



National Planning Improvement Framework

Attribute 3: The planning authority has embedded continuous improvement



A high performing planning authority has a positive culture through ensuring it has sound governance, effective leadership and a commitment to continuous improvement. The authority has an identified chief planner, who is supported by a strong leadership group to advise on decision-making, policy and operational management.

Overview

2023/24 has been a busy period for East Ayrshire Council planning service in terms of self reflection and improvement actions being identified. As covered in attribute 1, in mid 2023 a best value service review of the Development Management section was undertaken and was presented to Council in October 2023. A copy of that report can be found at [Governance Services - Best Value Service Review of Operations and Regulatory Services.pdf \(east-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/Governance%20Services%20-%20Best%20Value%20Service%20Review%20of%20Operations%20and%20Regulatory%20Services.pdf).

That service review identified a number of areas for improvement, some of which were aligned to previous commitments in the Planning Performance Framework, along with new improvements.

The highlights of these include the requirement to update the Scheme of Delegation which was identified as being out of date and in need of refresh (underway), amendments to discretionary fee charges (which is complete), the establishment of a Chief Planning Officer post and recruitment to that (complete), a review of costs (underway), strengthening our enforcement function (review underway) and review of processes within our technical support team (commencing early 2024/25). A similar service review is now underway of our Development Planning function and will be reported to full Council in due course.

Service Improvements

Our Planning Performance Framework service plan for 2023/2024 had 19 actions across a range of Development Planning and Management functions. A range of these actions have been completed or are in hand and are referenced through this NPIF submission. However, in terms of some significant highlights from the PPF list:

- *LDP2 was taken through examination and was adopted on 8 April 2024;*
- *Recruited into a number of vacant posts including planners and senior planners across the service;*
- *Revisions made to the prior notification/approval process internally to smooth handling and aid understanding of the process;*
- *Worked with Key Agencies Groups, particularly around flooding matters;*
- *Service review completed for Development Management and underway for Development Planning;*
- *Continued support for Ayrshire Growth Deal projects, noting the recent submission of an application for a centre of excellence for food production and associated business units;*
- *Equipment updates to Development Management and Development Planning;*
- *Put in place opportunities for new apprenticeships within the Service via the Jobs and Training Fund with a new graduate intern starting in coming weeks;*
- *Working to develop the Mauchline CARS action plan;*
- *Continued the development of the Coalfield Communities Landscape Partnership and related projects.*

As demonstrated by the above list, we have reviewed our functions across two separate, but tied, processes and have implemented a range of those identified improvements/actions. A number of others remain in hand and underway at the moment and those are built into the improvement actions identified in this report.

Some of the previously identified service improvements are no longer being taken forward, such as the RCGF proposals as funding for this has not been continued, the development of placemaking plans has been pivoted to take account of the new Local Place Plan process and full Regional Spatial Strategy has been paused awaiting guidance to be issued by the Scottish Government. We continue to strive to identify where we can make improvements to the service we provide across all of our functions, building on our own strengths but also seeking to tackle our identified weaknesses.

As part of this process, we seek to work with our peers to identify areas where we could learn from good practice elsewhere. Heads of Planning Scotland (HoPS) provides a good platform for knowledge sharing across Scotland. East Ayrshire Council actively participates in Heads of Planning Scotland, as covered in Attribute 2. Beyond HoPS, East Ayrshire Council colleagues have met with representatives from West Dunbartonshire Council to exchange knowledge on technical and IT working systems for the Development Management process and Development Planning leads from the three Ayrshire Authorities meet regularly on an informal basis to share information, ideas, challenges etc.

Complaints Procedure

Further learning and improvement opportunities can come from complaints. Due to the nature of the planning system, complaints are somewhat inevitable, often driven by unhappiness at certain outcomes or decisions. However, on occasion processes and standards can also be subject to complaint from stakeholders who are involved in the planning system. This can relate to failures on the part of the Planning Authority to uphold our own standards or to have failed to deliver an adequate service, for example. Whilst we strive to minimise such complaints by providing a high quality service, when we do fail we seek to understand why that happened and try to put in place learning or process improvements to prevent repetition. The Council operates a two stage complaints system prior to any complaint being considered by the Scottish Public Services ombudsman (SPSO). This is displayed on our website home page with a link to our complaints handling procedures and how to make a complaint at [Comments, suggestions and complaints · East Ayrshire Council \(east-ayrshire.gov.uk\)](https://www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/Comments_suggestions_and_complaints).

In 2023/24, six formal stage one complaints were received, three of which were not upheld, 2 partially upheld and one resolved. At the more detailed stage 2 level complaint (i.e. following on from stage 1 or more complex complaints that merited a detailed review under stage 2), a total of 9 complaints were received, of which three were upheld, 2 partially upheld and four not upheld.

Four complaints related to our planning function were made to the SPSO however none of these were taken forward to the decision stage by the SPSO, having reviewed the nature of those complaints. In one of these responses from the SPSO the quality of the Council's complaint response was given specific praise by the Ombudsman. In terms of the volume and complexity of matters dealt with by the Planning Authority each year, the number of formal complaints were small and even less of those complaints were upheld.

Where they were upheld, the learning experience has principally been the requirement to improve staff understanding of certain processes, such as the requirement to maintain timely communication with our customers, however others have been in terms of process, for example failing to timeously publish certain compliance monitoring related information on our website. In

such cases, the highlighting of the failure itself is generally adequate to reinforce the improvements required and there is no evidence of existential failure, or repeated failures, on the same matters.

Further to learning from complaints, we issue feedback forms within the decision notice packs to try to gain an understanding of our customers experience. Responses to these have been low to none over the last number of years and as such the benefit of doing this is not being achieved. On review, we think that we can make this process easier for our customers and have advanced an improvement action to properly review our current feedback form and process to try to obtain an improved response rate going forward.

Awards

The Planning Authority, along with other participants, has been recognised during 2023/24 for good practice and achievement in the Hagshaw Energy Cluster Development Framework. The Development Framework has been developed together between the local authorities, renewable energy developers and operators, statutory agencies and communities to create a shared vision for the cluster. It sets out an ambitious but deliverable ten year vision for how a more strategic and collaborative approach to renewable energy development can help us achieve Net Zero together in a just and fair way. The Development Framework identifies opportunities to deliver enhancement to both communities, and the natural and built environment, and support a thriving and prosperous local and regional economy. The Framework was shortlisted for the UK Landscape Institute Award – category ‘Excellence in climate, environment and social outcomes’, was the winner of the Scottish Green Energy Award 2023 – category ‘sustainable development award’ and was entered for the RTPi Excellence in Planning Award 2024. The submission of projects and/or processes for awards can bring benefits to the wider team by bring a sense of profession accomplishment and pride, knowing that all the efforts and work has been acknowledged in a formal setting and appreciated by others as well as raising the profile of the Service, Council and the Planning Profession.