

NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Minutes of Strategy Policy & Resources Committee Meeting held on
Thursday 16 May 2024 at 6.00pm in the Council Chamber, Downshire Civic Centre**

In the Chair: Councillor S O'Hare

In Attendance in Chamber:

Councillor P Byrne	Councillor C Enright
Councillor O Hanlon	Councillor R Howell
Councillor T Howie	Councillor A Lewis
Councillor A Mathers	Councillor A Quinn
Councillor L McEvoy	Councillor H Reilly
Councillor M Rice	Councillor G Sharvin
Councillor D Taylor	

**Non-Committee Members
In Attendance in Chamber:**

Councillor J Truesdale

**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
Mr C Boyd, Assistant Director Capital and Procurement
Mr P Rooney, Head of Legal Administration
Ms S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager (Acting)
Ms F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

SPR/073/2024: APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillor McAteer.

SPR/074/2024: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Taylor declared an interest in Item 6 – Proposed Renewal of Lease of lands adjacent to Cloughreagh Community Centre.

SPR/075/2024: ACTION SHEET ARISING FROM STRATEGY, POLICY AND RESOURCES COMMITTEE MEETINGS HELD ON THURSDAY 18 APRIL 2024

Read: Action Sheet of the Strategy, Policy and Resources Committee Meeting held on Thursday 18 April 2024. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Mathers, seconded by Councillor Howell, it was agreed to approve the action sheet from the Strategy, Policy and Resources Committee Meeting held on 18 April 2024.**

NOTICE OF MOTION

SPR/076/2024

NOTICE OF MOTION – PROJECTED RATES INCREASE

Read:

Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration and Tourism, regarding Notice of Motion – Projected Rates Increase (C/060/2024). **(Copy circulated)**

In proposing his motion, Councillor Enright outlined three investment categories that he believed Council should invest money into and stated that the new proposed Newry Civic Centre at Abbey Way was an example of a product that was not financially responsible. He noted that he still had a large number of unanswered questions, queried the governance of the project, and reminded Members that his issue had been referred to the NI Audit Office and the local government ombudsman.

He advised that estimates for the project ranged between £14 and £17 million for a building he believed was much larger than necessary to house Newry based Council staff. He confirmed that his Party believed that a "Plan B" was needed for the proposed project that provided no on-site parking for staff. He stated that he believed his motion should be forwarded to the Strategic Finance Working Group (SFWG) with a clear instruction to reduce long term borrowing, advising that frontline services like parks or leisure centres should be prioritised and that projects such as the Newry Civic Centre should be minimised to try to minimise any rates increases.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Howie referenced the inappropriateness of a large administration building consuming a large portion of Council's capital budget. She referenced planning and statutory consultees objections regarding the plans and called for Council to consider a Plan B for the Civic Centre. She stressed her concerns regarding parking provision within the City and noted that DFI Roads had advised that 376 parking spaces would be needed, which would be difficult given the loss of parking space required to build the new civic centre.

Councillor Sharvin requested clarification on the aim of Councillor Enright's Motion as he believed it referenced one capital project despite Council having numerous ongoing capital projects.

Councillor Enright clarified that he believed that Council must tailor its investment plans to ensure there were minimal rates increases and that this required a re-examination of capital expenditure to attempt to reduce the impact on budgets relating to borrowing. He stated that he focused on the Newry Civic Centre as it was the largest investment going forward.

Mr Mallon noted that the Officer's Report detailed responses to Councillor Enright's Motion in relation to rates and financial scrutiny, office accommodation and outlined that Council proposed to provide accommodation with an employee to desk ratio of 75% due to agile working, a model which was replicated across other public sector bodies. He addressed Councillor Howie's statement regarding objections from statutory consultees and noted that they weren't objections but concerns and this was not unusual and part of the planning process for such a large project. The Planning Department and statutory consultees had been in discussion, and further responses would be issued in the coming days in response to issues raised.

Mr Mallon further advised that the North Street site was not a formal car park, although it had been temporarily used as such. He advised that Council had entered into discussions with the

Department in respect of a lease for the site and agreed that a planning application would run in parallel to the lease discussions. He further noted that within the Report it detailed parking requirements for Council staff, that 182 staff currently utilise public parking spaces within Newry, and this relocation of staff to the new Civic Centre would not increase demand on public spaces within the City. He further noted that numerous alternative sites (33 in total) had been assessed and it had been agreed at a 2019 Strategy, Policy and Resources Committee, which was appended to the Officer's Report that the Abbey Way site had been selected as the most appropriate site.

Councillor Mathers stated that continuous underfunding within Newry had resulted in families, friends and neighbours leaving the area due to increasing unemployment. He noted that he had witnessed the hope that was returning to Newry following on from the proposed investment from people in the voluntary, community, public and private sectors and believed that the Alliance Party was attempting to prevent these projects. He noted that the young people of the area were witnessing almost £200million investment which would grow the local economy, create more jobs and provide better working conditions for Council staff and would, in turn, encourage further potential investment into the area.

Councillor Byrne noted his support for the recommendations in the Officer's Report and stated that he shared in the optimism for the future of the area given the potential for future investment from the private sector. He referenced a meeting he had recently attended with American investors where the Dublin Belfast Economic Corridor (DBEC) had been discussed and it had been raised that there was a lack of investment along the economic corridor. He advised that elected representatives had to grasp every opportunity to secure investment to enhance the district. He understood the concerns regarding capital projects and advised that it was the role of the Programme Board to practice their due diligence, but they needed the work to progress the project as approved.

Councillor Byrne noted that projects progress through a stringent process with both the Department and independent economists, and the Civic Hub had been approved which all supported the regeneration of Newry. He supported a review of capital project spend overall but urged caution when drilling down into singular issues such as parking and stated that Council had an obligation to deliver investment for the whole city and projects could not be hampered if parking was unavailable at the front door.

Councillor Taylor noted that he was a member of the Programme Board and urged Members not to be deliberately obstructive but advised that there did appear to be genuine concerns that should be addressed while allowing the Planning process to continue. He confirmed that the job of an elected representative was to be responsible and constructive when raising issues and concerns, especially in relation to large amounts of money.

Councillor Hanlon noted her Party's support for the officer's recommendations and echoed Councillor Taylor's sentiments of elected representatives being responsible and constructive. She noted her frustration at having gone through this subject matter numerous times, despite it having already been scrutinised by governance processes and an external audit company with no issues being raised. She stated that the Newry Civic Centre was not a non-essential project and highlighted that the Downshire Civic Centre was a successful public sector hub that housed numerous public services.

Councillor Hanlon reiterated the agreement that was taken during the Shadow Council period that there would be two administrative hubs within the Council area due to the size of the district and it was unhelpful to pit one against the other when discussing the new Civic Centre. She stated that there may come a time when a Plan B was needed, but now was not the time. She argued that hybrid working was the future as the need for high quality flexible

workspaces continued to soar and it showed Council as being innovative in securing that space.

Councillor Sharvin confirmed Downpatrick was very important to Newry, Mourne and Down and that Downpatrick staff would not be impacted by a new Civic Centre. He noted that there seemed to be a theme of parking and reminded Members that dedicated parking was not a requirement of a role as many had to secure their own parking, particularly in Belfast. He urged Members not to get caught up in singular issues such as parking as there was a planning process in place with DFI Roads to manage this and it was being addressed. He queried other elements of the capital project programme that didn't appear to have any issues from Members, such as the Theatre and Conference Centre that was fully funded by Council. He then proposed an amendment to the report to include a further recommendation that "*Council carry out a review of the capital projects programme at SFWG to identify whether the planned capital projects were an accurate reflection of Council's objectives*". This was seconded by Councillor Hanlon.

Mrs Ward queried if the amendment was agreed that Council would continue to deliver on the Newry Civic Centre to which Councillor Sharvin confirmed that his proposal would not stop work on the Newry City Centre but was in addition to the Officer Recommendations, to review whether the planned capital projects were an accurate reflection of Council's objectives.

Councillor Byrne left the meeting at this stage – 6:47pm

Following a query from Councillor Quinn regarding time frames, Mrs Ward advised that Abbey Way was agreed pre-covid and a programme of works had been put in place, but a number of issues had happened that slowed the delivery progress. Mrs Ward highlighted that all delays cause further cost increases which was a concern for Council, but Planning was underway.

Councillor Reilly noted his Party's concerns regarding the site selection from the outset and stated he had hopes of it being built on a few acres in the Middlebank area and Council would have had a facility for Newry that would have been world renowned. He also expressed his Party's recognition of the importance of a civic centre hub within Newry in relation to the regeneration of the City. He queried whether the acquisition of the unofficial North Street car park land would alleviate the parking issues as noted within the Report.

Mrs Ward noted that Council took governance very seriously and reassured Members that Council would continue to do so. She highlighted that various structures were in place to manage capital projects; scrutiny was provided by SFWG, and the SP&R Committee and external specialist consultants were appointed to work through every stage of delivery of a project. She reminded Members that qualified quantity surveyors determined costs of a project and monitored them throughout. She further outlined the social aspect of the project in that the current building in Monaghan Row had been sold to the Southern Trust to allow for expansion of their services.

Mrs Ward further highlighted the significant consideration of sites for the Civic Centre and made particular reference to Councillor's mention of a civic centre on the Albert Basin. She stressed to Members that this was not an option as a lot of work had gone into agreeing the Albert Basin as a 15-acre park following a notice of motion to Council and Council was committed to delivering this park. She further highlighted that Planning issues arose during any significant project however any concerns would be addressed through the appropriate channels, especially relating to transport and parking. She noted the movement from the green agenda and the need to consider sustainable transport and confirmed that North

Street parking would address some parking concerns, but it would be DFI Roads who would make that determination.

Mrs Ward confirmed that the governance process regarding the site selection had been audited by an external auditor and independent internal consultants and neither had found any cause for concern. She highlighted that when plans were being discussed and progressed for the Downshire Civic Centre that there had been concerns raised too, and the site was now a success. She finally confirmed that there would be no requirement for staff based in Downpatrick to relocate and for Members to consider Newry based staff who had been very co-operative to date in working from various locations but who now needed assurance that they too were valued, and their work space was being invested in.

In summing up, Councillor Enright reiterated his concerns regarding cost and section 2.5 of the Officer's Report, which detailed the decision making of Council in 2019. He stated that the Report implied a lack of understanding of how to manage large projects, and the fact that a Plan B was needed immediately and stressed that Council needed to look at other sites. He stressed that he was supportive of an office for Newry based staff but that the cost implications of the build needed reconsideration. He detailed some site options again, those of Lidl, Dunnes or the Albert Basin.

Councillor Hanlon noted her disagreement for a Plan B and urged Members to focus on the project that was tabled and to not go through all the detail of the project as had happened numerous times in the past and received external and internal auditor approval.

Councillor Sharvin requested clarity on a statement made during the debate and queried if the Alliance Party were requesting that the design for the Newry City Park be amended and impacted with the inclusion of the Newry Civic Centre plans. He stressed that this would impact external funding already secured and require a public consultation following amended designs being agreed with the Department.

Councillor Hanlon queried whether Councillors Enright and Howie understood the Report tabled, the governance report regarding the site selection of Abbey Way and how it came to be. She reminded Members that this was decided on in 2019. She highlighted that the Lidl site referred to was number 8 on the recommendations report, and Dunnes was not an option as it was not for sale.

Councillor Enright noted that he understood the Report and highlighted that it was several years old and statutory consultees had current objections to the Abbey Way site.

Councillor Hanlon reminded Councillor Enright that as a Planning Committee member he would be aware of the process of major Planning applications, and regular consultations occur with statutory consultees and return with conditions to be adhered to. She urged Members to follow the process, to allow for Planning applications to be processed as usual and any conditions or amendments would be tabled accordingly. She further queried a point of clarity whether the Alliance Party were requesting that the design for the Newry City Park at Abbey Basin be amended to allow for the inclusion of the Newry Civic Hub.

Councillor Quinn queried whether Council was at risk of losing the Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD) funding if the projects were not to be completed.

Mrs Ward advised that the projects were all linked with the BCRD and needed to continue to ensure that funding was realised. She highlighted to Members that inaccurate and misleading statements were unhelpful and potentially a breach of the Councillor's Code of Conduct, stressed that Council had no issue with challenge on projects and

recommendations but reminded Members that it needed to be reflective of facts. She further stressed that Council would not be looking at constructing a Civic Hub at the Albert Basin and reiterated Council's commitment to building a City Park at that location. She responded directly to Councillor Enright's statement regarding Council's lack of understanding on delivering large projects and highlighted the immense skill set of every member of the capital projects team and noted the numerous leisure centres, community centres and parks that had been delivered to date.

Councillor Taylor thanked Mrs Ward for the clarity of the project in relation to the the Albert Basin and noted that the community had made their expectations very clear regarding this project. He queried whether Councillor Enright wanted to deliver the Civic Centre project as he noted his confusion as the debate continued. He requested clarity from Councillor Enright regarding his expectations and noted his support for Councillor Sharvin's amendment. He called for the Programme Board to be updated on a more regular basis but stressed that concerns did need to be addressed.

Councillor Enright stressed that the Abbey Way site was running into difficulties and highlighted that his understanding of parking requirements was not wrong and therefore not inaccurate.

Following further debate regarding parking requirements, Mr Mallon confirmed that as previously advised by the CEO the current demand for the new building, as agreed with DfI, was 133 spaces.

Mrs Ward reminded Members that Council had considered 33 sites within Newry for the Civic Centre, and it was agreed at an SP&R committee in August 2019 that Abbey Way site was the preferred site. She further reminded Members that Council had made a public call to developers to establish if there was an interest in developing on their sites.

Councillor Lewis queried the role of the Project Board as he believed that this was something that should have been covered under that remit. He queried the purpose of continually debating the same topic at different meetings, especially a 90-minute debate that had already been discussed at length. He queried if all Parties had representatives on the Project Board.

Councillor Rice left the meeting at this stage – 07.15pm

Following a further query from Councillor Lewis regarding a reminder of the decisions and process to date for all Councillors, Mrs Ward confirmed that a controlled read had been offered to all Councillors regarding the process audited in 2021 over a number of dates during the past week and was available by request to read as needed. She further advised that Project Boards oversee and manage a project and they would highlight and report any major changes to this Committee. She further noted that the democratic mandate as referred to in Councillor Enright's Motion led to this item being debated again at Committee, and further stressed that Council deliver on the democratic mandate of Council.

As there was dissent within the Chamber, the item was put to a vote with Councillor Sharvin's amendment and the results were as follows:

FOR	8
AGAINST	2
ABSTENTIONS	2

The proposal was declared carried.

AGREED:

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

- **To proceed as per the Council decision to deliver the NCCR Programme of works as agreed including development of the Civic and Regional Hub at Abbey Way Newry.**
- **To note Council's decision for two offices, one in Newry and one in Downpatrick.**
- **To note the new Civic Hub in Newry provides the facilities to deliver on the needs of the Council going forward in respect of accommodation for both staff and elected members and is in line with the Council's Agile working policy.**
- **To note that an extensive site selection exercise was completed in 2019, that considered the Lidl site, and Council approved Abbey Way site as the preferred location for the Civic Hub.**
- **To note that it is anticipated that the carpark income levels at Abbey Way will not be negatively impacted.**
- **Council carries out a review of the capital projects programme at SFWG to identify whether the planned capital projects were an accurate reflection of Council's objectives, alongside the continued delivery of Newry Civic Centre.**

Councillor Rice rejoined the meeting at this stage – 7.23pm

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

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor McEvoy, seconded by Councillor Mathers, 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 Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Howell, it was agreed the Committee come out of closed session.

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

SPR/077/2024

PROPOSED LEASE OF LANDS AT ORIOR PARK, BESSBROOK

Read: Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr P Rooney, Head of Legal Administration, regarding Lease of Playing Fields at Orior Park, Bessbrook. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Quinn, seconded by Councillor Mathers, it was agreed to enter into a lease with the club noted in the Officer's Report for a term of 25 years at a peppercorn rent subject to Departmental consent.**

Councillor Talyor left the meeting for discussion on this item, having previously declared an interest – 07.25pm

SPR/078/2024 **PROPOSED RENEWAL OF LEASE OF LANDS ADJACENT TO CLOUGHREAGH COMMUNITY CENTRE.**

Read: Report dated 18 April 2024 from Mr P Rooney, Head of Administration, regarding the Proposed Renewal of Lease of Lands adjacent to Cloughreagh Community Centre, Bessbrook. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Mathers, seconded by Councillor Sharvin, it was agreed to grant a renewal of lease in respect of the lands shaded red to the party noted for a period of 25 years subject to the market rent all as outlined within the Officer's Report.**

Councillor Talyor re-entered the chamber at this stage – 7.30pm

SPR/079/2024: **DEPARTMENT OF INFRASTRUCTURE RIVERS AND NEWRY, MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL LEGAL AGREEMENT**

Read: Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration and Tourism, regarding a Contract with DFI Rivers. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to approve the draft agreement to be signed.**

SPR/080/2024: **NEWRY LEISURE CENTRE**

Read: Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Boyd, Assistant Director: Capital Projects and Procurement, regarding Newry Leisure Centre. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Mathers, seconded by Councillor Howell, it was agreed to approve**

**the final invoice and retention owed to Contractor as outlined within the Officer's Report.
It was also agreed to approve the Final Account of Newry Leisure Centre – Phase 1 as outlined within the Officer's Report.**

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

SPR/081/2024:

IT UPDATE

Read: Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mrs J Kelly, Director Corporate Services, regarding an IT Programme Highlight Report. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Lewis, seconded by Councillor Howell, it was agreed to note the contents of the Officer's Report.**

SPR/082/2024:

NEWRY SWIMMING POOL UPDATE

Read: A verbal update was provided by Mr A Patterson, Director of Active and Healthy Communities, regarding an update on Newry Swimming Pool.

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Howell, seconded by Councillor Quinn, it was agreed to note the verbal update from Officers regarding Newry Swimming Pool.**

SPR/083/2024:

LABOUR MARKET PARTNERSHIP FUNDING UPDATE

Read: Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration and Tourism, regarding Labour Market Partnership (LMP) Update. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Howell, seconded by Councillor Quinn, it was agreed to note the contents of the Officer's Report.**

SPR/084/2024:

SPECIFIC DELEGATED AUTHORITY

Read: Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services, regarding a specific delegated authority. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Howell, seconded by Councillor Quinn, it was agreed to note that**

delegation had been exercised by the Chief Executive regarding a legal health and safety matter in the best interests of the Council and is being reported in accordance with 3.1.11 of the Council's Scheme of Delegation for Officers.

FOR NOTING

SPR/085/2024:

STATUTORY REPORTING – RURAL NEEDS ANNUAL MONITORING REPORT FOR PERIOD 1 APRIL 2023 – 31 MARCH 2024

Read:

Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Moffett, Head of Corporate Policy, regarding Statutory Reporting – Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report for Period 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed:

On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Howell, it was agreed to note the completed annual return prepared and submit to DAERA to meet their requested deadline of 21 June 2024.

SPR/086/2024:

STATUTORY REPORTING – SECTION 75 POLICY SCREENING REPORT – QUARTERLY REPORT FOR PERIOD JANUARY – MARCH 2024

Read:

Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Moffett, Head of Corporate Policy, regarding Statutory Reporting – Section 75 Policy Screening Report – Quarterly Report for Period January – March 2024. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed:

On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Howell, it was agreed to note the contents of the report.

SPR/087/2024:

ANNUAL REPORT FOR THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2023 – 31 MARCH 2024 ON REQUESTS RELATED TO NAMING COUNCIL FACILITIES, PLANTING TREES AND TO LOCATE ARTWORKS/SCULPTURES ON COUNCIL PROPERTY

Read:

Report dated 16 May 2024 from Mr C Moffett, Head of Corporate Policy, regarding annual report for the period 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 on requests related to naming Council facilities, planting trees and to locate artworks/sculptures on Council property. **(Copy circulated)**

Agreed:

It was agreed on the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Howell, to note the contents of the report.

There being no further business, the Meeting concluded at 7:41pm

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 3rd June 2024.

Signed: **Councillor Siobhan O'Hare**
 Chairperson

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