NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Ref: AC/2026

Minutes of Audit Committee Meeting held on Thursday 24 September 2026, at 2.00pm, in the Mourne Room, Downshire Civic Centre, Downpatrick

Chairperson: Ms B Slevin, Independent Chairperson

Committee Members in attendance: Councillor C Bowsie, Councillor J Brennan, Councillor O Hanlon

Committee Members in attendance via Teams: Councillor L Devlin, Councillor K Murphy

Non-Committee Members In attendance via Teams: Councillor J Truesdale

Officials in attendance via Teams:
Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Mrs S Murphy, Director of Sustainability & Environment
Mr A Patterson, Director of Active & Healthy Communities
Mr C Boyd, Assistant Director of Capital & Procurement
Ms J Tierney, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Ms F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer
Mr C Smyth, Democratic Services Officer

Officials in attendance Via Teams:
Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Ms E Kirk, Assistant Director of Legal & People
Mr J McGilly, Assistant Director: Regeneration

Also in attendance:
Ms C Hagan Sumer NI
Ms S Jones NIAO
Ms C O'Hagan NIAO

AC/062/2026: **APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS**

Apologies were received from Councillors Byrne and C King.

Ms Slevin noted that the proposed meeting dates were not aligned with the reporting schedule and asked Members whether they would be content to realign the dates accordingly. She advised that the proposed meetings scheduled for January 2027 and April 2027 should be rescheduled to 3 December 2026 and 25 March 2027 respectively.

Councillor Bowsie proposed the amended dates, which was seconded by Councillor Brennan.

AC/063/2026: **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

AC/064/2026: **ACTION SHEET OF AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD 30 JULY 2026**

Read: Action Sheet arising from the Audit Committee Meeting held on 30 July 2026. (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the Action Sheet for Audit Committee Meeting held 30 July 2026.**

PERFORMANCE

AC/065/2026: **ANNUAL ASSESSMENT OF PERFORMANCE 25/26**

Read: Report from Ms C Hughes, Acting Head of Performance & Improvement, regarding Annual Assessment of Performance 25/26 (Copy circulated)

Ms Hughes advised that the report detailed Council's performance improvement objectives for 2025/26, along with the self-imposed performance indicators aligned to the eight corporate objectives as set out in the Corporate Plan 2024-2027. She noted that the report had been approved by the SP&R Committee in August, ratified by Council in September, and subsequently published on the Council's website in compliance with the statutory publication deadline of 3 September 2026.

Ms Slevin thanked Ms Hughes and her team for the comprehensive work in producing the report.

Councillor Bowsie welcomed the clear, well-presented report and queried three areas as follows:

- He welcomed the £2m of financial assistance being allocated from Council but queried the success rate of 61% and why 39% of applicants were not receiving funding.
- He welcomed the popularity of the Leisure Services and queried how the increased demand was to be managed.
- He noted his concern that 78% of fleet breakdown was related to vehicles under 8 years of age, querying whether this was considered a young age for a vehicle breakdown.

The responses were provided as follows:

- Mr Mallon reminded Councillor Bowsie that as previously discussed, there were a number of reasons why groups were unsuccessful with financial assistance, ranging from not meeting mandatory requirements to insufficient budget. He noted that applicants may be successful, however they were scored and ranked below the level of funding that was available.
- Mr Patterson advised that work was progressing within Leisure Services regarding customer satisfaction, reminding members that a report had been tabled at the most recent AHC Committee meeting that detailed future actions regarding customer satisfaction.

- Mrs Murphy advised that 7 years was the fleet replacement recommendation and that she would revert to Councillor Bowsie directly regarding the detail of breakdowns.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the following:**

- **Assessment of Performance 2025-26, including the summary document "Our Performance Looking Back Going Forward".**
- **The addendum to the Assessment of Performance detailing the summary of changes to the planning statistics.**

AC/066/2026: **PLANNING DEPARTMENT UPDATE**

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

Mr McGilly outlined the report, noting that it was an ongoing report that would continue to be presented at Committee. He advised that the report had been considered by the SP&R Committee the previous week and detailed the performance of the Planning Department against its 2025/26 targets, together with the most recent performance data extracted from the Council's internal reporting systems.

Councillor Bowsie expressed concern regarding the Planning Department's performance, noting that processing times remained significantly above both the Northern Ireland average and those achieved by other councils. He highlighted that Belfast City Council, despite receiving a higher volume of planning applications, had achieved considerably shorter processing times. He questioned whether the Planning Service Improvement Programme was delivering the intended outcomes and sought clarification on whether additional staffing resources were required to improve performance.

Mr Mallon advised that staffing resources had been discussed at the SP&R Committee the previous week, reiterating that engagement with the Department and a review of the Council's performance improvement proposals had indicated that staffing and resources within the Planning Service were considered adequate. He explained that the fundamental challenge remained the historic backlog of planning applications and while the Council continued to process a significant volume of applications, second only to Belfast City Council, performance statistics were based on the time elapsed between receipt and determination of applications. As a result, the determination of older applications continued to adversely affect performance figures. Mr Mallon reminded Members that proposals to address the backlog would be presented to the SP&R Committee in the coming month, with the aim of improving performance against the statutory targets.

Councillor Bowsie stated that he was not satisfied with the response provided, noting that similar explanations had been given over a number of years without a corresponding improvement in performance. He highlighted that Belfast City Council, despite processing a higher volume of planning applications, continued to achieve significantly shorter determination times for local applications. He expressed the view that there were ongoing issues within the Planning Department and sought clarification on the implications of

continued failure to meet statutory performance targets, including whether external intervention or audit oversight could arise as a result.

Mr Mallon cautioned that comparisons with Belfast City Council should be viewed in context, stating that, unlike Belfast's predominantly urban environment, the Newry, Mourne and Down district contained extensive environmental and landscape designations, including Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the Global Geopark. As a result, planning applications often required consultation with a range of external bodies, which added complexity to the planning process and had a subsequent impact processing time.

Councillor Hanlon noted that the report had already been considered in detail by the SP&R Committee and welcomed its presentation to the Audit Committee, reiterating her view that the planning application backlog represented a significant risk to the Council and therefore warranted oversight by both committees. She welcomed the detailed report and the assurance that regular updates would be brought forward to enable Members to monitor trends and assess progress over time. While emphasising the need to improve performance and address the backlog, she also stressed the importance of supporting and protecting Planning Department staff as Council employees.

Ms Slevin requested that reports relating to the Planning Department also be presented to the Audit Committee. She noted that the planning application backlog represented a risk to the Council and therefore considered it important that the Committee maintained oversight of any actions, developments and performance improvements associated with addressing the backlog.

Councillor Devlin welcomed the contribution being made by apprentices within the Planning Service and noted positive feedback received from members of the public regarding their work, querying whether opportunities existed to recruit additional apprentices to further support the service. She also referred to the significant delays arising from statutory consultees and acknowledged the impact these delays were having on the processing of planning applications and queried whether consideration had been given to issuing consultation requests at the validation stage of an application, rather than waiting until a case officer had been assigned, with a view to progressing applications more efficiently and reducing delays within the system.

Mr McGilly noted that while that approach presented certain challenges, it was an option being actively explored. With regard to delays associated with statutory consultees, he explained that this issue was being monitored at a Northern Ireland level through engagement with the Department and the Statutory Consultee Forum. He advised that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) had introduced a programme of change aimed at improving consultation response times and, while still at an early stage, there were initial indications that progress was being made. Mr McGilly also advised Members that delays in obtaining consultee responses remained a challenge for Councils across Northern Ireland and continued to be closely monitored.

Councillor Truesdale referred to concerns previously raised at the SP&R Committee regarding planning enforcement and queried whether enforcement cases were tracked electronically, noting that she believed enforcement matters often involved multiple departments and expressed concern that cases could be delayed or overlooked as they progressed through the system.

Mr McGilly advised that planning enforcement cases were electronically tracked through the MasterGov system, which was also used to monitor local and major planning applications and confirmed that the system included functionality for tracking enforcement cases.

Councillor Truesdale referred to a recent planning approval for a change of use from a hairdresser's premises to an office in Downpatrick for her Party, which she noted had taken 207 weeks to be determined. She sought clarification on whether a proposed approach of allocating caseloads based on complexity, rather than date received, would help to ensure that straightforward applications of this nature could be processed more quickly in future.

Mr McGilly advised that he was unable to comment on individual applications without considering any relevant detail.

Following a query from Councillor Hanlon regarding the appropriateness of querying a personal planning application, Mrs Ward acknowledged that Councillor Truesdale had likely referred to the specific planning application as an illustrative example. However, Mrs Ward reminded Members that Committee meetings should not be used to seek information on individual cases or applications and advised Members to exercise caution in this regard. She advised that it was not appropriate to raise or discuss individual planning applications within the context of the Committee's proceedings.

Ms Slevin advised Members to discuss individual queries directly with officers.

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

CORPORATE SERVICES – OPEN SESSION

AC/067/2026: **CORPORATE RISK REGISTER, TO INCLUDE S&E RISK REGISTER**

Read: Report from Ms A Jones, Director of Corporate Services, regarding Corporate Risk Register. (Copy circulated)

Ms Jones outlined the report and Corporate Risk Register, confirming that it had been reviewed by Senior Management (SMT) on 8 September and was informed by Quarter 1 assurance statements. She advised that the register identified 12 corporate risks, comprising seven red risks, four amber risks and one yellow risk, and confirmed that no new risks had been added since the previous review.

Ms Jones reminded Members that Directorate Risk Registers were presented to the Audit Committee on a rotational basis and advised that the Sustainability and Environment Directorate Risk Register was included for consideration, noting that eight risks had been identified within the Directorate Register, including two new risks relating to defendant insurance claims and compliance with health and safety requirements. Of the eight risks, five were rated red and three were rated amber, with two risks having increased in score since September 2025.

Councillor Bowsie welcomed the information provided on progress to date in relation to the Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) but suggested that Members be provided with a project schedule to assist in monitoring key milestones and ensuring delivery remained on track.

Mr Mallon advised that the first BRCD Tourism Project Board meeting had been convened the previous day, with representation from all parties. He noted that the project risk register and proposed delivery programme had been considered and discussed and confirmed that updates would continue to be reported through the established governance structures, enabling Members to monitor progress.

Ms Slevin requested further detail on the S&E Risk Register given the two new risks that had been identified.

Mrs Murphy advised that the Sustainability and Environment Directorate Risk Register had been reviewed during Quarter 1, noting that two existing risks had increased in score, including the fleet management risk, which had been reassessed in light of issues relating to driver behaviour, speeding offences, insurance claims and a vehicle overturn incident. She also advised that the cemeteries risk score had been revised following a realignment of the risk assessment methodology.

Mrs Murphy further advised that two new risks had been added to the register, relating to insurance claims management and health and safety compliance and outlined a number of mitigating actions, including the appointment of an Insurance Officer, implementation of a fleet action plan, the introduction of technology to support driver behaviour management, staff training initiatives, and ongoing health and safety improvement measures. She noted that the two new risks were closely linked and were being actively managed through a range of associated action plans.

Following a query from Councillor Bowsie regarding burial space within the District, Mrs Murphy advised that work was currently underway regarding a review of burial provision across the district, taking account of the remaining capacity and potential capacity for expansion at those sites.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Brennan, it was agreed to approve the updates to the Corporate Risk Register highlighted within the summary at Appendix 1, full Corporate Risk Register as evidenced at Appendix 2. It was also to note the revised Sustainability & Environment Directorate Risk Register at Appendix 3 and detailed Sustainability and Environment Directorate Risk Register at Appendix 4.**

ITEMS RESTRICTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH PART 3 OF SCHEDULE 6 OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2014

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Brennan, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to exclude the public and press from the meeting during the following items which related to exempt information by virtue of Part 3 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern**

Ireland) 2014 – Information relating to the financial or business affairs of a particular person (including the Council holding that information) and the public may, by resolution, be excluded during these items of business.

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Brennan, it was agreed to come out of Closed Session.**

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

CORPORATE SERVICES – CLOSED SESSION

AC/068/2026: **DIRECT AWARD CONTRACTS REPORT**

Read: Report Ms A Jones, Director of Corporate Services, regarding Direct Award Contracts. (Copy circulated)

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

- **The 2026/27 Q2 update in relation to Direct Award Contracts.**
- **The Direct Award Activity 2026/27 year in review (Q1&2) totals**
- **The Active Direct Award Contracts as of 11/09/2026**

AC/069/2026: **PROCUREMENT ACTION PLANS**

Read: Report Mr C Boyd, Assistant Director of Capital Projects & Procurement, regarding Procurement Action Plans. (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the Directorate Procurement Action Plans.**

AC/070/2026: **UPDATE ON AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS**

Read: Report from Ms J Tierney, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Update on Audit Recommendations. (Copy circulated)

Ms Slevin advised that, moving forward, reports should include details of any associated risk implications arising from recommendations that had not yet been implemented. She emphasised the importance of ensuring that the Committee was kept informed of any risks associated with delayed or outstanding actions.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor K Murphy, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the progress in implementing both internal and external audit recommendations.**

AC/071/2026: **UPDATE ON FRAUD AND RAISING CONCERNS**

Read: Report from Ms A Jones, Director of Corporate Services, regarding Update on Fraud and Raising Concerns. (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Devlin, it was agreed to note the following:**

- **The update in relation to fraud and raising concerns cases as detailed at Appendix 1**
- **The progress on actions arising from the NIAO Internal Fraud Risk self-assessment**

INTERNAL AUDIT (CLOSED SESSION)

AC/071/2026: **SUMER NI SUMMARY REPORT**

Read: Sumer NI Summary Report (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Brennan, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Sumer NI Summary Report, including:**

- **Mid-Year Follow Up Report**
- **PCSP Report**

NIAO – CLOSED SESSION

AC/073/2026: **DRAFT REPORT FOR THOSE CHARGED WITH GOVERNANCE**

Read: Draft Report for Those Charged with Governance (Copy circulated)

Cllr Devlin left the meeting at this stage – 2.49pm

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Brennan, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to remove this item from the agenda.**

CIRCULARS

AC/074/2026: **DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE – COMMERCIAL DELIVERY GROUP, MAJOR IT PROJECTS – LESSONS LEARNED REPORT JULY 2026**

Read: Department of Finance – Commercial Delivery Group. Major IT projects. Lessons learned report. July 2026 (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the circular.**

AC/075/2026: **NATIONAL FRAUD INITIATIVE IN NI 2026-27: INSTRUCTIONS**

Read: National Fraud Initiative in NI 2026-27: Instructions (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the circular.**

AC/076/2026: **NIAO SELF APPRAISAL CHECKLIST: NFI**

Read: NIAO Self Appraisal Checklist: NFI (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the circular.**

AC/077/2026: **NIAO MEDIA RELEASE – LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUDITORS REPORT 2026**

Read: NIAO Media Release – Local Government Auditors Report 2026 (Copy circulated)

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the circular.**

There being no further business the meeting concluded at 3.08pm

For consideration at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 2 November 2026.

Signed: _____
Mrs M Ward
Chief Executive

Signed: _____
Ms B Slevin
Independent Chairperson