

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

Ref: SC/

Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on Monday 24 August 2026 at 6.00pm in Mourne Room, Downshire Civic Centre, Downpatrick

In the Chair: Councillor G Hanna

**In attendance in
Chamber:**

Councillor T Andrews	Councillor C Bowsie
Councillor C Galbraith	Councillor O Hanlon
Councillor J Jackson	Councillor A King
Councillor D Lee-Surginor	Councillor S O'Hare

**In attendance
via Teams:**

Councillor L Devlin	Councillor K Feehan
Councillor M Hearty	Councillor G Kearns
Councillor M Larkin	Councillor A Mathers
Councillor D Murphy	Councillor A Quinn
Councillor H Reilly	Councillor M Rice
Councillor J Truesdale	Councillor H Young

**Officials in attendance in
Chamber:**

Mrs S Murphy, Director of Sustainability & Environment
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager
Ms F Branagh, Democratic Services Officer

**Also in attendance in
Chamber:**

NI HOUSING EXECUTIVE

Ms C McFarland, Interim Chief Executive
Mr J McCartan, South Regional Manager
Ms C Crainey, South Down Area Manager
Ms S Collins, Head of South Place Shaping

**Also in attendance via
Teams:**

NI HOUSING EXECUTIVE

Mr A Kennedy, AD Asset Strategy
Mr N Bolton, AD Project Delivery
Ms C O'Hare, Band 8 Sustainable Homes
Mr A Mawhinney, AD Strategic Partnerships

SC/008/2026:

APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Councillors Clarke, Finn, Harte, Lewis and Magennis. Apologies were also received from Mrs Ward, Chief Executive, Ms Jones, Director of Corporate Services, Mr Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism, and Mr Patterson, Director of Active & Healthy Communities.

SC/009/2026

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest

SC/010/2026

NI HOUSING EXECUTIVE

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

Ms McFarland thanked the Council for the opportunity to present the Housing Investment Plan and introduced the delegation. She advised that the Housing Executive regarded itself as a key partner of the Council and highlighted the close working relationship through Community Planning, the Housing Needs Working Group, rural housing initiatives, and engagement on the Local Development Plan and associated housing policies.

Ms McFarland outlined the local housing context, investment activity and future priorities, advising that the Housing Executive continued to work with the Council to identify land opportunities and facilitate the provision of affordable housing within mixed tenure developments across both urban and rural areas. She reported that as of March 2026 there were 1,340 applicants on the social housing waiting list in rural areas, and during the preceding year, 131 social housing allocations had been made in rural areas. She outlined that the five-year projected social housing need for rural areas was 946 units, representing 39% of total district need and confirmed that one rural new-build scheme had been completed in Camlough, two schemes were under construction in Forkhill and Saintfield, and eight further rural schemes comprising approximately 150 units were included in the programme for 2026-2029.

Ms McFarland noted that Co-Ownership had an active stock of 599 homes at the end of March 2026, with 28 purchases completed during 2025-26. She also highlighted the St Clare's Convent development in Newry, which would provide 18 two-bedroom intermediate rent apartments managed by Maple & May.

Ms McFarland advised that the Housing Executive had invested £53.37 million across the district during 2025-26, including £6.28 million in new-build housing and that during that period, 39 new social homes had been completed, 435 homes were under construction at the end of March 2026, and 339 units were included within the 2026-2029 development programme. She further reported that £6.55 million had been invested in planned maintenance and improvement works to 868 homes, with 975 units included within 28 planned schemes for 2026-27. She outlined a number of significant challenges facing the housing sector, including budgetary pressures, uncertainty regarding long-term investment in housing stock, increasing demand for social housing, high levels of housing stress and

homelessness, the ongoing need for temporary and emergency accommodation, shortages of social and affordable housing, and wastewater infrastructure constraints affecting housing development. She also emphasised the impact that housing conditions could have on health and wellbeing.

Looking ahead, Ms McFarland highlighted a number of opportunities and initiatives, including an initial budget allocation for 2026-27, engagement with housing associations to bring forward new schemes, consultation on amendments to the House Sales Scheme, the launch of the Rural Strategy 2026-2031, completion of a comprehensive stock condition survey, funding secured for the Foundations Programme to support young people leaving care, consultation on a new Homelessness Strategy, the Low Carbon Retrofit Pilot, and the forthcoming Warm Healthy Homes Fund aimed at tackling fuel poverty.

In conclusion, Ms McFarland emphasised that increasing housing supply remained the key issue underpinning housing need, homelessness and housing stress, and was critical to enabling the Housing Executive to maintain and improve its housing stock. She advised that a comprehensive stock survey would inform long-term investment planning and welcomed questions from Members on any aspect of the Housing Investment Plan.

Following the presentation, the Chairperson invited questions and comments from Members.

Comments and questions from Members were as follows:

- Thanks were offered to the delegation, and the local teams were commended for their professionalism and hard work.
- Were the delegation aware of any planned discussions or legislation changes with the aim of reducing vacant homes through working with private owners to increase supply in key areas.
- The demand for housing in Downpatrick was acknowledged, with 285 units required, alongside the impact of housing stress for those on the waiting list.
- What were the initial steps needed to address the demand for housing, as the waiting list appeared not to have moved much in recent years. What was the best place to start in terms of addressing the issues.
- What were the difficulties with rural housing, especially as housing stress within the farming community could go unrecognised.
- What impact did planning permission and land availability have on the demand.
- The demand in Kilkeel was noted, and disappointment expressed that planning permission had not been granted due to the constraints with the wastewater infrastructure.
- The recent changes to the housing allocation points system were welcomed, however Members queried whether consideration could be given to awarding additional points to applicants seeking housing within their local area, noting instances where applicants remained on waiting lists while properties in their preferred location were allocated to individuals from outside the area.

- What evidence was available regarding the wastewater infrastructure as several developments within the Saintfield area had been stalled due to lack of available capacity.
- It was noted that it seemed peculiar in the group settlements that Kilmore and Loughinisland were together, and Crossgar and Annacloy were grouped. It was stated that it would be more reflective of the DEAs if Crossgar and Kilmore were grouped together, and Loughinisland and Annacloy grouped.
- What plans did the Housing Executive and housing associations have to maximise opportunities to bring forward additional housing developments to help address the chronic housing shortage.
- What impact did the recent changes to the housing allocation points system have to date.
- Had the Housing Executive's research identified a demand for more multi-unit or apartment-style developments within the Newry, Mourne and Down District, and could such developments play a greater role in meeting housing need in the future.
- Was the Housing Executive aware of any desire among local authorities to write to the Department for Communities seeking reconsideration of the housing points system, including the allocation of additional points for those wishing to remain within their local area.
- Given that the Housing Supply Strategy and Treasury negotiations regarding borrowing powers remained ongoing, had the Housing Executive considered alternative arrangements or contingency measures should those powers not be secured.
- It was noted that it appeared that of the £56m budget, £27m had been ringfenced for housing benefit – was housing benefit part of the Housing Executive's budget.
- Section 75 stated that a military veteran could not get additional points for housing, how then could an asylum seeker be granted housing before a veteran?
- What were the Housing Executive's views on the recent measures introduced by the Communities Minister to strengthen tenants' rights and security of tenure and could these measures improve protections and stability for people in the private rented sector.
- Was tenancy fraud a large risk to the available budget.
- Were there any plans to improve the right of succession for occupied houses as an example was provided of a resident who had to leave his family home due to unsigned paperwork following his mother's admission to a nursing home.
- Were all new-build homes required to meet sustainability standards.
- What role did the Housing Executive play when considering housing for those with additional needs.

The delegation responded as follows:

- Empty homes have been discussed at a Departmental level, and the impact it could have on housing supply. However, it remains a departmental policy change and any discussion on the issue was welcomed.
- The connection between housing and health was noted, and the Corporate Plan detailed that connection. A number of actions could be taken to address the shortfall

need in Downpatrick; however the issue was wider than the Housing Executive that required the utilisation of supply strategy and a departmental strategy that could be fed into.

- Rural areas were noted as an ongoing issue within the Council area having the highest need across Northern Ireland, however the Housing Executive worked closely with the local District Electoral Areas (DEAs) to identify available land for development, and to continue to assist in developing policy that would put the onus on developers to provide social housing within new developments.
- One method of addressing the shortfall in housing provision would be to ensure that housing remained a priority within the Programme for Government, as funding was linked to government priorities.
- The Housing Executive would continue to work alongside housing associations and Council to consider options that sat outside the normal processes that could bring forward opportunities to identify suitable sites for housing development.
- With regard to unrecognised demand, the Housing Executive could only work with the information that was available, so those seeking housing were encouraged to register that demand so that it could be recognised and utilised to secure any potential housing where possible.
- The housing points system was set out in legislation, and it was not possible to adjust the system by request, the matter required departmental agreement and consent.
- The Housing Executive had a good working relationship with NI Water, with ongoing discussions to address concerns, however this was also hampered by the limited role that the Housing Executive had with regard to infrastructure.
- The Housing Executive worked closely with housing associations to identify voids in property ownership to ensure available stock was used to maximum capacity.
- A large number of apartments were contained within the current programme for the District, however that had to be managed in line with the preferred house type which was a traditional house.
- With regard to the Treasury negotiations, the discussions relating to the Housing Executive being able to borrow to invest was at an advanced level, income was received through rent but that had to be balanced against the need to invest in homes to maintain the required standard of living.
- The housing benefit was included for information relating to the housing benefit within the District, there were essentially two budgets that were not in competition for spending.
- Any information provided in relation to potential tenancy fraud was investigated and addressed as necessary, while a large number of reports were received, not all were fraudulent cases.
- In relation to Section 75, Ms McFarland highlighted that the Housing Executive could only work within the point system as laid out and was unable to comment on individual cases.
- Ms McFarland welcomed measures that would strengthen tenants' rights and improve security of tenure. She advised that a significant amount of the Housing Executive's work focused on tenancy sustainment, including supporting tenants to remain in their

homes, preventing homelessness, assisting households to maintain tenancies, and promoting financial inclusion.

- Succession was a major concern across all Council areas and was constrained by policy framework. However, discussions were ongoing regarding any potential amendments that could be made to the issue of succession.
- There was a sustainable homes team that looked at retrofitting properties with sustainable features, decarbonising stock, maintenance teams, the affordable warmth scheme and that all new builds were built to the housing associations guide standards with may achieving an 'A' energy efficiency rating.
- Should someone on the waiting list not be suitable for general needs housing, the Housing Executive worked closely with the relevant Health & Social Care Trust to ensure the individual's needs could be met in an appropriate location.
- The kind words for the local Housing Executive's local teams were welcomed and would be fed back to the teams.

Cllrs Devlin, Larkin and Hearty left during the above discussions at 6.22pm, 6.54pm and 7.08pm respectively.

Councillor Hanna thanked the delegation for their presentation and time.

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 7.12pm

For adoption at the Council Meeting to be held on Monday 7 September 2026.

Signed:

Cllr Hanna
Chairperson

Marie Ward
Chief Executive