

ARDS AND NORTH DOWN BOROUGH COUNCIL

A Meeting of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group of Ards and North Down Borough Council was held in the Council Chamber, Church Street, Newtownards, on Monday 29 April 2024 at 6:00 pm.

PRESENT:

In the Chair: Councillor McKimm

Alderman: Graham (6.55pm)

Councillors: Cochrane

Creighton
Harbinson
McCollum
W Irvine (6.18pm)
Martin (6.30pm)
McKee
Rossiter

Officers: Director of Community and Wellbeing (G Bannister), Head of Parks & Cemeteries (S Daye), Head of Communications and Marketing (C Jackson) and Democratic Services Officer (R King)

1. APOLOGIES

An apology had been received from Councillor Hollywood and apologies for lateness were received from Alderman Graham and Councillor Martin.

NOTED.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest notified.

3. MINUTES OF NORTH DOWN COASTAL PATH WORKING GROUP MEETING DATED 23 JANUARY 2024

The Chair recalled a query in relation to land ownership on various sections of the coastal path and that officers were to provide a map in order to provide clarity. He noted that the discussion had not been recorded in the minutes and that a map had not been provided. He asked if this could be actioned and the Director of Community and Wellbeing explained that this information was available on the Council's Geographic Information System (GIS) however it was difficult to generate maps into a format that could be circulated with the meeting papers. In the meantime, he encouraged members to access the GIS mapping facility, while the Head of Parks and Cemeteries added that the images would be shown on a presentation screen at

future meetings once the full membership of the Working Group had been established.

In a further matter, Councillor McKee was concerned that there had been a three-month gap between this and the previous meeting. While he understood there were discussions around meeting quarterly, he was concerned about criticism from the public in terms of progress. The Chair recalled that there had been a plan to meet in February, but the Director advised that this had only been an aspiration and subject to completing various objectives in January that had not been achieved.

As a general comment, the Chair felt it was important to get as many details as possible within the minutes in order to convey diligence. The Director clarified that the minutes were not verbatim and like all committee minutes required only to give a flavour of items discussed and provide a formal record of decision making.

AGREED TO RECOMMEND, on the proposal of Councillor McKee, seconded by Councillor Cochrane, that the minutes be adopted.

4. EXTERNAL MEMBERS OF WORKING GROUP (FILE NDCP001)

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED: Report from the Director of Community and Wellbeing detailing that in January 2023 Elected Members had decided to abandon the Kinnegar to Donaghadee Greenway Scheme proposals and instead agreed to set up a Task & Finish Working Group to address issues of connectivity, access and maintenance along the North Down Coastal Path.

In September 2023, the Council agreed a Terms of Reference (see Appendix 1) that included the requirement to “invite interested groups, and those with specific expertise to be represented on the Working Group”.

At the North Down Coastal Path Task & Finish Working Group (NDCPWG) meeting in January, Officers presented proposals for external membership, and this was discussed by the Members. Officers were asked to come back to the next meeting with a report that reflected on comments from the meeting including geographical split, workability of group, number of social members & Section 75 considerations.

To progress this Council decision, it is now proposed that we progress external members under three headings:

1. Expert Guests
2. Geographical Representatives
3. Community Partners.

The Expert Guests would be invited to attend occasional meetings by the Director of Community and Wellbeing. Expert Guests could include government agencies (such as NIEA, DfI etc.), specialist interest groups (such as RSPB, WWT etc.) and specialist consultants (individuals or organisations).

The Geographical Representatives would be a representative from the 3 x Town/City Advisory Groups i.e. Holywood, Bangor & Donaghadee. The 3 persons

representatives would regularly attend meetings on behalf of their Advisory Group and would be expected to update the Advisory Group on the work of the North Down Coastal Path Task & Finish Working Group.

The Community Partners would regularly attend meeting for up to 1 year with possible extensions if agreed by the Working Group. The Community Partners would be progressed via an application process. It was proposed that an initial 5 positions be advertised, and this could be increased if the Working Group felt it would be useful to do so.

Procedure for Selecting Community Partners

Stage 1: Open advertisement requesting applications from interested groups or organisations. Up to 5 places initially. The group would be required to specify the main person representing the group and two deputies.

Stage 2 - Proposed Vetting Process: a written application (see Appendix 3) process with the Chairperson and two Council Officers putting a recommendation to the Working Group. Proposed timetable:

- Advertisement of Community Partners – 6th to 27th June
- Evaluation Process during July
- Invite successful groups to NDCPWG meeting in September.

RECOMMENDED:

That Officers progress:

1. Advertise and Select Community Partners as detailed above.
2. Write to Town/City Advisory Groups (Holywood, Bangor & Donaghadee) requesting a representative to attend the NDCPWG meeting in September.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries outlined the above report and recommendation, explaining that a presentation had taken place at the previous meeting on how the Working Group would operate in terms of its partnership with external members.

He outlined a three-prong approach in relation to the external membership, with representatives that the committee deemed as experts, who would attend on an ad hoc basis. Those would be from organisations such as the Department for Infrastructure, Northern Ireland Environment Agency and third sector groups such as the RSPB.

A second category would be made up of geographical representatives and it was envisaged that this would include one member, and a deputy, to be nominated by the relevant Town Advisory Groups. He referred to three TAG groups in Bangor, Holywood and Donaghadee and each group could be represented at meetings that were area specific.

He added that five further positions would be allocated to community partners who would attend regularly and provide a representation of interested groups. He advised

that if the recommendation was agreed, then the external partners would be in place to attend a meeting in September.

Councillor McKee queried the reasoning for inviting TAG representatives to join the Working Group as he understood they had more of a regeneration and economic development remit in relation to the town centre as opposed to a path network. While he understood the benefit of approaching an established group, he wondered if they would have the necessary expertise. The Head of Parks and Cemeteries advised that TAGs represented their towns and communities as a whole and could offer rounded views of the coastal path and its place within their town and wider community. He agreed it would not work if the external membership was made up only of TAG representatives but felt this was just one aspect of the three-pronged approach he had outlined. The Director added that a consideration for TAGs was potential visitor numbers and the coastal path was an important factor in that while the Head of Communications and Marketing added that the remit of TAGs was currently under review and seemed to be moving towards a wider scope of 'place making' that would go beyond the regeneration and economic focus and take in their area in its entirety.

In a further matter, Councillor McKee felt that the application paperwork and advertisements for external membership needed to state clearly what the expectations of external members would be in terms of requirement to attend meetings, including the times and locations. He felt that this would help prospective members when deciding to make the commitment and prevent drop off.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries explained that he hoped to confirm a schedule of quarterly meeting dates up until the end of the year and that could be communicated.

Speaking as a member of Donaghadee TAG, Councillor McCollum recognised that its remit would be expanded to include Place and she felt that members of the groups would feel aggrieved if they were not involved in this process as they had a viable interest in the town.

In a further matter, Councillor McCollum queried if there was clear selection criteria and an appeals process in place so that the Council could stand over the appointment process outlined. The Officer referred to various interests set out at the last meeting that each member would represent, along with Section 75 legislation that would need to be followed.

The Director advised that there would be criteria provided for applicants and the scoring panel. For community grants applications Council did have an appeals policy in place and officers could consider if something would be appropriate in this case.

The Chair suggested that Officers could refer to a Community Partnership, which he felt worked effectively within strict governance. He highlighted this as an example of a model that worked well.

Councillor McCollum queried the liability in terms of the decision-making process of the Working Group and it was confirmed that all decisions would ultimately be made

by the Council after passing recommendations through the Community and Wellbeing Committee in the normal way.

Councillor Rossiter asked if the representatives from the TAGs would not be Elected Members, indicating that this would be his personal preference. The Head of Parks and Cemeteries confirmed this would be for the TAGs to decide. Councillor McCollum indicated agreement for that approach.

Responding to a further query from Councillor Rossiter, the officer explained that the attendance at each meeting would be made up of one member of a TAG, up to five community representatives and, as and when required, expert members. He further clarified that each community group would nominate a deputy to attend in the event of absence of the lead representative.

Councillor Rossiter queried who would assess the applications, wondering what would happen in the event that the Council received more applications than there were spaces available. He further provided a scenario of Council only receiving applications from five cycling groups and how that would be dealt with in the event where community representation was not balanced.

The officer explained that the process would be dealt with in the same way as a tender exercise and considered in different categories in order to prevent the scenario outlined. It was also noted that it is up to five community representatives being proposed and Council could select less than five. He added that a panel made up of two officers and the Chair would score the applications and then bring information and a recommendation to the Working Group in July.

Referring to the sectors outlined by the officer, Councillor Cochrane asked what would happen in the event that there were no applications for a specific area and expressed concern that this could lead to complaints of failing to engage, in the long term. The Chair wondered if there would be scope to expand the membership from five in that particular scenario where the Working Group needed the contribution of others. He asked a similar question, wondering what scope the Council had to actively seek representation from a specific group.

The officer explained the strength of the advertising campaign and the importance of following that process. He stressed that the Council should not be approaching specific groups but referred to a community database that would be utilised as part of the campaign. He added that many groups would cover more than one area of interest and it was felt that five members would provide a good selection of people. He added in response to a further query from Councillor Cochrane that, like the tender process, the Working Group, Committee or Council could reject any recommendation from the scoring panel. Members would simply be provided with the information to make a decision.

Referring to a list of groups within the Borough, Councillor W Irvine was confident that the Working Group would cover the five places and while he felt that 10 places would be excessive he was content that the Working Group at least had the scope to increase numbers if necessary.

Councillor Harbinson was keen to see the net cast as wide as possible and queried if individuals who didn't represent a group would be excluded from the application process. The Head of Parks and Cemeteries advised that the process was open to groups to nominate a representative, however groups did not need to be constituted and it could relate to a Facebook group for example. He felt though that group representation would be more beneficial.

Councillor Harbinson felt that it would be a good idea to point interested individuals towards a relevant group while the Chair expressed the view that it could be beneficial to invite individuals who held a specific area of expertise when appropriate.

The officer explained that his team had been putting together a set of questions and answers for members to be able to advise the public and this would assist members in responding to anticipated queries from the public. He felt this had been useful in previous matters of potential controversy, e.g. when the Council was felling trees.

In a final query, Councillor Harbinson asked if the advertising campaign would have a strong online and social media focus and the Head of Communications and Marketing advised that there would be a full integrated approach including the use of social media. She explained e-zines and databases would be a key part of that engagement process too. The officer added that there were also mechanisms in place to enable regular communication about the Working Group and secure views and opinions from individuals.

Councillor Martin was hesitant in expanding the membership to individuals and felt that it was best to point them towards groups which were key to obtaining views from ground upwards. He felt that this was the right way to enable the many passionate individuals to engage.

The Chair asked for a final tally of the membership following the appointment of external members and the Director advised that including all elected reps presently on the working group, it would be up to 23.

In a further query, Councillor McCollum was aware that under Place and Prosperity plans, there would be the addition of Rural Advisory Groups and she wondered if those should be included, particularly those groups that represented the likes of Groomsport and Helen's Bay. She also wondered if there could be scope for micro meetings which could engage with those groups.

The officer added that it was not going to be feasible to represent every hamlet within the membership and he pointed out that those areas were represented by Elected Members. He added that there would be the option for micro-meetings but advised that they would not be minuted due to the resource involved, but an officer would report back to the Working Group. The Head of Communication and Marketing added that there were key groups eg young people who would be unlikely to engage via meetings and other mechanisms to collate their views would be considered moving forward.

The Chair advised that if Members had any further questions, they could contact officers directly.

AGREED to adopt the officer proposal.

5. LESSONS LEARNED FROM GREENWAY

In January 2023 Elected Members decided to abandon the Kinnegar to Donaghadee Greenway Scheme proposals and instead agreed to set up a Task & Finish Working Group to address issues of connectivity, access and maintenance along the North Down Coastal Path. Officers were asked to reflect on what led to the Councillors' decision to withdraw the planning application for Kinnegar to Donaghadee and take lessons from what happened. At a meeting called by the Chief Executive Officers and attended by multiple services across the Council, Officers also looked at what systems/ approaches would best help projects move on to delivery/ completion. The lessons learned from the Greenway experience were discussed at the last committee meeting and this update report was looking at what we were doing to address the issues including:

- Insufficient Revenue Budgets
- Better Sustained Engagement
- Difference between Consultation and Engagement
- Larger Survey
- Dedicated Officer for all Path Networks
- Building a Network of Support and Community Champion
- 'One Path Initiative' Workshops / Awareness
- Planning Application was too large and complicated

Given the scale and complexity of the Kinnegar to Donaghadee Greenway (the length of the greenway was 32 km) there was limited resources i.e. no dedicated staff and no revenue budget. During the early stages of the project initial consultation with stakeholders was subcontracted with significant focus on the technical and legal issues (such as negotiations with landowners) and not enough focus on winning hearts and minds. It was acknowledged that although formal consultation took place there was little engagement or the resources to carry it out. It was now acknowledged that there was too much being invested in capital projects not to have dedicated staff, with budgets, talking to stakeholders to ensure buy-in and building sustainable relationships.

The Kinnegar to Donaghadee Greenway was submitted as a single planning application, it was too large and complicated. Given the length of the route there were numerous drawings which were not easy to negotiate through. Splitting up planning application ensured that when issues occurred with one application it did not jeopardize the full project and stakeholders could concentrate on areas that they were particularly interested in. This approach had been taken with the Comber, Newtownards to Bangor / Green Road Greenway.

Going forward there needed to be a stronger focus on winning hearts and minds. Officers needed to consider what was a proportionate amount to spend on engagement and communications and include in budget from the start of a project.

Budgets to produce non-technical 3D drawings, illustrations and technology would ensure a better understanding of projects. This approach had been successful in the recent Ward Park Redevelopment. A dedicated Officer for all Path Networks was planned within the strategy and the Council had now advertised to fill this post and this was likely to be in place this summer. The dedicated Officer would have the time to building a network of support and ensure community champions assist council in promoting our projects. The Parks Service had also now appointed an Engagement Officer to progress our friends' and volunteering groups and worked with others to ensure public buy in to large and small projects with community group meetings, events and projects that assists in identifying localised issues and to achieve wider support. This proactive approach appeared to be already working in projects such as the Ward Park Improvement Scheme in Bangor.

Council had recently invested in a digital participation platform, Citizen Lab, to improve engagement and information sharing across a number of our most significant regeneration projects. To use the platform people needed to register (currently 220 registrations) and they then have multiple ways of engaging via posting ideas, contributing to discussions, or choosing to vote and prioritise community projects. The platform offered a clear process that everyone could follow – seeing where feedback had supported or amended decisions made. This would enable citizens to engage in a much more meaningful way on issues that impacted upon them or the area where they lived. Citizen Lab was designed to be used alongside more traditional engagement activities such as in-person conversations, surveys, and public information sessions. On average, local government users of the system saw a 12x increase in resident engagement by introducing online participation into the mix (as opposed to just using traditional methods). We had recently launched the platform with an engagement on the Ward Park Improvement Scheme.

RECOMMENDED that the above report is noted.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries outlined the above report that reflected on lessons that were learned from the abandoned Kinnegar to Donaghadee Greenway Scheme. He pointed to the absence of a revenue budget and explained that there was now £150,000 put aside – a further update on this was to follow later in the meeting. Having that funding was important in order to carry out necessary surveys before it became a capital project.

He referred to the Ward Park Environmental Improvement Scheme, which involved a number of phases. Early engagement, keeping local groups well informed and officers meeting with them regularly, was prioritised and all parties were aware of what was planned.

He highlighted the key difference between consultation and engagement, the latter being about building a relationship with local people, something that had not happened during the Greenways process. He explained that recently purchased participation software, Citizen Lab, had provided great benefit with regard to engagement for the Ward Park and and would also be used for the Whitespots project.

The officer added that an Engagement Officer had been appointed who would be an important resource as their contracted hours would include evenings and weekends and that would allow them to reach out to communities at times when most people were available. He recognised that the public brought a lot of great ideas that the Council could build on.

A Greenway and Trails Officer would be appointed in the coming weeks and one particular focus for the appointee would be on a shared path for all to enjoy and respect other users. He referred to a 'One Path initiative' as a brilliant way to create shared spaces through public engagement.

A discussion ensued and Councillor McKee referred to an ongoing partnership with Sustrans and asked if Council had engaged with that organisation. The Director advised that the Council's contract was with AECOM but Sustrans was a partner in that contract; however that it was still possible to engage separately with Sustrans on any matter.

Councillor W Irvine felt that Ward Park was a good example of public engagement and it had provided a clear outcome that people wanted sympathetic improvements which retained the character and heritage of the park. The Coastal Path was a similar principle with a key consideration being how it could be shared between the pedestrians and cyclists. He hoped that it could be used by as many people as possible.

Alderman Graham expanded on that view, feeling that in a perfect world both cyclists and pedestrians could use the path together but realistically there were huge challenges and he was concerned that there was a perception that the greenway was for cyclists and to make the pathway passable. He believed that it was important for the Working Group to reach a conclusion early in its work regarding its position on that.

The Chair felt this was a good point and asked if the Member was suggesting that engagement should look to address the relationships that existed on the path and Alderman Graham said he felt that it was important if the path was going to be maintained for both sets of users. He felt that cyclists who used the path in its current state were considerate but was cautious that changes to the path could change the number of cyclists using it.

The Director expanded on that view, explaining that it was a crucial point and the Working Group needed to consider how it could make the best of what already existed to accommodate all current users.

The Chair emphasised the importance of a 'light touch' approach, particularly in terms of the role of the new officer posts that the Head of Parks and Cemeteries had referred to.

NOTED.

6. BUDGET

As referred to in the previous item, the Head of Parks and Cemeteries explained that a £150,000 revenue budget had been acquired.

The officer clarified following a query from Councillor McKee that initially he had requested that £100,000 of that figure be capital funding but the final total acquired had been entirely revenue.

Councillor Creighton asked if the funding included the existing routine maintenance budget and the officer advised that it was new money to be spent on surveys or work that was above and beyond routine maintenance and cleansing.

Referring to sections of the coastal path at Rockport and Seahill, Councillor Creighton noted they were in poor condition and asked if mitigation work was likely or if that would come under the remit of the Working Group. The officer advised that the Head of Assets and Property Services would be in attendance at future meetings and could clarify which budgets would cover that type of maintenance.

The Director added that Council did not own a large part of the coastal path so the focus was on the sections that the Council did own, although there was potential to acquire ownership of new parts of the path over the longer term.

Councillor McCollum queried the availability of the funding and if there was a list of priorities for spending and the Head of Parks and Cemeteries explained that once the full membership was established there would be some survey work carried out and the budget would be able to be progressed. By September he hoped to have a clear list of work that could be undertaken. He explained that the timeframe for spending would be March 2025, but a further business case would be submitted as part of the estimates process for the next financial year.

Councillor Rossiter expressed caution about spending money before the external members were appointed but the officer clarified that a portion, around 20%, would be required to be spent beforehand to enable some survey work to be undertaken to enable further work to be completed within the existing financial year, otherwise the funding would be lost.

The Chair was cautious that the Head of Parks and Cemeteries was only one part of a jigsaw that included other officers across various Council services and was queried why the burden seemed to fall on him. The Director explained that the officer was the lead in terms of the land but clarified that there were others involved and that the Head of Parks and Cemeteries was in regular contact with those officers and that it was a group effort in that regard.

NOTED.

7. ANY OTHER NOTIFIED BUSINESS

There were no items of Any Other Notified Business.

8. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries advised that following the assessment of community members applying to join the group, it was hoped that a meeting would be held in July to advise on this, and the date would be confirmed along with a meeting schedule for the remainder of the financial year. He added that he hoped that the community partners would be in place for a Working Group meeting in September.

In a further matter, the Director clarified that the now agreed minutes of the meeting dated 23rd January 2024 would go to the Community and Wellbeing Committee for noting and then ratification at full Council in May. He clarified that the minutes would reach the public domain once they were issued with the Community and Wellbeing Committee meeting agenda in May.

The Chair asked if the minutes of this meeting could be issued earlier given the length of time until the next meeting and the Director confirmed they could be circulated for information.

CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting terminated at 7.30pm.