

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMC/SC

**Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on 23 September 2024 at 6.00pm in
Downshire Chamber**

In the Chair: Councillor P Byrne

In attendance in Chamber:

Councillor T Andrews	Councillor J Brennan
Councillor P Campbell	Councillor W Clarke
Councillor C Galbraith	Councillor O Hanlon
Councillor G Hanna	Councillor V Harte
Councillor R Howell	Councillor G Kearns
Councillor C King	Councillor M Larkin
Councillor D Lee-Surginor	Councillor A Lewis
Councillor A Mathers	Councillor D McAteer
Councillor S O'Hare	Councillor M Rice
Councillor G Sharvin	

**In attendance in Chamber:
(Officials)**

Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Mr C Mallon, Director Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager (Acting)
Mrs F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

**Also in attendance in
Chamber:**

DFI Roads
Mr Mark McPeak – Divisional Manager
Mr Stephen Duffy – Section Engineer Newry, Mourne & Down
East
Ms Bronagh Gillespie, Section Engineer Newry, Mourne &
Down West

SC/016/2024 APOLOGIES & CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Bowsie, Devlin, Enright, Feehan, Finn, Finnegan, Howie, Jackson, Magennis, McEvoy, D Murphy, K Murphy, S Murphy, Quinn, Reilly, Ruane, Truesdale and Young.

SC/017/2024 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

SC/018/2024 DFI ROADS

The Chairperson welcomed the delegation to the meeting and invited them to make their presentation.

Mr McPeak thanked Council for the opportunity to present DFI Annual Roads Report, noting that it highlighted the work completed last year and set out a programme of works for this financial year. He highlighted that the road network was the largest structural infrastructure network and although aware that there was a lot of work required to protect and improve the network, his division were maximising the work they were doing to carry out this task, while facing continued staffing pressures, which had an impact on what they were able to deliver.

Mr McPeak stressed that DFI Roads had received a challenging budget for the year, the impact of which was that important areas of work could not be progressed, including essential road maintenance. He highlighted that within the constrained budget, DFI Roads would still manage defect repairs, grass cutting and provide a full street lighting repair service. He outlined the requirements around prioritising potholes on rural and main roads, the verge cutting schedule, and the winter preparation plans that were underway.

Mr McPeak highlighted the recent resurfacing that had been completed within the District, and those that were still at the planning phase, including traffic calming measures and stressed again that a limited budget would mean that all works would have to be prioritised.

Mr McPeak outlined the progress on the Newry Southern Relief Road, which was continuing to progress towards key decisions, with a public consultation expected in early 2025. He further noted that the development work on A24 Ballynahinch bypass had completed and the decision to proceed to procurement would be taken dependent on the Department's Major Projects priorities, which would be informed by the suite of transportation plans.

Mr McPeak ended by highlighting the current staffing pressures, the impact of a constrained budget, and stressed that the main focus was on public safety issues as a priority. He encouraged everyone to report defects using the online service, which had a direct link into the DFI system, where reports were triaged and actioned according to priority.

Following the presentation the Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members:

- Thanks were expressed to the delegation for the work ethic of their teams, prompt responses to queries and actions taken on any issues raised directly with them.
- Following concerns raised regarding gullies in Downpatrick, could DFI be proactive in ensuring the gullies were cleaned to alleviate concerns regarding flooding?
- Could the online reporting system be better maintained regarding updates on reported issues, as when Members check their submitted reports, they were showing as "to be actioned" when they had been completed.
- What was the shortfall in the annual budget, and what impact would this have on the day-to-day work?
- Was the use of surface dressing rather than resurfacing roads a cost saving exercise, or were there benefits to its use?
- Did the lack of investment result in the Shore Road, Strangford, being reported as the worst road in the North, and what was the plan to improve this, given the current level of investment?
- Who had responsibility over entry ways to housing estates and developments as moss and other vegetation was causing safety risks for residents when walking?
- When would Shore Road, Rostrevor, be reopened to two lanes, and could the delegation confirm that they were working with DAERA and the Forestry Service regarding this reopening?
- Who was responsible for clearing up following on-site works as drain covers had been left in place following a recent surface dressing in Kilkeel that resulted in some localised flooding?

- What was the scheduled maintenance for edging, as several issues had been reported as a safety risk, having overgrown the footpath.
- Following utilities or other departments accessing underground works, who was responsible for the repair of the footpaths, as several had been reported to be in disrepair following works?
- What was the overall cost of compensation events such as liability, etc?
- Was there a timeframe on resolving the landslip outside of Hilltown?
- Why had the Ballynahinch by-pass been rejected, given the highlighted need over a number of years and residents were feeling abandoned while improvement works were being continued elsewhere.
- Could Darragh Cross be reduced to a 30mph zone, and if resources were an issue could Council and local community groups assist in actioning this?
- Could a number be created solely for Elected representatives to make use of?
- What measures were being put in place following the completion of the Narrow Water Bridge, given this would result in rural roads being utilised for a higher volume of traffic that they were not designed for?
- While taking into account the biodiversity benefit of reduced cutting, this inevitably had a knock-on effect on nearby farmland regarding ragweed and thistles and raised concerns regarding visibility on approach to junctions and roundabouts. Could consideration be given to cutting at a different time of the year to reduce this impact, or could additional cuts be scheduled?
- What was the process for surface dressing a road, as there had been instances where potholes had been dressed without being repaired, which resulted in the pothole appearing again.
- Could additional warnings be put in place on Lock Road, Rathfriland, as the local school bus stopped on a dangerous corner and was a safety risk?
- Why had sign posts had been erected with no speed limit signs on the Green Road?
- Could the pedestrian crossing outside Buttercrane Shopping Centre be addressed as it appeared to work on demand, not with the flow of traffic, and was causing a congestion issue.
- Could the delegation comment on the grit levels in storage in preparation for winter?
- What was the delay on beginning works to repair the defect on the Ballynaclosa Road as it was coming close to two years since commitment was given to begin the works?
- Could the delegation be more specific regarding timelines for a public consultation regarding the Newry Southern Relief Road, as Council had requested a meeting with the Minister regarding the design and a timeline would help encourage that meeting to take place?
- Could the delegation outline any discussions that were ongoing with the Department to try and implement the Barton Report and push for a multi-year budget?
- Could the delegation outline the division of funding per council area as it spanned across three Council areas, as the roads within the District were among the worst in the province, especially given the number of rural roads?

The delegation responded as follows:

- The gullies in Downpatrick were inspected the same day as they were reported, and action was taken accordingly.
- In 2022, DFI received 25,000 online reports, compared to 45,000 online reports in 2023. It was difficult to respond to all online reports, however Mr McPeak reassured everyone that all reports go directly into the system and are triaged accordingly, with critical safety issues actioned urgently.
- The day-to-day impact of the reduced budget of £89m, compared to the Barton report outlining a minimum investment of £143m per year, was a work list that required

prioritisation while taking account of the result of 10 years of under investment, increasing liability claims and defects needing repaired. Mr McPeak highlighted that ongoing work was being carried out to manage the situation as best as possible.

- Shore Road, Strangford, was in a phased repair plan, but any works would be dependent on budget allocation and prioritisation.
- Surface dressing was carried out to protect the life of the pavement as it ensured its structural integrity and prolonged the life for 10 – 15 additional years. The aim was to surface dress a road every 10 years, but at no point would a failed road be surface dressed.
- DFI would not intervene if there was not a safety issue but encouraged the reporting of issues such as moss and work would be undertaken to source the responsible owner to take action as DFI were not in a position to spend funds on areas they were not responsible for.
- The Shore Road landslip clean up required the appointment of geotechnical engineers to help plan the reopening of the road. Quick action had been taken to reopen one lane as there were concerns of further slips and safety concerns and the situation was monitored until the team were confident that the landslip had stabilised. The Forestry Service and NIEA were engaged in talks on moving towards a permanent solution. A further temporary solution had been devised and was awaiting confirmation from NIEA that this was acceptable.
- Drain covers during road works should have been removed upon completion of the work and DFI would action a response team to address.
- Utilities were bound by the same standards as DFI with regard to completion of works but would sometimes put in a temporary cover until such time as the rest of the work could be completed. It was noted that some footways were old and falling into disrepair, the footway resurfacing budget was extremely low and action had to be taken on the worst areas initially.
- DFI was exploring ways to improve walking and cycling across the District.
- Concerns regarding grass and vegetation encroachment should be reported utilising the online portal, the policy was to cut once a year in rural areas for biodiversity benefits, but if a second cut would be beneficial this would be taken on board.
- Any edging concerns should be reported utilising the online reporting system and would be actioned accordingly.
- The compensation costs were detailed within the report.
- The landslip outside of Hilltown required the engagement of structural engineers to ensure that any work would not result in a further landslip. A plan was currently being thought out and a timeframe could not be put on this as it required departmental approvals.
- Mr McPeak advised that specific queries would be taken away and dealt with by the appropriate department, such as speed limit zones and pedestrian crossings.
- The cutting schedule had been completed, but if there were areas of concern these should be reported using the online function and would be actioned accordingly, especially if they resulted in a safety concern.
- Mr McPeak advised that DFI would be happy to work with Council on any pilots they wanted to take forward regarding speed limit reductions.
- It was noted that the main roads were holding up well, however rural roads were in need of repair and internal discussions were ongoing with the Department to try to ensure further funding, especially with regard to the completion of Narrow Water Bridge and the impact on the rural roads.
- Prior to surface dressing a road, a pre-service dressing team squad would be dispatched and all potholes repaired prior to a road being dressed. If this was not the case, please report these for investigation and repair.

- Road signs were ordered in batches, and sometimes the poles were ready for installation prior to the signs being received, but they would be in place as soon as possible.
- Mr McPeak noted his understanding of the frustrations felt regarding the Ballynahinch by-pass, advising that schemes were developed and taken forward for decision, but the final decision would be taken following any public consultation and be dependent on available funding.
- Rather than a dedicated phone number, everyone was encouraged to utilise the online reporting tool which would immediately prioritise and action any reports according to protocol.
- The winter service ran from mid-October until April, with the barns currently being at capacity for grit.
- All plans were in place with regard to the Ballynaclosa Road, however, the delay is an issue with the landowners and legal proceedings, and it was not possible to put a timeline on that process.
- Mr McPeak confirmed that DFI had also requested a meeting with the Minister regarding the bridge design, however the BRCD plan was to continue with the design. Any timeline would be dependent on the next stage of statutory orders and an environmental impact assessment, which typically spanned 4 or 5 years.
- Mr McPeak advised that every year, prior to the financial year, DFI always sought a multi-year budget to be able to effectively prepare schemes, highlighting that Northern Ireland could have whatever road quality it liked, it just required an appropriate budget.
- Potholes were noted as a complex issue, especially regarding the different number of potholes across the different Council areas. There was a difficulty in that potholes could be documented a number of times due to the online reporting tool, and while there were notably more potholes within this District, the repair of potholes was dependent on a number of factors such as road length, overall road condition and the width and depth of the pothole. While the number across different districts varied, the funding available to each district was proportionate.

Councillor Hanlon left the meeting during the above discussion – 7.18pm

The Chairperson thanked the delegation for their presentation and time.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 7.20pm.

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 7th October 2024.

Signed:

Chairperson

Chief Executive