SJHLG/S7/26/9/2

Social Justice, Housing and Local Government Committee
Wednesday 18 November 2026
9th Meeting, 2026 (Session 7)

Note by the Clerk

Planning Themed Stakeholder Evidence Session

1. At its meeting on 24 June 2026, the Committee agreed to hold a series of themed stakeholder roundtable evidence sessions to assist Members in developing their understanding of key issues across the Committee's remit. These roundtable sessions follow a series of evidence sessions with Scottish Government Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers, during which the Committee explored the Scottish Government's priorities and planned activity across the Committee's remit. The roundtable evidence sessions are intended to complement that evidence by providing Members with an opportunity to hear directly from a range of stakeholders and organisations working across those policy areas.
2. At its meeting on 09 September 2026, the Committee agreed to invite a selection of stakeholders to participate in a roundtable discussion on planning.
3. At its meeting on 18 November 2026, the Committee will take evidence in a roundtable format from representatives of the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI), Planning Democracy, the Built Environment Forum Scotland, the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland and Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS).
4. SPICe has prepared a briefing for the Committee on planning. This briefing is included as **Annexe A** to this paper.
5. This evidence session will provide an opportunity for the Committee to explore key issues relating to its planning remit, including planning system performance and capacity, housing delivery, infrastructure funding and the role of planning in supporting sustainable development, economic growth and community interests.
6. Witnesses were invited to submit a one-page briefing in advance of the session, outlining their organisation's priorities for planning in Scotland over the current parliamentary session, including key issues, opportunities, challenges, and areas of concern that they consider relevant to the Committee's scrutiny work. Submissions made can be found at **Annexe B**.

Clerks to the Committee
November 2026

Annexe A: SPICe Briefing on Planning

This briefing provides background information on key planning issues, and a summary of written evidence received, for a roundtable session with:

- Dr Caroline Brown: Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI)
- Paul Marcari, Heads of Planning Scotland (HOPS)
- Clare Symonds, Planning Democracy
- Hazel Johnson, Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS)
- Ewan Anderson, Royal Incorporation of Architects Scotland (RIAS)

An overview of the Scottish planning system can be found in the SPICe briefing: Planning in Scotland: An introduction.

Key issues raised in written evidence

The Committee asked witnesses to provide short written statements, setting out their priorities for planning in Scotland over the next five years, and issues they consider to be worthy of committee scrutiny. Written evidence has been received from all the witnesses appearing at this week's meeting. The key points raised in these submissions include:

- Planning should be recognised as a frontline public service, essential to delivering key national and local policy goals.
- There should be a focus on reducing bureaucracy, simplifying policy and legislation, removing duplication between consenting regimes, and standardisation of systems and approaches where possible.
- Governance arrangements should be improved – including enhanced co-operation between agencies and greater consistency of approach between authorities.
- Planning departments must be properly resourced to deliver a high-quality service to applicants, elected members, and the public. This could include full cost recovery from service users, ring fencing of planning fee income for planning purposes, access to modern IT systems, access to training for new and existing staff, attractive routes into the profession, and the protection of planning staff from abuse and harassment.
- Planning departments need access to staff with specialist skills, in areas such as architecture, building conservation, ecology, and climate change. This could be provided through a national "talent bank", that could be called on by planning authorities when required.
- Public Service Reform – the place of planning in any new system of local government must be carefully considered, with careful thought given to how individuals and communities will engage with that system.
- Planning Democracy have raised concerns that the current approach to planning is benefitting investors and developers, in the name of supporting economic

growth, at the expense of communities and the environment. Particular concerns include the approach to allocating housing land, planning for the development of hyperscale data centres, action to tackle the housing, climate, and nature emergencies, and the effectiveness of Local Place Plans.

- The growing use of Section 75 agreements to fund essential infrastructure development is not sustainable and is acting as a barrier to the viability and delivery of developments. A review of the approach to securing infrastructure delivery is needed.
- The planning system should focus on facilitating viable developments, with policy applied flexibly and proportionately, where that will deliver high-quality, affordable places, which maximise active and sustainable connectivity and minimise the loss of agricultural land and the creation of urban sprawl.

Background and other planning issues

In addition to the issues raised in written evidence provided by witnesses appearing at this week's meeting, the Committee has also heard or received evidence on other matters from other stakeholders, including:

Developer contributions: A planning authority may require a developer to contribute towards essential infrastructure or community facilities, including affordable housing. These developer contributions are normally secured through a "planning obligation", which are sometimes referred to as a "section 75 agreement". The use of a planning obligation is considered on a case-by-case basis, taking account of the policies set out in the development plan and the unique circumstances of each proposed development. Where appropriate, a development plan will include a policy on developer contributions.

The Scottish Government describes the role of planning obligations in Planning Circular 4/2025: Planning Obligations and Good Neighbour Agreements, which states:

> "Planning obligations may be used for a range of planning purposes: there is no list or definition of what they can or cannot be used to deliver. However, they most often take the form of an agreement between a developer and/or landowner and the planning authority, to overcome obstacles to the grant of planning permission and ensure development complies with policies, for example to secure the provision of necessary infrastructure or affordable housing. In this way, planning obligations can enable a proposed development to be permitted which would otherwise be unacceptable…Where planning authorities propose to use planning obligations to secure the provision of infrastructure which is needed to enable development on allocated sites, this should be set out in the local development plan, in line with the Infrastructure First approach."

Circular 4/2025 sets out the circumstances in which planning obligations can be used, listing five tests that a planning authority should use in deciding whether to propose a planning obligation, these are that the obligation:

- is necessary to make the proposed development acceptable in planning terms.
- serves a planning purpose.
- relates to the impacts of the proposed development.
- fairly and reasonably relates in scale and kind to the proposed development.
- is reasonable in all other respects.

Enforcement of the terms of a planning obligation is a matter for the parties to that agreement, i.e. the planning authority and the developer.

Developer contributions can also be secured through the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973; which gives local authorities the power to enter into agreements for a purpose related to the discharge of any of its functions; the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984, which allows the roads authority to enter into an agreement with any person willing to contribute to the construction or improvement of a road; and less commonly, the Countryside (Scotland) Act 1967 and the Sewerage (Scotland) Act 1968.

Infrastructure First: National Planning Framework 4 confirms the Scottish Government's commitment to an "infrastructure first" approach to development. This is defined as an "…approach to land use planning, which puts infrastructure considerations at the heart of placemaking. In particular, it seeks to ensure that infrastructure needs are understood and identified early in the development planning process as part of an evidence based approach.

NPF4 makes clear that Local Development Plans and their delivery programmes should:

- be informed by evidence on infrastructure capacity, condition, needs and deliverability within the plan area, including cross boundary infrastructure;
- set out the infrastructure requirements to deliver the spatial strategy, informed by the evidence base, identifying the infrastructure priorities, and where, how, when and by whom they will be delivered; and
- indicate the type, level (or method of calculation) and location of the financial or in-kind contributions, and the types of development from which they will be required."

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 contained provisions allowing the Scottish Government to introduce an Infrastructure Levy by means of Regulations. The levy would have established a standard schedule of charges payable by the developer of certain developments to a planning authority to help fund infrastructure provision. However, the power to introduce such Regulations was subject to a 'sunset clause' meaning the power to introduce such Regulations would lapse seven years from the date the Act received Royal Assent (25 July 2019). The Scottish Government ultimately decided not to proceed with the Infrastructure Levy and the power to do so has now lapsed.

Housing land: Local Development Plans are required to set out a 10-year "Local Housing Land Requirement", which should exceed the nationally mandated Minimum All-Tenure Housing Land Requirement for each local authority, set out in National Planning Framework 4. It is important to note that these are not house building targets, but a means of ensuring that a Local Development Plan meets the statutory requirement (Section 15(1A) of the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997) that it "…include targets for meeting the housing needs of people living in the part of the district to which it relates."

Decisions on the delivery of new homes rests largely with private sector developers, housing associations, and Council housing departments, taking account of factors such as housing need, commercial viability of developments, market conditions, availability of finance, and other factors.

Members have previously heard concerns that the operation of the planning system is constraining housing delivery. For example, Homes for Scotland evidence to the Committee for last week's evidence session stated that

> "Local housing planning applications are averaging 19.4 weeks, with major applications at 44 weeks, compared with the 8-and 16-week respective statutory periods for determination."

The Minister for Public Finance wrote to the Committee on 9 October 2026 outlining work to tackle constraints on housing delivery. This includes:

- closely monitoring LDP delivery timescales, with planning authorities reporting to Ministers on a six-monthly basis, the most recent deadline being 30 September 2026.
- Ministerial guidance published requiring significant weight to be given to Proposed Local Development Plans in planning decisions, including site allocations, following publication.
- Arguments that the actions of planning authorities are only one element in housing delivery – with responsibility delays in the planning process and the build out of consented developments also resting with developers, their agents, and other stakeholders.

Homes for Scotland also suggested that there should be incentives (and penalties) to increase the supply of land and the speed of decisions through:

- an emergency land release, where an LDP is out of date and a proposed plan is not expected until 2029.
- a new expedited process for Ministerial call-in on housing sites, and
- a reformed scheme of delegation for Councils after the local elections.

Presumption in favour of sustainable development: Developers, including Homes for Scotland, have argued that the previous "presumption in favour of sustainable development" should be reintroduced where Local Development Plans are out of date.

In 2014, the Scottish Planning Policy (which previously set out national planning policy, prior to the adoption of NPF4 in 2023) introduced a presumption in favour of development which contributed towards sustainable development. The Presumption became a material consideration in planning decisions when a local authority had a shortfall in its five-year effective housing land supply and/or an out-of-date development plan. This meant that in such circumstances a developer could potentially receive permission to build on a site not identified in the development plan, if they could prove that it would contribute towards sustainable development.

The application of the presumption was effectively removed by the Scottish Government in 2020, which argued "…if the current policy remains un-amended, its application may now lead to approval of some development proposals which are not sustainable."

Out of date local development plans: Scotland has a plan-led system, with Local Development Plans currently having a 10-year lifespan (previously five years). However, a key recurring issue experienced over decades has been the length of time, and level of resources, it takes to produce a plan – leading to many authorities having out of date plans. Respondents to the Session 6 Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee work on NPF4, including Homes for Scotland, Heads of Planning Scotland, and the RTPI, have raised concerns about the speed with which new style Local Development Plans are being created, arguing that many authorities will not meet the 2028 deadline for the adoption of such plans. The failure to produce new plans within expected timescales means that existing plans will fall out of date, which can have implications for consistency in decision making, tackling issues such as the housing emergency, and the likelihood of decisions being challenged at appeal. Reasons given for delays include limited budgets, a lack of qualified planners, competing work priorities within planning authorities and statutory consultees, and some evidence reports [the first formal stage of the plan making process] not passing the Scottish Government's 'gate check' exercise at the first attempt.

The Scottish Government has worked to tackle this issue over many years, most recently publishing Local Development Plans Proposed Plans Action Plan and Advice in September 2026. This emphasises that Local Development Plans should focus on showing where development should and should not happen – using maps, illustrations and diagrams, rather than being policy documents. It argues that policy is set out in NPF4 and that detailed, site-specific requirements should be set out in site briefs, and masterplans rather than the development plan itself. The intention being that stripping plans to their most basic elements will speed development, consultation, examination and adoption.

Hyperscale data centres: The Scottish Government sets out its policies on data centre development in its 2021 Green data centres and digital connectivity: vision and action plan for Scotland, which is supportive of their development and sees green data centres as delivering significant economic benefits. This positive policy approach to facilitating green data centre development is carried through in the Scottish Government's 2026 Scotland's AI Strategy. The Scottish Government has not offered a firm definition of what constitutes a "green data centre".

The Scottish Government has designated "green data centres" as part of a national development (National Development 12: Digital Fibre Network) in National Planning Framework 4. National development status is not an award of planning permission but means that the principle of the development cannot be challenged during the planning application process. In practice, this means any objections to a development considered a green data centre must focus on the detail of a proposal rather than the need for the development itself.

The Scottish Government has taken two recent actions on planning for data centres:

1. issued a Direction to Scottish planning authorities on 17 August 2026 requiring them to notify Scottish Ministers of any application for a data centre with a processing power exceeding 50MW within seven days of the validation of that application.
2. issued a Direction on 16 September 2026 requiring any planning application for a data centre with a processing power in excess of 50MW to be accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

The Scottish Government has also made two further data centre related commitments:

1. It will publish planning guidance on data centres prior to Christmas 2026.
2. It will publish a "strategic approach to attracting and securing responsible green data centre investment in Scotland" in 2026-27.

When considering the likely impact of new guidance, it is worth considering its status within the planning system. Scotland's planning system is 'plan-led'. Planning authorities are required to make decisions on applications for planning permission in accordance with the development plan (NPF4 and the adopted Local Development Plan), unless there are compelling reasons, "material considerations", which indicate that the decision should be otherwise. Planning guidance provides advice to planning authorities and other stakeholders on the application of current planning legislation and policy, it does not change any statutory requirements or planning policy itself.

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Date: 13/10/2026

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.
The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP www.parliament.scot

Annexe B: Stakeholder Written Evidence

The Royal Town Planning Institute – November 2026

Planning is a frontline public service and must be recognised as such

Planning is fundamental to delivering Scotland's ambitions for housing, economic growth, climate resilience, public health and thriving communities. Yet too often it is viewed as an administrative function rather than a frontline public service. It is a priority of RTPI Scotland for planning to be widely recognised as a frontline service. This should be central to the work of the Committee over the current parliamentary session and the Scottish Government's programmes of public service and local governance reform.

Good planning delivers long-term public value. RTPI research has shown that investment in planning generates significant economic, social and environmental benefits, helping to create places that support healthier lives, attract investment, enable housing delivery and protect the natural environment. It is our priority that planning investment be recognised as preventative public spending that supports outcomes across government portfolios rather than a cost to be minimised to achieve short-term savings.

To deliver these outcomes, it is also a priority of RTPI Scotland for Scotland’s planning profession to be properly resourced, digitally enabled and supported. Many planners currently spend significant time on administrative processes rather than applying their professional expertise to shaping places and delivering positive development outcomes. Greater investment in digital infrastructure, improved data systems and modernised processes would enable planners to focus on higher-value frontline work, improve efficiency and support a more responsive and proactive planning service.

The wellbeing and safety of planners must also be recognised as a critical issue and is a further priority of RTPI Scotland. The RTPI's "It Takes Planners & You" campaign highlighted the abuse and harassment experienced by planners across the profession. This behaviour affects recruitment, retention and morale at a time when planning services are already under pressure. If Scotland is to attract and retain the skilled professionals needed to deliver national priorities, planners must be able to carry out

their roles in a safe and supportive environment. Recognition of planning as a frontline public service would help reinforce the value of the profession and support efforts to improve public understanding of its role.

Planning faces significant workforce challenges. RTPI research indicates that 14.2% of Scotland's planners intend to leave the profession in the coming years through retirement or career changes. Addressing this challenge requires long-term investment in the planning workforce, support for graduate and mid-career entry routes, and a clear commitment to building the next generation of planners.

As the Scottish Government considers public service and local governance reform, planning must be recognised as an essential public service that underpins the delivery of national outcomes. A well-resourced, respected and digitally enabled planning profession is not simply a requirement of the planning system itself; it is a prerequisite for delivering Scotland's wider social, economic and environmental ambitions and must be a priority of this Committee during the current parliamentary session.

Planning Democracy – November 2026

Planning Democracy is a grassroots organisation campaigning for a fair, inclusive planning system that works for both people and planet.

We are members of Scottish Community Alliance and Scottish Environment LINK.

Planning Democracy's priority is a genuinely evidenced plan-led, place-based planning system that serves the public interest, advances social and environmental justice with communities as active partners.

We ask the Committee to focus its scrutiny on **seven** areas:

1. Biodiversity in Planning

Scotland faces a nature emergency, yet planning continues to struggle to secure meaningful protection and nature enhancements.

- **NPF4:** Maintain annual scrutiny of NPF4. Is the Scottish Government adequately monitoring whether biodiversity and climate policies are delivering meaningful outcomes? Does it have a clear way of assessing whether development is aligned with climate targets and carbon budgets, and biodiversity recovery? Are LHLRs 31% higher than MATHLR really desirable?
- **Biodiversity metric:** Ensure the forthcoming Biodiversity Net Gain metric is fit for purpose.

- **Ecological assessments**: Reform ecological assessments required for biodiversity enhancements in planning decisions to ensure impartiality they need to be funded by developers but commissioned by local authorities.
- **Strengthen Local Development Plans (LDPs**): Prioritise quality over speed, with clear identification and protection of nature. Question extent to which emerging LDPs are premised on housing- led growth strategies rather than meeting assessed housing need.
- **Protect ancient woodland**: Scrutinise the progress, coverage, effectiveness and funding of the Ancient Woodland Register.
- **Ensure funding for local authority ecologists**: Ensure planning authorities have support of expertise to assess, monitor and enforce biodiversity requirements.

2. Housing and Sustainable Land Use

Consider the housing emergency in the context of climate and biodiversity emergencies. Recognise that developers' commercial interests do not necessarily align with ending the housing emergency, regardless of their stated commitments.

Move away from a housing model dominated by private-sector delivery towards public led planning

- **Land allocation**: Question the over-allocation of housing land to maintain private developers' site pipelines and compensate for slow delivery and land banking. Allocations should reflect evidenced need, realistic delivery and sustainable land use and promote brownfield re-use.
- **Housing diversity:** Enable a wide range of housing developers, give support to community-led housing, self build and SME's. Identify successful alternative models and how to scale them up.
- **Quality and place:** Scrutinise whether development delivers genuinely affordable homes, infrastructure, good design, access to nature and climate resilience. Focus on planning outcomes not housing numbers and land requirements.

3. **The creation of a Major Projects Office**.

While improving the delivery of major projects may have economic benefits, there are important questions about who determines which projects are considered nationally significant, whose interests they serve.

4. **Local Place Plans**

Review whether LPPs genuinely empower communities to shape development. What needs strengthening, including consideration of community appeal rights?

5. **Planning Sector Reform**

Will strategic planning powers move planning decisions further away from people?

Committee must ensure the impact of reforms gives greater powers to local, not regional authorities on planning decisions.

6. **Human Rights Bill**

Press for reinstatement of the Right to a Healthy Environment in the Human Rights Bill.

7. **Hyperscale Data Centres**

Scrutinise implementation of the agreed pause on planning decisions pending national guidance; press for a spatial strategy addressing land use and grid capacity; examine claims that a moratorium is unlawful; and require a full 12-week public consultation on new guidance.

Our central message:

Planning is about shaping the future of our places, communities and natural environment. Looking to the long term ultimately, we must ask whether Scotland is being developed for the benefit of the people and communities who live here, or whether communities are increasingly being expected to accommodate a model of growth designed around the needs of investors, developers and economic expansion. That is the question against which the Government's promises of community empowerment, environmental protection and citizen-centred government should be judged.

Built Environment Forum Scotland – November 2026

As an umbrella body for organisations working in the built environment in Scotland, Built Environment Forum Scotland (BEFS) is grateful to the Committee for considering the priorities of its forty-plus Member bodies on spatial planning.

The three policy development areas most frequently raised in BEFS Member discussions are:

Increase Capacity: BEFS Members believe increasing planning workforce capacity will help improve the quality and speed of decision-making, and support progress towards a wide range of national outcomes including in the realms of climate change, economic development, heritage, housing and wellbeing. As set out in BEFS 2026 Manifesto, statistics from BEFS Members Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) Scotland show a 28.6% reduction in planning spend from 2010-2023. The RTPI Scotland 'Planifesto' and its 2025 State of the Profession report provide additional evidence and insights into

unfilled vacancies, stretched workloads, high application volumes, increasing policy complexity, and a rise in unfunded duties. Further investment in skills pipelines can alleviate many of the pressures in the system and lead to improved outcomes for all stakeholders. Investing in planning is not solely a financial decision; impact can also be derived from an aligned and holistic policy landscape, culture shift, and avoiding conflicting remits.

Improve Access to Specialist Skills: BEFS facilitates the Conservation Officers Group, a Scotland-wide forum of planning authority officers with remits for conservation, heritage and planning. Working Group Members regularly report major challenges in accessing the appropriate external expertise and specialist skills they require to assess applications in a timely manner. Examples include access to conservation engineers and conservation architects for cases involving potential demolition (for planners, owners and developers), and to independent expertise on valuations and development appraisals for cases that concern enabling development and significant alterations of listed buildings. BEFS is aware the Improvement Service's National Planning Improvement Team is actively seeking to address this challenge, and welcomes its plan to support the introduction of a 'talent bank' of specialists that planning authorities can utilise as required.

Modernise the Planning Framework: As BEFS Joining the Dots blog series demonstrates, the interconnected policy landscape around planning and the built environment is multi-layered. This has created a challenging operating environment, with tensions and contradictions between key policy areas such as protecting historic assets, biodiversity, local living and rural revitalisation. It has led to issues with the wider interpretation and understanding of objectives and hierarchies in the Fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4), and to the relevance and status of other planning guidance. BEFS Members argue that a fixed NPF4 document is less well-suited to the present digital era. Translating its content into a fully interactive web resource, as recommended by RTPI Scotland, has strong potential benefits in supporting use across sectors, incorporating recent and ongoing updates to guidance documents, and signposting to external policy areas. The BEFS network identified a great deal of potential in the planning system to further help protect, promote and leverage additional value from assets in Scotland's rich existing built and historic environment. A modernised, digital framework can support progress.

Produced by: Hazel Johnson, Director; Derek Rankine, Head of Policy & Strategy; and Jonna Meredith, Communications & Policy Officer

Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) – November 2026

The RIAS is supportive of the ambitions of the Scottish Government's planning reforms, and the profession is ready to play a key role in translating them into plans that will deliver successful places. Delivering sustainable places and quality homes to meet the country's needs requires a properly resourced, responsive planning system that is

integrated with development delivery to address the acute development challenges which both the public and private sectors are currently facing.

The profession's suggested priorities for the planning system are:

Focus on delivery – Better integration with the processes and mechanisms that are necessary to deliver good-quality, sustainable places.

- NPF4 has had a positive impact by creating a national level of ambition for sustainable development and good-quality placemaking, but this has been inhibited by a lack of integration with delivery challenges and the lack of national spatial planning for strategic infrastructure.
- Planning authorities should be encouraged to use NPF4 more flexibly to facilitate and incentivise good-quality development, rather than using it to introduce additional criteria and requirements to control development at a time when there are acute delivery challenges, particularly with housing affordability.
- This should include initiatives that recognise that brownfield land is inherently more expensive to develop than greenfield land, to radically recalibrate the equation.
- The current system often fails to provide affordable, quality homes in the right places, resulting in low-density sprawl, limited diversity, farmland loss, poor public transport integration, congestion, pressure on services and poor placemaking.

Help the important principle of 'infrastructure first' to be more deliverable by reviewing how Section 75 planning agreements are used to fund it.

- The use of Section 75 agreements to fund education, health, green/blue space, energy and transport infrastructure has grown to the point where these agreements are presenting significant barriers to the viability and delivery of development in both the public and private sectors.
- The development process can't sustain it. This will become an increasingly acute issue as steps are taken to tackle the Housing Emergency.

Tackling planning capacity gaps – It will be a sound investment for the future

- Address chronic under-resourcing within planning authorities and gaps in customer care, design skills, spatial coordination and practical policy implementation that delay the planning process and introduce risk and uncertainty for applicants.
- Better resourcing should allow officers to be identifiable and contactable, to facilitate engagement in constructive dialogue to resolve blockages and avoid time-consuming delays and costly appeals.
- The cost of not leaving the legacy of a better built environment to Scotland's future generations is a lot more than the cost of additional resourcing for planners today. Local Place Plans are a good example of what can be achieved by good

planning to meet the needs of a community if resources for delivery are identified.

Better harnessing the skills and capacity of the architectural profession to translate ambitious planning policy into projects and valued places. Greater involvement could:

- Build a better future by utilising the skills of Scotland's design sector to synthesise planning policy and community needs and aspirations into inspiring placemaking plans and deliverable local development frameworks that enhance the quality of our towns, cities and countryside.
- Restore Scotland's pioneering tradition of integrated planning and architecture by bringing more architectural skills into resource-starved planning departments so they can address climate change, circular economy and design quality challenges.

Heads of Planning Scotland – November 2026

1. Digital Transformation	
Digital maturity assessment of planning authorities	Understand strengths, weaknesses and digital readiness across authorities to target support and future investment.
Enhance customer self-service tools	Improve customer experience, access to services and reduce administrative workload.
Consistent national approach to planning technology	Standardise systems and data collection, support joint procurement, training and interoperability.
AI-assisted validation and reporting	Automate routine tasks, improve efficiency and free planners to focus on professional judgement and decision-making.
Long-term investment in digital infrastructure	Ensure planning services have modern systems that support efficient service delivery.

2. Sustainable Resourcing and Full Cost Recovery	
Full cost recovery for planning services	Generate sufficient income to cover service costs and allow reinvestment in performance improvements.
Re-investment planning fee income	Better re-investment of planning fee income into planning services, workforce capacity and service improvements.
Investment in workforce skills	Build capability, improve service quality and increase resilience to workload pressures.
Support for Higher Education and planning schools	Strengthen the future workforce pipeline, improve recruitment and address skills shortages.

3. Reduce Red Tape and Develop Common Functions	
Standard planning conditions	Improve consistency, clarity and efficiency in decision-making.
Standard Section 75 agreements	Reduce delays, legal costs and negotiation time.
Updated validation standards	Improve application quality and reduce requests for further information.
Standard scheme of delegation	Provide consistent decision-making frameworks and improve transparency.
Simplify consenting regimes	Remove duplication between planning and related consents, reducing timescales and effort.
Simplify Local Development Plan processes	Reduce resource demands and make plan-making easier to understand and deliver.
National planning policy mapping guidance	Create consistent presentation of plans and improve public accessibility.
Legislative simplification and review	Remove unnecessary burdens, modernise outdated legislation and improve efficiency.

4. Better Governance and Collaboration	
Improved engagement with agencies and consultees	Enhance collaboration, reduce delays and improve planning outcomes.
Greater consistency in planning practice across Scotland	Deliver a more predictable, understandable and efficient planning system.
Consistent performance reporting and aligned data management	Improve performance monitoring, benchmarking and evidence-based improvement.