

NEWRY, MOURNE & DOWN DISTRICT COUNCIL

NMC/SC

**Minutes of Special Council Meeting held on 6 November 2023 at 5.00pm in
Downshire Chamber and via Microsoft Teams**

In the Chair: Councillor V Harte

In attendance in Chamber: (Councillors)

Councillor T Andrews	Councillor C Bowsie
Councillor P Byrne	Councillor P Campbell
Councillor W Clarke	Councillor L Devlin
Councillor C Enright	Councillor D Finn
Councillor A Finnegan	Councillor C Galbraith
Councillor O Hanlon	Councillor G Hanna
Councillor V Harte	Councillor R Howell
Councillor J Jackson	Councillor G Kearns
Councillor T Kelly	Councillor C King
Councillor M Larkin	Councillor D Lee-Surginor
Councillor A Lewis	Councillor O Magennis
Councillor A Mathers	Councillor D McAteer
Councillor L McEvoy	Councillor A McMurray
Councillor S O'Hare	Councillor D Murphy
Councillor S Murphy	Councillor H Reilly
Councillor M Ruane	Councillor G Sharvin
Councillor J Tinnelly	Councillor J Truesdale

In attendance via Teams: Councillor M Gibbons Councillor M Rice
Councillor D Taylor

In attendance in Chamber: (Officials)

Mrs M Ward, Chief Executive
Mr A Cassells, Director of Sustainability & Environment
Mrs J Kelly, Director of Corporate Services
Mr C Mallon, Director of Economy, Regeneration & Tourism
Miss S Taggart, Democratic Services Manager (Acting)
Mrs D Starkey, Democratic Services Officer

In attendance via Teams: Mr J McGilly, Assistant Director: Regeneration
Mr A Patterson, Assistant Director: Economy, Growth & Tourism

SC/023/2023 APOLOGIES AND CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS

Apologies were received from Councillors Brennan and K Murphy.

SC/024/2023 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

SC/025/2023 EMERGENCY NOTICE OF MOTION – FLOODING INCIDENTS

The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the meeting which had been arranged to discuss an emergency notice of motion regarding the recent flooding that had devastated parts of the District. She advised she had seen first-hand the devastation and impact this had in Newry and Downpatrick along with Flurrybridge Retail Park. She stated her party colleagues in the Mourne, Crotlieve and South Armagh had also relayed the catastrophic impact the floods have had on residents and businesses with homes ruined and road infrastructure collapsed. She welcomed that all Parties had come together in solidarity with all residents of the District and that Group Leaders in Sinn Féin, SDLP, DUP and Alliance Parties had signed the agreement to proceed with this emergency meeting.

The Chairperson invited Councillor Hanlon to present the motion and for Group Leaders to speak on the motion.

Councillor Hanlon presented the following motion on behalf of the Group Leaders in the Council:

"This Council acknowledges the devastation that recent floods have inflicted on our District's residents and business communities; Council commends the efforts of Council and departmental workers, community responders, the emergency services and others who assisted within local communities where unprecedented flooding took place; Council agrees that a robust and comprehensive review of its response throughout these incidents should commence immediately; Council further agrees to write to other relevant statutory agencies that were involved in the response to carry out their own reviews; Council calls on the relevant directorates to begin work immediately on an accessible recovery plan which puts the needs of those impacted the most at its core; Council should immediately write to relevant Government Departments as well as Central Government to assess what financial support can be made available to support homeowners and businesses that have been affected."

In presenting the motion, Councillor Hanlon stated this was a time when Parties should be united, working in partnership to support our communities in the wake of the nightmare that had unfolded over the past week. She wished to place on record, her Parties thanks to Council workers, emergency services, community groups and all those that had assisted since the crisis began and she commended the community spirit in solidarity which had underpinned the response to date.

Councillor Hanlon stated the public deserved transparency and needed answers from the range of agencies who had been involved as the events unfolded last week. Questions such as whether flood alleviation measures at Camlough Lake were activated, if not, why not; gully clearing in the Mourne, have these been cleaned in the last year; in Newcastle the flood alleviation scheme was heavily invested in, yet family homes had been devastated by flooding, what are the next steps here to prevent this from occurring again?

Speaking about the catastrophic flooding in Downpatrick, Councillor Hanlon queried whether every single preventative measure had been enacted to try to stop it from occurring and whether the Quoile floodgates were operating properly or if the river had been dredged, would it have prevented such serious flooding. She stated these were all questions that needed answers and those that had borne the brunt of the devastation needed to have their voices heard as part of any review.

Councillor Hanlon highlighted the impact on the local businesses across the District who are anxious about how they would pay their mortgage and are living through the trauma of what had happened to their livelihoods. She praised the resilience of the local community and hoped urged Central Government to ensure financial support and funding packages be made available to those affected by the devastating floods. She also stated that the Secretary of State needed to visit the District to witness the devastation first hand.

In finishing, Councillor Hanlon stated all representatives must work together in genuine partnership to deliver the support that was needed to families that had lost their homes and to the people that had lost their livelihoods.

Councillor McMurray stated that Council needed to understand what happened and why areas flooded as they did and ensuring this does not happen again by addressing the financial cost which would be felt by both businesses and residents alike. The joint motion puts into place avenues and forums by which these areas can be addressed.

Councillor McMurray put on record his thanks to Council officers and workers involved in the response and cleaning up with the floods. He had direct dealings with Marie Ward, Josephine Kelly, Andrew Cassels and Sarah Taggart who had consistently convened and facilitated meetings that had kept Parties informed of what was happening while also allowing Party Leaders to relay issues that were arising in affected areas. He thanked those in the other statutory agencies along with those in other Councils both in Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland as well as those that assisted from the voluntary sector such as Mourne Mountain Rescue tea.

Councillor McMurray stated that ultimately this would require a financial package, outside the scope of the Council and in order to reestablish the traders affected by the flood, it was imperative that Stormont and Westminster put a financial package together that would help those who had contributed to the financial wellbeing of the District for so long. He outlined that with climate change these types of events would become more prevalent and we must do all we can to not only mitigate against future flooding events, but also to make the District as sustainable as possible.

Councillor Devlin offered her thanks to all of those who had stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the residents and businesses that had been so badly affected with the devastating floods in Newry, Newcastle, Downpatrick, Kilkeel and right across the District. She stated the goodwill of the people in the District shone through and was appreciated by all.

Councillor Devlin stated there were questions to be asked about how did Newry canal burst its banks; how did the Burren River get to such a high level; and how did the Quoile overflow so rapidly? She stated these questions would need to be answered in the weeks and months ahead, however, focus at present should be on supporting the people in the District that had been affected and assisting those affected business to reopen. She stated that businesses within the District employ staff from the local area and are the backbone of the local

economy, most without the reserves that large multinationals would. She stated that without direct support from Central Government, it was likely that some of these businesses would not reopen.

In summing up, Councillor Devlin stated going forward those homes that had been flooded in the past in Newcastle must be prioritised and measures taken to prevent such recurrence in the future.

Councillor Jackson stated he was conscious that many of the staff were still on the ground along with those people experiencing the aftermath of the flooding and devastation of their homes and businesses. He stated that Council was with them, hear them and would do whatever to took to help all those affected. He commended Council staff, emergency services, government agencies, members of the public who came forward to offer assistance and those farmers with pumping equipment who made themselves available in Newry and Newcastle. He acknowledged the work of the senior management team in Council along with their staff for their commitment and continuous updates throughout the past week.

In summing up, Councillor Jackson stated his Party was happy to join with other Parties in supporting the motion.

Members discussed the issue at length making the following comments regarding the flooding incidents:

- Many sports teams, voluntary organisations and charities have also been impacted by the devastating floods and some facilities that serve the local communities will face closure for months.
- There is a palpable sense of anger across Newry at the lack of support available to the victims of flooding. Urgent financial support is required to help those businesses impacted to support their staff who in the mouth of Christmas are facing an anxious wait in relation to their jobs. A furlough type scheme should be investigated to assist businesses.
- Commend those organisations that were on the ground in Newry providing support and practical help. A lot of the businesses affected are family-run or food outlets that cannot relocate due to logistics and the nature of their operations.
- Some members in the business community in Newry had commented on the absence of senior Council officials on the ground following the floods. Businesses need answers as to how this happened and what steps must be taken to ensure it doesn't happen again. Council need to step up to take the lead in the recovery of the District and ensure proper support mechanisms were put in place.
- Questions must be asked from the Rivers Agency as to why the river flowing behind the houses in Camlough had not been cleaned on a more regular basis and why the gullies in front of the houses have not been maintained. Questions also need asked whether the lake could have been lowered to its lowest capacity to cope with the amount of rainfall.
- There were huge issues in South Armagh with being able to access sandbags and in the end the Community Association and local residents had to purchase sandbags off a local builder. This should not occur and there should be ample sandbags available for everyone.
- Homes have been destroyed in Camlough and it will take a long time for the homeowners to recover from the devastation. Lessons must be learned to ensure this does not happen to them again.
- Many residents in Newcastle were again horrified to watch helplessly as their houses flooded and some were told by Floodline to purchase their own sandbags as there

were none left. This was completely unacceptable. People are angry and frustrated and many of these residents are either unable to purchase house insurance or pay hefty premiums. Questions need asked whether the Burren River was affected by the Shimna Flood alleviation works; where was the breach in the river and why did it appear that no agency was looking for the breach?

- Perhaps Islands Park could have a store for sandbags operated by a radar key or individual codes given to the Mourne Councillors to access these as quickly as possible.
- There was no Flood Warning System that exists in Northern Ireland in the same way it does in England, Scotland and Wales. These systems outline severe flood alerts which were then issued by the government's emergency mobile phone alarm system. Northern Ireland need to have a forecasting and warning system put in place.
- Huge thanks must be given to Council staff for the work they undertook over the past week. They were working around the clock to respond to the flooding incidents alongside the local community and other agencies.
- There was huge frustration with the Floodline system and the length of time it took to report a case due to the huge amount of detail that was being requested.
- The review to take place needed to take cognisance of any flood defence measures that either were in place or needed to be installed to deal with potential future flooding incidents.
- There was an amber warning for heavy rain for South Down therefore the head of services in a lot of organisations should have organised for inspections to take place prior to the flooding. Was the pumping system in the Burren River working correctly? Why did the flood defence at the Burren River fail?
- What measures will be put in place with regards to the fall away of the road at A2 in Kilkeel which is a main arterial route?
- These flooding incidents are directly linked to the amount of public service cutbacks over the last few years.
- The Quoile barrier had not been recognised as fit for purpose as it was not letting out enough water between high tides. This along with the narrow arches under the Belfast Road Bridge at the Quoile need to be cleared to prevent the back-up of water which then caused the flooding.
- Regarding flood alleviation schemes – how many more projects were to come with the Newry scheme; was the Newcastle scheme finalised or was there to be more investment; the lack of investment and replacement of the Quoile river barrier needs to be addressed.
- Mourne was an isolated community with only three ways into the community. With the landslide in Killowen people were trapped in their houses and this cannot occur again.
- Within Kilkeel several fishing boats had been completely destroyed causing millions of pounds worth of damage.
- The perception in the days following the floods from the business community in Newry was that people felt they were not getting the information in a timely manner and that senior Council personnel were invisible on the ground. Although the work carried out following the flooding in Newry and Downpatrick needs to be acknowledged, questions also need to be asked of Council and other agencies as to what could have been done to prevent such a catastrophe.
- There used to be a sandbag store in Rostrevor prior to the flood alleviation scheme however over Covid this seemed to have been removed. It was welcome to hear the Rivers Agency personnel encouraging local representatives to highlight areas where sandbag stores could be placed.

Councillor Enright suggested inviting the Drainage & Flood Council to present to Council.

Councillor Sharvin asked for an amendment to the motion to include the following:

For all Councillors within this Council to sign a letter to the Secretary of State requesting assistance; that an Independent Review of the serious flooding incident be conducted with all agencies feeding into the review and that Council write to the Department for Communities asking for the establishment of a pop-up market at the back of the police station in Downpatrick to enable those business struggling to identify alternatives, a space to trade in the run-up to Christmas"

Councillor Hanlon agreed to the amendment.

ACTION: It was agreed on the proposal of Councillor Hanlon, seconded by Councillor McMurray that:
"This Council acknowledges the devastation that recent floods have inflicted on our District's residents and business communities; Council commends the efforts of Council and departmental workers, community responders, the emergency services and others who assisted within local communities where unprecedented flooding took place; Council agrees that a robust and comprehensive review of its response throughout these incidents should commence immediately; Council further agrees to write to other relevant statutory agencies that were involved in the response to carry out their own reviews; Council calls on the relevant directorates to begin work immediately on an accessible recovery plan which puts the needs of those impacted the most at its core; Council should immediately write to relevant Government Departments as well as Central Government to assess what financial support can be made available to support homeowners and businesses that have been affected.
For all Councillors within this Council to sign a letter to the Secretary of State requesting assistance; that an Independent Review of the serious flooding incident be conducted with all agencies feeding into the review and that Council write to the Department for Communities asking for the establishment of a pop-up market at the back of the police station in Downpatrick to enable those business struggling to identify alternatives, a space to trade in the run-up to Christmas"

There being no further business, the meeting concluded at 6.12pm.

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

Signed:

Chairperson

Chief Executive