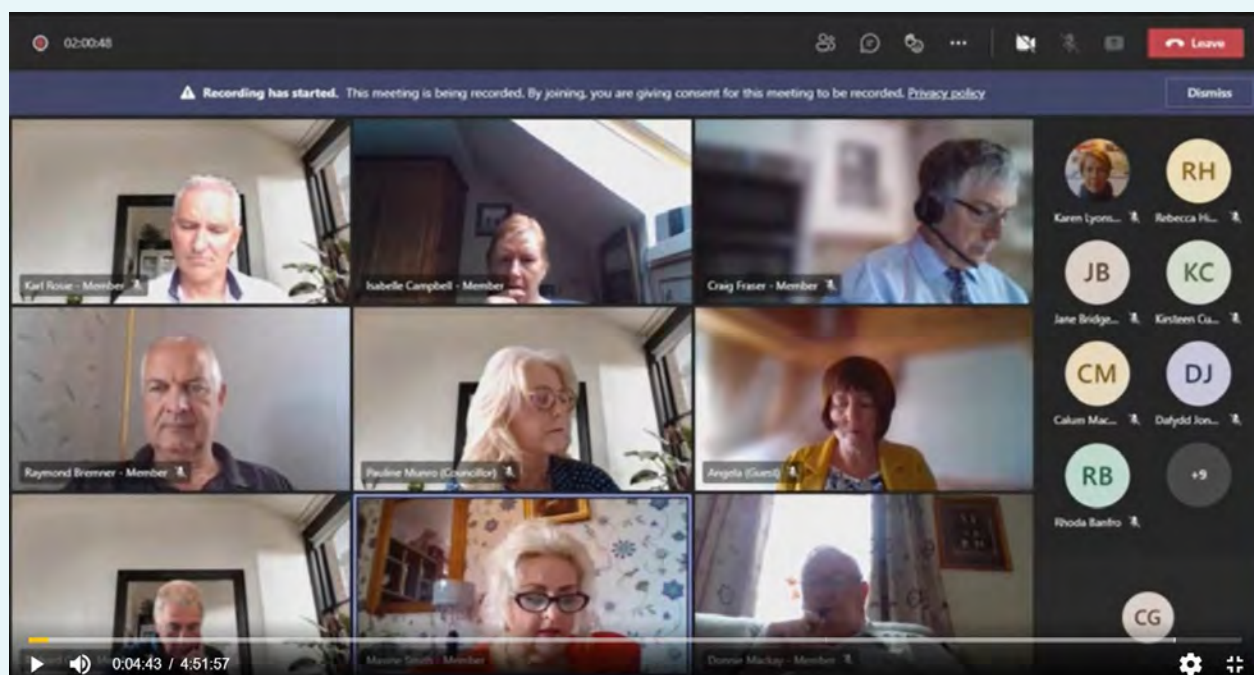
With the exception of site notices and site visits (for some of this period) for development management staff all other aspects of planning work were able to be undertaken.

Internal process changes have been limited with the only significant change being the need to put in place a daily internal one stop printing service using existing THC office equipment.

The alternative measures put in place of site visits was to request site photographs from applicants. However, in spite of this, there was an impact on our ability to determine a sizeable proportion of applications as quickly as we would have wished, resulting in a build-up of work.

MS Teams has allowed us to continue to hold our Major Pre Application meetings with developers and external consultees (see Case Study D), the Inverness Design Review Panel meetings and other meetings with Benchmarking colleagues, Heads of Planning Scotland, Scottish Government and many others. It has by and large replaced physical meetings with applicants, Members and teams.

Our Development Plans Team has undertaken a series of Highland Region Indicative Spatial Strategy meetings with external stakeholders associated with NPF4 etc. using this format, along with Member engagement in the MIR in addition to new customer engagement systems (see Case Study B).



We operate two area planning committees; one for the North and the other for the South Highland. Only one cycle of planning committees was postponed due to the Covid pandemic outbreak, however contingency arrangements were swiftly put in place to allow applications to continue to be determined.

The interim arrangement that was established involved those applications that were destined for committee being referred to the respective North and South Planning Application Committee Chairs for consideration. This allowed 6 items to be determined that otherwise might have been continued.

Virtual committees were established, using MS Teams, for the next cycle which has continued to operate successfully since.

Communication

We continue to update our guidance on the Service web page and have communicated to our agents and communities any revisions that we have had to make to our operating practices and procedures throughout this period. The use of the website and email communication in this way is likely to continue in future.

Assisting our Covid Response

Our CAG Team received separate requests, via the Improvement Service, for information vital to the protection of vulnerable citizens and to assist our health partners in contingency planning.

The first request entailed reviewing all care home addresses to ensure that the entries were uniform so that the Scottish Government could be provided with one definitive list of all care homes in Scotland.

The subsequent request related to compiling definitive, up to date lists of health and social care location (addressed) datasets that could be used by the entire data community for any work and reporting related to the continuing Covid pandemic,

ensuring that local pharmacies and medical centres were using the same addressing as recognised by Public Health Scotland and making changes where relevant.

A sizeable proportion of staff within the Service were re-deployed during the first and third quarter of this financial year to help with essential duties in response to and assistance with the recovery from the Covid pandemic; mainly to process business grant applications. At its height between April and June 2020 and January and March 2021 this amounted to almost 30% of staff being re-deployed.

The re-deployment of staff placed additional workloads and strain on remaining colleagues exacerbated at the start of the first lockdown due to limitations on IT capabilities.

Staff with the Service have also had a significant role to play in creating Spaces for People (see Case Study E).

Staff Wellbeing

We have surveyed staff at several points this year to gauge opinion on wellbeing and the approach that we may wish to take on a return to the office with the majority wishing to continue in a blended approach.

It is recognised that working from home has been increasingly difficult for many staff either through individual and physical circumstances or through the loss of contact with colleagues on a face to face basis.

Trying to maintain staff morale and provide support for virtual colleagues who miss their daily interaction is a challenge and we are acutely aware of the pressures that this brings.

The resilience of all concerned to carry on and provide the high quality of service that they have to date, has been remarkable and a testament to the dedication and professionalism of our staff.

Graduates and newer staff in particular will have had a challenging year working remotely although opportunities are now opening up for one to one meetings to re-establish more formal coaching and mentoring.

Until decisions are made on return to the office Team Leaders are being encouraged to replace virtual team meetings with physical ones outdoors where appropriate and safe to do so.

Recruitment

While there has been staffing pressure, we have managed to make a number of appointments during the period. While some positions that have been filled are from internal staff, others have been external.

All recruitment has been undertaken by interview through MS Teams.

Training

While usual annual staff training event has not taken place this year, the advent of online training has increased the available opportunities for staff training, and this has been actively encouraged.

We have re-written our Member training this year and successfully delivered this via MS Teams. Following feedback this will be reviewed, in time for the elections next year, with the intention being to split it into several separate modules that can be delivered through a self-service online training tool.

It is intended that Community Council training will follow a similar methodology but will be more accessible on the web.

Workload and Income

The number of planning applications received over the year was 7.9% lower than the previous year although there was a marked increase in the number of applications received in the second half of the year.

The planning fees for the year was proportionate to the reduction in applications however was more than 15.6% down on the preceding year. This represented a disproportionate impact. This can largely be accounted for by the reduction in the number of large scale residential development proposals.

Summary

The impact of the Covid pandemic has no doubt been significant. This is evidenced in the dip experienced in our key performance indicators, in the reduction of income and in our ability to progress with many of our improvement projects identified in the previous year.

Having said that, we believe that we have respond to the challenge in a positive way and assisted where we were most able to have greatest impact; whether that was by relaxing planning controls, coordinating corporate activity, providing statistics and data or by directly supporting our business community.

And, in doing so, with slight adjustments to approach to what we do, we were able to determine over 2300 planning applications, continue to progress our planned development plan work and to support the corporate outcomes effectively

B. Environmental Surgeries

We introduced a conservation surgery in late 2019. This surgery provides planning officers with a weekly face-to-face session with our conservation officer and conservation planner to discuss complex, controversial and difficult cases relating to Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas. The opportunity for early discussion of an application, to understand different viewpoints and to find solutions for potential issues resulted in a joined-up, coherent response, offering clarity for the applicant, and ultimately a more efficient process.

The surgery, which was physically located in Inverness Area Planning Office, ran for a few months prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. During that time, it was clear that both planning officers and applicants benefited from this method of engagement with planning officers able to pick up on conservation concerns and provide prompt feedback to applicants before receiving a formal consultation response.

With the subsequent move to home working in March 2020, the opportunity was taken to expand the conservation surgery across the entire planning team via MS Teams. A dedicated weekly time-slot where both the conservation officer and conservation planner were available was arranged and planning officers invited to book on to discuss any relevant applications. Most surgery sessions have been fully filled since the move online.

The surgery has proven to be particularly effective for less-experienced planners who now have the opportunity to discuss not only complicated applications but also more straightforward cases. This is a level of interaction that was previously very limited with officers and specialists widely dispersed across the Council area and rarely able to meet in person to discuss cases. The move online has enabled graduate planners and planning officers with less practical experience of historic buildings to gain a more in depth understanding of the guiding principles of building conservation along with many of the more technical aspects. The surgery is not only providing planning officers with the ability to return to applicants more quickly with advice on how to move an application forward, but it is giving them the skills, knowledge and confidence to deal with historic buildings and building conservation.



Given the success of the surgery for building conservation, it was logical to increase its scope to encompass the historic environment more widely. This has enabled planning officers to discuss applications where archaeology, inventory battlefields and inventory gardens and designed landscapes are factors and constraints, with the Council's archaeologist brought into surgery sessions as required. Furthermore, it was clear that opportunities existed within the Forestry and Ecology Teams to bring the same benefits to planning officers both in terms of efficiencies in determining applications and also in engendering a more in depth understanding of the subject.

In March 2021 we launched a weekly surgery for Trees and Forestry and a monthly surgery for Ecology. The Trees and Forestry surgery has demonstrated a similar level of uptake and a similar range of benefits for planning officers and subsequent efficiencies in determining applications. The Ecology surgery, run by the Council's ecologists (who ordinarily carry out survey and ECoW duties for the Council), gives planning officers the opportunity to discuss ecological information submitted to support applications and discharge conditions. This has proven to be not only been useful but to offer a level of reassurance to planning officers that information submitted is, or is not, sufficient to address ecological issues and conditions.

C. Delivery of Major Development

In the course of the last year, our Strategic Projects Team worked closely with the development industry to support the delivery of a significant number of major developments across the Council area. A wide variety of projects have been granted permission, including affordable housing projects to meet the housing needs and demands of the area, renewable energy developments to facilitate the road to net zero, and Scotland's first vertical launch spaceport. In addition, we have considered a significant number of applications under the Electricity Act for transmission infrastructure and large scale renewable projects.



Once restrictions related to the pandemic were lifted, a number of larger scale housing developments have continued apace. We have continued to provide advice, satisfy conditions, undertake site visits and deal with any remix applications efficiently as they relate to the changing market conditions post-Covid pandemic. In doing so we have continued to negotiate improvements to design quality, implement the principles of Designing Streets on the ground to deliver high quality development.

In addition, we have supported the delivery of Community Liaison Groups being taken forward in virtual formats to ensure dialogue between developers and communities to ensure open lines of communication to timeously deal with matters of concern to the community through the construction process.

To help move developments forward we have also reviewed and refined our processes related to our value added services including:

- **Street Design Review** – working jointly with colleagues in Transport Planning we have continued to run our pilot Street Design Review Service. The Street Design Review seeks to give early and detailed feedback on the road layout at the pre-application stage, to help align planning applications with the requirements for Road Construction Consent for developments of 20 houses or more. In doing so, we encourage developers and their agents to engage in discussions with us for street design to achieve a more efficient review of any formal Planning and Road Construction Consent Applications, whilst also helping to avoid conflicts between those two separate processes;
- **Satisfaction of Conditions Service** – we have facilitated hotel development and renewable energy developments through this responded to information submitted to satisfy conditions within agreed timescales. In the last year we have refined our internal processes for logging of information submitted and rolled this out to all submissions to satisfy conditions. This allows us to monitor workload, support staff and more efficiently respond to requests to satisfy conditions;
- **Priority Determination Service** – we have launched a priority determination service where, for a fee, we provide dedicated recourse and a faster service for the determination of applications. This was in response to requests from the development industry to provide quicker service and balancing this with resource implications. We will report on this in more detail in the next PPF.



D. Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan Main Issues Report

In this last year we have discovered new and innovative ways to communicate internally and with stakeholders in responding to the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic.

In April 2020 we established a virtual Inner Moray Firth Team within MS Teams to facilitate collaborative authoring of the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan documents, work programming, best practice exchanges and training. This was one of the first collaborative virtual set ups within the Council acting as a pilot to demonstrate best practice in home/blended team working.

Most Plan area community councils made the transition to online meetings during 2020 and we met with them and other groups during late 2020 and early 2021 via Zoom and MS Teams. Sharing of Plan mapping and other graphics proved far better online than via the conventional village hall-type exhibition/presentation. Some communities chaired these meetings (conventionally the Council would chair them) and the community feedback has, generally, been better than conventional events. For those community councils not online and who hadn't responded close to the end of the Main Issues Report (MIR) consultation we resorted to an old fashioned phone-around to encourage participation and to guide people through the online commenting process.

We also used MS Teams meetings to engage with Key Agencies and set up a wider development industry online event which attracted around half of the housebuilders, developers and agents that operate within the Plan area. In addition, during early 2021, we undertook tailored, online sessions with local High Schools and some parent councils.

A campaign of geographically targeted social media posts was used during the early 2021 MIR consultation to better engage the general public during the online-only consultation (January to April 2021). We produced 2 short videos to coincide with the launch of the MIR. One to explain the Plan's importance and process and the other to explain how to browse the online document, register and comment.

More conventionally, an attractive postcard was sent to all Plan area households during the consultation to encourage web searches for Plan material and to offer a telephone contact alternative for those not online. Also, for those not online, we set up a telephone enquiry option so people could discuss the MIR with an officer, request hard copy content and have this sent out with a paper comments form. The skeleton staff retained within the Council building handled the printing, mailouts and scanning of returned comments.

We received over 1,400 comments on the MIR which is the most formal representations on any Highland local development plan which perhaps indicates the success of the methods chosen. We also appear (from the breadth of issues raised and list of names and organisations) to have reached a more diverse audience than our conventional approach of paper press advertisement, public library deposit of documentation and village hall-type meetings/exhibitions. This success has encouraged us to further improve our consultation software, which has been highlighted as an issue by many respondents, particularly in terms of registration. It is likely to be a feature of future consultation and engagement in development planning moving forward and to that end we are discussing how we might improve the system with our current software provider at the same time as trialling other suitable software with other public consultations.

4. Legal Agreements

Our adapted process that:

- sets out clearly in the Report of Handling the developer contributions that are required;
- provides a streamlined instruction form to Legal Services;
- has created updated style agreements;
- is achieving the expected outcome of freeing up resources.

The anticipated benefits of improved turnaround times has not materialised, with applications subject to legal agreements taking longer to conclude as a result of challenges in recruiting a replacement member of staff.

Since establishing new processes and utilising the Uniform Case Management System for recording developer contributions, we continue to see an improvement on the ability to monitor incoming contributions, the ability to report on developer contributions information in order to inform spending services and increase the rate of drawdowns, and a focus on accountability and governance on how decisions are made on spending of contributions.

Our Developer Contribution Action Group meetings, which are represented by colleagues within the Council's spending services, have continued to be held during the last year.

An improvement to the process this year has been to provide a formal Terms of Reference that establishes the roles and responsibilities of the Developer Contributions Action Groups (DCAG).

The Terms of Reference allows DCAG to follow set rules with regards to:

- allocation of contributions to established projects
- identifying projects for the future application of developer contributions
- liaising with internal and external Community Groups in the identification of future projects to receive contributions
- the drawdown and spend of developer contributions by Lead Officers/Asset Owners
- The membership of DCAG with regards to Highland Council Staff
- DCAG meeting frequency and content
- The roles and responsibilities of its members

The Terms of Reference should allow DCAG to provide a better and more responsive process of dealing with developer contributions, provide clear guidelines for DCAG members to follow, and increase transparency on how Developer Contribution decisions are made in a time of increased interest from the public.

5. Enforcement Charter

Our [Enforcement Charter](#)¹ has been reviewed within the last two years; the most up to date version approved and published in August 2019. The charter is currently under review to include greater clarity around release of information covered by Data Protection and Environmental Information legislation.

6. Continuous Improvement

Service Improvements Delivered 2020/21

Create a single integrated planning service

COMPLETE

The last year has seen further integrated working in carrying out planning functions both internally and with external stakeholders. Development management staff have co-authored parts of the new Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan (IMFLDP) Main Issues Report, Consultation Authorities (HES, SEPA and NatureScot) have helped co-author the IMFLDP Environmental Report, and other Council staff and external agencies such as Highlands and Islands Enterprise have helped formulate planning policy rather than just react to a draft prepared within the policy team. Such an approach creates more robust policies and a wider, shared commitment to apply and implement those policies leading to better outcomes. Similarly, the Fort William 2040 (FW2040) delivery model has been continued and evolved to achieve better coordination between Council departments and with external stakeholders this time at a more senior, corporate level to ensure that decision takers and funders commit to proper, funded, placemaking. We have been continuing to develop our Council position for NPF4 through finalising our submissions to “Call for Ideas”, development and further refinement of an Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy for Highland and preparing a comprehensive response to Scottish Government’s NPF4 Position Statement. Fundamental to our approach has been not only to engage our elected members and external stakeholder organisations in that process, but also our colleagues from across the planning and other services of the council. This included specialists within the wider service leading our engagement and co-authoring our submissions. We intend to continue this approach in the coming year when we come to consider Draft NPF4 in recognition of the importance that it will carry, particularly as part of the development plan going forward, thus forming a key role in the assessment of all planning applications.

This shows that despite the challenges presented during the reporting year - with the primary focus being supporting the response to the Covid pandemic, and the economic and business recovery activity - the service has continued to be proactive with integration. This has informed and provided a clear steer for the corporate role of planning in the organisation and across partners.

Review of enforcement process

ONGOING

In our last submission we committed to undertaking a review of our enforcement process. This is an ongoing project. This year we have concluded the following:

- Created a process, via access reports linked to Uniform, to highlight the expiry date of an advertisement consent and for a reminder to be sent to applicants/property owners as a proactive rather than reactive enforcement response.

¹ https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/1302/our_planning_enforcement_charter

- Identified some areas where routine admin tasks can be removed from Enforcement Officers.

Ongoing work is detailed below:

- Updating current and adding new document templates produced by the system to allow more automated functionality
- Enforcement case officer workload graph for monitoring of case load

We continue to look at opportunities to increase the equivalent staff hours dedicated to enforcement activity, including potential charging for enforcement officer time.

Promote the corporate role of planning including the preparation of COMPLETE a Place Planning Protocol and a “Full Cycle Planning” approach to the management of Council and partner assets affected by development

Our role and remit in the corporate structure of the Council is increasingly important as well as our work to help engage and coordinate different sectors to work with communities to shape their future. Along with representatives from the Chief Executive’s Service we are leading the preparation of a report that outlines what the corporate approach to place planning will be and the implications this might have for the structure and operational service delivery of the Council as it relates to particular places.

We are working with A&DS and HIE to lead the preparation of an [Investment Plan for Skye and Raasay](#)¹. This aims to coordinate how the wide range of organisations and groups operating in the area invest together and maximise the impacts and benefits. The Investment Plan will identify the shared priorities for Skye and Raasay and provide a joint portfolio with actions and responsibilities to help improve the prospects of securing future funding.

Further to our work to draft a Place Planning Guide, it is now informing our advice to elected members and communities on how they could prepare guidance for their place that is compatible with the Council’s Development Plan, other plans and strategies, as well as the emerging approach from Scottish Government. It is hoped that these national arrangements will formalise and standardise the approach to place planning and make clear how land use planning, the work of community planning partnership and community led plans inter-relate.

¹ <https://www.highland.gov.uk/skyeraasay>



We are continuing to use the Delivery Programme as a more effective tool for managing the assets that are implicated by development and for managing the Council’s capital programme. Alongside frequent meetings with our Care and Learning Service to help manage any issues for schools, the wider Developer Contributions Action Group provides a forum for infrastructure and service partners to interact with the planning service. Service representatives have also joined the Council’s Strategic Asset Management Group where our monitoring activities – particularly the Housing Land Audit and Developer Contributions Monitoring – are helping to coordinate infrastructure delivery across the Council and its partners.

Looking ahead, we have been stressing the vital role that National Planning Framework 4 can play in setting the ambitions for Highland communities and the opportunity it creates to align land use planning and investment infrastructure and communities.

Our Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan is being prepared as a means of taking forward many aspects of our vision for the region and the contribution it can make to national priorities and outcomes emerging through NPF4 and in taking a more coordinated approach to development. We will be seeking alignment between the Council’s vision and priorities for NPF4 (as expressed in our Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy for Highland), its approach to place planning and the emerging IMFLDP. We look forward in 2021-22 to seeing the draft NPF4, reviewing it against the role we feel it should play and our earlier submissions – and providing feedback.

Continue to develop functional teams to make best use of available resources **COMPLETE**

We have committed further resource into our Strategic Projects Team, including engagement of a dedicated monitoring officer, in recognition of the demand being placed on it; particularly from new onshore renewable development proposals. We have taken the view that this is where we should rightly focus our resource at this time but will continue to look at opportunities for creating other functional teams as demand and/or resource allow.

Addressing climate change and the green recovery **ONGOING**

There remains a requirement on all Council services to work with partners throughout 2021/22 and into the future to secure a green economic recovery post-Covid-19 and to ensure that the principles of a “just transition” are embedded across all sectors of the economy.

The merging of the Climate Change and Energy teams this year has created opportunities to identify areas for new policy development that support the low carbon development agenda. This has been around the areas of EV charging, energy efficiency and the emerging hydrogen economy.

As part of our response to the Scottish Government’s preparation of NPF4, we developed and refined an indicative Regional Spatial Strategy (iRSS). The iRSS sets out vision which recognises the important role Highland will play in meeting national climate change ambition:

By 2050, Highland will be an exemplar carbon action region by optimising its unique, rich and diverse assets to lead national emissions reduction targets. Our unmatched land, coast and water environment and natural, built and cultural heritage – which define the character of Highland – will be safeguarded, enhanced and internationally celebrated.

Highland will have transitioned to a green, circular economy which maximises the value of existing core industries, helps attract new and emerging sectors and diversifies jobs and skills. This will maintain and enhance Highland’s role as a global centre of excellence for renewable energy innovation and generation and one of the most attractive sustainable leisure, recreation and tourism destinations in the world.

Work on the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan will help address the climate and ecological emergencies. For example, we are undertaking a Greenspace Audit which will include an assessment of the habitat value and therefore biodiversity value of all land within the larger settlements and its potential for enhancement. This approach was formulated during 2020 and is being implemented during 2021. We are also working with NatureScot to better identify specific greenspace/green network enhancements for each Plan area main settlement. This approach was agreed with NatureScot during late 2020/early2021 and is being implemented during 2021.

Our Main Issues Report (MIR) includes an outline of a Biodiversity Enhancement Policy which would require direct developer provision of enhanced habitats or financial contributions towards such for greenfield sites.

More widely, one of the two pre-eminent Main Issues of the MIR (published in January 2021) is to address the climate change and ecological emergencies. The Plan’s strategy including its settlement hierarchy, placemaking priorities and site selection are and will be underpinned by this central theme and aim.

The Plan’s approach to Strategic Environmental Assessment has also been innovative. We believe it’s the first in Scotland to trial direct and detailed Consultation Authority development site assessment input prior to MIR publication. In this sense the site assessments component of the draft Environmental Report has been co-authored by the Council and Consultation Authorities. This should ensure greater accuracy in site assessments, more informed choices and therefore less disagreement and resource requirement for all parties later on in the Plan process.

This shows that the service has embedded climate change in its strategic level policies and strategy and will continue to look at opportunities to implement changes on the ground.



Local engagement to inform our approach to economic recovery and our contribution to national outcomes **ONGOING**

Engagement with local communities and stakeholders has been a key element of our work to coordinate partners, plans and strategies around a shared approach to economic recovery and regeneration. As an evolution of our approach to the FW2040 project, our work with A&DS and HIE to lead the preparation of an [Investment Plan for Skye and Raasay](#)¹ has involved significant engagement to secure buy-in from the inception of the project and through to preparation of the plan itself. This plan aims to coordinate how the wide range of organisations and groups operating in the area invest together to maximise the impacts and benefits for national and local outcomes. The Investment Plan will identify the shared priorities for Skye and Raasay and provide a joint portfolio with actions and responsibilities to help improve the prospects of securing future funding. It is hoped that the Skye and Raasay plan will inform the corporate approach to place planning across all of the Highland region.

Previously, as part of our input to the new National Planning Framework 4 within 2019-20 we developed the Council's response to the Call for Ideas and formulated an Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy for Highland (IRSS). We see this as being vitally important to express Highland's interests and significant contribution to national outcomes. This work has continued into 2020-21 with our submissions made to the Call for Ideas and a series of workshops arranged with colleagues, partners and stakeholders, for further working up of the IRSS ahead of its submission later this year.

Continued effort to align Planning and Corporate Services and Priorities **ONGOING**

We will continue to use the Development Plan at the national and local level, particularly the establishment of Highland's Regional Spatial Strategy through the National Planning Framework process, and our LDPs, to promote a coordinated, cross-cutting approach to growing and investing in our communities and infrastructure. We will look to align the Development Plan with the emerging economic recovery plan, and the Council's capital programme, to provide greater certainty on how we might achieve our vision for sustainable economic recovery and growth.

We will continue to input to the Council's approach to Place Planning, to firm up the corporate approach to engaging communities in the short, medium and longer term actions for delivering our vision for the future. We are jointly leading the preparation of a report to Full Council that will spell out the corporate approach to place planning across all Council services and with partners across sectors.

Securing positive effects for biodiversity **ONGOING**

We have progressed our approach to securing biodiversity enhancement through our development plan policy, beginning with the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan as outlined within the MIR and referred to above.

Preparation of an interactive LDP evidence report **COMPLETE**

Our aim was to create a more intuitive link between the plan and monitoring report and elevate its status as an essential component of the plan for all users. This was seen as having a particular benefit for the MIR stage where the implications of different policy and strategy options can be better understood. It was also considered to be a useful feed in to the LDP Gateway Check process.

¹ <https://www.highland.gov.uk/skyeraasay>

Due to the limitations of available software for LDP preparation it proved too complex to create a truly integrated and interactive evidence report for the IMFLDP MIR. However, in our online publication hyperlinks were provided to relevant aspects of our evidence base.

We will continue to look for opportunities to better integrate the evidence for our plans into our publications.

Review of the planning processes

ONGOING

We are continually reviewing our planning process to see where savings (both financial and timesaving) can be achieved.

This year we developed and implemented a new process for dealing with applications for Planning Certificates Under Section 50 of the Licensing (Scotland) Act 2005. Under the Act, when someone wants to apply for a premises license to sell alcohol any application must be accompanied by a planning certificate. A planning certificate will show that either planning permission has been obtained for any development of the premises in connection with their proposed use as a licensed premises OR that no such planning permission is required. Applications are now recorded in our Uniform case management system which enables workflow of cases to happen automatically dependent on the status of the application. This service is complimented with the need for building warrant application and enables joined up thinking across the 2 disciplines giving added value to the customer and a “one stop shop”.

Continue to develop virtual teams and support for home/flexible/remote working

COMPLETE

The Covid-19 pandemic has evidenced that the current processes work well and has also re-enforced that we have a well-supported and robust home/flexible/remote working infrastructure in place. The already established electronic workflow of case management has, without doubt, empowered the planning service to continue service delivery in the face of the pandemic. We continue to look at opportunities to develop virtual teams.

We are currently working on a review of Street Design Review letter templates held within the case management system.

Service Improvements 2021/22

Develop position statement on planning and adopted roads

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 too do the calls for such roads to be adopted.

Review of planning process

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

- Improving data entry at validation and enhanced data monitoring to help improve reporting information i.e. affordable housing numbers; land use; Photovoltaic Units; Air Source Heat Pumps; Hydro Schemes; Electric Charge Units; Wind Farm information etc.
- Process improvements for those applications being reported to Committee including the workflow of tasks within the established electronic case management system in much the same way as is already in place for delegated decisions.

Virtual/Online Planning Training

We will develop a suite of online digital training tools for Local Members and Community Councils taking a topic-based approach to our process and policy framework i.e. Development Planning, Development Management, Appeals and Judicial Review, Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings, Street Naming and Numbering, Legal.

Biodiversity/Ecology Advice

We aim to increase the resources available to the Environment Team to provide an improved level of biodiversity advice. The Highland Council and NatureScot have agreed that a shared resource to move Council policy and strategy as it relates to the twin climate and ecological emergency forward would have significant benefits to both organisations and is an excellent example of joined-up thinking across local and national government. It is intended that this new post will be filled in the 2021-22. Furthermore, it is intended to expand the Ecology Team so it can continue to provide an Ecological Clerk of Works service to Council projects, and undertake ecological survey, including protected species survey to enable the Council to discharge its duties effectively, efficiently and in line with statutory requirements.

7. Local Development Plan

Average age of our adopted Local Development Plans at July 2021 is 4 years and 9 months, as follows:

- HwLDP (April 2012) – 9 years 3 months.
- IMFLDP (July 2015) – 6 years 0 months.
- CaSPlan (August 2018) – 2 years 11 months.
- WestPlan (September 2019) – 1 year 10 months.

19 years/4 = **4 years 9 months**.

8. Development Plan Scheme

The Inner Moray Firth LDP 2 Main Issues Report was prepared and consulted on from 29th January 2021 to 30th April 2021 with a soft launch on the 15th January 2021. Slightly delayed from our 2020 Development Plan Scheme aim due to key members of the team being redeployed onto Covid response duties.

A review of the consultation responses is currently underway with a Proposed Plan anticipated in early 2022. The review of the Highland-wide LDP has remained on hold until the implications of NPF4 can be more fully understood, which it is hoped will become clearer in September 2021 when it goes before Parliament.

This means that while this plan is not being reviewed within a 5 year timescale Members have recognised the value in awaiting the full details of the NPF before embarking on a more significant planning policy review. We are also conscious of the legislative changes that will result in a 10 year review period. No Highland Local Development Plans were submitted to Scottish Ministers during the year 2020-21.

The 2021 Development Plan Scheme was considered by our Economy and Infrastructure Committee in February 2021.

9. Early Engagement of Elected Members

National Planning Framework 4

During 2020-21 the Highland Council accorded high priority to engaging with the preparation of NPF4, making a number of submissions in response to the Call for Ideas and Position Statement and preparing and refining an Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy for Highland. Given the constrained timescales and the pandemic restrictions, Council officers have considered early and effective engagement of elected members in the evolution of the Council's position to be particularly vital. This has included sharing information with elected members at key stages by email and online StoryMap (and using videos made in-house and with Kevin Murray Associates for Scottish Government). We sought and gained elected members' feedback through these methods and at online workshops held for them in July 2020 and March 2021. This provided equal access to members to understand the enhanced role of and opportunity provided by NPF4 and to input in otherwise challenging circumstances, thereby influencing Highland's statement of vision, priorities for development, contribution to national outcomes and thinking on a wide range of policy topics whilst ensuring that timescales could be met for submissions.

Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan

Informal discussions were held with local councillors via online Ward Business Meetings in the run up to the formal round of local/City committee meetings. This happened from June 2020 despite the Council's understandable concentration on Covid response issues at that time rather than land use planning functions and before formal committee meetings had resumed. Despite the large geographic Plan area, Members showed a willingness to engage early to discuss detailed site and policy option issues both informally and then via the 5 relevant City/local committees which took place during late autumn 2020 - again, despite the majority of other Council business concentrating on Covid response issues. The further subdivision (in mid 2021) of the Council's committee structure within the Plan area (there are now 6 City/local committees to report to) presents challenges to officers but does provide more local scrutiny of planning policy decisions and will bridge a gap before local place planning can better be defined, enacted and implemented.

The onset of the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic delayed the publication of our 2020 Development Plan Scheme from the start of the calendar year to the summer. The unique outlook of this delayed DPS was around our approach to engagement at a time when face-to-face consultation events and meetings were not possible.

Housing in the Countryside Supplementary Guidance

During 2020 and 2021 the Highland Council has been reviewing its Housing in the Countryside Supplementary Guidance. At the start of the process an in-person engagement session was held with elected Members, to allow them to input and advise what changes, updates and direction they wished the document to take. This initial session was followed up in late 2020 with a further Members briefing session, albeit this time held virtually to update Members and present the Consultative Draft version of the Supplementary Guidance, prior to opening it up for public consultation. We are currently preparing the finalised version of the revised Housing in the Countryside Supplementary Guidance and are organising a further Member’s Briefing event to be held in mid-August to present the final version prior to adoption.



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:

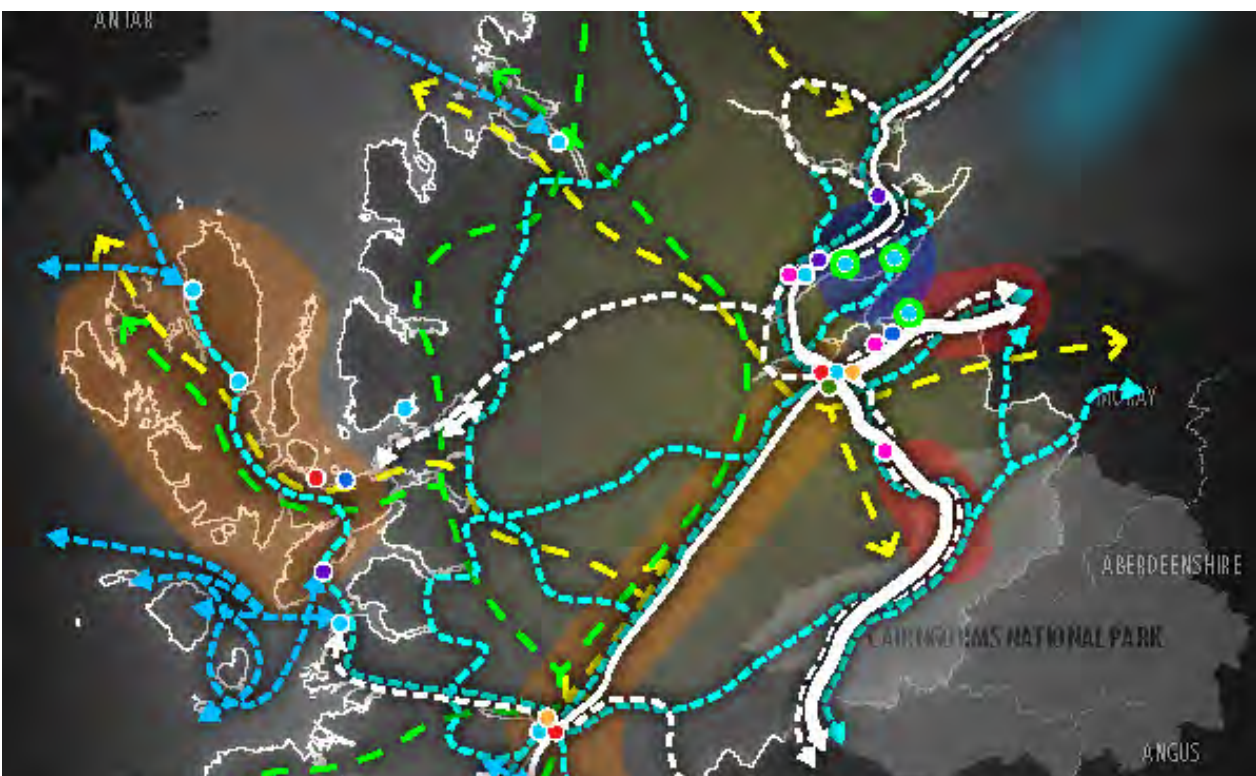
Opportunity Cromarty Firth Green Port

The Council is part of Opportunity Cromarty Firth, a collaborative partnership of private and public sector organisations formed in March 2020, with the aim of capturing the unique economic and regeneration opportunities arising from a multibillion-pound, 50 year pipeline of offshore wind energy projects planned for the Moray Firth. As part of the strategy, the consortium is currently working towards a bid for Greenport/Freeport status, which forms a key part of the Government’s post-Brexit economic growth strategy. The transformational economic development potential of future renewables and low carbon technology for the Highland region has formed an important part of the Council’s indicative Regional Spatial Strategy and is helping to shape the content of the Inner Moray firth Local Development Plan which is currently under review. The Opportunity Cromarty Firth project may have potential to not just promote business growth and strengthen communities within Highland but make a significant positive impact on the national economy.

Highland IRSS engagement

The Scottish Government invited Planning Authorities to prepare Indicative Regional Spatial Strategies (IRSS) to help inform the preparation of NPF4. Regionally, the Council has taken the lead role in preparing a Highland IRSS, with contributions from partners. Given the constrained timescales and the pandemic restrictions, Council officers have considered early and effective engagement of partners in the evolution our position to be particularly vital. This has included sharing information with stakeholders at key stages by email and online StoryMap (and using videos we made with Kevin Murray Associates for Scottish Government). We sought and gained partners feedback through these methods and at online workshops held for them in July 2020 and March 2021. This provided equal access to partners to understand the enhanced role of and opportunity provided by preparing an IRSS and to input in otherwise challenging circumstances, thereby influencing Highland's statement of vision, priorities for development, contribution to national outcomes and thinking on a wide range of policy topics whilst ensuring that timescales could be met for submissions.

Informal discussions were held with local councillors via online Ward Business Meetings in the run up to the formal round of Area Committee meetings to consider the Main Issues Report for the plan. This happened from June 2020 despite the Council's understandable concentration on Covid response issues at that time rather than land use planning functions and before formal committee meetings had resumed. Despite the large geographic Plan area, Members showed a willingness to engage early to discuss detailed site and policy option issues both informally and then via the 5 relevant City/local committees which took place during late autumn 2020 - again, despite the majority of other Council business concentrating on Covid response issues. The further subdivision (in mid 2021) of the Council's committee structure within the Plan area (there are now 6 City/local committees to report to) presents challenges to officers but does provide more local scrutiny of planning policy decisions and will bridge a gap before local place planning can better be defined, enacted and implemented.



Permitted development consultation and guidance

We have been working collaboratively with Aberdeenshire, Argyle and Bute, Borders, Dumfries and Galloway and Moray Councils to inform our response to consultations on the changes to the Town and Country Planning (Permitted Development) (Scotland) Order, particularly the changes to agricultural and forestry permitted development rights, and also to align our guidance for the validation, interpretation and approach to our consideration of Prior Notifications.

West Highlands and Islands Core Path Plan.

Public consultation for the amended West Highland and Islands Core Path Plan (WHICPP) was completed and responses collated. The majority of objections were successfully resolved and the draft WHICPP modified accordingly, although a small number of objections remain outstanding. The amended WHICPP has been approved by Local Access Forums and also Local Area Committees. Unfortunately Covid did not allow the final stage of consultation (on the modifications to the amended WHICPP) to take place, but it is intended to complete this process in 2021-22.

Hydrogen

We have recognised the significant role hydrogen will play in regional decarbonisation efforts, and at a meeting of The Highland Council on 4 March 2021, Members agreed funding to support the development of corporately-agreed hydrogen and low carbon heat strategies, to ensure that the Council benefits from the energy-systems transformation that these technologies will bring. Work is underway across the wider region, most notably through Opportunity Cromarty Firth, to help expedite the region's transition to a hydrogen economy, whilst opportunities for collaboration and learning through the work of other Councils, such as Aberdeen City, who are at the forefront of public sector involvement in hydrogen production and utilisation, are also well underway.

Draft Food Growing Strategy

Under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, the Council is required to develop a food growing strategy, and in late 2019, Growing Our Future was opened for public consultation.

Growing Our Future aims to inspire, empower and support anyone in the Highlands who wishes to grow their own food, through existing growing opportunities and new approaches to growing.

The key objectives of Growing Our Future are:

- To raise awareness of community growing in the Highlands.
- To inspire communities to start growing or expand their growing.
- To signpost communities to growing information, resources and networks.
- To help identify potential allotment and growing spaces.
- To support communities to become more resilient.

The Flow Country World Heritage Site

In early 2020, following submission of a technical evaluation of The Flow Country to an expert panel assembled by the UK Government, it was recommended that The Flow Country proceed to the next stage of the World Heritage Site process and submit a full nomination package to UNESCO. To facilitate this process, in partnership with Nature Scot the Council employed a World Heritage Site Coordinator to work with stakeholders across a range of sectors to pull together the nomination including a draft management plan and a defined boundary for the site. The post is hosted and managed within the Council's Environment Team and coordinates a working group consisting of NatureScot, Forestry and Land Scotland, The Highland Council, RSPB Scotland, The Environmental Research Institute, The Confederation of Forest Industries, HIE, The Federation of Small Businesses, Scottish Land and Estates, Rural Payments and Inspections Division, Wildland Ltd and Visit Scotland. As the project develops further the Working Group will be tasked with carrying out an extensive community and stakeholder consultation exercise with the completed nomination package to be submitted in 2022.



Spaces for People

We have pursued an ambitious, rapid funding bid to deliver Covid-19 interventions across Highland to support key workers and communities to physically distance during the pandemic.

In order to ensure public awareness and engagement with the potential interventions, [a consultation portal event¹](https://consult.highland.gov.uk/kse/event/35394/section/5644950) was published at the time we submitted a bid for funding. This portal stayed open for over 12 months in order that people could give early, meaningful responses to the proposed physical distancing measures being rolled out.

We constantly monitored the portal for feedback and regularly reported this back to the cross-service team delivering the project. This early engagement provided essential data on public and other stakeholder's views of the measures that were used at Council Committee when reporting on the project. Further information on the project is set out in Case Study E.

A range of workshops have been held with interested parties including events tailored to elected Members, communities and Community Councils.

¹ <https://consult.highland.gov.uk/kse/event/35394/section/5644950>

Inner Moray Firth Youth sessions and developer workshop

Our Development Plans Team constantly strive to engage with hard-to-reach groups in all of its work. During the consultation for the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan Main Issues Report we were able to facilitate focused stakeholder workshops with young people using Microsoft Teams. This enabled us to connect with a typically hard to reach group, despite the Pandemic, and helped share information about the consultation, and support young people to contribute to its preparation.

Highland Adapts

The Climate Change and Energy Team has taken the lead on the development of a place-based, partnership approach to climate change adaptation under an initiative called Highland Adapts.

Over the course of 2019 and 2020, the team undertook consultation with a variety of public sector partners, and throughout this process, an appetite for taking a region-wide approach to adaptation, particularly given the various challenges presented in a region of this size as well as its largely remote rural population, was demonstrated.

It was also recognised that there are multiple benefits (social, economic, financial and environmental) which are likely to flow from such an approach, and it is anticipated that the number of partners and reach of the initiative is likely to grow as Highland Adapts matures.

The formal Highland Adapts Partnership is currently comprised of the following partners:

- The Highland Council
- Changeworks
- Forestry and Land Scotland
- Highlands and Islands Enterprise
- NHS Highland
- NatureScot
- Zero Waste Scotland

SEPA Liaison and Consultation Approach

In response to the recent cyber-attack suffered by SEPA they reviewed their current protocols and adopted a triage approach to consultations on planning applications. In recognition of the pressures faced by them and in order to help facilitate and continue our good working practices we set up regular surgery meetings initially every two weeks. This surgery provides planning officers with a regular virtual face to face session with our colleagues in SEPA to discuss complex and difficult cases relating to flood risk, peat management etc. These regular surgeries allow a build-up of knowledge and trust between colleagues. The opportunity for early dialogue on a planning application or pre application enquiry, to understand particular concerns and issues and to find solutions has resulted in a joined-up, coherent response, offering clarity for the applicant, and ultimately a more efficient process which helps save time and money.

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:

Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans

In 2020/21 draft Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans were finalised for both the Tain and Wick: Pulteneytown Conservation Areas. In both cases the appraisals proposed revised boundaries to more accurately reflect the respective area's architectural and historic interest. To help mitigate the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, both public consultations ran for an extended period of 12 weeks. Following feedback and representations from the public consultations, both appraisals and management plans have now been finalised and will be presented to relevant Committees for adoption in late summer/autumn 2021.



EV charging infrastructure guidance

A key project contributing positively towards Scottish Government decarbonisation targets is The Highland Council's Local Authority Installation Programme (LAIP). Funded by Transport Scotland, this annual programme further develops the EV public charging network so that EV drivers can confidently travel throughout Scotland – in both urban and rural locations.

The Highland Council has been awarded over £3m since the first EV charge point was installed in 2012 (£2.1m of which has been awarded since 2018). The Highland Council currently hosts 50 EV charge points on the public network around the region with additional projects in progress and more planned in the future.

In support of the Council's EV infrastructure vision, bespoke EV charging infrastructure planning guidance for new housing developments has been produced. This guidance sets out requirements for both "active" and "passive" provision of charging solutions within developments and has been welcomed by developers.

E. Spaces for People

The Covid-19 pandemic placed unprecedented pressure on public resources. The Highland Council rapidly transformed its workforce to cope with the myriad responses required. Among those projects required was a cross-Council task force set up to bid for and deliver active travel interventions across urban areas to support people to physically distance and take daily exercise. The Planning Service played, and continues to play, a key role in this important public health initiative.

From the outset, due to the emerging Transport Strategy being prepared for the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan, and a strategic understanding of the transport network across the rest of Highland, Officers were able to rapidly prepare a bid to secure funding to roll out a comprehensive suite of interventions across the transport network.

A total award of £1.97M was awarded to deliver the project. The Planning Service has continued to contribute to the roll out, management, monitoring, and improvement of the interventions throughout the course of the pandemic.

These measures have provided an invaluable set of data, experience and understanding amongst Officers, Elected Members, the public and other stakeholders about the potential opportunities available to rethink our transport network to make a low carbon and just transition.



F. Merkinch School

Completed in April 2021 this multimillion-pound development to replace the existing Merkinch Primary School and relocate the Merkinch Family Centre, situated in the heart of one of the most deprived areas of the Highlands, into one integrated community campus involved the major refurbishment of the existing listed building and creation of a new large two-storey extension.



The new building includes 14 classrooms, ancillary teaching areas, a three-room nursery to support the delivery of 1140 hours of early learning and childcare, nurture rooms, a four-court games hall, and an external multi-use games area.

Planning permission was granted within the timescales agreed with the client. Following the tender stage significant amendments were made to the scheme as part of a much wider value-engineering exercise that stemmed from the decision to the use a cross-laminated timber construction. We worked closely with various stakeholders to ensure that a number of changes could be made to the project to reduce costs, whilst ensuring that the overall quality of the development on

the ground would be maintained. This exercise included variations to the overall design and changes to the external materials. The cumulative effect of these changes ensured that this development, which would be seen as vital to our recovery from the pandemic and beyond, was delivered successfully for the benefit of the local community while at the same time safeguarding the original building and its history.

Merkinch is the first primary school in the Highlands and the largest school in Scotland to be built using cross-laminated timber, which is seen to be more sustainable than traditional methods of construction and has been proven to positively impact the learning environment. The welfare of the pupils and staff have been at the core of the design.

Head teacher Jillian Kean said:

The coronavirus pandemic has meant our young people, and the rest of our school community, have had to adjust to changes within our school when we returned from lockdown. The new building will not only provide us with extra space and facilities but will help us to focus on our school's future during these challenging times.

The school will move into the extension after the October holidays and the second phase of the project will commence thereafter. This will include the formation of the playing fields, and the refurbishment of the original school building to provide new kitchen and dining facilities for the school and accommodation for Merkinch Family Centre by August 2021.

12. Corporate Working Across Services

How we work across services and with other key stakeholders is illustrated by the four following examples:

Short Term Lets

Representatives from Planning, Licensing, Environmental Health and Corporate Services have been working together in preparing our response to consultations on the forthcoming Regulations and guidance on short-term lets. Working in this way has brought time savings and a clearer understanding of the likely implications of the legislation from a corporate perspective.

Skye and Raasay Investment Plan

The Highland Council, in partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) are leading on the preparation of Skye and Raasay Future; a new place-based investment plan for Skye and Raasay. The purpose of the plan is to establish and support a collaborative approach to the prioritisation and coordination of investment opportunities across the islands between public sector agencies, community organisations, the third sector, private sector, and the wider community.

The Investment Plan for Skye and Raasay seeks to connect the benefits of the collectively identified projects, with not only the agreed priorities for the area, but those of the region and nation. This approach, aided by the support of Architecture and Design Scotland (A&DS), will contribute to a robust case for any future funding by demonstrating the Place Principle in practice.

Work on the Investment Plan commenced towards the end of 2020 and the engagement process has been exclusively held online. In January several events were held, and an online survey launched. The feedback we received informed how we subsequently engaged with stakeholders, such as holding smaller and more focused workshop sessions and creating a simpler, redesigned online survey. These conversations between the project team and island stakeholders will influence and inform the draft plan which is due to be completed by the end of the summer 2021.



Motorhome Guidance

The Planning Service in conjunction with colleagues in Environmental Health, Building Standards and Roads helped prepare guidance for private individuals and community groups who wished to set up temporary stop over sites for motor homes. This was in response to pressures on existing communities, services and infrastructure associated with the growth in the popularity of motorhomes exacerbated by more people holidaying at home during the pandemic. This has been particularly felt in our more remote rural communities in part due to the popularity of the NC 500. [This guidance¹](#) was in part based on guidance from the Chief Planner to adopt a more flexible stance to enforcement matters in response to the need for social distancing during the pandemic and to also help aid and assist the economic recovery. The guidance was aimed at providing clarity on the existing legislation relating to planning and licensing with an online form for enquires. Officers would contact enquirers to provide guidance and advice on their prospective proposals along. The form provided helpful links related to additional advice related to other services e.g. wastewater, water, electricity, waste and recycling.



Housing Needs and Demand Assessment

The Housing Need and Demand Assessment (HNDA) requires extensive cross service working (especially between Planning and Housing teams) to ensure the latest available data is used and relevant analysis and information is incorporated into this important report. The draft HNDA was submitted to the Centre for Housing Market Analysis in mid-June 2021 for their assessment.

Regular meetings and updates on the progress towards delivery of this report are required and assist in ensuring the content includes a range of voices and provides a real assessment of the unique Highland Council area.

¹ https://www.highland.gov.uk/news/article/13790/the_highland_council_launches_welcoming_motorhome_and_campervan_guidance_for_visitors

Ecology Service

The Ecology Team provide advice (including developing mitigation strategies), undertake pre-construction ecological survey, act as Ecological Clerk of Works and carry out protected species survey (including preparing licence applications to NatureScot) on behalf of services across the Council. The Ecology Team work on a variety of small, medium and large-scale projects from major infrastructure developments and flood protection schemes, to works on or close to watercourses, through to mitigating impacts on bats identified during roofing repairs.

They are also a key contact in tackling invasive non-native species across the Council estate.

The Ecology Team operate on a cost-recovery basis and have proven to be not only less expensive than external consultants but also highly effective and efficient. As demand for the service far outstrips resources currently available the team is set to expand in 2021-22.

13. Sharing Good Practice, Skills and Knowledge

We are an active participant in our benchmarking group with other rural authorities: Dumfries and Galloway, Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Border, Orkney, Moray, Shetland and Cairngorms National Park Authority. We recognise and value the knowledge and experience gained by sharing best practice with different authorities and encourage and promote these opportunities with our staff.

In this year we have undertaken collaborate working with colleagues in Dumfries and Galloway, Argyll and Bute, Aberdeenshire, Borders and Moray along with the Scottish Government relating to the changes to the Permitted Development Order that came into effect on April 2021. This included assisting with the preparation of national guidance and the prior notification application forms to ensure that the proposed process would work more efficiently and would be applied with greater consistency.

In addition, along with colleagues from Moray, we have assisted Aberdeenshire with improving its understanding of how best to prepare for renewable energy appeals; in particular Public Inquiries.

We also regularly attend and participate in the Heads of Planning Scotland Executive committee and sub-committee meetings.

Regular Team Leader meetings are held by senior staff every 6 weeks to review and discuss ongoing and emerging planning issues and develop and promote practice and procedures accordingly (during the Covid-19 pandemic these have been weekly). Each Team Leader has regular meetings with their respective teams to discuss and disseminate information All of these meetings are a two-way process to encourage staff feedback and engagement.

We aim to ensure staff training needs are met. We had planned to hold our annual training day event for technical and professional staff in May but this had to be cancelled.

We actively promote and develop good practice both internally and externally with other organisations. We have bi-annual meetings with NatureScot/SEPA to review existing practices and procedures, predominantly in connection with large scale developments and major applications. This collaborative approach allows us to have a better understanding of our respective roles and specific concerns in our consideration and assessment of development proposals.

Highland Archaeology Festival

The Council has run the Highland Archaeology Festival for 28 years and it continues to go from strength to strength. It provides a platform for the public and private sectors, academics and the public to share good practice, skills and knowledge and to celebrate the archaeology and built environment of the Highlands.

The annual Festival in normal circumstances involves publicising dozens of events contributed by the commercial sector, academics and students, heritage groups and field clubs as well as members of the public and running a weekend conference focussing on recent discoveries and research. For 2020, it was decided to provide a Covid19-safe online Festival of Talks focusing on the results of archaeological work – much of which was secured through planning conditions and funded by developers.

The online platform resulted in attendees joining from across the world, with 1653 people booked on the series of 12 sessions with the final talk fully booked at our maximum limit of 250 and a waiting list of over 100. The online Festival allowed us to promote the Highlands to a wider audience than we would have traditionally reached with attendees and speakers joining from across the world, including Australia, the U.S., Europe (Czech Republic, Hungary, Norway, France, Netherlands, and Germany), England, Wales, Ireland and throughout Scotland, with many asking for virtual talks to be included in all future festival programmes.

The festival highlighted the importance of developer-funded research with talks detailing how landmark sites such as Fairburn Tower can be developed while minimising impacts and simultaneously to the advancement of our knowledge and understanding of this important historic asset. Planning is already underway to ensure that the festival continues to be a powerful device to engage communities and build a sense of identity and place.



North of Scotland Development Plans Forum

We continue to participate in the North of Scotland Development Plans Forum, which meets quarterly and comprises development planning representation from planning authorities in the wider Highlands and Islands region and from Scottish Government. Highland has been able to share the role of coordinating the Forum with the other authorities during 2020-21, in no small part due to the meetings being held online (due to the pandemic restrictions), rather than (as was previously typical) hosted in Inverness. This change and opportunity has been embraced and aids participation by Forum members. In particular, the group has collaborated around its input to the NPF housing forum to consider and provide feedback on housing issues faced by the constituent authorities.

Innovation in mapping and digital publication

Early in the summer, we were invited by Objective to take part in a short video case study to show how we have been using their Keystone public consultation software to improve our Local Development Plan process. As part of this, we highlighted the benefits of online consultation for publishing our development plans (time and cost saving, targeted consultation points, rigorous consultee and responses databases, dynamic document content) and demonstrated our innovative use of their recently-developed embedded media tool to embed GIS maps within our consultation documents.

We utilised this new development to great effect in January to April 2021 when we published the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan Main Issues Report: our first online consultation with fully interactive GIS maps. The use of live GIS in online local development plans has proved invaluable and highly effective in publishing a large quantity of information in an easily accessible format that is not possible with “traditional” paper maps. During the consultation period, flaws were identified in our implementation of this new technology; however, these proved to be valuable learning experiences in how we can better help people to engage with this new digital platform, especially under the limitations that the pandemic imposed on public meetings and the difficulties in publishing and distributing large paper documents.

In continued collaboration with Objective after our case study collaboration, we were invited to take part in an online webinar in March 2022 as a keynote speaker, alongside Dover Council, on the topic of “Lessons from the Planning Policy field” where we further highlighted our innovative use of their software in how we organise our local development plan work and engage with the public.

Throughout 2020-21 we have also made extensive use of online GIS in other formats. In June 2020, members of the planning service contributed to Scottish Government workshops held as part of a series of events on Regional Spatial Strategies being prepared for the new National Planning Framework 4. We provided advice and demonstrated how online GIS and ESRI ArcGIS Online StoryMaps could be developed, published and embedded within our online consultation software to provide an intuitive forum for communicating and consulting upon our emerging strategy. This session was well received and feedback was very positive.

During the pandemic, StoryMaps have proven to be a very valuable means of sharing information within the Council and with the public where face-to-face meetings or the distribution of physical media has not been possible. A range of online mapping

applications were developed internally to assist the Development Plans team in the Inner Moray Firth Local Development Plan site selection and Main Issues Report process. Also, the Inshes Corridor Improvements consultation benefitted greatly from interactive GIS maps of what would have otherwise been very hard to read CAD plans and, along with the refinements to the Highland Indicative Regional Spatial Strategy, used the newly-adopted Survey123 online forms to carry out quick consultations where the larger consultation events of Objective Keystone would not be as suitable.

These developments in how we share our skills and knowledge have allowed us to carry on working effectively under the unique and challenging circumstances we have been dealing with in 2020-21. Furthermore, the diminishing reliance on printed documents and reduced need to travel for face-to-face meetings has led to a reduction in the consumption of resources, representing a significant financial saving for the Council and has the potential to contribute greatly to the Council's ongoing commitment to the climate emergency.

RTPI training event - "What Lies Beneath: Archaeology in Development Management"

At the request of the Highlands and Islands chapter of the RTPI, the Council's Historic Environment Team ran a CPD Event for RTPI members, "What Lies Beneath: Archaeology in Development Management" in February 2021. The training event outlined how archaeological impacts and issues arising from development are assessed and how and why different mitigation strategies are employed. The event also covered the challenges and opportunities that developer-led archaeology can present. The event was very well attended (c.120 attendees) with participants coming from Local Authority and National Park planning authorities from across the UK, as well as good representation from the private sector. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, with the RTPI noting that "...this is the first event run over the last year where 100% of responses said that they found the event interesting and engaging..."



Highland Environment Forum

We remain a key member of the Highland Environment Forum (HEF) and in partnership with NatureScot continue to part-fund the project officer. HEF provides an arena for discussion, networking and action on environmental subjects. Key aims of HEF are to foster and coordinate activity on environmental matters; take forward relevant actions identified in the Highland Outcome Improvement Plan and be a valuable source of practical advice; identify, and respond to, emerging environmental agendas; provide a link between local groups and national strategies, action plans and reporting; and raise awareness and promote good practice on environmental issues.



In 2020/21 much of the work of the Forum moved online but engagement across sectors and with the public continued. One of the main projects was to progress Highland Nature, the new Biodiversity Action Plan for Highland and to get commitments to biodiversity from a range of stakeholders across the area. The annual HEF Forums/ Seminars also went ahead online in September 2020 and March 2021. The first, held over two days, looked at the implications of climate change with large scale changes and policy implications and the benefits and responsibilities of working together with nature. Papers were presented by Dynamic Coast, SEPA, Highland Council, NatureScot, Scottish Forestry and RSPB. The March seminar titled Tourism, Landscape and Nature considered how best to encourage tourism and visitor behaviour that benefits and cares for nature. Speakers included the John Muir Trust, NatureScot, Wester Ross Biosphere, Highland Council and Visit Scotland.

14. Stalled and Legacy Cases

The number of legacy cases determined in 2020/21 rose from 58 to 72 from the preceding year. The number of legacy cases that remained undetermined during 2020/21 however rose markedly from 53 to 99. One factor related to this has been our desire to help address and resolve planning issues where possible to enable appropriate development to proceed where this can occur through constructive dialogue. Undoubtedly the primary factor on this increase was the Covid pandemic. Developers, applicants and consultees alike were unable in a large number of cases to undertake essential survey work which can be seasonal in nature for developments. Similarly, where further information was received requiring a further site visit this was delayed impacting on the timescales for consideration of applications. This applied both to major and to local developments. In some cases the cyber attack on SEPA also impacted on the determination of applications. All of these factors combined to significant delay in the submission of information and survey work required prior to the determination of number of planning applications during the course of the year.

Sites	2020/21	2019/20
Number cleared during reporting period	72	58
Number remaining	99	53

15. Developer Contributions

Our [Developer Contribution webpage](#)¹ has been developed to provide information on the Supplementary Guidance behind any Developer Contribution request, links to the Local Area Plans that may be relevant to the contributions projects we are funding, and Affordable Housing information.

All our pre-application advice contains information on likely developer contributions.

16. Performance Information

Key Outcome	2020-21	2019-20
Development Planning		
● Age of local/strategic development plan(s) at end of reporting period. (Requirement: less than 5 years)	5 years	4 years
● Will the local/strategic development plan(s) be replaced by their 5th anniversary according to the current development plan scheme?	N	N
● Has the expected date of submission of the plan to Scottish Ministers in the development plan scheme changed over the past year?	Y	Y
● Were development plan scheme engagement/consultation commitments met during the year?	Y	Y

¹ https://www.highland.gov.uk/directory_record/712087/developer_contributions

Effective Land Supply and Delivery of Outputs

● Established housing land supply	28583 units ¹	28803 units ¹
● 5-year effective housing land supply	6505 units	6209 units
● 5-year housing supply target	5715 units	5715 units
● 5-year effective housing land supply	5.7 years	5.4 years
● Housing approvals	?? units ²	1592 units
● Housing completions over the last 5 years	5215 units	5223 units
● Marketable employment land supply	?? ha ³	?? ha ³
● Employment land take-up during reporting period	NA	NA

Key Outcome 2020-21 2019-20

Development Management
Project Planning

● percentage and number of applications subject to pre-application advice	18.54% 419	NA
● number and number of major applications subject to processing agreement or other project plan	50% 15	NA

Decision-Making

● application approval rate	96%	96%
● delegation rate	97.56%	96.71%

Validation

● percentage of applications valid upon receipt	46.94%	44.96
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Decision-Making Timescales
Average Number of weeks to decision:

● Major Developments	52.09	40.18
● Local Developments	12.32	13.48
● Householder Developments	7.73	7.53

Legacy Cases

● Number cleared during reporting period	72	58
● Number remaining	99	53

Enforcement

● Time since enforcement charter published/reviewed (Requirement: review every 2 years)	22 months	10 months
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1 Actual figures on 1st June 2019 and 2020 respectively from HLA.

2 Total Number of units (all tenures) consented during the reporting period to be communicated to SG from 16th August.

3 Business, Industrial and Retail allocations from adopted LDPs – excludes mixed-use allocations.

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

Category	2020-21	Average timescale (weeks)	
		2020-21	2019-20
Major developments	11	27.8	33.3
Local developments	1522	13.4	13.8
● less than 2 months	56.8%	6.0	6.5
● more than 2 months	43.2%	22.0	21.6
Householder developments	690	7.6	6.7
● less than 2 months	86.8%	6.0	6.1
● more than 2 months	13.2%	18.2	12.2
Major housing developments	4	31.8	45.1
Local housing developments	769	13.8	16.6
● less than 2 months	54.1%	7.1	6.8
● more than 2 months	45.9%	23.7	24.4
Major business and industry	1	11.7	0
Local business and industry	150	13.5	10.7
● less than 2 months	60%	6.7	6.8
● more than 2 months	40%	23.7	18.8
EIA developments	4	28	22.9
Other consents	303	9.8	9.4
Planning/legal agreements	181	19.6	17.1
● Local: less than 2 months	3	23.7	45.1
● Local: more than 2 months	178	19.6	16.5
Local reviews	25	11.7	12.6

Decision-making, local reviews and appeals

Type	Original decision upheld			
	2020-21		2019-20	
	No.	%	No.	%
Local reviews	25	64.0	28	75
Appeals to Scottish Ministers	10	50	15	66.7

Enforcement activity

Key Outcome	2020-21	2019-20
Enforcement		
Complaints lodged	499	526
Cases taken up	183	181
Breaches identified	236	269
Cases resolved	231	360
Notices served	9	75
Reports to Procurator Fiscal	0	0
Prosecutions	0	0

Context

This has been a challenging year for The Council, we had several staff redeployed to the Business Grants work in support to the Covid Pandemic throughout the year. This has impacted on performance, and the emphasis is now on completing improvement projects to ensure that efficiency remains as high as possible.

Committee information

Committees and site visits	Number per year
Full Council	0
Strategic Committees	4
Planning Committees	17
Area Committees	0 ¹
Area Committee site visits	0
Local Review Body	7
LRB site visits	0

Staff structure documents

RTPI Qualified Staff	Headcount	Number
Director	1	1
Head of Planning Service	1	0
Manager	3	0
Development Management	23	
Development Planning	6	

A all applications are dealt with at Planning Committee.

Non-RTPI Qualified Staff	Headcount	Number
Development Management	15	
Development Planning	5	
Enforcement	2	2
Specialists	10	
Other		

Staffing age profile	Number
Under 30	2
30-39	24
40-49	12
50 and over	23

The data shown in these tables has been drawn from the Council’s HR and personnel records. The information has helped shape our strategic approach to workforce planning and our proposed Single Planning Service ensuring that all planners and staff within the Service have the opportunity to upskill across a range of planning functions.

Although the Council has an ageing workforce, the planning and environment service has a reasonable spread of age groups with some vulnerability to potential retirees in particular geographic locations. We are however sighted on this and as such the data is being used to shape our approach to succession planning, flexible working, deployment of staff and the use of corporate Modern Apprenticeship/Graduate Apprenticeship in recruiting. This should alleviate the risks to the delivery of the Planning and Environment functions.

