

NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Ref: AC/2026

Minutes of Audit Committee Meeting held on Thursday 7 May 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 L Devlin
Councillor O Hanlon Councillor S O'Hare

Committee Members in Attendance via Teams:

Councillor P Byrne Councillor K Murphy

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 K Hanna, Finance Manager
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Ms F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer
Mr C Smyth, Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance in chamber:

Mr P Brady Sumer NI
Ms C O'Hagan NIAO

AC/023/2026: APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Brennan and C King.

AC/024/2026: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

AC/025/2026: ACTION SHEET OF AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD 29 JANUARY 2026

Read: Action Sheet arising from the Audit Committee Meeting held on 29 September 2026. **(Copy circulated)**

Ms Slevin noted that training had been arranged at the request of Members and expressed disappointment that Members had been unable to attend. She confirmed that the training

forthcoming year, including the standing agenda items for each quarter and the required attendees at the quarterly pre-meetings.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor O’Hare, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to approve the Audit Committee Terms of Reference and to note the timetable for the year ahead.**

AC/028/2026: AUDIT COMMITTEE SELF ASSESSMENT

Read: Proposed date and start times for Audit Committee meetings for 2025/26. **(Copy circulated)**

Ms Slevin advised that the document remained in draft form and that the completed self-assessment checklist had been circulated to all Members for comment. She noted that the checklist was comprehensive and detailed and requested that Members review the document and provide any comments, and all responses received would be considered prior to the final report being presented to the July meeting.

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

PERFORMANCE

AC/029/2026: DRAFT PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT OBJECTIVES 2026/27

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Draft Performance Improvement Objectives 2026/27. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Byrne outlined that the report had been presented to the February meeting of the Strategy, Policy and Resources (SPR) Committee. He advised that the subsequent consultation process had now been completed and that the report would be presented to a forthcoming SPR Committee meeting for ratification and to the July Audit Committee meeting for noting.

Mr Byrne noted that the five objectives remained largely unchanged, with a minor amendment to the wording of Objective Four in relation to sustainability, together with several minor amendments to target measures.

Councillor O’Hare queried the marginal improvement in planning statistics, noting that there were still significant issues impacting ratepayers across the District, and requested further information on the current position.

Mr Mallon reminded Members that a quarterly Planning Update Report was presented to both the SPR and Audit Committees, reporting against statistics, targets, and business plan objectives. He advised that there were ongoing recruitment and retention challenges, issues relating to the quality of submitted applications, and delays in response times from statutory consultees. He confirmed that Council was continuing to explore innovative approaches to improve decision-making, streamline processes, and expedite application

determination, and noted that a paper would be brought to a forthcoming SPR Committee meeting regarding proposals for the Planning Department. He further advised that improvements had been made over the past six to eight weeks in relation to turnaround times and expressed hope that this positive trend would continue.

Councillor O'Hare queried what consideration had been given to the health and wellbeing of employees, given the potential pressures arising from ongoing issues.

Mr Mallon confirmed that all relevant factors were taken into account in the management of the Department and that Council, as an employer, had a duty of care for staff health and wellbeing. He acknowledged that workload volumes presented challenges but noted that targets for determined applications per month were being met and exceeded.

Mrs Ward advised that Council placed significant emphasis on staff health and wellbeing, including access to non pay benefits, wellbeing days, additional support mechanisms, and opportunities to engage with specialist services, and confirmed that these supports were available across all Departments.

Mrs Murphy advised that the Health and Wellbeing Group had developed an annual work plan for all staff, including isolated workers, and was leading on a staff stress survey in collaboration with HSCNI, which was planned for rollout by September 2026. She further confirmed that mental health check-ins had been undertaken by an external provider, with onward referrals made as appropriate in partnership with the HR Department.

Councillor O'Hare queried whether the assessment would consider if health and wellbeing factors were contributing to the backlog and ongoing issues within the Planning Department.

Mrs Ward reminded Members that the meeting was in open session and cautioned against detailed discussion of individual staff matters. She confirmed that the issues being experienced were not unique to this Council but were reflected across the region, alongside concerns regarding statutory consultee response times.

Mr Mallon advised that Council received 66% of statutory consultee responses within the required timeframe, compared with approximately 86% in the nearest comparable Council in terms of size and application volume. He stated that this represented a 20% deficit against comparable authorities which presented a significant challenge. He confirmed that the figures were based on statistics published by DFI. He outlined that approximately 15% of processing time related to validation and allocation to a case officer, around 70% to statutory consultation, and the remaining 15% to consideration of responses and preparation of recommendations, noting that delays in statutory consultee responses were a significant contributing factor to overall processing times.

Councillor Bowsie echoed Councillor O'Hare's comments regarding staff wellbeing and welcomed the fact that there were no current vacant posts. He noted a slight improvement in processing times, from 45.2 weeks in 2024/25 to 44.6 weeks currently. He also queried the potential impact of Mid and East Antrim Council no longer providing Shared Environmental Services (SES).

Councillor Bowsie further queried why only 257 trees had been planted against a target of 2,800. Mrs Murphy advised that staff were continuing to address significant storm damage, which had impacted delivery of the tree planting programme and Mr Byrne advised that the

report had been presented to the February SPR Committee and therefore contained more dated information, but confirmed that the target had since been met.

Mrs Ward confirmed that SOLACE were considering correspondence received regarding the SES service provided by Mid and East Antrim Council on behalf of all 11 Councils, and that an update would be provided to a future Planning Committee in due course.

Councillor Hanlon welcomed the forthcoming paper on the Planning Department update. She queried whether delays in assigning case officers could also contribute to delays in consultation, suggesting that applications awaiting allocation may be a factor in overall timescales, rather than statutory consultee response times alone.

Mr Mallon advised that applications were validated upon receipt and that validation was up to date. He noted that case officers were managing between 60 and 80 applications each and that further allocations could not be made until existing workloads reduced, due to capacity constraints. He acknowledged that there was a gap between validation and allocation and advised that measures were being explored to address this, including reducing unnecessary consultations. He confirmed that consultation timescales commenced once consultations were issued, and therefore DFI statistics accurately reflected that stage, but that Council was considering ways to address delays arising prior to allocation.

Councillor Devlin queried why Council appeared to be at a disadvantage compared to other comparable Councils. Mr Mallon clarified that he had not referred to Council being at a disadvantage, but rather that it was operating at a 20% deficit compared with similar authorities.

Councillor Devlin acknowledged the challenges and queried what work had been undertaken to identify the causes of delays within statutory consultee responses, to which Mr Mallon confirmed that the issues had been raised with the Department and discussions were ongoing.

Councillor Byrne requested that further information regarding statutory consultees be brought back to Committee for consideration, noting that any delay had a detrimental impact on residents of the District.

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor O'Hare, seconded by Councillor Devlin, it was agreed to note the following:

- **The five draft performance improvement objectives 2026-27, as outlined in appendix 1.**
- **The proposed approach and timetable for publishing the Performance Improvement Plan 2026/27, as outlined in appendix 2, including approval to commence the consultation and engagement process on 13 February 2026.**

CORPORATE SERVICES – OPEN SESSION

**AC/030/2026: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER – CORPORATE SERVICES
DIRECTORATE RISK REGISTER ALSO TO BE TABLED**

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

Mr Byrne outlined that the Corporate Risk Register had been updated as at 28 April 2026 by the Senior Management Team (SMT), noting that there were 12 risks in total, including 7 rated red, 4 amber, and 1 yellow. He further noted that section 2.3 of the officer's report set out the Corporate Services Risk Register, which contained 8 risks in total, containing 1 red, 6 amber, and 1 yellow.

Councillor Bowsie welcomed the effort being made to secure £29.2m Belfast City Region Deal (BRCD) funding within the District but stated that the information presented had been largely abstract. He suggested that, should Council wish to secure cross-party support, SMT should be more forthcoming with detail regarding the project. He queried what level of detail had been provided to project partners and expressed doubt that it matched the information provided to Elected Members.

Mrs Ward confirmed that details of the proposal had been discussed at four workshops, to which all Councillors had been invited, and referred to the April SPR Committee meeting where it was noted that partners had agreed to progress to the Outline Business Case (OBC) stage.

Councillor Bowsie queried the appointment level of the Strategic Capital Projects Director and whether the role should be included as a mitigation factor to reduce the overall risk score. He also raised concerns regarding the risk associated with engagement with the media, suggesting that Council response times to media enquiries were slow and should be improved, and noted that delayed responses or Member queries could negatively affect public perception.

Mrs Ward acknowledged that scrutiny of Council activity could sometimes be perceived negatively and emphasised that, while scrutiny was appropriate, the manner in which it was undertaken could impact public perception. She advised with regard to response times to media enquiries that a report containing the facts would be brought to Committee as hearing and knowing where two different things. In relation to the Strategic Capital Projects Director role, she noted that this had been discussed in closed session at the April SPR Committee meeting and was included in open session for information purposes only.

Councillor Bowsie stated that the post had been referenced in open session and queried whether Council therefore effectively had five Directors.

Mrs Ward referred Councillor Bowsie to the detail contained within the SPR Committee report, which had been considered in closed session, and reiterated that she would revert to him outside the meeting should he require further clarification.

Councillor Bowsie stated that, if any matters were confidential, they should have been tabled in closed session.

Ms Slevin advised that the job title had been referenced in open session for information purposes only and reiterated that there were confidentiality considerations in relation to the detail, advising Councillor Bowsie to raise the matter outside the meeting.

AGREED:

On the proposal of Councillor Devlin, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, 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 Corporate Services Directorate Risk Register summary at Appendix 3 and detailed Corporate Services Directorate Risk Register at Appendix 4.**

AC/031/2026: PROMPT PAYMENT STATISTICS QUARTER 4 2025/26

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Prompt Payment Statistics Quarter 4 2025/26. **(Copy circulated)**

Ms Hanna outlined that the current statistics confirmed that 92% of invoices were paid within the 30 days, with 8% falling outside that time, with the average processing time being 14 days

Ms Slevin commended the team for the progress in payment statistics.

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Devlin, it was agreed to note the Quarter 4 2025/26 and the financial year 2025/26 Prompt Payment Statistics.

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

Agreed: On the proposal of Councillor O'Hare, seconded by Councillor Devlin, 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 Devlin, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, 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/032/2026: UPDATE OF AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS

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

Ms Slevin wished to record her thanks to the team for the hard work in actioning the recommendations, and the clear presentation of data that made it easily understood.

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

- **The progress in implementing both internal and external audit recommendations.**
- **The 2024/25 Follow Up by SUMER NI tabled today will also be considered as part of this report going forward.**

AC/033/2026: 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 O'Hare, it was agreed to note the following:**

- **The 2025/26 Q4 update in relation to Direct Award Contracts.**
- **The Direct Award Activity 2025/26 year in review totals**
- **The Active Direct Award Contracts as of 31/03/2026**

AC/034/2026: 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 Devlin, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, it was agreed to note the Directorate Procurement Action Plans.**

AC/035/2026: UPDATE ON FRAUD AND RAISING CONCERNS

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

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Devlin, seconded by Councillor O'Hare, 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**

Mr Brady declared an interest in the following item and left the Chamber – 3.00pm

AC/036/2026: INTERNAL AUDIT CONTRACT EXTENSION

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding Internal Audit Contract Extension. . **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor O’Hare, it was agreed to agree the second one-year extension period in order that work can commence on the final year of the four-year Internal Audit Plan.**

Mr Brady rejoined the meeting – 3.02pm

NIAO – CLOSED SESSION

AC/037/2026: AUDIT STRATEGY 2025/26

Read: Audit Strategy 2025/26. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor O’Hare, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the contents of the Audit Strategy 2025/26.**

INTERNAL AUDIT (CLOSED SESSION)

AC/038/2026: SUMER NI SUMMARY REPORT

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

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor O’Hare, seconded by Councillor Devlin, it was agreed to note the Sumer NI Summary Report, including:**

- **Performance Data and Validations**
- **Estates Management and Security**
- **Labour Market Partnership**
- **Review of Local Economic Partnership**
- **Follow up of 2025/26 Recommendations**

AC/039/2026: INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 2026/27

Read: Internal Audit Plan 2026/27 **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor O’Hare, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to approve the Internal Audit Plan 2026/27.**

AC/040/2026: ANNUAL ASSURANCE REPORT

Read: Annual Assurance Report (**Copy circulated**)

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Devlin, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to approve the Annual Assurance Report 2025/26.

CIRCULARS

AC/041/2026: ACCOUNTS DIRECTION TO DISTRICT COUCILS 2025/26 – LG07/2026

Read: Circular LG07/2026 – Accounts Direction to District Councils 2025/26 – LG07/2026 (**Copy circulated**)

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor O’Hare, it was agreed to note the circular.

AC/042/2026: DISTRICT COUNCIL RATE STATISTICS – LG 08/2026

Read: Circular LG08/2026 – District Council Rate Statistics (**Copy circulated**)

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor O’Hare, it was agreed to note the circular.

AC/043/2026: NI AUDIT OFFICE – RAISING CONCERNS IN THE NI PUBLIC SECTOR – MARCH 2026

Read: Circular from NI Audit Office – Raising Concerns in the NI Public Sector – March 2026 (**Copy circulated**)

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor O’Hare, it was agreed to note the circular.

AC/044/2026: NI AUDIT OFFICE CODE OF AUDIT PRACTICE 2026

Read: Circular from NI Audit Office – Code of Audit Practice 2026 (**Copy circulated**)

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor O’Hare, it was agreed to note the circular.

There being no further business the meeting concluded at 3.34pm

For consideration at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 1 June 2026.

Signed: Mrs M Ward
Chief Executive

Signed: Ms B Slevin
Independent Chairperson