

NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Ref: AC/2026

**Minutes of Audit Committee Meeting held on Thursday 29 January 2026, at
2.00pm, in the Mourne Room, Downshire Civic Centre, Downpatrick**

Chairperson: Ms B Slevin, Independent Chairperson

Committee Members in attendance in Chamber: Councillor C Bowsie Councillor O Hanlon

Committee Members in Attendance via Teams: Councillor P Byrne Councillor J Brennan
Councillor K Murphy

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

Officials in attendance in Chamber: Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
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
Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance
Ms E Kirk, Assistant Director of Legal & People
Ms A Smyth, Assistant Director of Economy, Growth and Tourism
Ms C Hughes, Head of Performance and Improvement
Ms S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Ms F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

Officials in attendance via Teams: Mr J McGilly, Assistant Director of Regeneration

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

Also in attendance via Teams: Ms C O'Hagan NIAO
Ms K Doey NIAO

AC/001/2026: APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Devlin, Howie, C King and O'Hare

Councillor Bowsie queried why Item 15 – Mourne Mountain Gateway Project (MMGP) Update was to be held in closed session, noting that the item merely recorded the

costs incurred to date for the project, to which Mrs Ward advised that the form contained financial information relating to the organisation and was considered an exempt item.

Councillor Bowsie read out the reasoning for the closed session item and argued that there was no personal or identifiable information contained within the report and that it should be held in open session, to which Ms Slevin and Mrs Ward stated that the Council was acting as the professional body and was entitled to hold items in closed session.

Councillor Bowsie noted that by the reasoning stated, the Council could hold every item in closed session, which he believed was unacceptable and queried whether the information would ever be made public, to which Mrs Ward and Mr Byrne confirmed that the figures would be made public in the 2025/26 financial statements.

Councillor Bowsie noted that he had previously requested legal advice on closed session legislation in April 2025 and was still awaiting a response. Mrs Ward advised that a new Assistant Director of Legal and People was now in post and that an update would be tabled at a subsequent meeting of the Strategy, Policy & Resources Committee. She confirmed that the legal advice would be provided on behalf of Council.

AC/002/2026: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest

AC/003/2026: ACTION SHEET OF AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD 25 SEPTEMBER 2025

Read: Action Sheet arising from Minutes of the Audit Committee Meeting held on 25 September 2025. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Byrne, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Action Sheet for Audit Committee Meeting held 25 September 2025.

AC/004/2026: UPDATE OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS

Read: Report from Ms S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager, regarding Update of Members' Interests. **(Copy circulated)**

Ms Taggart advised that, in line with Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) audit recommendations, the Register of Interests would be updated every six months, regardless of whether there were any amendments to a Members' register. The report tabled was the beginning of the six-month update.

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Byrne, it was agreed to note the update provided on Members' Registers of Interests.

PERFORMANCE

AC/005/2026: MID-YEAR ASSESSMENT OF 2025/26

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Mid-Year Assessment of Performance 2025/26. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Byrne outlined the report, reminding Members that it had been tabled at a recent Strategy, Policy & Resources Committee Meeting and was tabled for noting.

Councillor Hanlon noted the mid-year assessment of planning, acknowledging that it had been discussed at length at other committees, and queried what consideration had been given to the fact that Council had the highest number of applications and whether any consultation had been carried out with regard to best practices or staffing level per application in other Councils.

Mr Mallon confirmed that there was regular engagement with other Councils regarding resourcing and workloads and stated that each Council dealt with differing application types with this Council being more rural so consideration would have to be given to similar rural settings. He acknowledged the ongoing challenge of obtaining a full complement of staff and confirmed that the Planning report tabled at item 20 would be considered moving forward.

Councillor Hanlon concurred that comparisons should be made with councils facing similar challenges and suggested Fermanagh and South Tyrone as a marker as they faced comparable issues. She further noted the delays outside of Council control, such as Environmental Impact Assessments and statutory consultation times, but stressed that such comparisons would help ensure the Council was keeping on top of its responsibilities and provide reassurance regarding workforce capacity and other related matters.

Councillor Bowsie noted his concern with the wait time not meeting statutory targets, stating that staffing had doubled in recent years and queried why the targets were not being met.

Mr Mallon stated that he would need to review the staffing complement in 2020 compared to the present day, noting that there may have been some increases but doubted that staffing had doubled. He explained that the reporting on planning statistics meant that making more decisions could make it more likely to miss targets, particularly when dealing with legacy applications and a backlog. He clarified that if no decisions were made, nothing would be reported in the statistics, so targets would appear met by default and when more applications were determined, it became challenging to improve statistics, especially while addressing a backlog. He emphasised that current struggles were due to the number of incoming applications sometimes equalling or exceeding those being processed, and that this was not a reflection on the performance, efficiency, or effectiveness of the staff. He concluded that the issue was related to how statistics were recorded and reported rather than staff performance.

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Mid-Year

**Assessment of the Performance Improvement Plan
2025/26.**

CORPORATE SERVICES – OPEN SESSION

AC/006/2026: RISK MANAGEMENT STRATEGY – REVIEW OF RISK APPETITE

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Risk Management Strategy – Review of Risk Appetite. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Byrne advised that the purpose of the paper was to review the Risk Appetite Statement for the next financial year, which informed the Council's Risk Management Strategy and was a recommendation from a historic internal audit report that Council review the Statement on an annual basis. He advised that the Senior Management Team (SMT) had considered the Risk Appetite Statement on 26 January and had concluded that no changes were required.

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Byrne, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to approve the Risk Appetite Statement for the year 2026/27.

AC/007/2026: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER – ERT DIRECTORATE RISK REGISTER ALSO TO BE TABLED

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Corporate Risk Register – ERT Directorate Risk Register also to be Tabled. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Byrne advised that the Corporate Risk Register had been reviewed and updated by SMT on 7 January 2026 and had identified 12 corporate risks, seven of which were rated red, four amber, and one yellow. He confirmed that no new risks had been added to the register since it was last tabled but noted that SMT were considering including a corporate risk in relation to the impacts of climate change. He advised that a Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan was currently out for public consultation, due to close in March 2026. He advised that work would commence in the coming weeks to develop a risk for inclusion in the Corporate Risk Register, which Members would see at the April Committee.

In relation to ERT, Mr Byrne stated that Directorate Risk Registers were tabled on a rotational basis to the Audit Committee, allowing Members to review them once per year. He advised that the ERT Risk Register was attached at Appendix 3 and contained eight risks, seven of which were rated amber and one yellow.

Councillor Bowsie stated that spend on MMGP was a substantial figure, with the vast majority of it being Council expenditure and questioned who should be held responsible for the gross spend with no outcomes.

Mr Mallon stated that he did not believe it was appropriate for him to respond to the question without prior notice and requested that any response be deferred until he had the

opportunity to consult with the Chief Executive, after which he could respond to Councillor Bowsie.

Ms Slevin agreed with Mr Mallon's statement, noting that the Chief Executive had to step out to deal with an issue and advised that officers would respond to Councillor Bowsie outside of the meeting.

Councillor Bowsie emphasised that the scale of the expenditure on the project was significant, stating that a six-figure sum had effectively been wasted and questioned who would ultimately be held responsible, stressing that Council needed to address how such substantial amounts of money had been spent.

Councillor Truesdale acknowledged Councillor Bowsie's queries regarding blame and noted that the Alliance Party had received no correspondence from either Councillor Bowsie nor the DUP and welcomed any correspondence regarding his concerns raised.

Councillor Byrne emphasised that the role of the Audit Committee was to ensure proper governance of decisions made and stated that, while officers were involved, they had followed the direction of the Council, who had made the decisions based on information presented and several debates on the matter. He reiterated that the Audit Committee's role was to ensure that proper governance had been followed and that decisions were made with the correct information, which had already been confirmed. He stated that he did not consider the query an issue for the Audit Committee but requested that the Chief Executive provide a response outside of the meeting.

Councillor Bowsie stated that the Audit Committee was currently considering the Corporate Risk Register, specifically the sub-item relating to the failure to deliver capital projects and stressed that as a Councillor on the Audit Committee, it was his duty to ask how such a significant amount of money had been spent without any legal guarantees, noting that the Committee's role was to mitigate risk and expenditure. He further stated that there needed to be some form of investigation into how the money had been spent.

Mrs Ward stated that she did not believe it appropriate to apportion blame, reiterating that all governance processes had been followed. She explained that the project had been considered by Council over several years and had been identified as a priority within the wider master plan approved by Council. She noted that the Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD) had provided an opportunity for funding to enable project delivery and that appropriate governance procedures had been implemented, including programme boards, reporting through the relevant statutory committees, and review by government departments.

Mrs Ward highlighted that officers had followed the Council's decisions in relation to project delivery and that the risk register had always included risks associated with land ownership, which had been debated and considered in detail, reminding Members of the National Trust's attendance at a Council meeting on the matter a number of months ago. She added that the project had also been reviewed by the Department for the Economy and the Department of Finance, with no concerns or issues raised. She concluded that it would be inappropriate and unfair to assign blame, stating that the project was a corporate decision of Council, delivered in line with governance.

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Byrne, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, the following was agreed:

- **To approve the updates to the Corporate Risk Register highlighted within the summary at**

Appendix 1. Full Corporate Risk Register can be evidenced at Appendix 2.

- **To note the revised ERT Directorate Risk Register summary at Appendix 3 and detailed ERT Directorate Risk Register at Appendix 4.**

AC/008/2026: PROMPT PAYMENT STATISTICS QUARTER 2 AND 3 2025/26

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Prompt Payment Statistics Quarter 2 and 3 2025/26. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Brennan, it was agreed to note the Quarter 2 and 3 2025/26 Prompt Payment Statistics.

AC/009/2026: ICO GUIDANCE ISSUED IN RESPECT OF SENIOR OFFICERS' DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Read: Report from Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive, regarding ICO Guidance Issued in Respect of Senior Officers' Declarations of Interest. **(Copy circulated)**

Councillor Bowsie criticised the Council's handling of the Senior Officer Register of Interests, stating that it was being made more complicated than necessary. He noted that a previous Audit Committee report had claimed the register could not be published based on Information Commissioner's Office (ICO guidance), but he stated that the guidance allowed for publication of senior officers' interests, subject to data protection considerations, and he expressed concern that the Senior Management Team's position of not publishing the register contradicted this. He highlighted that the ICO had confirmed that senior officers' declarations of interest should be made public and that the Council should publicise which registers it holds.

Councillor Bowsie also raised concerns about transparency, noting that his Freedom of Information request to view the register had been refused on commercial sensitivity grounds. He argued that the public was entitled to know, at minimum, the commercial interests of senior officers with delegated decision-making authority. He stated that withholding this information rendered the register effectively meaningless and suggested that senior officers deciding not to disclose their interests could itself constitute a conflict of interest, undermining confidence in the Council's governance.

Ms Kirk explained that declarations of interest for senior officers differed from those for elected Members, as officers were employees with protections under GDPR, Data Protection legislation, and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act. She emphasised that the purpose of declarations was for officers to declare any relevant interests, and that the key issue arose only if officers failed to do so. She confirmed that all declarations had been properly recorded in the register, was reviewed annually, and that any undisclosed interests should and would be investigated through the proper channels.

She clarified that there was no legal requirement to publish officers' declarations on the Council's website and while guidance from the ICO existed and represented best practice, it

did not override the lawful position in Northern Ireland. She stated that there were no issues with the declarations she had seen and cautioned against personalising the matter or breaching officers' rights. She offered to provide further advice or guidance outside of the meeting, if required.

Ms Slevin thanked Ms Kirk for her informative response and invited Councillor Bowsie to take the matter up with Ms Kirk outside of the meeting should he have any further concerns.

Councillor Bowsie argued that Section 75 related to equality of opportunity and could equally be interpreted as supporting disclosure regardless of class, colour, or professional position and that GDPR required the removal of sensitive personal information, such as home addresses, trade union status, and health details, but did not justify withholding an entire register and maintained that the professional element should be published in line with GDPR. He further highlighted what he viewed as an inconsistency within the Council's own policy, which stated that declarations of interest for councillors and senior officers were published on the Council's website, but not for other staff. He questioned whether the Council did, in fact, publish senior officers' declarations, noting that the policy indicated it did while he had been advised otherwise, and argued that this contradiction was not compliant with ICO guidance.

Ms Kirk clarified that professional memberships relating to an officer or any professional body to which they belonged were published on the Council's website. However, she cautioned against conflating the lawful position regarding employees with that of elected Members, emphasising that different legal considerations applied.

Ms Slevin acknowledged Councillor Bowsie's points but noted that the Audit Committee was not the correct forum for the debate and encouraged him to engage with Ms Kirk outside of the meeting.

Councillor Bowsie stated he would like to know if any other Party's had concerns regarding officer's declarations of interest.

Ms Slevin clarified that there were no other Members wishing to make a comment and drew the matter to a close, reiterating that the topic could be discussed following the meeting.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Brennan, it was agreed to note the requirement in relation to senior officers' declarations of interest and that the Council are compliant.**

AC/010/2026: **PLANNING UPDATE**

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

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Brennan, to note the contents of the report.**

Items restricted in accordance with Part 3 of Schedule 6 of the Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014

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

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

CORPORATE SERVICES – OPEN SESSION

AC/011/2026: UPDATE OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding an Update on Audit Recommendations. **(Copy circulated)**

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

AC/012/2026: DIRECT AWARD CONTRACTS REPORT

Read: Report Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism, regarding Direct Award Contracts. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the Quarter 1, 2 and 3 Financial Year ended 31/03/2026 update in relation to Direct Award Contracts.

AC/013/2026: PROCUREMENT ACTION PLANS

Read: Report Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism, regarding Procurement Action Plans. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Quarter 1, 2 and 3 update in relation to Procurement Action Plan Progress.

AC/014/2026: UPDATE ON FRAUD AND RAISING CONCERNS

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Update on Fraud and Whistleblowing. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, 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
- The update in relation to the National Fraud Initiative

AC/015/2026: MOURNE MOUNTAIN GATEWAY PROJECT UPDATE

Read: Report from Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism, regarding Mourne Mountain Gateway Project Update. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Byrne, it was agreed to note the total costs incurred in relation to the Mourne Mountain Gateway Project.

NIAO – CLOSED SESSION

AC/016/2026: REPORT TO THOSE CHARGED WITH GOVERNANCE 2025/26

Read: Correspondence from NI Audit Office, regarding Report To Those Charged With Governance 2024/25. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Byrne, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Report To Those Charged With Governance 2025/26.

AC/017/2026: ANNUAL AUDIT LETTER 2025/26

Read: Correspondence from NI Audit Office, regarding Annual Audit Letter 2025/26: Newry, Mourne and Down District Council. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the Annual Audit Letter 2025/26.

AC/018/2026: **AUDIT AND ASSESSMENT REPORT 2025/26 – S95**

Read: Correspondence received from NI Audit Office regarding Newry, Mourne and Down District Council: Improvement Audit and Assessment – Final Audit and Assessment Report 2024/25 **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Audit and Assessment Report 2025/26

AC/019/2026: **LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUDITORS REPORT 2025**

Read: Local Government Auditor Report 2025 **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the Local Government Auditor's Report 2025.

CORPORATE SERVICES (CLOSED SESSION)

AC/020/2026: **SUMER NI SUMMARY REPORT**

Read: Sumer NI Summary Report **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to approve the Internal Audit Plan 2025/26 and to note the Sumer NI Summary Report, including:

- Leisure Centre Report
- Economic Development and Inward Investment Report
- Planning - Management of Planning Applications Report
- Preparation for the Implementation of the Procurement Act Report

CIRCULARS

AC/021/2026: **CONSOLIDATED COUNCILLOR ALLOWANCES**

Read: Circular LG17 2025 – Consolidated Councillor Allowances **(Copy circulated)**

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

AC/022/2026: DESIGNATION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT AUDITOR

Read: Circular LG20 2025 – Designation of Local Government Auditor
(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 3.23pm

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

**Signed: Mrs M Ward
Chief Executive**

**Signed: Ms B Slevin
Independent Chairperson**