

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 6th October 2025 at 6:00 pm.

PRESENT:

Councillor Brady (Chairman)
Alderman Graham
Councillor W Irvine
Councillor Hennessy
Councillor McClean
Councillor McKee
James Hunter (Greenspaces)
Charlie Reid (Friends of Columbanus)
Stephen McCrory (Ards and North Down Cycle Campaign Group)
Alison McQueen (For Another Path)

Officers: Director of Environmental Services (G Bannister), Parks & Cemeteries Development Manager (J Bettes) and Democratic Services Officer (R King)

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from The Mayor Councillor McCollum, Alderman McRandal, Councillor Cochrane, Councillor Hollywood, Councillor Harbinson, Ms Marianne Kennerley, Mr Frank Shivers and the Head of Parks and Cemeteries.

NOTED.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest notified.

NOTED.

3. MINUTES OF NORTH DOWN COASTAL PATH WORKING GROUP MEETING DATED 30TH JUNE 2025

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED: Minutes of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group meeting dated 30th June 2025.

NOTED.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

There were no matters raised.

5. UPDATE REPORT AND PRESENTATION

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager outlined his presentation to members which was summarised as follows:

Planning Application

- Draft drawings were shared in June; further meetings held.
- Council approved intent to submit planning application in September.
- Initial surveys completed and ready for submission.
- Landowner discussions pending before application submission.
- Application scope reduced from 2 km to 600 m, focusing on Royal Belfast Golf Club section.
- Emphasis on sensitive design and prioritising undermined areas.

Maintenance (Pickie–Swineley Bay)

- Vegetation and verge clearance carried out in spring and late summer.
- Full path width to be reinstated during winter 2025/26.
- Temporary barriers at Downshire Road/Smelt Bay to be replaced.
- Surfacing underway near Swineley Bay; drainage resolved at Skippingstone Beach.
- Completion expected by March 2026.

Audit of Assets

- Ongoing signage and street furniture audit using ESRI GIS Field Maps App.
- 133 assets audited to date, including benches, bins, and signs.

Events and Promotion

- Inclusive walk with The Outdoor Partnership held 29 October.
- Monthly Mindful Walks with TCV scheduled through February 2026.

Cycling Friendly Borough

- Collaboration with Department for Infrastructure on Active Travel Strategy.
- Development of Ards and North Down Cycling Masterplan underway.
- Continued progress on greenway network between Bangor, Newtownards, and Comber.

Alternative Route (Sheridan Drive Link)

- Landownership confirmed.
- Public Path Creation Agreement being explored.
- Route includes laneway from Sheridan Drive and links to lower coastal path.

The Working Group discussed the following areas of the presentation:

Planning Application

The Chair asked whether the section of path leading to the first pinch point included a muddy area near the tree line. He noted that tarmacking this section could damage its character and potentially make it slippery. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager responded that the proposed works could avoid the tree line if it was deemed unsuitable.

Councillor McClean noted the planning application originally covered 2km and asked for clarification that it had been revised to 600 metres. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed the revision, explaining that a more complex application would take longer to process. Prioritising a smaller section made the planning more achievable. Councillor McClean welcomed the revised approach and felt the revision would help address budget pressures.

Ms Alison McQueen, representing For Another Path, welcomed the revised plan as pragmatic and sensible. She referred to some ongoing public distrust in the Council stemming from earlier greenway proposals, including concerns over previously suggested widening beyond what this group had agreed. However, she believed the new approach addressed health and safety issues, offered clear benefits, and would help rebuild public confidence in the Council's process

Councillor McKee noted that connectivity had emerged as a key priority in the direct feedback he had received from the public. He felt it would have been unwise to pursue a more elaborate plan while neglecting this core concern. He also highlighted budget constraints, noting that the adapted plan was more financially realistic. In his view, it represented a positive story of the Council listening and learning from previous processes.

Mr Charlie Reid (Friends of Columbanus) expressed concern about the potential loss of character along the path. While much of it was already hard surfaced, he noted that small sections still retained a sense of wonder and natural wildness. He described the fenced area near the golf club as unattractive due to the rock armour and fencing, but emphasised that the headland beyond remained both beautiful and ecologically valuable, and should therefore be treated with sensitivity. He also questioned the dismissal of porous surfacing options, suggesting these should not be ruled out and cited examples of their successful use elsewhere in the UK.

Mr Stephen McCrory (Ards and North Down Cycle Campaign Group) welcomed the plans but raised ongoing concerns about accessibility, pointing to public feedback on safety and access. He stressed the need for improvements to ensure inclusivity, particularly for elderly users and those with limited mobility.

He believed that a more solid and wider path could still preserve the area's character and beauty, but stressed that attention should be given to other areas that were currently inaccessible.

The Chair felt the two previous comments reflected broader feedback he had received and he recognised the revised approach looked to address a section that was of highest priority but stressed the importance of looking to other sections of the path when funding became available.

Ms McQueen added that it was important to look at accessibility, not just along the path itself but also in terms of joining it. She referred to an access point at Seahill as an example of where improvements could represent an easy win and could be considered for future improvements.

Mr James Hunter (Greenspaces Bangor) felt the original plan was overwhelming due to its many components and it risked being rushed. He supported a more manageable, phased approach and highlighted health and safety concerns, such as a steep slope near the archway. He believed the revised plan was more sensible and shared insights from a recent countryside access conference with regard to alternative surface types, referring to maintained grass and gravel and quarry dust. He emphasised the importance of preserving the character of the path and looked forward to negotiating future sections piece by piece. He welcomed the slower pace, which allowed for greater focus on the longer-term vision.

Welcoming the consensus, Councillor W Irvine queried the next steps and the officer confirmed that following general agreement, the business case would be the next step. He added that each section of the path involved different considerations, and this approach allowed the project to be tackled in smaller, more manageable phases.

Maintenance (Pickie–Swineley Bay)

Ms McQueen welcomed the planned drainage repairs at Skippingstone Beach, noting that the area had experienced long-standing issues. The officer confirmed that it was the right time of year to proceed with the work due to resource availability.

Audit of Assets

Both Councillor McKee and Ms McQueen highlighted numerous complaints about the removal of a bin along the Carnlea section of the path and cautioned against overlooking this location in the review of future bin provision. Both the Director of Environmental Services and Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager noted this issue.

Mr McCrory highlighted dog fouling as a persistent problem, noting that some individuals were leaving bags in trees. He also called for improved waste provision at Brompton, where bins frequently overflowed due to regular gatherings of young people.

The Chair agreed, referring to his own experience, and confirmed that the lack of bins had previously been noted.

The officer stated that bin provision would be included in the forthcoming audit, with entrance points identified as logical locations. He referred to an approach taken at Cairn Wood where bins were situated at the entrance and people had responded well. He acknowledged that there had been considerable campaigning on the issue and emphasised the importance of striking a careful balance in placing bins appropriately.

Mr Reid recognised the difficulties of servicing the bins in terms of logistics. Placing bins on headlands for example were difficult for vehicle access.

Councillor McClean referred to the issue of dog fouling and felt that enforcement of the issue needed to be stepped up rather than waste resources cleaning up after offenders.

Mr Reid acknowledged that while excessive signage could be overwhelming, there was no clear indication or signposting linking the train network to the coastal path. He pointed out that this connection was not widely known and believed that simple, well-placed signage would have been beneficial in raising awareness. Mr Reid felt that Translink should have been more actively engaged in promoting this link, as it could have encouraged greater use of the train service.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that officers would be assessing signage requirements including the connection from the railways to the coastal path and that would also include the removal of redundant signage.

Mr Hunter asked for views on signage relating to the shared use of paths by pedestrians and cyclists, including speed limits and warning signs. He referred to specific incidents that he had been aware of. The officer responded that such considerations would be particularly relevant at locations where the path narrowed or at pinch points. Ms McQueen felt it was important to clearly indicate these areas and encourage users to "share with care."

The potential for excessive signage was also noted as a concern in the discussion and the use of wooden signs was suggested as a visually appropriate option, it was recommended that some form of signage be placed at the start of the walk to set expectations.

Mr McCrory acknowledged that the trails officer had given consideration to how interactions between walkers and cyclists were best managed. While signage was helpful to a limited extent, there was a broader need that could potentially be addressed through education and awareness initiatives.

The officer explained that there had been a programme designed to demonstrate how people could interact respectfully on shared paths. The trails officer actively engaged with the public and educational groups, which was expected to have a

positive impact over the longer term. It was noted that signage was effective for those who paid attention to it, but direct engagement and education were seen as more impactful overall.

NOTED.

6. ANY OTHER NOTIFIED BUSINESS

There were no items of notified business, but Ms Queen reiterated her support for the revised planning application as discussed earlier in the meeting, noting that it was pragmatic and more deliverable.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group was scheduled to take place on Monday 5th January 2026.

The Officer advised that the meeting in April 2026 would need to be rescheduled due to falling over the Easter public holidays. Monday 13th or Monday 20th April were suggested alternatives but this would be confirmed.

CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting terminated at 6.40pm.