Planning Aid Scotland







Impact

2025–2026 Report

This is excellent — a credit to Planning Aid Scotland. Well done to you and your equally excellent volunteers!

— Comments on our Sustaining Choices project



Digital Mapping Hackathon, February 2026. Credit: John Swan.

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Cover photos:

1. Digital Mapping Hackathon, February 2026. Credit: John Swan.
2. Staff and Board day, June 2026. Credit: John Swan.



A Message from the Chief Executive

Planning is about people as much as places. It shapes homes, neighbourhoods, infrastructure, green spaces and the future of communities across Scotland.

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 defines planning's purpose as "to manage the development and use of land in the long-term public interest". That is a significant responsibility. Planning decisions can support action on climate, health, wellbeing, equality and nature, but they can also cause real anxiety when people feel change is happening around and to them, rather than with them. For planning to work well, people need to feel they are included and listened to.

2025/26 has been a significant year as, alongside delivery, we adopted a new organisational strategy. This has sharpened our focus and helped us clarify where we can have the greatest impact. A further milestone was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the other Planning Aid organisations across the UK, strengthening collaboration through the new Planning Aid National Network (PANN).

Since joining Planning Aid Scotland, I have been inspired to hear about the work happening across the country. I've heard from passionate people who are bringing their communities together to drive change. We see this interest reflected in the calls to our Advice Service too, with people getting in touch to better understand how they can help shape their local areas. I'm encouraged by this enthusiasm, but I also appreciate that this kind of community-led planning is not without its challenges. I'm learning how difficult it can be to get started, gather expertise and recruit volunteers. It can feel daunting. That's where Planning Aid Scotland can make a genuine contribution.

Across the year we supported thousands of people, including through more than 900 Advice Service cases, and worked in every council area in Scotland, as well as with both national parks.

Our work ranged from supporting Local Place Plans in Shetland and Community Action Plans in Ruthrieston, Fa'side, Eskdalemuir and Kelty, to delivering an extensive programme of free online training for the National Planning Hub.

We also responded to emerging needs. As more people contacted us about energy consents cases, we developed new resources and training to help communities understand the process and engage with it more confidently.

All of this took place against a challenging backdrop, with financial pressures across the charity sector continuing to strain resources. Our social enterprise activity remains an important part of how we respond to this environment. None of this work would be possible without our dedicated staff, Board of Directors, volunteers, funders and partners, and we extend particular thanks to the Scottish Government for its continued core grant funding in support of our charitable and educational objectives.



Cherie Morgan
Chief Executive

Our Vision, Mission and Values

We believe in an inclusive society where communities are empowered to shape decisions about their place.

Our strategy is built around three core priorities that shape everything we do — our advice, training, projects and partnerships:

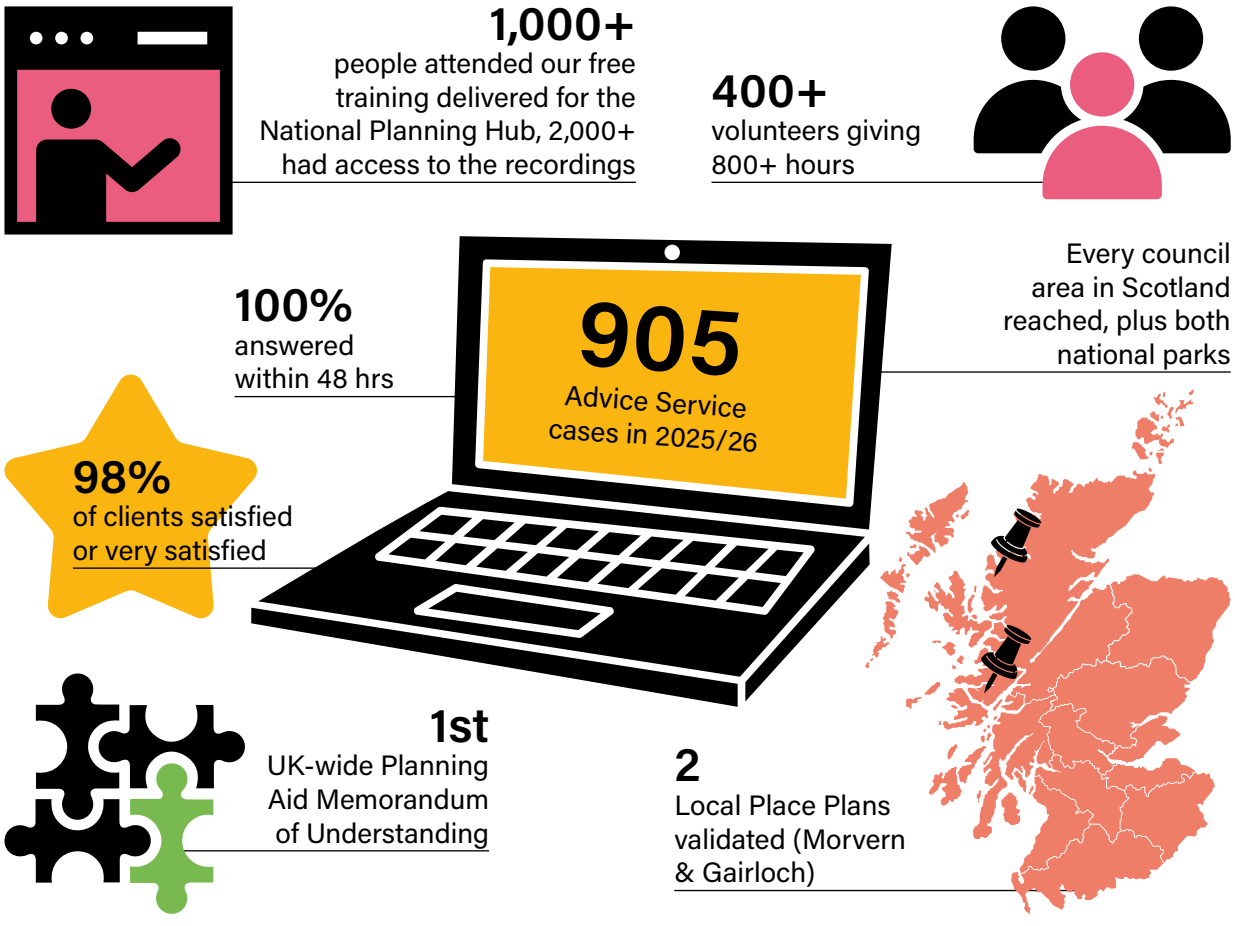
Inclusive Participation: we support people to understand and engage with the planning system.

Community-Led Planning: we empower communities to shape decisions about their places.

Learning and Innovation: we promote reflection, creativity and continuous improvement.

Cutting across all three, we recognise the urgent need to respond to the climate and nature crises and prioritise approaches that help create more sustainable and resilient places.

Our Year at a Glance



Strategic Priorities

Inclusive Participation

We help people understand and take part in the decisions that shape their places — through free, impartial advice and accessible resources funded by the Scottish Government, that turn a complex system into something people can navigate with confidence.

Advice Service

Our free, impartial and confidential Advice Service gives people clear, independent guidance on planning issues — reaching every part of Scotland and both national park authorities. Enquiries came from individuals (around 81%), community groups and organisations, and business start-ups and social enterprises.

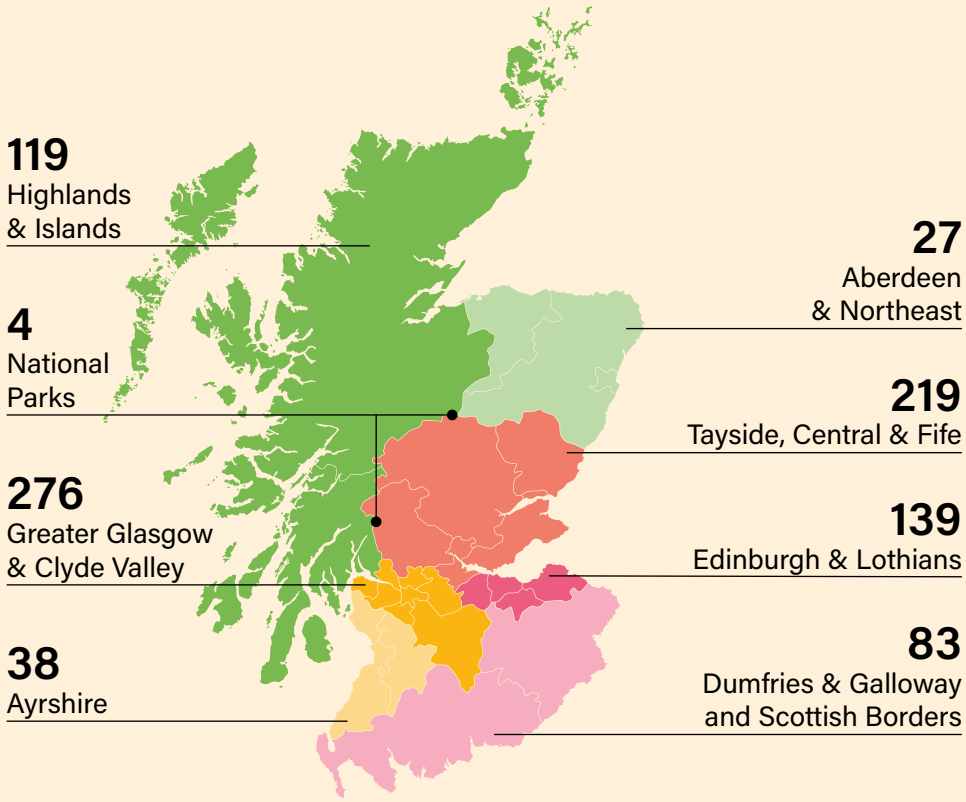
The impact is clear: people came to us unsure, overwhelmed or unable to access paid advice, and left with clarity, confidence and practical next steps. The service plays an important role in addressing gaps in public understanding, ensuring people have accurate information when they need it most.

Enquiries this year reflected some of the most pressing issues facing places today — from renewable energy and church conversions to sustainable transport, coastal resilience and community-led planning.

905
cases in 2025/26

966
enquiries received

100%
answered within 48 hours



98% of clients were satisfied or very satisfied with the support they received.

Client feedback consistently points to both the practical and the emotional value of the service:

Theme	In clients' own words
Reducing uncertainty	*"I feel a bit less daunted about setting things in motion now."*
Clear explanation and signposting	*"It has cleared up so many questions I had."*
Prompt, practical support	*"Thank you for the prompt reply — a whole new world for me!"*
Quality and depth of advice	*"I think the service offered was incredible."*
Confidence to participate	*"Made a huge difference to the document I submitted in the end."*
Human support and reassurance	*"The relief is amazing." "Thank you for going above and beyond today in what has been quite an isolating experience."*

Examples of support in practice:

- Supporting sustainable transport: advising a community group in East Ayrshire campaigning to reopen their local rail station.
- Strengthening island resilience: helping an island resident explore planning permission for a sea wall, feeding into wider conversations about climate adaptation and coastal resilience.
- Building community capacity: supporting a Community Council to prepare a plain-English guide to the Scottish planning system for their community website.



Homebuilding & Renovating Show, Glasgow, May 2025.

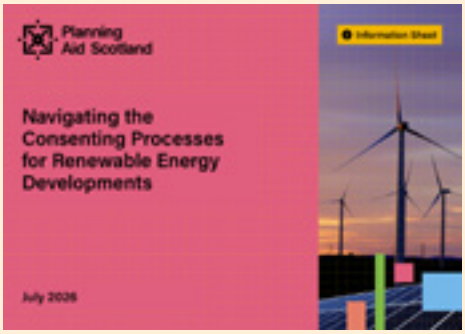
Planning clinics at the Homebuilding & Renovating Show

We continued our long-standing partnership with the Homebuilding & Renovating Show in Edinburgh and Glasgow, where our volunteer and staff planners delivered free one-to-one planning clinics.

These gave hundreds of attendees direct access to impartial advice before making decisions about their homes, land or building projects, alongside two seminars on securing planning permission.

> *What you do really makes a difference.*
>
> — Advice Service client

> *What a service for people trying to navigate planning, especially if, like us, you are all volunteers with limited resources, knowledge and time!*
>
> — Director, Samaritans of Inverness SCIO





Resources

We provide free, accessible guides, toolkits and information sheets that help individuals and communities navigate regulations, prepare Local Place Plans, understand their rights and take part in decisions about their places.

We are continuing to review and update our suite of information sheets to keep them clear and current, covering topics from development management and material considerations to listed buildings, enforcement, planning appeals and planning for young people.

A key addition was a new information sheet on the renewable energy consenting process, developed in response to growing public interest as Scotland's wind, solar, hydro and battery storage sectors expand.

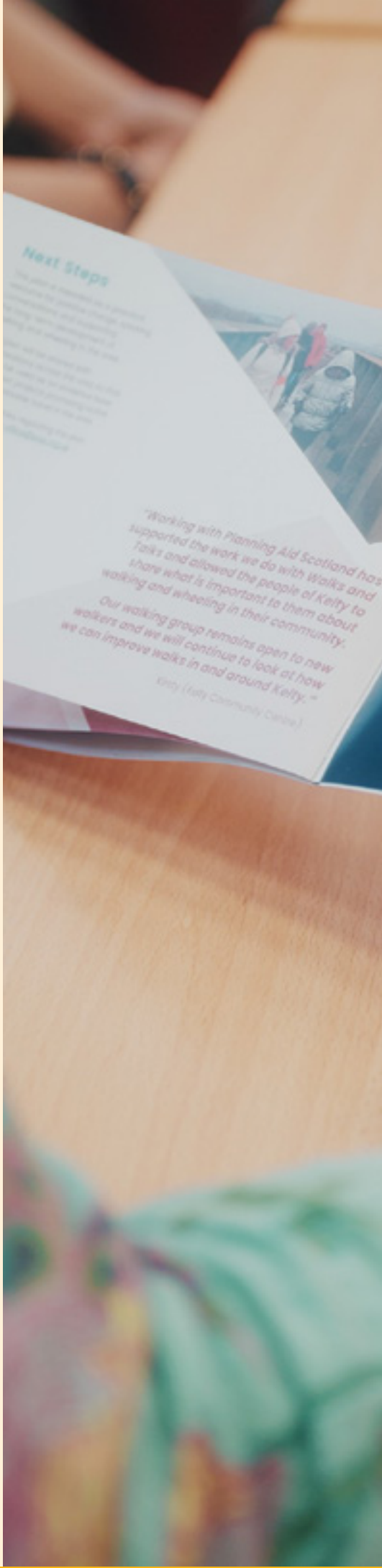
We also updated our SP=EED® Framework for community engagement, available free on our website, which sets out best-practice principles, levels and criteria for planning, delivering and evaluating effective engagement.

"The consenting process for renewable energy can feel complicated, especially with Scotland's two-tier planning system for these projects. We designed this sheet to break things down clearly — from the early pre-application stage right through to appeals."

— Anne Krippler MRTPI, Planning & Projects Officer, Planning Aid Scotland

"I think it is excellent — very well presented, with really clear information that will be very helpful for people."

— Dr Fiona Simpson MRTPI, Chief Planner, Scottish Government on our new information sheet



Community-Led Planning

We help communities move from having a say to shaping the plans that guide their places — building the confidence, skills and structures to set out what matters to them.

Local Place Plans

Local Place Plans shift where planning begins. Instead of starting with proposals and asking communities to respond, they begin with communities setting out what matters to them. Introduced through the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019, they give communities a formal route to propose how land should be used — proposals that planning authorities must then take into account. For communities, where change can have a lasting impact, that influence matters.

From vision to validated plan: Morvern

Building on Live Life Morvern — the award-winning Community Vision and Action Plan developed with our support — the community turned its ambitions into spatial proposals, and the Morvern Local Place Plan was validated by Highland Council in April 2026. It shows how community-led planning can move from vision to action, giving local priorities a stronger route into future decisions. (The earlier Live Life Morvern work was named overall winner at the Scottish Planning Innovation Awards)

The Gairloch Local Place Plan was also validated by Highland Council, in April 2025.

"In a small community like ours, people volunteer for all kinds of things. It's that diversity of interests and passion that makes things happen."

— Annie Tordoff, Planning Aid Scotland Board Director 2024-2026, Director of Morvern Community Trading Company and local resident in Morvern

Building capacity across Shetland

With funding secured by Shetland Islands Council from the UK Government, we led a capacity-building programme helping more than 20 community groups across 18 areas of Shetland gain the knowledge, confidence and practical skills to prepare their own Local Place Plans. For many groups it was their first time engaging directly with the planning system. Through training, mentoring, peer-learning sessions and pre-submission checks, groups moved from asking "where do we start?" to actively drafting proposals.

"There is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about."

— Quotation from Margaret Wheatley shared by a Shetland programme participant

"Thank you all at Planning Aid Scotland for your enthusiastic support of at least my aspirations and hopes."

— Shetland workshop participant, September 2025



Shetland workshop, September 2025.

Understanding what communities need

Our national Local Place Plans Community Survey gathered the experiences of communities preparing, submitting, or choosing not to progress a plan, identifying what works and where more support is needed. The findings were presented to the national Community Action Plan and Local Place Plan Working Group, hosted by the Improvement Service, reaching around 60 participants and helping ground national discussion in real community experience.

Our Island Capacity Survey and workshop, delivered for the National Planning Hub, engaged island communities from Shetland, Orkney and the Hebrides — from places of 20 people to 22,000. It identified the barriers islanders face, including limited local capacity, geographic isolation and skills gaps, and has directly informed the design of more flexible, inclusive Planning Hub support tailored to island contexts.



Photos from the launch of the Kelty Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Action Plan.
Credit: Manuel Pennuto from Strength in Motion Films.









Community Action Plans: active travel

Through Sustaining Choices — our community-led active travel programme, funded by Walking Scotland through the Smarter Choices, Smarter Places fund — we helped communities develop Local Walking, Wheeling and Cycling Action Plans.

This year's phase worked with Ruthrieston, Fa'side, Eskdalemuir and Kelty, with the resulting plans reflecting the views of more than 650 people.

The process helped communities turn local knowledge into practical priorities, tackling barriers such as path maintenance, lighting, accessibility and missing links — with creative methods like art and film helping each community tell its own story.

"If you want people's involvement, and for it to be successful, you need to find out their actual needs and what they think of the local community."

— Margaret Pollock, Kelty Walks and Talks group leader

This is excellent — a credit to Planning Aid Scotland. Well done to you and your equally excellent volunteers!

— Matt Ritchie, Archaeologist, Forestry and Land Scotland

Learning and Innovation

We build the knowledge, confidence and skills people need to take part in planning — and we keep learning, adapting and bringing new approaches to our own work.

Training and mentoring

Our training reached thousands of people across Scotland this year, with participants from every local authority area — decision-makers, elected members, public bodies, charities, community councillors, community groups and members of the public. Delivered by chartered planners and engagement specialists, our sessions go beyond explaining the system: participants leave with clearer routes into planning and the confidence to use that knowledge in practice, and consistently describe our training as engaging, clear and confidence-building.

Community Engagement Skills Training

Our flagship programme, based on the SP=EED® Framework (Successful Planning = Effective Engagement and Delivery), supports participants to design, deliver and evaluate engagement that is meaningful, inclusive and responsive to local context. This year three full-day workshops trained 38 people from planning authorities, energy companies, active travel and community organisations, rural businesses and more.

"The facilitators were fantastic, with a wealth of experience in community engagement."

— Kasia Kozlowska, Sustainability Consultant, Max Fordham

"Having used the framework for years now, we would highly recommend it."

— Fiona Henderson, Managing Director, Affric

Supporting Community Councils

We delivered training to members of more than 100 community councils, helping local volunteers — who bring strong local knowledge but often little planning experience — take part with more confidence. Support focused on four areas: understanding the planning system and the role of communities; responding to planning applications; Local Place Plans and community-led planning; and energy consents and community energy. Feedback from our community energy workshop was overwhelmingly positive.

"Excellent presentation — slides clear and questions addressed."

— Energy Consents Training participant, Aberdeenshire & Angus

Community capacity for renewable energy and planning

Funded by the Scottish Government through the National Planning Hub, this programme of 22 online sessions helped people engage more confidently with renewable energy proposals and prepare community-led plans. Demand far exceeded expectations and the programme drew 2,147 registrations, with waiting lists common.

Where asked, 43% of attendees were representing a community organisation, and participants rated the sessions an average of 4.2 out of 5. Most said they had learned something new and felt better equipped to support and engage their communities.



Community Engagement Skills Training, Glasgow, October 2025.

Developing the next generation of planners

Our Graduate Training Scheme, run twice this year, responds to a recognised gap between academic study and the practical skills early-career planners need. This initiative also supports our volunteer activity and is supported by the Scottish Government. Professionals and mentors supported graduates to build confidence and career direction in two phases — learning from experienced planners across the sector, and through interactive skills sessions.

"The programme has made me feel much more confident and prepared to apply for planning roles in the UK, and I would definitely recommend it to other graduates."

— Graduate Training Scheme participant

Our Licentiate Training Scheme pairs early-career planners with experienced mentors to respond to real Advice Service cases — typically one a month over six months. This mentoring approach maintains high-quality advice while developing confident, well-supported professionals, and this year we supported five licentiates from backgrounds spanning development management, policy and private consultancy.

"This diversity clearly demonstrates that a one—size-fits-all approach is not effective in planning — one of the most valuable lessons I took away."

— Licentiate Training Scheme participant



Digital Mapping Hackathon, February 2026.
Credit: John Swan.

Volunteering

Our Volunteer Network of more than 400 built environment professionals and supporters gave over 800 hours this year, strengthening every area of our work — from Advice Service cases and training delivery to Local Place Plan support in Shetland. Highlights included our first Digital Mapping Hackathon, a hybrid QGIS workshop where volunteer teams explored what makes a good place to live, and our Meet the Volunteer campaign celebrating their expertise and stories.

"She explained complex planning processes with clarity, patience and enthusiasm. She is a credit to your organisation!"

— Mike, Chair of Dunblane Civic Society, on Planning Aid Scotland volunteer Stacey

"This role has been so much more than volunteering; it's been a chance to learn, grow, and make a meaningful difference."

— Arushee Patnaik, a Graduate Town Planner and Planning Aid Scotland volunteer

Elected Member Training

We worked with the Scottish Government and Improvement Service to develop content for the forthcoming mandatory training for elected members. All elected members who take planning decisions will need to complete the training and pass the accompanying test, which comes into force ahead of the May 2027 local government elections.

The online, self-guided training consists of five modules, each ending with a short test. They cover the importance of a plan-led system, the planning application process, decision-making at committee, the role and conduct of elected members, and what happens post-decision.

With the content produced by the end of March 2026 (with input from Heads of Planning Scotland), we are now working with the Scottish Government, Improvement Service and Open University to develop the training portal, which will be hosted on the Improvement Service's new Councillor Academy. This next phase includes user testing with key stakeholders and current elected members.

Influence, Partnerships and Policy

We bring community perspectives into wider conversations about planning, place and participation — influencing national policy in favour of a more inclusive planning system.

A UK-wide network: the Planning Aid National Network

For the first time in our history, Planning Aid Scotland joined Community Places (Northern Ireland), Planning Aid England, Planning Aid for London and Planning Aid Wales to form the Planning Aid National Network and sign a shared Memorandum of Understanding — all five UK planning aid bodies with one shared commitment to inclusive, community-led planning.

The network will support shared learning, stronger public engagement, cross-border collaboration on challenges like climate adaptation and housing, and joint development of resources and funding.

"Empowerment only works when people have access to knowledge and support. This partnership is about breaking down barriers — between organisations, between professionals and the public, and between the four nations."

— David McAllister, Director of Operations, Planning Aid Scotland



Training for Traveller communities in Waterford, Ireland, March 2026.

Sharing our approach internationally

We shared our engagement experience beyond Scotland through support for work with Traveller communities in Waterford, Ireland, introducing partners to our approach and the Place Standard Tool (including its young people's version). The work reflected our commitment to inclusive engagement with communities whose voices are often underrepresented in decisions about place.





Contributing to Scotland's land reform conversation

We contributed to ScotLand Futures, an initiative of the Scottish Land Commission exploring what it would mean to complete Scotland's land reform journey, highlighting the importance of dialogue, trust and meaningful engagement between communities, landowners and decision-makers.

"Land reform is not just about ownership, it's about relationships. Where there is openness and trust, the potential for collaboration is enormous."

— Johanna Boyd, Chief Executive, Planning Aid Scotland, 2022-2025

Sector influence and knowledge exchange

We contributed to sector events, meetings and research conversations — sharing learning from our Advice Service, training and community engagement work, and bringing community perspectives into wider debate. This included work with SEPA on public participation in environmental authorisations, research interviews with BiGGAR Economics and the James Hutton Institute, a presentation to the COSLA Environment and Economy Board, and a busy stall at the Development Trusts Association Scotland Conference, which brought together 300 delegates from community-led organisations — where renewable energy was a clear and recurring theme. We responded to four consultations from the Scottish Government, including School Premises Regulations and Onshore Energy Generation.

Our Chief Executive, Cherie Morgan, joined partners from Shelter Scotland, Scottish Futures Trust, Berwickshire Housing Association and Befriending Networks on a panel on Housing, Place and Loneliness at the Campaign to End Loneliness Edinburgh Roadshow. Speaking on how planning shapes people's experience of place was one of the ways we connected beyond the planning sector to support better place-based outcomes for communities.

Themes running through the year's sector engagement included: community voice and access to planning advice; energy and climate; land and community power; health and wellbeing; place, poverty and inequality; rural and island planning; and pathways for early-career planners.

Looking Ahead

In 2026/27, we will continue to deliver on our strategic priorities: Inclusive Participation, Community-led Planning and Learning and Innovation, all underpinned by our commitment to addressing the climate emergency.

To support Inclusive Participation, we will continue developing our Advice Service and resources so that they are accessible to more people. This will include creating more multimedia resources and exploring new ways to help communities to understand planning.

To advance Community-Led Planning, we will continue our Local Place Plan and island capacity building work, helping communities develop the knowledge and skills to shape the future of their places. We will also expand our support around energy consenting, allowing more communities understand proposed developments and engage meaningfully with the processes and decisions that affect them.

Through the Island Communities Place Programme, we will build the capacity of island residents, community groups and local organisations to participate in planning. We will provide tailored training, bespoke resources, peer learning opportunities and support that respond to island-specific challenges, including distance, connectivity, limited local capacity and access to services.

We will strengthen collaboration with partners through the Planning Aid National Network and other networks, including exploring joint funding opportunities for placemaking projects focused on climate action and youth engagement. In 2026/27 we are particularly excited to build relationships within the Planning Aid National Network through study visits, creating opportunities to learn from each other's work across different parts of the UK and share approaches that can strengthen community participation in planning.

We will also work to identify where enhanced engagement and more streamlined processes could contribute meaningfully to improved outcomes for communities of place and interest across Scotland.

As part of our commitment to Learning and Innovation, we will continue to value and strengthen our existing partnerships across the sector while developing and nurturing new partnerships to help us deliver our vision and priorities. This includes engaging with communities and organisations that may not initially see themselves as connected to planning and placemaking, but whose work and lives are nevertheless affected by the planning system. In doing so, we will continue to highlight the important role planning plays in people's wellbeing and everyday experience of place.

Back page photos:

1. Volunteers' Week event, June 2026.
2. Homebuilding & Renovating Show, Glasgow, May 2025.







Planning Aid Scotland

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