

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMD/C/

**Minutes of Council Meeting held on Monday 2 February 2026 at 6.00pm in
Council Chamber, Downshire Civic Centre, Downpatrick**

In the Chair: Councillor P Campbell

**In attendance in
Chamber:**

Councillor T Andrews	Councillor C Bowsie
Councillor J Brennan	Councillor P Byrne
Councillor W Clarke	Councillor L Devlin
Councillor K Feehan	Councillor D Finn
Councillor C Galbraith	Councillor O Hanlon
Councillor G Hanna	Councillor V Harte
Councillor M Hearty	Councillor T Howie
Councillor J Jackson	Councillor A King
Councillor C King	Councillor M Larkin
Councillor N Lawlor	Councillor D Lee-Surginor
Councillor A Lewis	Councillor A Mathers
Councillor D McAteer	Councillor D Murphy
Councillor K Murphy	Councillor S Murphy
Councillor S O'Hare	Councillor A Quinn
Councillor H Reilly	Councillor M Rice
Councillor M Ruane	Councillor D Taylor
Councillor J Tinnelly	Councillor J Truesdale
Councillor H Young	

**In attendance
via Teams:**

Councillor C Enright	Councillor M Gibbons
Councillor R Howell	Councillor G Kearns
Councillor O Magennis	

Officials in attendance: Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Mrs S Murphy, Director of Sustainability and Environment
Mr A Patterson, Director of Active and Health Communities
Mr G Byrne, Assistant Director of Finance & Performance
Mrs V Keegan, Assistant Director of Digital & Communications
Ms E Kirk, Assistant Director of People & Legal
Ms S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Mr C Smyth, Democratic Services Officer

C/013/2026

APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

There were no apologies.

The Chairperson delivered the following remarks:

- He noted the appointment of the integrated design team for the redevelopment of the Newcastle Centre, describing the project as long overdue and stating that it would bring significant benefits to Newcastle and the wider district.
- He highlighted the 25th anniversary of the Peace Maze in Castlewellan, recognising it as an important cross-community project marking the Good Friday Agreement. He stated that it represented a significant milestone in the Council's shared history and expressed anticipation of continued progress and development in the area in the years ahead.
- He announced the Chairperson's charities for the year ahead: Head Injury Support and the Laurence Trust. He described both as excellent organisations providing vital support within the community. He noted that Head Injury Support assisted individuals with acquired brain injury by helping them build social connections, develop new skills, enhance their wellbeing, and regain a sense of purpose. He further noted that the Laurence Trust was a small but essential organisation offering support and advice to men experiencing eating disorders and mental health challenges.
- He offered sincere condolences, on his own behalf and on behalf of the Council, to the family and friends of the late Micky Brady, who had served the district as a public representative in his roles as MLA and MP.

C/014/2026 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

C/015/2026 TO SET A DISTRICT RATE FOR THE FINANCIAL YEAR 2025/26
Read: Report from Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive regarding the District Rate 2026/27 dated 2 February 2025. **(Copy circulated)**

The Chief Executive reported that, in accordance with the Local Government Finance Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, she was required, as Chief Executive and Chief Financial Officer, to provide Members with assurance on the robustness of the revenue estimates and the adequacy of the Council's reserves as part of the annual rate-setting process prior to submission to the Department for Communities.

She advised that detailed revenue estimates had been developed over several months and had been presented to, and scrutinised by, Members of the Strategic Finance Working Group (SFWG). She stated that the estimates had taken account of previous years' financial out-turns, known corporate pressures, planned savings and efficiencies, current service delivery requirements, projected future investment, and the need to ensure adequate funding for frontline services.

The Chief Executive reported that five meetings of the SFWG had taken place since 18 November in preparation for striking the 2026/27 rate and that Members had been provided with detailed financial analysis, scenario modelling, and updates on emerging pressures. Following this extensive scrutiny, she confirmed satisfaction that the estimates provided sufficient financial resources to support the Council's operational requirements for 2026/27 and that reasonable consideration had been given to the financial risks known at this time.

The Chief Executive highlighted a number of significant uncertainties that continued to affect the Council's financial planning, including the wider economic climate; the draft Northern Ireland Executive budget; the future of animal welfare; Go Succeed funding; the Rates Support Grant; ongoing issues relating to the Windsor Framework; the stability of the future rate base and the Council's sustainability commitments within the draft Corporate Plan 2024–2027.

The Chief Executive stated that Members were asked to approve the consideration and recommendations of the SFWG in relation to 2026/27 to strike a District Rate of 2.8%.

Councillor Harte proposed striking a 2.8% rate, seconded by Councillor Hanlon. She stated that the increase was among the lowest in recent years and would allow the Council to maintain services while supporting investment, growth, job creation, and financial stability.

She noted that Members had scrutinised the Council's financial position over several months. She referred to the Council's ambitious capital plan, including Newry Regeneration, City Park, the Theatre and Arts Complex, ring-fenced funding for Downpatrick Regeneration, and a new health and wellbeing hub for Warrenpoint. She also highlighted the refurbishment of Killeel Leisure Centre, progress on the Newcastle Centre, and plans for the treetop walk in Castlewellan, alongside continued delivery of financial assistance programmes for local communities. She stated that Sinn Féin believed all parties had a responsibility to work together for the benefit of ratepayers and local businesses during challenging times.

Councillor Hanna confirmed that the DUP would not support the rate, stating that the minority Unionist community continued to feel unseen. He reported that basic services, including bin collections, had not been delivered effectively, describing the Christmas collections as a "disaster" and noting the volume of complaints received. He added that the DUP had sought improvements over several years, including progress on the Festival of Flight, but had seen little advancement and were beginning to lose confidence. He emphasised that the Unionist community represented 25% of the population yet were not receiving an adequate level of service.

Speaking on behalf of the Alliance Party, Councillor Truesdale confirmed support for the 2.8% increase. She acknowledged the difficulty of endorsing any rise during a cost-of-living crisis but noted that this was the first increase Alliance had supported in the current Council term. She stated that Alliance had previously abstained due to concerns about Council spending and the Mourne Mountain Gateway Gondola project, which they believed lacked local support, posed environmental risks, and contained significant flaws. She emphasised that Alliance had consistently applied strong scrutiny to major expenditure and would continue to do so to ensure value for money and protect Belfast Region City Deal investment.

Following a detailed review of Council finances and service delivery, she confirmed that Alliance supported the 2.8% increase, which remained below inflation and reflected rising operational costs required to maintain waste management, leisure, and community services, as well as fair pay for staff. She stressed that the decision had not been taken lightly but was necessary to protect service quality. She reiterated that any rates decision had to be justified, proportionate, and focused on frontline services, and stated that the increase met those requirements while maintaining the Council's financial stability.

Councillor Reilly stated that, in all his years as an elected representative, he had never experienced such a high level of public interest in the setting of the rates, particularly from

hard-pressed homeowners and the business community. He reported that many small and medium-sized businesses had indicated they were on the brink of closure due to rising employer costs, and that the prospect of a further rates increase was causing significant anxiety across the district.

He advised that staffing costs totalled £49.5 million and that the Council had already applied a vacancy allowance to salaried posts, recognising that the organisation would not operate at full staffing levels throughout the year. This assumed that some posts would remain temporarily unfilled, with frontline roles excluded to protect service delivery. He noted that the 5% allowance on salaried posts removed £1.6 million from the estimates, equating to a saving of over 2% on the rate.

He stated that further focus was required on this area of expenditure to reduce costs to the ratepayer and to examine any duplication that might still remain following the amalgamation of the former Newry and Mourne and Down Councils. He added that this should apply to both salaried and hourly paid staff. He therefore proposed a freeze on the recruitment of non-essential, non-frontline personnel. Councillor Hanna seconded the proposal.

Councillor Hanlon sought clarification on how non-essential roles would be defined. Councillor Reilly responded that the Council had its own definition of essential and non-essential roles and reiterated concern that the Council continued to operate as two separate entities following amalgamation, with staff numbers now higher than before. He stated that greater efficiency was required and believed there was scope to achieve this.

The Chief Executive stated that the Council had determined through its Corporate Plan that all current staff were needed and essential. She advised that significant work had been undertaken over the previous six to ten years, including redundancy schemes, restructuring of senior management, and regular reviews of staffing levels and structures.

Councillor Byrne stated that the SDLP would not be comfortable with a vote being taken on freezing recruitment of non-essential, non-frontline personnel without due consideration. He proposed an amendment to Councillor Reilly's proposal, requesting that a report be tabled at the next SFWG meeting to enable an informed decision to be made. Councillor Reilly accepted the amendment.

Councillor Reilly noted that reducing the salaried post allowance by 5% would remove over £1.6 million from the rates system for the current year. He added that this reduction could be made permanent and that further investigation could be undertaken to improve this figure with the aim of reducing the burden on households and businesses.

The Chief Executive explained that the vacancy allowance in place was not specific to any individual post. She stated that the allowance recognised the continual turnover of staff and the nature of the organisation, noting that recruitment—particularly for posts at different management tiers—could take three to four months. She clarified that the vacancy allowance was intended to manage the burden on the ratepayer by acknowledging this recruitment period, but that no posts were removed as part of the process. She emphasised that the Council continued to carry the same payroll budget and that the allowance simply recognised the time required to complete recruitment.

Councillor Byrne stated that, contrary to what had been implied, the recommendation to strike a 2.8% rate had not come from the SFWG. He clarified that the Working Group had not reached any recommendation and noted that five robust meetings had taken place, with

an additional meeting requested by the SDLP to examine alternative proposals. While there had been extensive debate on the options presented by officers and political parties, he confirmed that the Working Group had not agreed a formal recommendation.

Councillor Byrne concurred with Councillor Harte's comments and stated that nothing proposed at SFWG would have compromised programmes or the capital plan. He said discussions had focused on how the Council managed its finances to support businesses under severe pressure and noted the Chief Executive's earlier reference to uncertainty around the animal welfare rate support grant.

He stated that businesses were operating in highly uncertain circumstances, highlighting the publication of the Reval 2026 draft valuation, which had caused significant concern in the hospitality and licensed premises sectors. He acknowledged that the valuation process had only been paused and uncertainty remained.

He referred to funds ring-fenced within the capital reserve and said it was within the Council's remit to revisit these commitments given the changed economic environment. He stated that elected members had to balance professional advice with the views of the public and expressed disappointment that alternative proposals had not been fully considered. He urged Members to listen to businesses, noting that a 2.8% increase, combined with the regional rate and the eventual outcome of Reval 2026, would add further pressure. He concluded that the SDLP wished to protect recent economic growth and would therefore vote against the proposed rate increase.

Councillor Taylor recognised the work undertaken in recent years to deliver projects and programmes across the district but stated that genuine concerns remained, with households and businesses under significant financial pressure. He said elected representatives had a responsibility to protect ratepayers.

He believed that the proposal brought forward by Councillor Byrne the previous week had offered scope for greater flexibility but had not received the consideration it merited, particularly given the Minister's recent U-turn on Reval 2026. While the reversal was welcome, he said it still left businesses facing considerable uncertainty, as no final determination had been made and the process had only been paused. He emphasised that this uncertainty affected key economic and tourism providers.

He stated that serious concerns remained about the impact of the proposed rate increase on local businesses. He noted that the 2.8% rise, combined with the regional rate, had the potential to push already pressured businesses beyond viability and for the reasons outlined, he confirmed that he could not support the rate increase.

Councillor Bowsie concurred with Councillor Reilly on the high level of public interest in the rates and agreed with the concerns raised by Councillor Hanna. He added that Planning remained a major issue, with NM&DDC the worst-performing Council in Northern Ireland and confirmed that he could not support the proposed increase.

The Chief Executive advised that, as Chief Financial Officer, she was required to present a rate sufficient to deliver the Council's corporate and strategic objectives. She confirmed that the suggestions raised at SFWG had been examined and noted that reserves policies allowed for in-year review. She explained that completing the Ballynahinch Community Centre this year would contribute only £7,000 to the MRP and that withdrawing £1.1 million from reserves would still not achieve the saving required. She added that Planning was regularly

scrutinised through the SP&R and Planning Committees and stated that the rate presented was, in officers' view, the appropriate level for effective service delivery.

Councillor Byrne stated that his SFWG proposal had been misrepresented as a single line in the Capital Plan, noting that Members had reviewed twelve projects and discussed more strategic use of capital reserves. He highlighted that the MRP had risen from £5 million to over £6 million in two years and required a long-term strategy. He reminded Members that the SDLP had previously proposed using reserves over a five- to ten-year period to reduce the MRP. He said he had requested an additional SFWG meeting before the rates process due to the uncertainty facing businesses.

The Chief Executive clarified that she had not reduced the proposal to a single line but had provided an example and remained open to reviewing any proposals. Councillor Byrne added that alternative financing methods could also be considered.

As there was dissent in the chamber, the Chairperson put the matter to a recorded vote, the results of which were as follows: (copy attached)

FOR:	25
AGAINST:	16
ABSTENTIONS:	0

Agreed: **It was agreed on the proposal of Councillor Harte, seconded by Councillor Hanlon, to approve the considerations and recommendations of the Strategic Finance Working Group in relation to the 2026/27 rate setting process (see Appendix 7) and, having regard to the Chief Executive's statement as required by the Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 (see 2.1 & 2.2 above):**

- 1. Approve an increase in the district rate for 2026/27 of 2.80% based on an estimated penny product of 2,561,999 meaning a non-domestic rate of 31.0337 pence and a domestic rate of 0.4999 pence.**
- 2. Approve the Medium-Term Financial plan and authorise the 2026/27 expenditure included in the estimates (Appendix 1).**
- 3. Approve the General Estimates of Rates form 2026/27 to be signed by the Chief Financial Officer (Appendix 2).**
- 4. Approve the Capital Strategy Report for 2026/27 required by the CIPFA Prudential Code. (See Appendix 3).**
- 5. Approve the ongoing Capital Programme (see Appendix 4).**
- 6. Approve the Treasury Management Strategy Statement 2026/27 (see Appendix 5).**
- 7. Approve the Minimum Revenue Provision Statement 2026/27 (see Appendix 6).**
- 8. Approve the action sheets of the Strategic Finance Working Group relating to the rate setting process. (see Appendix 7: Restricted item)**

It was also agreed that a report would be tabled at the next SFWG regarding a freeze on the recruitment of non-essential, non-frontline Council personnel.

C/016/2026 ACTION SHEET ARISING FROM COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 12 JANUARY 2026

Read: Action sheet from Council Meeting held on 12 January 2026.

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Andrews, the Action Sheet from Council Meeting held on 12 January 2026 was agreed.**

COUNCIL MINUTES FOR CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION

C/017/2026 MINUTES OF COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON 12 JANUARY 2026

Read: Minutes of Council Meeting held on 12 January 2026 (copy circulated).

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Andrews, seconded by Councillor Ruane, the Minutes of the Council Meeting held on 12 January 2026 were agreed as an accurate record and adopted.**

COMMITTEE MINUTES FOR CONSIDERATION AND ADOPTION

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

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor McAteer, seconded by Councillor Hanna, 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 in relation to which a claim to legal professional privilege could be maintained in legal proceedings.**

AGREED: **On the proposal of Councillor O’Hare, seconded by Councillor McAteer, it was agreed to come out of closed session.**

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

C/018/2026

**MINUTES OF ECONOMY, REGENERATION AND TOURISM
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 19 JANUARY 2026**

Read: Minutes of Economy, Regeneration and Tourism Committee Meeting held on 19 January 2026 (copy circulated).

Agreed: On the proposal of Councillor Hanna, seconded by Councillor Young, the Minutes of Economy, Regeneration and Tourism Committee Meeting held on 19 January 2026 were agreed as an accurate record and adopted.

Following legal advice received, it was agreed to accept the officers' recommendation regarding ERT/009/2026 – Warrenpoint Pontoon and Breakwater.

Having declared an interest, Councillor Tinnelly left the meeting during above discussions – 6.45pm.

C/019/2026

**MINUTES OF STRATEGY, POLICY AND RESOURCES
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 22 JANUARY 2026**

Read: Minutes of Strategy, Policy and Resources Committee Meeting held on 22 January 2026 (copy circulated).

SPR/213/2025 – Planning Update

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Reilly, the Chief Executive confirmed that a reply had not yet been received and that an update would be provided as soon as it was available.

SPR/010/2026 – Annalong Community Centre – Contractor Procurement and Appointment

In response to an enquiry from Councillor Reilly about engagement with users and the committee of Annalong Community Centre, Mr Patterson confirmed that engagement had taken place and would continue. He also confirmed that the Council was assisting the community centre in identifying an alternative venue and that Mourne Councillors would be kept updated.

SPR/008/2026 – Donard Park Works

Councillor Reilly raised concern that the measures introduced to reduce anti-social behaviour remained vulnerable to damage from motor vehicles and suggested installing ramps as a long-term solution. Mr Patterson advised that engagement continued with the PSNI and multi-agency partners, noting significant investment in speed ramps and further works involving lights and barriers. Councillor Devlin thanked officers and welcomed the progress in Donard Park, describing it as a positive step forward.

SPR/014/2026 – Lease of the Generator House, Newcastle Harbour

Councillor Devlin highlighted the excellent work of the Harbour Heritage Association and welcomed the renewal of the lease.

Agreed: On the proposal of Councillor Reilly, seconded by Councillor Mathers, the Minutes of Strategy, Policy and Resources Committee Meeting held on 22 January 2026

were agreed as an accurate record and adopted.

Councillor Enright left the meeting during above discussions – 7.02pm.

C/020/2026 **MINUTES OF ACTIVE AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 26 JANUARY 2026**

Read: Minutes of Active and Healthy Communities Committee Meeting held on 26 January 2026 (copy circulated).

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor K Murphy, seconded by Councillor Lawlor, the Minutes of Active and Healthy Communities Committee Meeting held on 26 January 2026 were agreed as an accurate record and adopted.**

C/021/2026 **MINUTES OF SUSTAINABILITY AND ENVIRONMENT
COMMITTEE MEETING HELD ON 28 JANUARY 2026**

Read: Minutes of Sustainability and Environment Committee Meeting held on 28 January 2026 (copy circulated).

SE/009/2026 – Refuse Christmas Collections Update

Councillor Reilly stated that there had been a significant breakdown in communication between the Council and residents regarding alternative bin collection dates, particularly in the Mourne area, where Members had received numerous complaints. He asked that the Council acknowledge this failure and ensure that stickers with revised collection dates were issued well in advance of Christmas 2026.

Agreed: **On the proposal of Councillor Reilly, seconded by Councillor Taylor, the Minutes of Sustainability and Environment Committee Meeting held on 28 January 2026 were agreed as an accurate record and adopted.**

C/022/2026 **PLANNING SECTION**

There were no issues arising.

C/023/2026 **CORRESPONDENCE REPORT**

Read: Report from Mrs Ward, Chief Executive, regarding an update on correspondence received for the attention of Council (copy circulated).

Correspondence from Minister Givan MLA re NOM Voting at 18 C/184/2025

Councillor Bowsie welcomed the correspondence from Minister Givan, describing it as comprehensive. He proposed forwarding it, along with the correspondence from the Chief Executive of the Education Authority to St Louis' Grammar School, Kilkeel, so the school

could see that their actions had prompted a government response and remain engaged in the democratic process. Councillor Howie seconded the proposal.

Correspondence from Minister Muir MLA re NOM ReGen Waste Warrenpoint C/183/2025

Councillor Finn expressed disappointment at the Minister's response and proposed writing back to ask why he had again stipulated that he would meet only the Chairperson and Chief Executive. She noted that it was common practice for a Council delegation to include more than two representatives and proposed requesting that the Minister meet with a delegation comprising representatives from each party. Councillor Ruane seconded the proposal and stated that representatives from the Crotlieve area, who were most affected, should be included in the delegation.

Councillor Truesdale proposed an amendment that Council request a meeting involving party group leaders and Councillor Gibbons. This was seconded by Councillor Howie.

Councillor Finn did not accept the amendment but clarified that the delegation would include members from each party, including Alliance. Councillor Truesdale confirmed she was content to withdraw her amendment.

Councillor Reilly left the meeting during above discussion – 7.45pm.

Agreed: **It was agreed on the proposal of Councillor Finn seconded by Councillor Ruane, that Council write to Minister Muir asking why he had again stipulated he would meet only with the Chairperson and Chief Executive, and requesting he meet with a delegation of representatives from each Party.**

Correspondence from Richard Pengelly, Chief Executive of Education Authority re NOM Voting at 18 C/184/2025

Councillor Rice welcomed the correspondence and noted that the purpose of the Notice of Motion had been to encourage political interest, promote democratic engagement, and better prepare young people for participation in the electoral process. He proposed that the Council write to all schools in the District, inviting them to allow elected representatives to engage with pupils on policies and manifestos, and to provide opportunities for pupils to question and scrutinise their local representatives. Councillor Quinn seconded the proposal.

Agreed: **It was agreed on the proposal of Councillor Rice seconded by Councillor Quinn, that Council write to all schools within the District inviting them to permit elected representatives to attend and engage with pupils for discussion around policies, manifestos and to providing opportunities for pupils to question and scrutinise their local representatives.**

It was also agreed on the proposal of Councillor Bowsie, seconded by Councillor Howie, to forward correspondence received from the Minister of Education and the Chief Executive of the Education Authority to St Louis' Grammar School, Kilkeel.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 7.51pm

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

Signed:

Chairperson

Chief Executive

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

RECORDED VOTE

DATE: 02/11/2026 VENUE: Downshire Civic Centre MEETING: Council

SUBJECT OF VOTE: C/015/2026 - To Set a District Rate for Financial Year 2025/26

COUNCILLOR	FOR	AGAINST	ABSTAIN	ABSENT
T Andrews		1		
C Bowsie		2		
J Brennan	1			
P Byrne		3		
P Campbell	2			
W Clarke	3			
L Devlin		4		
C Enright		5		
K Feehan		6		
D Finn		7		
C Galbraith		8		
M Gibbons	4			
O Hanlon	5			
G Hanna		9		
V Harte	6			
M Hearty	7			
R Howell	8			
T Howie	9			
J Jackson		10		
G Kearns	10			
A King		11		
C King	11			
M Larkin	12			
N Lawlor	13			
D Lee-Surginor	14			
A Lewis		12		
O Magennis	15			
A Mathers	16			
D McAteer		13		
D Murphy	17			
K Murphy	18			
S Murphy	19			
S O'Hare	20			
A Quinn	21			
H Reilly		14		
M Rice	22			
M Ruane	23			
D Taylor		15		
J Tinnelly		16		
J Truesdale	24			
H Young	25			
TOTALS	25	16	0	0