

NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Minutes of Strategy, Policy & Resources Committee Meeting held on Thursday 23 January 2025 at 6.00pm in the Council Chamber, Downshire Civic Centre

In the Chair: Councillor T Howie

**In Attendance
in Chamber:**

Councillor C Bowsie
Councillor C King
Councillor D McAteer

Councillor O Hanlon
Councillor A Mathers
Councillor G Sharvin

**Committee Members in
Attendance via Teams:**

Councillor P Byrne
Councillor S O'Hare
Councillor D Taylor

Councillor W Clarke
Councillor A Quinn

**Officials in Attendance
in Chamber:**

Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services
Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Mr A Patterson, Director of Active & Healthy Communities
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager (Acting)
Mrs F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

**Officials in Attendance
Via Teams:**

Mr J McGilly, Assistant Director Regeneration
Mr P Rooney, Head of Legal Administration (Acting)

SPR/001/2025:

APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Enright, Reilly and Rice, and from Mrs S Murphy, Director of Sustainability & Environment.

SPR/002/2025:

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Sharvin declared an interest in item 4: IT Strategy 2030, and item 6: Proposed Renewal of Lease of Lands at Saul, Downpatrick.

SPR/003/2025:

**ACTION SHEET ARISING FROM STRATEGY, POLICY &
RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETING HELD 12 DECEMBER
2024**

Read:

Action Sheet of Strategy, Policy & Resources Committee meeting held 12 December 2024 **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor Mathers, it was agreed to approve the

**action sheet of Strategy, Policy & Resources
Committee meeting of 12 December 2024.**

FOR DISCUSSION / DECISION

Having declared an interest, Councillor Sharvin left the room at this stage – 6.05pm

SPR/004/2025: IT STRATEGY 2030

Read: Report from Ms V Keegan, Assistant Director of Digital & Communications, regarding IT Strategy 2030. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Ringland outlined that the new IT Strategy had been developed to provide a clear road map for how technology would support and drive the Council’s IT investment to help integrate technology into day-to-day services, with security and service continuity being key components of the strategy. He highlighted that the IT Strategy supported Council’s digital transformation strategy and would be overseen by a robust governance framework that was aligned with the audit recommendations from the previous IT Strategy.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor King, it was agreed to approve the draft IT Strategy 2030.**

SPR/005/2025: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION STRATEGY 2030

Read: Report from Ms V Keegan, Assistant Director of Digital & Communications, regarding IT Strategy 2030. **(Copy circulated)**

Ms Keegan outlined the new Digital Transformation Strategy which set out a high-level approach as to how Council would use digital technologies and innovative practices to enhance service delivery and support the longer-term transformation agenda. She confirmed that this would be delivered alongside a robust governance framework to ensure effective oversight and resource management during the implementation.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor King, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to approve the draft Digital Transformation Strategy 2030.**

Cllr McAteer joined the meeting during the above discussion – 6.09pm

ITEMS RESTRICTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH PART 1 OF SCHEDULE 6 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT (NI) 2014

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor King, it was agreed to exclude the public and press from the meeting during discussion on the following matters which related to exempt information by virtue of Paragraph 3 of Part 1 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 – information relating to the**

financial or business affairs of any particular person (including the Council holding that information).

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed the Committee come out of closed session.**

The Chairperson advised the following had been agreed whilst in closed session:

SPR/006/2025: PROPOSED LEASE OF LANDS AT SAUL, DOWNPATRICK

Read: Report from Mr P Rooney, Head of Legal Administration, regarding Proposed renewal of Lease of Lands at Saul, Downpatrick. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor McAteer, it was agreed to lease the lands outlined in red on the map attached to the Officer's Report with the party noted in the report for a period of 10 years subject to a peppercorn rent.**

Cllr Sharvin rejoined the meeting at this stage – 6.14pm

SPR/007/2025: PROPOSED RENEWAL OF LICENSE AT AUGHNAGUN, MAYOBRIDGE

Read: Report from Mr P Rooney, Head of Legal Administration, regarding Proposed Renewal of License at Aughnagun, Mayobridge. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor McAteer, seconded by Councillor Mathers, it was agreed to enter into three, one-year license agreements in respect of lands as shown hatched red on the map attached to the Officer's Report with the party noted in the report at no cost, subject to Departmental Consent.**

SPR/008/2025: PROPOSED LEASE OF LANDS AT BESSBROOK

Read: Report from Mr P Rooney, Head of Legal Administration, regarding the Proposed Lease of Lands at Bessbrook. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Mathers, seconded by Councillor King, it was agreed to enter into a lease with the group noted in the Officer's Report in respect of the lands as outlined in red on the map attached for a term of 25 years at a peppercorn rent, subject to Departmental Consent.**

SPR/009/2025:

REQUEST FOR PURCHASE OF LAND

Read:

Report from Mr A Patterson, Director of Active & Healthy Communities, regarding a Request for Purchase of Land. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor McAteer, it was agreed to the sale of lands outlined in red on the attached map to the party detailed within the Officer's Report for the value determined by Council's valuer. The sale will be subject to the inclusion of a buy back clause and the interested party paying Council's legal and valuation costs.

SPR/010/2025:

AHC CAPITAL PROJECTS

Read:

Report from Mr A Patterson, Director of Active & Healthy Communities, regarding a AHC Capital Projects. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to progress to the procurement and appointment of an Integrated Consultancy Team to progress the capital projects as detailed within the Officer's Report to RIBA Stage 3: Developed Design and Submission of planning applications.

SPR/011/2025:

PUBLIC REALM DOWNPATRICK UPDATE

Read:

Report from Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism, regarding a Public Realm Downpatrick Update. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Sharvin, it was agreed to request budget from the Capital Plan for 2024/25 to support the completion of one business plan submission as outlined within the Officer's Report

SPR/012/2025:

CASTLEWELLAN FOREST PARK

Read:

Report from Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration, regarding Castlewellan Forest Park. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Sharvin, the following was agreed:

- To proceed with the installation of gas infrastructure into Castlewellan Forest Park with the organisation as outlined within the Officer's Report.
- To proceed with the installation of internet connectivity / Fibre with the organisation as outlined within the Officer's Report.
- To proceed with the NIE connection and to increase the size of the cable.
- That Officer's investigate and liaise with NIE regarding the upgrade of the electricity supply infrastructure to ensure adequate loading to facilitate any future development, with a further report to be presented at Committee for approval.

FOR NOTING - ITEMS RESTRICTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH PART 1 OF SCHEDULE 6 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT (NI) 2014

SPR/013/2025: IT STRATEGY 2016 PROGRESS REVIEW

Read: Report from Ms V Keegan, Assistant Director Digital & Communications, regarding IT Strategy 2016 Progress Review. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor McAteer, it was agreed to note the contents of the Officer's Report**

SPR/014/2025: STRATEGIC FINANCE WORKING GROUP ACTION SHEET MEETINGS HELD 3RD AND 17TH DECEMBER 2024

Read: Strategic Finance Working Group Action Sheets of Meetings held 3rd and 17th December 2024 and 15 January 2025. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor McAteer, it was agreed to note action sheets.**

SPR/015/2025: PLANNING DEPARTMENT UPDATE

Read: Report from Mr J McGilly, Assistant Director Regeneration, regarding a Planning Department Update. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr McGilly outlined the contents of the Report and highlighted that the NILGA statistics contained within the Report included information up to September 2024, while the internal analysis statistics accounted for activity up to period ending 20 January 2025.

Councillor Bowsie commended the hard work of the staff within the Planning Department as evidenced by the improving statistics and raised some queries as below:

- Was there a projected timeline with regard to the LDP and consideration of Conservation Areas as important local heritage was being destroyed in the interim.
- What statistics were available with regard to the number of breaches being pursued and what impact did the backlog of planning applications have on these.
- What additional statistics could be made available with regard to staffing levels, staff retention and reasons for staff leaving their posts and was it possible to compare these with the rest of the Province.
- Caution should be shown with regard to performance improvement actions as they could potentially be demoralising which could have a negative impact on staff morale and retention rates.

Mr McGilly acknowledged the points raised and addressed Councillor Bowsie's queries as follows:

- The LDP was due to be agreed by the Planning Committee, Council and the Department within this upcoming year.
- Conservation Areas were currently considered in line with the Local Development Plan and would be reviewed under the Local Policies stage in due course.
- The enforcement statistics indicated that all enforcement cases were being pursued but were unfortunately hampered by resource challenges and the complexity of some cases. He stressed that 147 cases had been closed, while in the same period an additional 144 had been opened.
- No statistics were published with regard to other Council's staffing level, but this information was shared through discussions with other Councils.
- Performance improvement actions were handled with positivity and discretion, and all staff were involved in any discussions.

Councillor Hanlon stated that the main complaint she received from agents was the delay between application validation and allocation. She welcomed the ongoing recruitment but queried how any tangible outcomes would be visible to applicants. She recognised that poor applications caused delays, further welcoming the validations checklists that were to be tabled at a future Planning Committee meeting stating that these should help cut down on unnecessary delays in the processing of applications.

Councillor Taylor left the meeting at this stage – 6.57pm

Councillor Hanlon further queried when the LDP would be tabled for agreement, noting that it would affect everything across the District and stated that Council should be doing everything it could to address the concerns of the public regarding this.

Mr McGilly drew Members attention to the statistics from June 24 – September 24 within the report, noting in particular the significant increase in the number of applications being processed. He stated that while there were still a number of applications awaiting allocation, this had decreased significantly from the previous year. He outlined that reported processing times would increase as the Department began processing applications that had been in the system for some time.

Mr McGilly highlighted the issues with regard to statutory consultations, stressing there was a resource issue across the board in relation to planning applications. He outlined a pilot that Council had recently undertaken with NI Water and NI Environmental Agency (NIEA) which he hoped would decrease consultation times.

Councillor Sharvin stated that the Planning Department staff had been very responsive and continued to respond extremely well to queries. He queried the number of vacant posts that existed at present, what the interest in positions that had been advertised was, and whether there was anything that Council could do to make the positions more attractive.

Mr McGilly noted that there were two Planning Officer positions that were awaiting a start date, and a further recruitment was underway for 3 Planning Assistant positions, advising there had been a large number of applications for each position and reserve lists were utilised regularly.

Councillor Sharvin queried whether there had been any positive change from the strategic engagements with statutory consultees and queried whether any improvement had been noted following engagement sessions with agents to discuss application quality.

Mr McGilly stated that there were challenges across the board when it came to Planning applications, noting that delays were not always as a result of internal processes, highlighting again the resource issues faced by statutory consultees and the delay this had on applications. He advised that the Application Validation Checklists would be utilised by the Planning Department to attempt to gather all the relevant information up-front and would also establish time limits on agents responding to queries for further information.

Councillor Sharvin noted that every refused application on the weekly delegated list was called in and queried if there was a responsibility on all Members to assess if a call in had valid and credible planning reasons, rather than simply calling in every application as requested.

Councillor McAteer noted his support for the Planning Department stating that he felt progress had been made and further commended the pilots with NI Water and NIEA. He queried if it was possible for the Planning Department to have a surplus of staff to account for absences, such as maternity leave, to allow for the Department to remain on track with processing applications.

Councillor McAteer further queried the number of opportunities that applicants were given to resubmit information on poor quality applications as it slowed processing times. He further stressed his dismay at the time senior planners spent processing objections and felt that this could be limited somehow.

Mr Mallon confirmed that it had been agreed at Committee before Christmas to approve three new positions to complement the existing staff, noting that reserve lists were never utilised for long as they were exhausted quickly with the appointment of new staff. He noted his hope that the benefits of new staff and the pilot schemes would be visible in the coming months.

Mr Mallon addressed Councillor McAteer's comments in relation to poor quality applications and objections, stressing that they were two different issues. He confirmed that the planning process had to ensure that each objection was addressed and was something the Department of Infrastructure (DFI) was aware of. In relation to statutory consultees, he confirmed that DFI produced annual reports on statutory consultations, nothing that an updated report should be available soon for officers and members to consider.

Councillor Hanlon requested clarity around the call in process, confirming that she processed every call in form to be considered by the Planning Call-In Panel as she felt she was unable to consider an application in line with planning policies.

Mr Mallon confirmed that it was the remit of members of the Planning Call in Panel to consider each called in application.

Councillor Hanlon then requested clarity from Councillor McAteer regarding the hiring of women and any subsequent maternity leave requirements, and whether he was stating that Council should not hire women in case of absence.

Councillor McAteer stated that he was alluding to maternity leave as an example of absence but apologised for any offence caused and withdrew his comments.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the contents of the report.**

SPR/016/2025: **STATUTORY REPORTING: SECTION 75 POLICY SCREENING REPORT – QUARTERLY REPORT FOR PERIOD OCTOBER – DECEMBER 2024**

Read: Report from Mr C Moffett, Head of Corporate Policy, regarding Statutory Reporting: Section 75 Policy Screen Report – Quarterly Report for Period October – December 2024. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor King, seconded by Councillor Howie, it was agreed to note the Section 75 Policy Screening Report – Quarterly Report for period October – December 2024.**

SPR/017/2025: **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY IN LOCAL COUNCILS’ DIVERSITY AMBASSADOR NETWORK**

Read: Report from Mr C Moffett, Head of Corporate Policy, regarding Equality and Diversity in Local Councils’ Diversity Ambassador Network. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor King, seconded by Councillor Howie, it was agreed to note the correspondence from the LGSC Equality & Diversity Group regarding the establishment of a Diversity Ambassador Network.**

There being no further business, the Meeting concluded at 7.16pm

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 3 February 2025.

Signed: **Councillor Tierna Howie**
Chairperson

Signed: **Josephine Kelly**
 Director of Corporate Services