

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMC/SC

Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on 30 October 2023 at 6.00pm in Downshire Chamber and via Microsoft Teams

In the Chair: Councillor G Sharvin (via Teams)

In attendance in Chamber: Councillor T Andrews Councillor C Enright

In attendance via Teams: Councillor C Bowsie Councillor P Byrne
Councillor P Campbell Councillor W Clarke
Councillor O Hanlon Councillor G Hanna
Councillor R Howell Councillor J Jackson
Councillor G Kearns Councillor T Kelly
Councillor M Larkin Councillor A Lewis
Councillor O Magennis Councillor D McAteer
Councillor L McEvoy Councillor A McMurray
Councillor S O'Hare Councillor K Murphy
Councillor H Reilly Councillor M Rice
Councillor M Ruane Councillor J Tinnelly

In attendance in Chamber: (Officials)
Mr A Cassells, Director of Sustainability & Environment
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager (Acting)

Also in attendance via Teams: Mr M McPeak, Divisional Roads Manager
Mr S Duffy, Section Engineer
Mr C Woods, Deputy Secretary

As the Chairperson was an apology, the Deputy Chairperson assumed the Chair.

SC/020/2023 APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Brennan, Devlin, Finn, Finnegan, Galbraith, Harte, Lee-Surginor, Mathers, S Murphy and Taylor.

SC/021/2023 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

SC/022/2023 PRESENTATION FROM DEPARTMENT FOR INFRASTRUCTURE, ROADS ANNUAL REPORT

The Chairperson welcomed the delegation from DfI Roads and invited them to make their presentation.

Mr McPeak thanked Council for the opportunity to meet and delivered a presentation on the

Roads Annual Report (copy of which is appended to these minutes). He stated the Secretary of State, in June 2023 had provided all Northern Ireland Departments with their budget allocation for the year and DFI Roads were facing an extremely challenging year with a reduction of 14% in their resource budget. He stated this was impacting on the department's ability to cover costs associated with day-to-day road maintenance work such as fixing potholes, traffic lights, road marks and gulley cleaning.

Mr McPeak advised for a number of years, the funding for roads maintenance has been far below the level required to maintain the structural integrity of the roads network and the investment gap in essential maintenance was approximately £1 billion since 2014.

Mr McPeak stated due to significant staffing pressures he encouraged elected members and the public to report road defects using the online services rather than emailing as the online system logs defects directly. He advised any queries that had been submitted via the DEA clinics would be responded to in writing to Members.

The Chairperson thanked Mr McPeak for his presentation and invited questions and comments from Members.

Members asked the following questions:

- Was there any update from DFI on the provision of sandbags available to the public or even to Councillors to assist those in need? Would there be containers for members of the public to avail of sandbags?
- What would be Council's share of the £8m from the Roads Recovery Fund?
- There was no feedback when you submit any incidents online, was this something that could be investigated?
- Work had been agreed to be carried out on Milltown Crossroads and Upper Dromore Road in Warrenpoint however it does not seem to appear on the report.
- There was also to be agreed signage put in place on the Greenan Road which would require the 30 mile an hour sign to be moved around 100 yards, however this had not been completed.
- Active Travel Plans did not appear in the report.
- With regard to Ballynahinch By-Pass, was there anything that could be done at Permanent Secretary level to get this scheme started?
- Concerns had been raised around Active Travel in Dundrum whereby people would need to cross the road twice. A meeting with the local DEA Councillors should be set up to discuss the issues and way forward.
- The A2 Kilkeel Road blockages were a perennial problem, had any investigations been carried out to resolve this long term issue?
- Who triggers the MOU between Council and DFI Roads with regard to winter weather gritting?
- Would DFI be replenishing grit bins and piles before the winter months set in?
- Was there advanced planning ahead of flooding that could be carried out, perhaps a better system put in place whereby people can access sandbags when in need.
- Would there be any plans put in place to alleviate the traffic congestion at the top of the town in Newcastle where traffic was being forced into a single lane?
- Had there been any engagement with National Trust regarding the active travel way given that many people park in the layby to use the beach?
- The service provided to the Mourne DEA had deteriorated since the amalgamation of the Council. Members had been unable to contact an engineer as he had not been given a mobile phone by DFI as yet.
- The gullies and storm drains need to be maintained more regularly than once a year as it had directly impacted on the level of flooding throughout the District.
- What was the total value of the 370 claims that had been paid out, as if the roads

- around Mourne area were better maintained, this figure would dramatically reduce?
- The Newcastle to Kilkeel road was beginning to get incredibly dangerous with the road surface irregular in many places.
- There needed to be a footpath between Saintfield and Crossgar which would create a continuous footpath between Downpatrick all the way to Belfast.
- The online reporting although very user friendly does not feedback to allow Councillors to know if something had been actioned.
- Given the recruitment freeze had now been lifted on the Civil Service, would it be possible that some of the 900 posts to be filled would be done within DFI Roads in order to relieve some of the pressures.

The delegation responded to queries as follows:

- The flooding response had been escalated with contractors and staff being redeployed from other areas to the District due to the severity of the flooding. There were 10,000 sandbags ready to be distributed at locations where flooding was likely to occur.
- The Roads Recovery Fund was £8m across the four divisions with Southern Division receiving around £4m of that split across all Council areas. At a guess that would potentially work out around 1.2m.
- The online reporting system was very effective from the DFI Roads side as defects were collected and triaged immediately into emergencies, high priority and other limited services. There was an internal delay in processing defect and getting information back into the system however there was a lack of staff available to operate the system.
- The reason certain schemes were not in the report were due to being unable to programme into new contracts at present. A minor works contract was being procured at present which would hopefully be up and running in January however there was limited resources therefore officers would be programming as much as they could within this financial year.
- There had been a lot of work undertaken with regard to Active Travel as a result of the Climate Change Act and a strategic document was being prepared by consultants to look at strategizing the delivery of active travel across all of Northern Ireland and how to link towns and cities together. This would be sent out to consultation in early 2024.
- The Department's capital budget which is how it funded major project, this year was 792m which was around 146m short of what was needed to deliver work across roads, rivers, Northern Ireland Water and Translink. The decision to prioritise major road schemes was driven largely by the budget shortfall and lack of multi-year budgets. The list contained within the report shows what the Executive had already agreed to prioritise, however due to the lack of money the list stops before any of the major projects such as Ballynahinch Bypass. If money was to arrive, the work had been completed to be ready to commence.
- With regard active travel in Dundrum, the road was very fast and dangerous and DFI roads were looking at possibility of doing something to try to help crossings. The cycle track proposal was currently on the landside rather than seaside and there would be a crossing needed for anyone cycling who may want to go to the beach. Mr McPeak suggested a way forward may be to have a consultation meeting with residents, interested groups and Councillors to discuss what the best options would be for the safety of everybody.
- The memorandum of understanding between the Department and Council was put in place for prolonged spells i.e. extended periods of frost and ice. There were specific locations in the Council area where Council would be provided with assistance to provide salt and work with Council officials to try and organise those specific areas. The trigger would occur when the weather is prolonged. Grit piles and salt bins would have been filled beginning in October, it took 8 weeks for 8 crews to go around the

division to fill the bins and piles. The baselined budget provided did not include the £7m required to deliver winter service therefore it was bid for within the monitoring rounds at each quarter. Unfortunately due to the lack of an Executive there were no bidding rounds which was why the Department was projecting an overspend in excess of £80m. Although the Department was not required to provide a gritting service legally, they did have discretionary powers to do so.

- The A2 road issues would be picked up with the official responsible and officers would reply to Members.
- The advanced planning included engaging with Council to assist with clearing of debris and sweeping to hopefully mitigate some of the flooding. The Department was inundated with requests for sandbags and there were 10,000 in preparation to be placed where they were required. The priority areas would be where there is a risk to life or property. Councillors and members of the public should contact Floodline to request sandbags. During significant flooding resources were limited and areas had to be prioritised.
- The Department was developing a number of high level policies to decarbonise transport by 2050 as part of the requirements of the Climate Change Act. One of these proposals was to switch fuels and encourage people to use public transport or active travel where possible. In order to restrict traffic parking provision would also need to be examined to ensure that people can travel to the places they wish to go to, however consultation would need to take place to decide what interventions could be delivered over the next 20 years.
- The network development team monitor locations of high congestion and would link that to any injury or collision information to see if they can improve movement of traffic. There were no plans at present to do anything at the top of the town in Newcastle, however it could be looked into again to see if there were any improvements that could be made.
- With regard to the online reporting system, it was the same people that inspect the roads who update the system and as they would be the most familiar with the roads, they would triage the defects. The Department however had 115 posts and only 78 inspectors in post to inspect all of the roads therefore prioritisation had to take place on which roads get worked on first.
- Officials were aware of the issue with the lack of a mobile phone for an engineer and would chase this up again.
- If the department had more resource funding they would be able to remove their limited service to a normal level of maintenance service which would mean they could potentially fix defects in a more proactive way which would in turn reduce the amount of claims the department would receive. The exact figure would need to be sent out to the Member.
- In terms of the Mournes the service policy would be impacting on rural areas that had more rural roads, therefore although it may seem that some areas were being treated worse than others, the policy was used throughout the division in the same way.
- Mr McPeak agreed to investigate the possibility of extending the footpath on the A7 to establish a potential connection.
- All gullies were cleaned once a year as that was the service provision that was available, if Members felt there were areas that had been neglected they should feed these back through to the department using the online forms.
- Part of the issue with filling posts goes back to the budget and posts were not being filled when someone resigns or retires. The workload was managed by officers which doesn't help to deliver the limited service policy and the department was looking for different ways in which they would be able to justify filling vacant posts.

The Chairperson thanked the delegation for their attendance and comprehensive responses to the questions.

AGREED: It was agreed that a meeting be organised with Slieve Croob and The Mournes DEA Councillors to discuss the active travel proposals between Dundrum and Newcastle.

Mr Cassells and Mrs Kelly provided an update regarding the Council's response to the flooding. Mr Cassells advised there was an amber weather warning in place from 9pm until 9am and a decision had been taken to close Council buildings to the public from 6pm until 10am while keeping the situation under review. There were major concerns in Newry particularly due to the levels in the river and the canal and Council were maintaining close liaison with the Rivers Agency during the day. The slush gates at the canal had been opened to allow water to flow out, however there was as much water coming in as going out. He stated this was an evolving situation currently and there were ongoing yellow weather warnings for the incoming week and there would be Emergency Management Team meetings taking place in the morning to advise on what had gone on through the night and the prospects for the day ahead.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 7.50pm.

For adoption at next Meeting of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council.

Signed:

Chairperson

Director