

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 Church Street, Newtownards, on Monday 31 March 2025 at 6:00 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor McKimm (Chairman)

Alderman McRandal
Councillor Hennessy
Councillor McBurney
Councillor McKee

Ms Alison McQueen (For Another Path)
Mr James Hunter (Greenspaces Bangor)
Mr David Lennon (Friends of Columbanus, Bangor)
Mr Stephen McCrory (Ards and North Down Cycle Campaign Group)
Mr Frank Shivers (Bangor Chamber of Commerce)

Officers: Head of Parks & Cemeteries (S Daye), Parks & Cemeteries Development Manager (J Bettes) and Democratic Services Officer (P Foster)

1. APOLOGIES

The Chairman (Councillor McKimm) sought apologies at this stage.

Apologies were received from Alderman Graham, Councillors Cochrane, Harbinson, Hollywood, Irwin, McClean, McCollum and Ms Marianne Kennerley (Boom Inc! / Boom Studios), Director of Community & Wellbeing (G Bannister) and Head of Communications & Marketing (C Jackson)

NOTED.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairman sought Declarations of Interest at this stage.

There were no Declarations of Interest notified.

NOTED.

3. MINUTES OF MEETING OF NORTH DOWN COASTAL PATH WORKING GROUP DATED 6 JANUARY 2025

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED: Minutes of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group meeting dated 6 January 2025.

Mr Lennon noted reference made to the St Columba's Way in the minutes and stated that it should be referred to as the Columban Way.

AGREED, that the minutes be adopted.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM MINUTES & 5. UPDATE REPORT AND PRESENTATION

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED: Minutes from 30 September 2024 meeting were approved by the Group at the meeting on 6 January 2025 and were noted at the January Council meeting.

At the July 2024 meeting members of the Group agreed a way forward regarding the £150,000 budget, the delivery areas breakdown was as below:

- £80,000 (Path Repairs and Surveys)
- £45,000 (Machinery Maintenance)
- £25,000 (Signage, Promotion and Engagement)

The draft minutes from the 6 January 2025 had been circulated to members of the Working Group due to the time delay between meetings. Those minutes would be considered for approval at the Council meeting this month and would be presented at the April Council meeting.

At the meeting on 30 September several proposals were put forward to members of the group to progress improvements to the maintenance of the path, the promotion of it and the accessibility and connectivity of the path.

As was outlined at the meeting most of the path was not in Council ownership.

Maintenance

It was agreed at the September meeting that Council would undertake maintenance works on the Council owned sections of the path (Pickie to Swineley Bay):

- Verge encroachment clearance to reinstate the full original width of the path exposing the tarmac underneath
- Cut back overhanging vegetation

- Temporary barriers would be replaced with railings similar to those adjacent to it at Downshire Road/Smelt Bay.
- Path would be surfaced on approach to Swineley Bay
- Address the drainage issues along the path.

Those works had been programmed to take place in January/February 2025. However, due to the workload created in the aftermath of Storm Eowyn and that the main contractor had also had to divert to deliver the Ward Park Dementia Friendly Garden. Due to funding deadlines the progress on this work had been limited. Some cutting back of overhanging vegetation had occurred which was undertaken by Parks staff. It was envisaged the other proposed works would be completed once the contractor was available.

Machinery

A procurement exercise had been completed for the purchase of a Non-Herbicide Weed Control Unit. This unit would do the future maintenance of the Coastal Path. Once the verges had been cleared back the entire path could be utilised, the new equipment would allow for ongoing chemical free maintenance of the path verges.

Additional equipment, namely a remote-control mower, had been purchased by Parks Operational teams to aid maintenance of the coastal path and would be delivered by the end of the end of March 2025.

Planning Application

Work was underway to prepare a planning application to cover the section from the bridge at Seahill to the Royal Belfast Golf Club, approximately two kilometres long. This section required restoration to its original width as previously outlined, the section along the Royal Belfast Golf Club was at risk of collapse given that the rock armour had slipped, and the path was unsupported in places. While the section being undermined did not comprise of the entire two kilometres, a planning application was required for the entirety given the sensitive nature of this protected area and the potential requirement for smaller structural works to the path.

Discussions would be required with the respective landowners prior to the submission of the planning application. Certain technical surveys would be required, and those were currently being implemented. A photomontage had been completed and would accompany the planning drawings so that the proposed improvements could be clearly understood. The planned works would be the minimal interventions to ensure the durability of the path and improve its condition only, however they would still require planning permission.

Previously it was reported that the intention was to present this planning application to the working group in March 2025, this may take longer as the work was still ongoing by the consultants (Aecom) to compile that planning application.

Signage and Promotion

The existing North Down Coastal Path leaflet had been reviewed and updated, and the new version had been delivered.

The new leaflets were distributed to locations including:

- Visitor Information Centres [VIC] in Ards and Bangor
- Cockle Row, Groomsport
- Translink Bangor
- Aurora
- North Down Museum
- Crawfordsburn Country Park
- Main hotels, e.g. The Old Inn, Clandeboye Lodge, etc.
- Offered to any other accommodation in the area that wants them to call and collect from the VIC for their premises
- Queens Hall Holywood
- Bangor Library

There were six signs along the North Down Coastal Path, at Seapark, Cultra, Grey Point, Bangor, Ballymacormick Point and Orlock. Those had perished over the years in the environment or had been removed. The content of those signs was updated and to date six panels had been installed at Seapark, Cultra, Grey Point, Pickie Park Bangor, Ballymacormick Point and Orlock.



Photographs illustrate the revised information panels installed at two of the six locations:

Above pictures at Cultra

And to the right signage at Seapark



A wider signage audit and strategy for the North Down Coastal Path would be explored and codesigned in due course with the Working Group.

Events

The Development Officer (Community Trails and Greenways) had facilitated and programmed a series of events along the coastal path over the winter period.

More were planned as follows:

Inclusive Walks:

- Two inclusive walks in October were provided one in the morning and one in the afternoon on the Coastal Path from Pickie Park

Mindfulness Walks:

- Six monthly walks from October 2024 to March 2025 had been provided to the public. The Mindful walks lead groups of 11-17 participants in gentle activity by the coast at Helen's Bay, Seapark and from Pickie Park Bangor.

A Bioblitz was being programmed for 30 May 2025.

Cycling Friendly Borough

A Notice of Motion was agreed by Council in February 2023: "This Council acknowledges the environmental and health benefits associated with the recent increase in cycling and declares Ards & North Down a cycling friendly Borough".

In June 2023 a report was brought to Council outlining the elements that were in place or were currently in development, planned or being progressed that would contribute towards ensuring that a 'Cycling Friendly Borough' status could be

declared and sustained. The elements that would contribute towards a Cycling Friendly Borough were as follows:

- f) The role of, and working with the Department of Infrastructure
- f) The proposed Ards and North Down Borough Council Cycling Masterplan
- f) Working with Sustrans, on its National Cycling Network and One Path Initiative
- f) The Councils Greenway network programme
- f) Cycle to Work Scheme
- f) Cycle Friendly Workplace Scheme

The budget was agreed to progress the One Path Initiative in the 2025/2026 Financial Year.

As the amount of people walking and cycling in public spaces and on multi use paths had increased over the years, so too had the interactions between those users and in some cases, those were negative.

As managers of many public spaces and multi-use paths, it was incumbent on Council to try to respond to those complaints. The danger was however that a response such as imposing speed limits, segregation of paths or adding signage outlining a list of rules impeded one group of users and left them feeling targeted causing further tensions between user groups.

The approach of 'The One Path Initiative' was to discuss and understand the issues people faced when using shared paths and to collaboratively develop ways which helped people to better share the space. By participating in this process, people would feel more invested in their local space, understand other user's experiences, feel more connected to their community, and it would create a positive atmosphere. The ethos behind the One Path Initiative was 'Share, Respect, Enjoy'.

The initiative was delivered over a period of two years, helping users of shared spaces understand and respect how other users enjoyed the space as follows:

Stage 1: An audit and analysis of issues

Stage 2: Development of a creative engagement programme

Stage 3: Embedding the One Path ethos, 'Share, Respect, Enjoy'.

In the first year the project provided for engagement with a variety of user groups through a series of focus group sessions e.g. with running groups, walking groups, cycling clubs, dog walker groups, local community groups, statutory bodies and so on. This was followed in the second year by on path animation events to engage users in conversations about messaging and how they and others could safely use the path together without the need for restrictive codes of conduct and lists of dos

and don'ts – the initiative helped path users understand each other's perspectives and that the simple message of 'Share, Respect, Enjoy' was applicable to all.

At the end of the two-year programme a One Path festival would be held along a shared space giving the various user group representatives opportunity to highlight their own work by running engagement events then and thereafter.

Given the progression of the Comber-Newtownards-Green Road Greenway project, and that the budget had been agreed, the One Path Initiative would commence in the autumn of 2025.

Mapping the Path

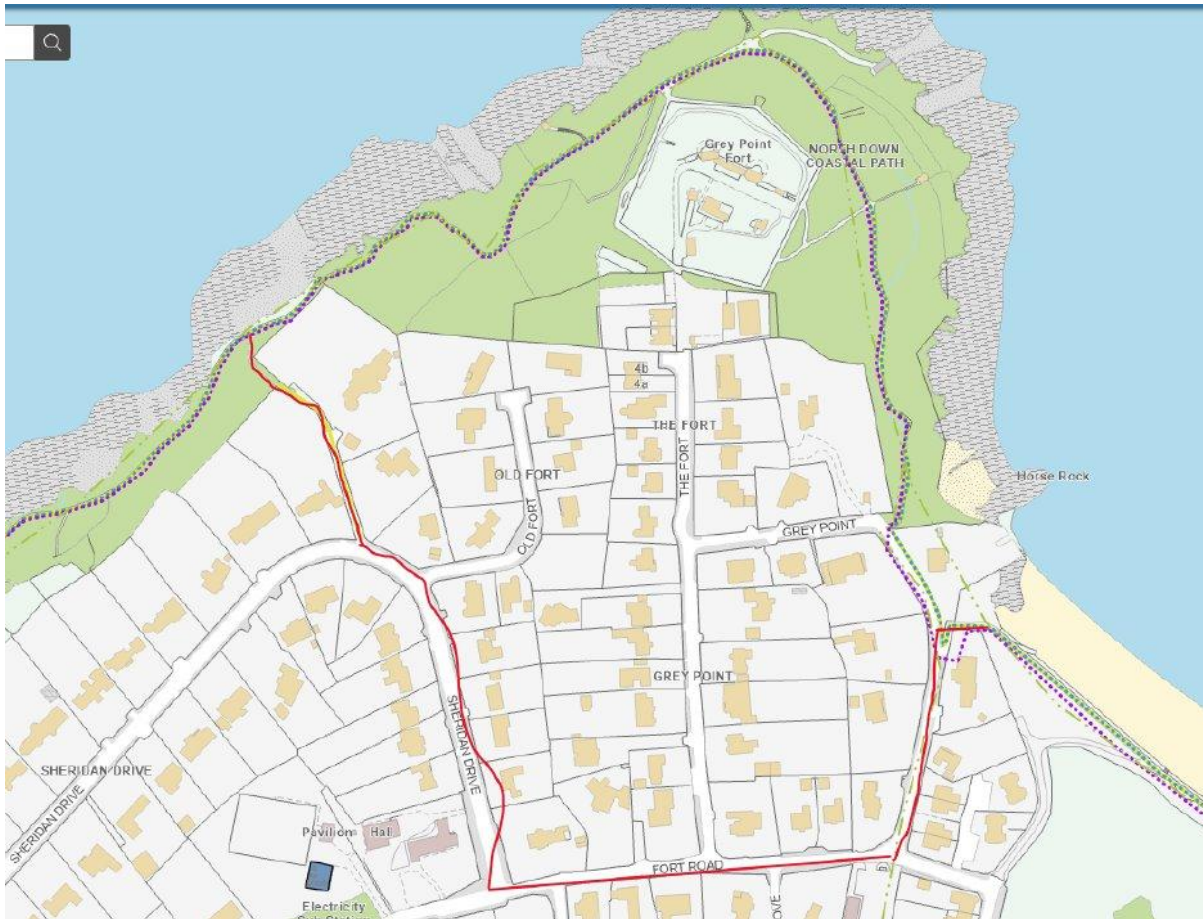
The path had now been 360 degree photographed and mapped from Holywood to Stricklands Glen and could be viewed on Google Streetview.

A videographer had created promotional footage and ariel shots of the Coastal Path and its surrounding landscape. The footage had been received would be used for future promotions of the Coastal Path and associated events. Raw footage supplied by the videographer would also assist this group with decision making and understanding of areas under discussion.

In January 2025 officers met with representatives from the Ards and North Down Heritage groups at their cluster meetings. At the meeting it was agreed to progress a living history project in collaboration between the Heritage Group and Parks and Cemeteries Officers. A specification for the project was being developed and would be finalised at the next cluster meeting in April.

Alternative Cycle Route at Grey Point

Officers were exploring the potential for an alternative cycle/accessible route in the vicinity of Grey Point Fort. At this point the path became narrow and uneven, not suitable for family cycling. There may be the option to direct people along Grey Point (public road) to The Fort and down alongside the fort to the path. There was an alleged Right of Way that linked Sheridan Drive with the coastal path and officers were currently exploring if that could also provide an alternative link to the path.



Grey Point: Map showing possible alternative route – red line – via possible Right of Way linking Sheridan Drive to Coastal path

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager, with the aid of a presentation provided an in-depth update on the above report, highlighting the salient points it included.

The Chairman agreed that questions could be asked throughout the presentation's progression and the following comments were made.

Maintenance

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager updated members to advise that the completion of infrastructure repairs was scheduled for the end of May 2025.

Machinery

Mr McCrory sought an update on the new machinery and was informed that it had been purchased but required a new trailer to transport it. It was further noted that the tender for the Mechanical Sweepers had been completed and it was hoped those would be in place by the end of June, in time for the start of the Summer. Members

of the Group were also informed that the maintenance would be carried out along the entire length of the path.

Signage and Promotion

Alison McQueen reported that the sign at Pickie was too high and would not be able to be viewed by wheelchair users. She added that the sign referred to at Ballymacormick Point was actually at Groomsport.

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that there had been some issues with the ground conditions at Pickie but indicated that he would look into this to see if the height could be adjusted accordingly.

Councillor McKee questioned the signs durability against vandalism and graffiti. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that officers had specifically sought the best signs available and as such were confident that they would withstand any vandalism or graffiti.

Frank Shivers asked if planning had to be sought for the new signs. In response the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that had not been necessary as they were replacing existing signs. Continuing he sought guidance from the Group in relation to the next steps and asked if there was an appetite for the path to be broken down into sections or if they were happy for officers to come forward with further ideas.

Alison McQueen suggested that it would be nice for the signs to include some history of the local area. For instance reference could be made to the old boat building yard at Stricklands particularly as remnants of the old jetty still remained in place. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager indicated that he would bring back some options for the Group to consider.

Councillor McKee suggested that there could be value in breaking the Path into smaller, distinct sections for example a five kilometre walk and one kilometre walk and so on.

At this stage the Head of Parks & Cemeteries also indicated that there could be an opportunity for providing some overall history of the Coastal Path. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager added that by sectioning the path into small distinct areas would encourage people to use the path.

Mr McCrory asked if there would be any recommendations drawn up on how to use the path which would cover the behaviour of all users and how they could successfully integrate with each other.

At this stage Mr Lennon welcomed the signage adding that he had regular visitors from a wide variety of walking groups who undertook walks such as the Columban

Way and the Bell Walk in Bangor. He asked if consideration could be given to including walks such as those in the signage.

Events and Promotion

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that officers had been working on and facilitating a number of events along the coastal path throughout the winter period with positive feedback to date. It was noted that more events were scheduled to take place over the coming months.

In response to a query from Alderman McRandal, the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that the walking events held covered approximately one kilometre with approximately 15 to 20 people in attendance. He added that the proposed Bioblitz would take place in and around the Brompton area.

Alderman McRandal asked for consideration to be given to alternative venues for any forthcoming Bioblitz's.

The Group were then informed that the path had been photographed and mapped with the promotional video now complete. Officers would now work with their colleagues in the Council's Communication section to take the matter forwards. It was also noted the Heritage Groups were fully on board and a specification was now being developed.

Cycling Friendly Borough

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager reported that the Council's Cycling Masterplan had been agreed by the Council and officers would work alongside Sustrans and the One Path Initiative to develop a two year programme.

At this stage Alison McQueen asked that no reference was made to the One Path Initiative. The Head of Parks & Cemeteries acknowledged there was a toxic element to this and reassured Ms McQueen that the matter had been discussed and officers were aware of the sensitivities.

Stephen McCrory asked for clarification around what those concerns were.

In response Alison McQueen stated that it was considered 'a foot in the door' for Sustrans to resurrect its Greenway plans.

The Head of Parks & Cemeteries advised that a full time officer was looking at this matter in respect of an international version of the One Path Initiative with a view to localising it.

Alison McQueen indicated that even the slightest hint of widening the path would create problems.

In response to a query from James Hunter about the potential impact Sustrans could have, the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that currently it had no involvement with the project. Instead he advised that it had merely been mentioned to provide an idea of the thought process and it was officers intention to sensitively look after the path and make it more localised. It was noted that consideration would be given to the use of logos on the path in an attempt to get users to engage with the path respectfully.

At this stage Mr McCrory informed the Group that the section of the Path from Helen's Bay to Pickie Fun Park was part of the National Cycle Network.

Grey Point Alternative Cycle Route

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager informed the Group that there were no further updates to this matter.

In response to a query from James Hunter, the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager outlined the proposals for this location.

At this stage the Chairman expressed his thanks to all of the officers involved for their hard work undertaken to date and asked the Head of Parks & Cemeteries to pass on those thanks.

NOTED.

5. ANY OTHER NOTIFIED BUSINESS

The Chairman referred to an area which had recently been cleared by Northern Ireland Water (NIW) in order to locate a manhole cover. He sought an update on the assurances which had been given around the area being replanted.

Alison McQueen noted the recent work which had been undertaken by the National Trust at Ballymacormick Point and was informed that a local farmer had carried out the planting there on behalf of the National Trust.

The Chairman advised of the following items of Any Other Notified Business submitted by Mr Jame Hunter (Greenspaces, Bangor) about the recent planting of some black pines along the path and would like to know:

1) Why was a non-native species chosen?

The Head of Parks & Cemeteries advised that black pines had been chosen as they had already been planted at that location and had thrived, as such they were deemed to be appropriate for that location.

- 2) Are the trees chosen a dwarf or standard variety and was any consideration given to their impact on views of the sea?

The Head of Parks & Cemeteries advised that the trees chosen were of a standard variety which would see growth only at the top.

Mr Hunter advised of some concern that local residents could take matters into their own hands in respect of this matter.

The Head of Parks & Cemeteries stated that the Council was in a position to prosecute anyone felling trees on its land. It was further noted that it was generally the case that more trees were planted than were required and the best ones selected for use.

- 3) Why was the open grass area chosen for dense tree planting as opposed to developing the area for rewilding and maximising biodiversity potential?

The Head of Parks & Cemeteries advised that the Council was doing both. It was planting trees for the birds and insects while rewilding opportunities would be provided for biodiversity.

- 4) The planting seems to be very regimented in straight lines, why was it done this way?

The Head of Parks & Cemeteries commented that the replacement trees would be planted and the best of those trees then used. Mr Hunter suggested that it was normally the case for trees to be planted in clumps to replicate mother nature. The Head of Parks & Cemeteries advised that the Council had a trained Woodland Officer in post to carry out that work adding that the long term maintenance of trees and the original tree canopy was more important than concern around individual trees.

Mr Hunter commented that he would predict what his members would say, that being that the Council consulted with them in advance of any future tree planting to be undertaken to prevent any possible misunderstandings. He suggested that consultation was undertaken annually.

In response the Head of Parks & Cemeteries commented that the Council would not be in a position to hold a conference on how to plant trees. He referred to the Council's forthcoming Tree Report to be considered by Committee which everyone would have sight of and he suggested that if any members of Mr Hunter's group had any concerns that they contacted their elected representative. He added that officers did endeavour to consult with local people as much as possible in respect of such matters. Mr Hunter was also advised that officers would also be happy to meet with

representatives of his Group adding that they were also readily available via telephone.

Mr Hunter asked if local residents had been consulted about the planting of the black pines.

In response the Head of Parks & Cemeteries replied no, adding that was not something which would normally be carried out every time the Council planted a tree, particularly as it aimed to plant over 15,000 trees annually. He added that officers met regularly with Groups and as such would be happy to meet with Mr Hunter's Group.

The Parks & Cemeteries Development Manager added that there would be an opportunity for elected members to have that debate around the plans for the planting of trees throughout the Borough.

NOTED.

6. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Chairman advised that the next meeting of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group was scheduled to take place on 30 June 2025 at 6.00pm at Church Street Council Chamber, Newtownards.

NOTED.

CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting terminated at 6.50pm.