

NEWRY MOURNE AND DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Ref: AC/2025

**Minutes of Audit Committee Meeting held on Thursday 31 July 2025, at
3.00pm, in the Mourne Room, Downshire Civic Centre, Downpatrick**

Chairperson: Ms B Slevin, Independent Chairperson

**In attendance
in Chamber:**

Councillor C Bowsie	Councillor L Devlin
Councillor O Hanlon	Councillor A Mathers
Councillor K Murphy	Councillor S O'Hare
Councillor G Sharvin	

**Officials in attendance
in Chamber:**

Mrs J Kelly, Director Corporate Services
Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Mr A Patterson, Director Active & Healthy Communities
Mr C Boyd, Assistant Director of Capital & Procurement
Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance
Ms S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Mrs F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

**Officials in attendance
via Teams:**

Mr J McGilly, Assistant Director of Regeneration

**Also in attendance
in chamber:**

Mr P Brady Sumer NI

**Also in attendance
via Teams:**

Ms K Doey NIAO

AC/058/2025: APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Gibbons, Howie and King and Mrs S Murphy, Director of Sustainability & Environment.

AC/059/2025: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Ms Slevin declared an interest in item 15 – Annual Assessment of Chairperson's Performance.

AC/060/2025: ACTION SHEET OF AUDIT COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 8 AND 25 MAY 2025

Read: Action Sheet arising from Minutes of the Audit Committee Meeting held on 8 and 25 May 2025. **(Copy circulated)**

AC/036/2025: Corporate Risk Register

Councillor Bowsie requested an update on the discussed Report concerning the Mourne Mountain Gateway Project and asked when it would be tabled.

Mr Mallon advised the Report would be tabled at a Strategy, Policy & Resources Committee once an update was available, as discussions regarding the next steps were still ongoing.

Following a query from Ms Slevin, Mr Mallon confirmed the Report would also be tabled at Audit Committee.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Devlin, seconded by Councillor Mathers, it was agreed to note the Action Sheet for Audit Committee Meeting held on 8 and 25 May 2025.**

AC/061/2025: AUDIT COMMITTEE ANNUAL REPORT 2024/2025

Read: Report from Ms B Slevin, Independent Chair of Audit Committee, regarding Audit Committee Annual Report 2024/2025. **(Copy circulated)**

Ms Slevin presented the 2024–2025 Annual Report, noting that the Committee had performed to the required standard, in line with best practice, and had operated effectively. She advised the NIAO checklist used to assess effectiveness had identified some elements requiring further consideration, which could enhance the Audit Committee’s performance. These were detailed in section 3.1 of the Annual Report.

Ms Slevin thanked Members for their co co-operation and input over year.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor O’Hare, seconded by Councillor Sharvin, it was agreed to approve the Audit Committee Annual Report**

CORPORATE SERVICES – OPEN SESSION

AC/062/2025: CORPORATE RISK REGISTER – INCLUDING AHC DIRECTORATE RISK REGISTER

Read: Report from Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services, regarding the Corporate Risk Register. **(Copy circulated)**

Mrs Kelly confirmed the Senior Management Team (SMT) had met recently on 22 July 2025 to review the Corporate Risk Register, noting the Annual Assurance Statement 24/25 was reflected within the Risk Register. She advised Members that SMT had met prior to the announcement by Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Minister regarding Kilbroney Forest Park, noting that it was part of an ongoing discussion with Belfast Region City Deal (BRCD) and updates would be issued in due course.

Councillor Bowsie noted the potential reputational damage on Council to continually fail to deliver projects and queried whether anything could have been done to mitigate barriers

for example, was it known that Kilbroney was dependent on DAERA approval and if so, why was this not noted within the Risk Register.

Mr Mallon stressed the importance of what had happened following the National Trust announcement, stating that Council had agreed to explore the opportunity of moving the project to another site, and had not explicitly agreed to move the project but was merely exploring the opportunity to do so. He stated that following the Minister's announcement, that exploration had concluded.

Councillor Bowsie queried whether Council was aware of the need for DAERA approval, and if so, had it been considered that the DAERA Minister was an Alliance Party Member and stressed that it was clear that the Alliance Party had a clear position on the project.

Mr Mallon advised a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was in place with the Forestry Service that detailed tourism facility arrangements on Council leased lands and this formed the basis of discussions with DAERA, and this MOU had been in place for a number of years.

Councillor Sharvin requested confirmation of his understanding that Council had not identified Kilbroney as the next potential site for the project, but that Tourism NI had reviewed a list of potential projects and had suggested Kilbroney as the next potential to explore.

Mr Mallon confirmed that a range of options had been submitted to Tourism NI as suggested by both the public and Elected Members, and they had been assessed against the criteria as set out within the BRCD ambitions and Kilbroney was the only option suitable for further exploration.

Councillor Sharvin queried whether the Minister was informed of how the proposal would look, and if he had all the information required to make an assessment and if not, should that have been recorded on the Risk Register.

Mr Mallon confirmed that Council was unaware of what information had been provided to the Minister prior to him reaching his decision as Council had met with DAERA to discuss the potential of exploring Kilbroney Park, but stated that as detail such as landing zones, height, entry points, exit points or termination points currently did not exist then the Minister would not have been aware of these.

Councillor Sharvin queried whether there was anything further from an officer perspective that could have been carried out in a different manner given Council was unaware of what information had been presented to the Minister.

Mrs Ward stated that the MOU with the Forest Service had been operational since 2017 and in that time, Council had invested over £10m in forest parks across the District, with plans already underway to invest further. She stated the MOU outlined each partner's roles and responsibilities, and that projects must meet staff approvals. She further confirmed Council spent in the region of around £300k annually maintaining and operating the forest parks. She stated Council now had to give consideration to the MOU and report back through the relevant committees on how that MOU was managed given how decisions were taken at a Departmental level.

Councillor Hanlon stated Council had a very good working relationship with the Forest Service, noting that the Ministers decision was taken at a Departmental level and stressed the positive working relationship must not be damaged as a result of a decision being made with no exploration of any proposal given that information did not currently exist.

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor K Murphy, seconded by Councillor O'Hare, 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 AHC Directorate Risk Register summary at Appendix 3 and detailed AHC Directorate Risk Register at appendix 4.

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Procurement, regarding Performance Improvement Plan 2025/26
(Copy circulated)

Councillor Bowsie acknowledged that, while not the most appropriate forum for suggestions, he queried whether it would be possible to include community halls alongside allocation of funding to sports clubs within the Plan as they also hosted a range of fitness and wellness programmes that supported less active and socially isolated individuals.

Councillor Sharvin noted the reported improvement in enforcement cases, citing similar statistics from the previous year, and queried whether further detail could be provided on cases that had been open for more than 12 months.

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Mr McGilly advised that this would be included within subsequent reports.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Performance Improvement Plan 2025/26 (including the five performance improvement objectives), Consultation, Engagement Report 2025/26 and Objective Delivery Plans 2025/26.**

AC/064/2025: PLANNING UPDATE

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

Mr McGilly outlined the Report, advising it had been tabled at multiple committees as an update on challenges facing the Planning Department and the measures being taken to address them. He noted that some issues were within the Department's control while others, such as responses from statutory consultees or agents, were not.

Councillor Bowsie expressed concern about the ongoing challenges and reiterated his request for staffing statistics, including retention rates compared to the NI average, reasons for staff departures, and the steps the Council was taking to mitigate these issues. He stated his belief that staff retention was the primary reason the Council was failing to meet targets and requested that more detailed staffing information be presented to address his concerns.

Mr McGilly advised the recent recruitment campaign was unsuccessful as applicants did not meet the essential criteria and confirmed interviews were scheduled over the next two weeks following other successful recruitment campaigns. He noted additional details could be included in subsequent reports relating to staffing.

Mrs Ward interjected to state that attributing the issue solely to staffing was incorrect. She explained this was a challenge affecting all council areas and was more complex than staffing alone, as detailed within the Report.

Councillor Bowsie stated that, following each of his requests for updates on planning applications, he was told the delays were due to staffing issues rather than the Department awaiting responses from agents, statutory consultees or applicants.

Councillor Devlin queried the progress of the validation checklists, to which Mr McGilly confirmed would be tabled at the Planning Committee meeting in August and were expected to reduce the number of incomplete applications submitted.

Councillor Devlin asked if there had been a response to the Council's approach to the Department for Infrastructure (DFI) regarding statutory consultation response times. Mr McGilly advised discussions were ongoing with all statutory consultees and noted that some, such as NI Water, had agreed to a pilot scheme aimed at alleviating delays.

Councillor O'Hare queried whether additional support could be provided to applicants and agents to help speed up processing times. Mr McGilly advised regular engagement already

occurred and highlighted the validation checklist should further reduce the number of incomplete applications.

Councillor O'Hare then asked if the Department contacted both the applicant and the agent for outstanding information or what the process entailed. Mr McGilly confirmed the Department communicated only with the party who submitted the application, explaining that contacting both the applicant and agent would increase and duplicate the Department's workload especially when the applicant had outsourced the work to an agent.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor K Murphy, seconded by Councillor Sharvin, it was agreed to note the contents of the report.**

AC/065/2025: PROMPT PAYMENT STATISTICS

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Procurement, regarding Prompt Payment Statistics **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Byrne confirmed the Quarter 1 prompt payment statistics, advising 30% of invoices had been paid within 10 days and 90% within 30 days.

Councillor Sharvin queried the reduction in the statistics compared to both the previous quarter and the previous year. Mr Byrne responded that several factors had contributed to the decline, including the introduction of a new control on non-Purchase Order (PO) invoices and staff absences. He confirmed measures were in place to address the non-PO invoice issue, staffing levels had returned to normal, and he hoped the statistics would improve and remain stable.

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Quarter 1 Prompt Payment Statistics 2025/26**

AC/066/2025: NMDDC ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK AND CODE OF GOVERNANCE

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Procurement, regarding NMDDC Assurance Framework & Code of Governance. **(Copy circulated)**

Mr Byrne confirmed the Assurance Framework was an Annual Report tabled for approval, with a summary provided in Appendix 1 of the Officer's Report. He explained it demonstrated how the Council monitored its governance arrangements and provided evidence to support the Annual Governance Statement.

In relation to supporting principle A2 within the framework (page 9), Councillor Bowsie noted the Register of Members' Interests was published online and queried whether a register of senior officers' interests should also be published as the relevant section of the website had been blank for some time.

Mrs Ward advised officers' declarations of interest were managed in line with established procedures and consistent with practices across other councils. She added she could forward the process to Members if required.

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Council's Assurance Framework and the Code of Governance, illustrated and described at Appendix 1.

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 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 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/067/2025: **ANNUAL GOVERNANCE STATEMENT AND STATEMENT OF ACCOUNTS 2024/25**

Read: Report from Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance, regarding an Annual Governance Statement and Statement of Accounts 2024/25 **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor K Murphy, seconded by Councillor Sharvin, it was agreed to approve the Annual Governance Statement 2024/25, subject to any amendments, and to note the draft Statement of Accounts and Financial Statement at Appendix 1 of the Officer's Report.

AC/068/2025: UPDATE ON AUDIT RECOMMENDATIONS – TO INCLUDE RISK PROFILE

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

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

AC/069/2024: DIRECT AWARD CONTRACTS

Read: Report Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services, regarding Direct Award Contracts. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the Q1 Financial Year ended 31/03/2025 update in relation to Direct Award Activity and to note the developmental work being carried out including the Active DAC register at 30 June 2025.

Cllr Hanlon left the meeting during discussion on the above item – 4.35pm

AC/070/2025: PROCUREMENT ACTION PLANS

Read: Report from Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services, regarding Procurement Action Plans. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Mathers, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the update and progress in relation to Procurement and the Directorate Procurement Action Plans

AC/071/2025: UPDATE ON FRAUD AND WHISTLEBLOWING

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 K Murphy, 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

Having previously declared an interest, Ms Slevin left the room for discussion on the following item – 4.46pm

AC/072/2025: ANNUAL ASSESSMENT OF CHAIRPERSON'S PERFORMANCE

Read: Report from Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services, regarding Annual Assessment of Chairperson's Performance. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Devlin, seconded by Councillor O'Hare, it was agreed to note the assessment of the Chairperson's performance

Ms Slevin rejoined the meeting – 4.49pm

INTERNAL AUDIT (CLOSED SESSION)

AC/073/2025: SUMER NI SUMMARY REPORT

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

Ms Slevin welcomed Mr Padraig Brady to the chamber as the new Audit Manager.

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

AC/074/2025: INTERNAL AUDIT PLAN 2025/26

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

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Sharvin, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to approve the Internal Audit Plan 2025/26

AC/075/2025: INFORMATION GOVERNANCE AUDIT REPORT

Read: Information Governance Audit Report. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor K Murphy, seconded by Councillor Bowsie, it was agreed to note the Information Governance Audit Report

AC/076/2025: STRATEGY BRIDGING LETTER

Read: Strategy Bridging Letter. **(Copy circulated)**

AGREED: On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor K Murphy, it was agreed to note the Strategy Bridging Letter.

There being no further business the meeting concluded at 5.09pm

For consideration at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 1 September 2025.

Signed: **Ms J Kelly**
 Director Corporate Services

Signed: **Ms B Slevin**
 Independent Chairperson