

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMC/SC

Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on 22 September 2025 at 6.00pm in Mourne Room, Downshire Civic Centre, Downpatrick

In the Chair: Councillor P Campbell

In attendance in Chamber:

Councillor C Bowsie	Councillor J Brennan
Councillor P Byrne	Councillor C Galbraith
Councillor V Harte	Councillor R Howell
Councillor G Kearns	Councillor A King
Councillor D Lee-Surginor	Councillor A Mathers
Councillor D McAteer	Councillor S O'Hare
Councillor H Young	

**In attendance
via Teams:**

Councillor W Clarke	Councillor L Devlin
Councillor C Enright	Councillor K Feehan
Councillor G Hanna	Councillor R Howell
Councillor J Jackson	Councillor C King
Councillor M Larkin	Councillor A Lewis
Councillor D Murphy	Councillor K Murphy
Councillor S Murphy	Councillor A Quinn
Councillor H Reilly	Councillor M Ruane
Councillor D Taylor	

**In attendance in Chamber:
(Officials)**

Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Ms S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Ms F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

**Also in attendance in
Chamber:**

National Trust

Ms H MacLachlan – Director for Northern Ireland
Mr P Lynch – General Manager South Down Property Portfolio
Mr J Clarke – Assistant Director of Operations, NI
Ms R Donnelly – Project Manager
Ms V Magreehan – External Affairs & Corporate Communications Manager
Mr R McKenna – Senior Estates Manager

SC/014/2025

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Andrews, Finn, Hanlon, Hearty, Magennis, McEvoy, Rice and Truesdale.

SC/015/2025

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Councillor Bowsie requested clarification that there were no members of the National Trust present.

Mrs Ward clarified that it was for Members to decide whether they had a conflict of interest and to declare same.

There were no declarations of interest.

SC/016/2025

NATIONAL TRUST

The Chairperson welcomed the delegation and invited them to make their presentation. (Copy attached to these minutes)

Ms MacLachlan introduced her team and thanked Members for the opportunity to discuss their recent decision regarding a land lease at Thomas' Quarry. She outlined the National Trust's role as custodian of places of historical and natural beauty for the benefit of all, noting that the Trust managed 1% of Northern Ireland's landmass and 22% of its coastline, including a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSI). She confirmed that the Trust's primary responsibility was to safeguard the mountains for the public benefit.

Mr Lynch described the ecology of the area, including wet and dry heath, blanket bog, and montane heath. He confirmed that over £1m had been invested to date in path repairs and wildlife recovery following the devastation of the 2021 wildfires. He further advised that while the Trust aimed to restore and protect the Mourne and maintain sustainable access for visitors, both the Donard Nature Recovery Report and NIEA's condition assessment indicated that habitats were under pressure from current visitor levels. He stressed the need for appropriate infrastructure and visitor dispersal plans to protect the landscape.

Mr Clarke highlighted the Trust's long-standing involvement as a stakeholder in the Mourne Mountain Gateway Project, noting that concerns over the gondola element had been raised as early as 2017. While the Trust had signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Council at Tourism NI's request, this had been a statement of mutual interest in preserving and promoting appropriate access, not a commitment to any course of action.

Mr Clarke explained that the decision not to lease Thomas Quarry had been made in light of the area's fragility, evidence from monitoring and reports, and DAERA-funded recovery programmes. He noted that public opinion and communication from Trust members had also influenced the decision. He acknowledged the disappointment caused but stated that the National Trust hoped BRCD funding would remain in the Newcastle area. He expressed the Trust's willingness to work with Council and stakeholders on alternative, sustainable options that aligned with environmental, cultural, and economic needs.

Following the presentation the Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members:

- A request was made for a copy of the map showing the National Trust's areas of responsibility in the Mourne.
- Members emphasised their wish for Council and the National Trust to work together respectfully.
- Concern was expressed at the timing of the decision on the lease, particularly as the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), had not been completed. Members questioned how a decision could be made without expert evidence.

- Why had the National Trust not awaited the outcome of the EIA before making its decision, as agreed in the MOU?
- Why had Council received only 20 minutes' notice before the public statement was released?
- Would it have been more prudent to arrange an emergency meeting with Council to discuss the decision, rather than Members learning of it through the press release?
- Some Members expressed difficulty in trusting the National Trust to work with Council again to secure funding for the District.
- While acknowledging the National Trust's commitment to the Mournes, Members questioned the speed of the announcement given the substantial public and political interest.
- Had the National Trust considered the implications of public spending when agreeing to wait for the EIA, which had been commissioned using ratepayers' money?
- Given the reported information already available on habitats and ecology, why had the Trust agreed to await the commissioned EIA if sufficient evidence already existed?
- Could the National Trust recognise the issue of trust created by stating in April 2025 that they would wait for specialist reports, then announcing a decision within a week?
- Caring for the environment had to be balanced with pragmatism; why was the Trust opposed to significant investment to showcase the Mournes in a controlled manner, where mitigating measures could ensure environmental protections?
- The National Trust's statement cited environmental concerns, yet it had not awaited the EIA as supporting evidence, which called their integrity into question.
- Did the National Trust consider it amicable or professional to have provided only 20 minutes' notice before issuing its statement?
- Had Council failed to adhere to any aspect of the MOU?
- Why did the National Trust decline a seat on the Programme Board?
- Had the final decision been influenced by public or political lobbying and pressure?
- Could the National Trust acknowledge that not awaiting the EIA had led to public money being wasted?
- Had the National Trust raised concerns about spending public funds in any communication with Council?
- Would the Trust be willing to share its internal records relating to the decision-making process?
- A Member expressed concern that the MOU had been taken as a declaration of intent, which was misleading to the public.
- A Member claimed the project risk register was inaccurate as it did not include land ownership as a risk.
- Members requested clarity on the status of the MOU, noting it contained a five-year expiry clause.
- Members suggested that both parties reflect on lessons learned from the project process.
- Members expressed disbelief that the Trust claimed to be unaware of the scope of the EIA and requested clarification.
- Members asked that the Trust notify Council of any future decisions before making them public.
- Was the Trust aware of the scope of the proposed visitor management plan designed to control access from the visitor site, and if not, why not?
- Members noted that achieving a BRCD-compliant solution would be challenging and that false narratives circulating publicly were placing unnecessary pressure on stakeholders.

The delegation responded as follows:

- The requested map of National Trust areas within the Mourne would be circulated to Members.
- Mr Clarke confirmed that the National Trust had gathered four years of evidence and made its decision to prevent further public money being spent on the EIA.
- Mr McKenna advised that section 3.5 of the MOU required the National Trust to report its decision within 48 hours, which it did as soon as the decision had been reached.
- Ms MacLachlan confirmed that analysis of the higher Mourne path network showed that the infrastructure could not support additional visitors.
- Ms MacLachlan stated that they were at times frustrated by a lack of response to specific requests for information, despite the MOU agreement in terms of communication.
- Ms MacLachlan confirmed that the National Trust was not aware of whether the EIA covered only the gondola footprint or the wider Mourne, or indeed the full scope of the report.
- Mr Clarke stated that the National Trust had declined a seat on the Programme Board as this would have created a conflict of interest, given its position as landowner. She stated that not being on the Programme Board meant the National Trust was not fully aware of the project scope and found it difficult to assess the wider impact of increased visitor numbers.
- Mr Clarke stated that the National Trust had been consistent in its communications throughout the process.
- Mr Clarke advised that multiple reports already evidenced environmental concerns, and that another report would simply reinforce existing evidence.
- Mr Clarke confirmed that the National Trust had not acted under pressure but had listened to its members, which outnumbered the membership of all political parties combined.
- Mr Clarke stated that the National Trust could not share its internal decision-making records but stood over its process as appropriate.
- Mr Clarke rejected any suggestion of compromised integrity, stating that the National Trust had behaved consistently.
- Mr McKenna confirmed that the National Trust decision had been announced in order to safeguard future public funds.
- Mr McKenna confirmed that the MOU remained specific to the project and as it was no longer progressing, the MOU had no effect; it was never a legally binding document.
- Ms Magreehan explained that a National Trust-commissioned report had already shown the fragility of the mountain and that it could not accommodate additional footfall. This evidence formed the basis for refusing the lease, as the Trust could not risk an EIA reaching a different conclusion or recommending a further investigation.
- Mr McKenna stated that while a gateway to the Mourne was an attractive concept, the mountain was already at capacity. Opening it further would have been detrimental, and as custodians, the National Trust had a duty to protect the area. He stated that any control measures were subject to failure and would further damage the fragile environment.

The Chief Executive and Director of Economy, Regeneration and Tourism also replied to some comments from Members as outlined below:

- Mrs Ward confirmed that Council's Corporate Plan sought to stimulate the local economy through tourism but stressed that this would not be at the expense of the environment, which was the driver for commissioning the EIA.
- Mrs Ward further confirmed that the Senior Management Team were continuing to work with BRCD partners and Members to secure funding for the District.
- Mr Mallon confirmed that more than 40 pieces of information had been shared with the National Trust, including the Strategic Outline Case and the Executive summary of the Outline Business Case, which contained objectives, benefits, and projected visitor

numbers. He noted that some commercially sensitive information could not be shared, and this was acknowledged and agreed within the MOU.

- Mrs Ward clarified that the MOU had never been presented by Council officers as a commitment to proceed, but as an agreement on communication and cooperation and any statement to the contrary was misrepresentation.
- Mr Mallon confirmed that a meeting in December 2024 had discussed environmental issues in detail, including the EIA scope, and that National Trust representatives had been present.
- Mr Mallon confirmed that the consultants' risk register included land assembly as a high risk and had been presented to the Programme Board, and statements to the contrary were misleading.
- Mr Mallon confirmed that a visitor management plan had been under development to strategically manage access from the visitor attraction to the mountain, and confirmed that the projected visitor numbers were widely known.

Cllrs C King, Jackson, Enright, Reilly and Ruane left the meeting during the above discussions – 6.58pm, 6.59pm, 7.01pm, 7.02pm and 7.12pm respectively.

The Chairperson thanked the delegation for their presentation and time.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at **7.23pm**

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 6 October 2025.

Signed:

Chairperson

Chief Executive



Mourne Mountains Gateway Project & Thomas's Quarry

Presentation to Newry, Mourne & Down District Council to discuss the National Trust's decision regarding a lease for Thomas's Quarry.

22 September 2025



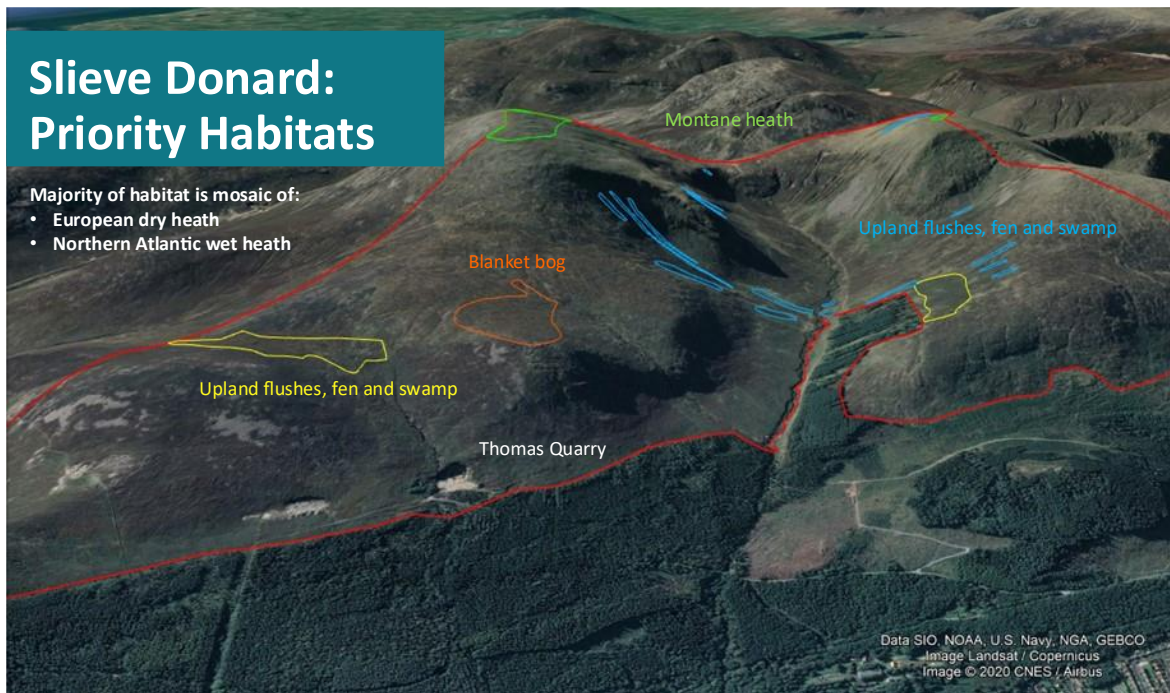
National Trust in the Mournes

The National Trust is responsible for managing 526ha of upland habitat in the Eastern Mournes ASSI / SAC, including Slieve Donard and Slieve Commedagh.

Slieve Donard: Priority Habitats

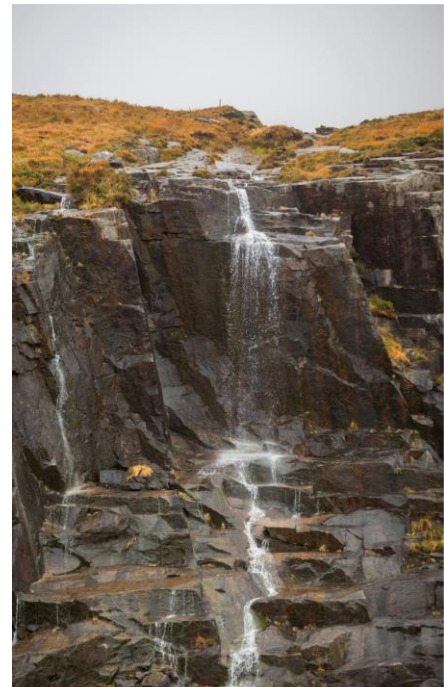
Majority of habitat is mosaic of:

- European dry heath
- Northern Atlantic wet heath



Engagement with the MMGP

- Engaged with Council in goodwill since 2017
- However, we consistently expressed our concerns
- RSK Report (June 2022) highlighted significant environmental impacts
- Transparent in our approach - sharing data, presenting to committee, meeting with officers & consultants



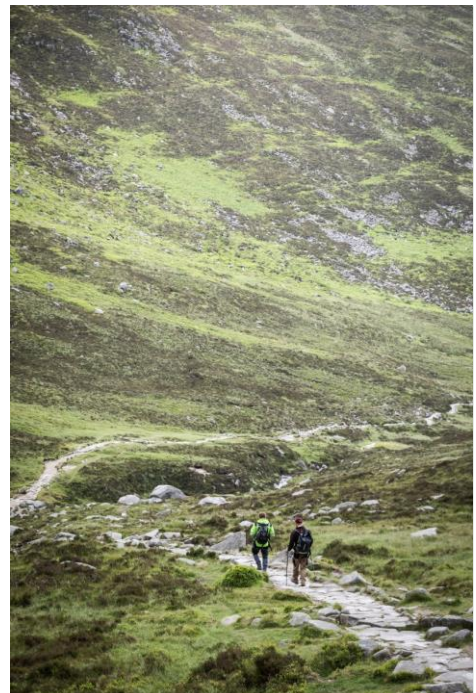


Our decision

- Core purpose to look after nature, beauty and history for everyone, for ever
- Informed by discussions with partners and stakeholders
- Growing body of evidence, including recent 'Donard Nature Recovery Report', confirms significant environmental risk

Looking to the future

- Opportunity for an adapted Mournes Gateway project that is truly sustainable
- Continue to work with the Council and other bodies, including through Forever Mournes Partnership





The Mournes:
Building a Sustainable Future Together