

NEWRY MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

**Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on
Monday 24 May 2021 at 6.00pm remotely via Microsoft Teams**

Chairperson: Councillor L Devlin

In attendance:

Councillor T Andrews	Councillor P Brown
Councillor R Burgess	Councillor P Byrne
Councillor C Casey	Councillor W Clarke
Councillor C Enright	Councillor A Finnegan
Councillor M Gibbons	Councillor O Hanlon
Councillor G Hanna	Councillor R Howell
Councillor M Larkin	Councillor A Lewis
Councillor O Magennis	Councillor C Mason
Councillor L McEvoy	Councillor H McKee
Councillor K McKeivitt	Councillor A Mc Murray
Councillor K Owen	Councillor H Reilly
Councillor M Savage	Councillor G Sharvin
Councillor D Taylor	Councillor J Tinnelly

Officials in attendance: Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Mr C Mallon, Director of Enterprise, Regeneration & Tourism
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager (Acting)
Ms L O'Hare, Democratic Services Officer

Also in attendance: **National Trust**
Mr J Clarke, Assistant Director – Operations
Mr P Lynch, Countryside Manager

Mourne Heritage Trust
Mr M Carey, Chief Executive

Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service
Mr D Rooney, Southern Area Commander
Mr N McGuffin, Wildfire Officer
Mr M Healy, District Commander

SC/015/2021: APOLOGIES / CHAIRPERSONS REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Curran, Doran, Gallagher, Harte, Mulgrew, O'Hare, Ó Muirí, Stokes and Trainor.

The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the meeting thanking representatives from National Trust, Mourne Heritage Trust and Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service for attending and thanked everyone on behalf of Council for their reaction and service to the community not just for the recent fire in the Mournes but also the many across the District that they had dealt with in recent times.

SC/016/2021: DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Enright declared an interest as a member of the Fire Service Board and was also involved with Creative Peace Downpatrick preventing wildfires.

Councillor Clarke declared an interest as he was a member on the board of the Mourne Heritage Trust.

SC/017/2021: PRESENTATION FROM THE NATIONAL TRUST

Councillors Hanna and Reilly joined the meeting during the above presentation.

Councillor Tinnelly left the meeting during the above presentation due to connectivity issues.

Mr Clarke and Mr Lynch made a presentation highlighting the following points:

- Setting the scene of the size of the area impacted by the fire on 23 April 2021.
- Highlighted the devastation caused to wildlife and landscape.
- Satellite images to show the extent of the burn and put into perspective.
- Drone survey carried out of affected areas, data currently being analysed.
- Grazing regime is currently under review, stock density has been reduced to allow land to recover.
- Recruitment of 2 additional rangers has recently been advertised to help with the recovery process.
- Analysing and working out next steps to the extent of the damage, working closely with DAERA, Mourne Heritage Trust and Council.
- Positive to come out of this is it has brought a lot of community and organisations together to work in a multi-agency approach for the future.

SC/018/2021: PRESENTATION FROM THE MOURNE HERITAGE TRUST

Councillors Clarke and McKevitt joined the meeting during the above presentation.

Councillors Magennis, Lewis and Owen left the meeting during the above presentation.

Mr Carey made a presentation highlighting the following points:

- Additional piece of work to be done to address the issue of wildfires across 'The Mournes'.
- Fire of 23 April 2021 was the biggest fire in 'The Mournes' since the Slievelamagan in the Annalong valley in 2011.
- Images showing the ecological devastation.
- Mourne Wildfire Group was established as a result of the 2011 fire and with funding from NIFRS, NI Water and NIEA the Eastern Mournes Wildfire report was prepared in 2012, which has guided a lot of work since.
- Provided an insight into what the Wildfire report highlighted.
- Undertaken a programme of training of key staff and procurement of specialist equipment.
- Demonstrated the process of controlled burns and the benefits of carrying this out.
- Significant collaborative effort over a decade to prevent the incidents and spread of landscape fires.
- Lack of continuity of resources more recently has affected the recovery measures required.
- Wildfire plan needs updated in terms of climate change impacts, strategic context and 'The Mournes' land management plan as well as co-ordinated public awareness.
- Mourne Wildfire Group has been intermittently successful but needs continuous resources and support to get the maximum benefit.

**SC/019/2021: PRESENTATION FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND
FIRE AND RESCUE SERVICE**

Councillor Finnegan and Casey left the meeting during the above presentation.

Mr Rooney, Mr McGuffin and Mr Healy made a presentation highlighting the following points:

- Updated members on the operational response to the incident and challenges presented.
- General peaks of wildfire incidents are in April and May.

- Work with a number of inter-agencies as a collective, sharing information and resources
- Statutory responsibility for the investigation of a fire is carried out by the PSNI.
- Most likely cause for majority of fires is caused by a person.
- Fire spread was limited due to good planning and good partnership working.

A discussion took place with the following points raised by Members:

- Members thanked representatives for the informative presentations and wished to put on record their thanks and heartfelt appreciation on behalf of all of the people in South Down, to all the agencies involved in the recent fire in the Mournes and their heroic efforts to contain the fire and all the fires attended throughout the district.
- Was there a general consensus as to how these fires were started?
- What could Council do to help manage this in the future?
- Was there a time of year when controlled burning could be done that would have the least impact on insects and wildlife?
- What stage do controlled burns serve their purpose and would it be worth rethinking how to replant as a management strategy?
- How well was the environmental management of these spaces working as a society as well as how interact with these spaces?
- The number of visitors in the Mournes had significantly increased during Covid, how could 'The Mournes' be protected going forward to ensure this did not happen again.
- How could Council be used as a platform to promote and educate visitors over the summer months.
- Councillor Clarke wished to put on record thanks to Matthew Busby who led the way in managing and preventing wildfires.
- Out of tragedy comes opportunities and Covid had highlighted how important our outside space was. There was a need for a structured, interagency and collaborative approach to manage wildfires throughout the District, who could lead on this Council, DAERA or National Trust?
- The Minister for Finance, Mr Conor Murphy had pledged to make finances available to help repair some of the damage however resources were limited when compared to other National Parks.
- Councillor McEvoy called on the Minister for Finance, Mr Conor Murphy to establish an urgent taskforce and round table discussion that would involve central government, local councils, other various agencies as well as landowners to put the necessary actions in place urgently.
- Was it possible to investigate the possibility of a job scheme for the long term unemployed to get involved in a volunteering role.
- Certain hotspot areas for wildfires could be better maintained in order to prevent these happening and a more structured inter-agency approach was required.

- Could appropriate training be provided by NIFRS and Mourne Heritage Trust with the help of Council to volunteers as a quick reaction force to help when wildfires occur.
- Was it possible to have information boards located at key areas to advise visitors of appropriate clothing, footwear, behaviours etc for walking in the Mournes?
- Why were helicopters not deployed in the recent wildfire and how could these be improved on in the future?
- Was there anyone responsible for checking and stopping walkers to see if they had supplies with them to potentially start a fire on purpose?
- It may be useful if a list was made of regular areas that fires were being started deliberately, especially in the Downpatrick area so landowners could maintain them better so as not to attract this type of behaviour?
- Was it correct that this was the first time such a major incident had been declared.
- Wildfires were mostly man made, was there ringfenced funding specifically for this or could more funding and resources be diverted to tackle this?
- April seen a big increase in wildfires, why was this?

Representatives from the delegation responded to queries as follows:

- Causation of the majority of wildfires were human fires, motivation and reasons why they do it differ from accidental to on purpose.
- Commend Council for their speedy approach and commitment in organising a multi-agency meeting in light of the recent wildfire, the biggest help Council could do was to help lever those significant resources from central government to help refresh the plan and get wildfire plan up to date and look at for future prevention and recovery.
- Controlled burns were done best in February to early March and the site would be thoroughly inspected beforehand to limit the amount of natural habitat affected and confined to a target area. There was some impact on insect's, but the view is it is for a greater good.
- Controlled burns were not just for wildfire protection measures but also a habitat enhancement measure and were only one part of the approach to preventing wildfires, other ways of controlling the fuel load are cutting and grazing. In terms of recovery there was rewetting and reseedling of lands which needed to be set out in the recovery plan.
- Landscape management was a bit of grey area when it comes to public policy, as there was a non-statutory basis for our AONB'S and with that comes insecurity of resource. Mourne Heritage Trust was a charity and other jurisdictions would have guaranteed statutory funding for these types of landscapes. In the bigger picture these do need to be addressed.
- The use of wardens was a positive initiative from Council to have people at key access routes to reinforce the four E's... engage, educate, encourage and if necessary enforce, however Council had been struggling to recruit to those posts which confirms more long-term management is required.

- Council would be the lynch pin for bringing various agencies together, it had the legitimacy and statutory authority along with elected representatives to bring the relevant agencies together and take the lead role in central government investment.
- NIFRS put on record thanks to the community support received in lieu of donations of food, drinking water and money raised with a special mention to Charlie Thompson from Newcastle who raised a significant amount of money during the recent fire in the Mournes.
- Happy to look at the role of volunteers going forward however pointing out a word of caution as these incidents were very dangerous and one of the challenges faced by the NIFRS was controlling people at a incident.
- Helicopter was requested, however it was a complicated process to obtain permission to use by the Secretary of State and by the time permission was granted unfortunately a similar fire had started in Killarney National Park and it had been deployed there.
- As part of the debrief, organisations were looking into commercial provision of a helicopter through a contract arrangement for water bombing.
- Enforcement of people lighting fires was more a role for rangers and wardens.
- Plan to hold more information days to educate the public. There was ongoing work with the PCSP and Youth Justice Agency and involved in a lot of community safety work in the Downpatrick area regarding the deliberate fires, however powers were limited when it comes to asking landowners to maintain and keep land tidy.
- Referring to the 'Jesip Principles' which were quite new and only starting to become imbedded - A major incident was declared for the first time and would probably do this more often at future wildfires as it brings other agencies together, focuses minds of public and opens up opportunities in relation to provision and use of helicopters.
- NIFRS were still able to carry out their statutory function during the major incident and attend other emergencies.
- NIFRS had a small number of trained specialist wildfire officers, however don't have a dedicated team but all officers are trained to tackle these type of wildfire incidents.
- Increase in April was down to the weather, dry spells bring wildfires, May had been less busy due to weather and ground frosts. Wildfire prediction system was used according to the weather during wildfire season.
- Council could help by sharing messages posted on social media by NIFRS raising awareness during wildfire season.

Councillor McMurray proposed that Council take the lead in organising a conference in the near future looking at environmental, land and visitor management in the District.

Councillor Brown seconded the proposal.

Agreed:

It was agreed on the proposal of Councillor McMurray, seconded by Councillor Brown, that Council take the lead in organising a conference in the near future looking at

environmental land and visitor management in the District.

The Chairperson thanked all representatives for their very informative presentation and all that they do throughout the District. Highlighting continued lobbying was required for a long-term strategy and long-term funding to tackle this huge issue on our doorstep and save the Mourne and our stunning landscape so that visitors can continue to come and enjoy the beauty of outdoors.

The Chairperson mentioned a special word of acknowledgement for Charlie Thompson who is to receive a civic award later in the week for his fundraising efforts.

Mrs Ward Chief Executive, made the following statement:

“Due to the current legislative uncertainty around remote meetings and the restrictions on indoor gatherings, the Chief Executive also agrees to exercise her delegated authority under Standing Orders to implement the resolution of the Committee once ratified by Council subject to any conflict of interest or legal advice that the decision is unlawful.”

The meeting concluded at 19.25pm.

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 07 June 2021.

Signed: Councillor L Devlin
Chairperson of Council

Signed: Ms M Ward
Chief Executive