

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 5th January 2026 at 6:00 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor Brady
Alderman Graham
Councillor Holywood
Councillor McKee
James Hunter (Greenspaces)
Marianne Kennerley (Boom Incl/ Boom Studios)
Stephen McCrory (Ards and North Down Cycle Campaign Group)
Alison McQueen (For Another Path)

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

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies had been received from Councillors' Hennessy and McCollum for inability to attend and an apology was received from Councillor Newman for lateness. David Lennon (Friends of Columbanus) also issued apologies for inability to attend.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made.

Noted.

3. MINUTES OF NORTH DOWN COASTAL PATH 6TH OCTOBER 2025

No issues were raised in regard to the previous minutes.

Noted.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES

Alison McQueen (For Another Path) explained that drainage which had been installed across parts of the pathway at the Pickie area appeared to have some

issues and was advised that this would be addressed during the update report and presentation.

5. UPDATE REPORT AND PRESENTATION

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager reported that there had been a slight change to the proposed planning application. The original intention had been to submit an application for the first 600 metres of the path from Royal Belfast Golf Club, as this section was considered the most problematic. However, following further professional advice, concerns were raised that submitting a smaller application and later extending the project could be viewed by Planning as “project splitting,” which is generally discouraged. He also noted that planning applications were costly, with approximately £20,000 already spent, and that submitting a second application in a year or two’s time would require repeating surveys and incurring significant additional expense. For this reason, he believed it was in the best interests of ratepayers to submit a single, larger application covering the full 2km stretch.

Alison McQueen referred to previous planning applications from her own work experience and asked to see the reasoning behind the advice received. She sought reassurance that the approach would not divert resources away from the section most in need of improvement. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that although the application would cover 2km, the business case would remain focused on the initial 600m, which remained the priority. He emphasised that securing planning permission did not oblige the Council to carry out all works immediately, but it would provide flexibility and avoid delays associated with future applications.

Alderman McRandal queried the extent of the 2km stretch. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed it would run from Station Road to the bridge at Seahill. In response to a further question, he advised that no works were proposed for the rocky outcrop and tunnel area, as the space was too narrow to accommodate meaningful intervention.

Alison McQueen reiterated her concern that obtaining approval for the full 2km might lead to funding being directed toward less essential sections. The Manager assured her that the Council remained obligated to address the most critical 600m first, and this would be clearly documented. Councillor Brady added that the group had a democratic mandate to prioritise the agreed section before progressing to others.

The Manager noted that once the initial 600m was completed, the remaining 1.4km could be approached in smaller phases if required, offering flexibility and reducing the financial burden of undertaking all works at once. Alison McQueen requested that these assurances be recorded to address ongoing concerns. The Manager

reiterated that planning approval did not predetermine the exact works to be carried out.

James Hunter concluded by stating that the purpose of the group was to ensure that no decisions or actions would be taken without full discussion.

Alison McQueen stated that, given the long-term nature of the project, it was essential for the group to scrutinise the detailed plans that would guide works over the next few years. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that the drawings were available and that, if those present were so minded, they could be shared, adding that there was a need for confidentiality with any imagery shared. Alison McQueen advised that she was unable to make any decisions at this meeting as there had not been enough time to review details within the presentation.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager noted that it was for the group to determine how it wished to proceed, adding that the planning application was ready and likely could be submitted within the next couple of weeks. Councillor Brady asked whether any further questions would assist members. Alison McQueen explained that she required the full drawings and input from someone with greater technical understanding, noting that a member of her group who normally reviewed such material was currently unavailable.

Councillor Brady suggested that her group might benefit from a separate meeting to examine the plans in more detail. Alison McQueen responded that she did not feel able to assess the material within a few hours and would welcome another opportunity to review it, acknowledging that there would also be a consultation stage.

Councillor McKee expressed confusion regarding the presentation, noting that the previous briefing had included more than 30 slides showing widths and detailed comparisons, whereas the current presentation contained only eight. He found it difficult to compare the two sets of images and felt that the reduced information made it harder to understand the proposals. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager explained that the intention had been to keep the presentation straightforward, as providing every drawing would have been overwhelming. The slides shown were intended to illustrate the design approach rather than provide full technical detail, although all drawings could be supplied if required. He added that the design principle involved a standard maximum width of 1.5 metres across the 2km route, except where the existing path was already wider.

Alderman McRandal commented on the proposed 2m width in certain areas, noting that the section beside the golf course wall was one of the worst parts of the path and clearly required upgrading, which he fully supported. However, he raised concerns about the rocky headland beyond, which formed part of the greenway route and was valued by some users in its current form, while others—particularly

cyclists—might favour improvements. He emphasised the need for transparency in how this sensitive section would be treated within the planning application. He added that the remainder of the route up to the bridge would require careful handling, as some areas needed upgrading while others were satisfactory as they were, and he anticipated differing views on whether the quarry-dust section beyond Rockport should be altered.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager clarified that Section 0.7, immediately after the golf course, involved one of the most significant widenings. He explained that the path had historically extended to the wall, and the proposal was simply to restore it to that original alignment by way of clearing overgrowth rather than create a new route.

[Alderman Graham joined the meeting at 18:20]

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager provided examples from Section 0.7 illustrating how the path currently extended beneath vegetation and how it could be widened. He also noted that at Section 11 the intention would be to return the path to the natural boundary of the existing wall.

Alison McQueen stated that she was content with the explanations but wished to see the full drawings before agreeing to proceed with a 2km application, emphasising the need to understand the totality of the proposals. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed he was happy to discuss the plans further but was conscious of the risks associated with wider circulation. Alison McQueen responded that the drawings would only be shared with four other individuals known to the group.

Stephen McCrory advised that he had first been made aware of the 1.5m width during the evening's presentation. From a cycling perspective, he noted that shared-path guidance, including recommendations from Active Travel England, suggested a minimum width of 2m. While recognising the constraints along the route, he expressed concern that the proposals appeared to be gradually reducing the space available for cyclists, who would still be required to pass pedestrians in narrow sections. He added that although his members understood the value of the rocky outcrop and were pragmatic about its limitations, they had anticipated a smoother surface and adequate overtaking space along the full length of the path. He asked whether the standards and functionality of shared paths had been fully considered.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that such considerations had always formed part of the process. He explained that the purpose of the meeting was to bring options to the group for discussion and that all user

needs were taken into account. He noted that when a 2m width had previously been proposed, objections had been raised.

Alison McQueen asked whether, once planning permission for the 2km stretch was secured, the plans could still be amended. She suggested that, with sufficient funding, passing places could be introduced similar to those on single-track roads, and she observed that much depended on the behaviour of all path users. She believed that a 1.5m width could be workable if users acted considerately.

James Hunter asked when the smaller, less complex works might begin. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager advised that the initial 600m would commence as soon as planning permission and the business case were approved. He cautioned that it could realistically take years before the 600m section was completed, as the planning process alone could take up to a year, followed by construction. James Hunter queried whether some of the lighter works could proceed sooner. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager replied that, subject to agreement, minor works could be undertaken while awaiting approval for the main section, but the priority had to remain the 600m. He expressed concern that focusing on “easy wins” could divert attention from the essential works.

Alison McQueen asked whether areas already in Council ownership could simply be scraped back as part of routine maintenance. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that this could be done easily.

Alderman Graham reflected on the ongoing tension between walkers and cyclists, noting that the group would eventually need to determine the primary purpose of the path. He shared observations from Helen’s Bay, where he and his wife had discussed the issue upon a stroll. From that conversation, he noted that some people believed if the path were improved too much, cyclists would travel too quickly, whereas a rougher surface naturally slowed them down. He added that most cyclists he encountered were courteous, though not all, and that while club cyclists tended to understand their responsibilities, others did not. He emphasised the need to reach a consensus.

Councillor Brady acknowledged the sentiment expressed. James Hunter observed that there were sections where a 2m width was simply not achievable, meaning the path would never be uniform. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager agreed, noting that towards Bangor the path already exceeded 2m in places, but in the section under discussion most of the route could only reach 1.5m due to boundary walls. He added that maintaining a consistent 1.5m width across the 2km stretch would provide coherence.

James Hunter noted the argument of whether the path was intended primarily as a leisure route or a commuter facility, advising that it was not used as a commuter corridor.

Stephen McCrory noted that cyclists had already accepted that the route would not function as a commuter path and would instead be a leisure facility. He said that while some issues raised by road cyclists might be addressed through the shared-path approach, he felt that the proposals were being scaled back. He highlighted that surface type and width were important factors, and that gravel differed significantly from tarmac. He anticipated that members of his group would question why the width was no longer 2m as previously discussed, adding that cyclists had already made concessions and did not want to see the width reduced to 1.2m or, in some places, 80cm, stressing that users would need to act responsibly to make the path work.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager returned to the presentation and stated that no further action should be taken until the plans and drawings had been shared. He asked the group how they wished to proceed and whether the planning application should be launched at this stage. Alderman McRandal agreed that the group should wait to see the photographs. Councillor W Irvine expressed concern that once images were shared, they could be posted online, which could undermine the group's work. Alison McQueen acknowledged this and said she understood the need to limit wider circulation of the drawings.

Councillor Brady asked those present to remember that reviewing plans for the full 2km would be more time-consuming and would require additional meetings. He asked whether the group wished to wait until the next meeting, by which time all members would have had the opportunity to examine the plans and consider a framework for how the remainder of the route should look, even if not in the same level of detail as the initial 600m. Alison McQueen said that while she believed few people would object to a 1.5m width, she was not prepared to agree to the proposals without having seen the actual drawings.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries reminded the group that the parameters had already been set: the path would be 1.5m wide unless the existing path was already wider, in which case it would remain at its current width. Alison McQueen reiterated that she wished to see the drawings. James Hunter asked whether any works beyond scraping back vegetation were proposed. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that, aside from the initial 600m, no additional works were planned. In response to a further question from Alison McQueen, he confirmed that the surface would be tarmacked.

Councillor McClean observed that members normally received documents a week in advance of meetings, a timeframe that he believed would proffer sufficient time to consider the proposals without delaying the process for months. He acknowledged the concerns raised but felt that five or six days before the next meeting would be adequate, given the long-term nature of the project. He stressed that members could not make decisions without seeing the plans.

The group agreed with Councillor Brady's suggestion.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that once agreement was reached, the process could begin and that drawings would be circulated for further discussion. He also reported on maintenance issues raised earlier in the day: the contractor had observed that the new drainage was working so effectively that it was now overflowing, particularly during snowmelt, and would be returning to extend the system. He had hoped to report that work had begun that morning, but snow had delayed progress. The temporary barrier replacement remained on track for completion by the end of March.

Stephen McCrory raised concerns about the surfacing at Swinley Bay, noting that while the gravel was an improvement on the previous condition, it had made cycling uphill more difficult and did not reflect what had been agreed at earlier meetings, where a hard surface had been expected. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager said he would check this. Stephen McCrory added that the 5cm layer of gravel would wash away and that any wheeled users would find it problematic. Alison McQueen suggested that the gravel should be laid in a more uneven, "lumpy" form to reduce slipperiness. James Hunter asked whether the surface consisted only of stones, and Alison McQueen reiterated that it needed to be textured to prevent slipping.

Councillor Brady summarised that once the group agreed an action, it was important that it be carried out exactly as decided. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager reported that, as agreed at the previous meeting, an audit of assets had been completed. A total of 283 assets had been logged, each in varying condition. He noted that some signage was out of date, unclear or unusable, and that several benches required attention. With all assets now mapped, the next step would be to determine priorities. He suggested that safety issues should be addressed first, followed by bins, which were straightforward to replace. However, signage and interpretative material were in particularly poor condition, and he proposed bringing forward recommendations on what should be removed, replaced or added, subject to the group's agreement.

Councillor McKee asked whether all of this work would be completed by the end of the financial year or whether a business case would be required. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager explained that a budget was already in place for

upgrades, but progress would depend on the planning application being completed. He did not expect the work to be finished within the current financial year due to the need for design work, communications input and decisions on interpretative content. The first stage would be to determine what should be removed and what should replace it.

James Hunter asked whether the planning application was required simply to scrape back grass. Councillor Brady understood that it was not. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager confirmed that scraping back vegetation fell under general maintenance, noting that the tarmac path already existed. When James Hunter queried the implications for the ASSI designation, the Manager explained that once the application formally established the route as a path, it could be maintained to that standard. In response to a further question about why scraping grass was an issue, he clarified that the concern related to altering the surface. While the tarmac section was clearly defined, the remaining 1.4km was not uniformly identifiable as a former path, particularly where the surface changed.

Councillor Brady observed that work was also required on the next section of the path beyond the agreed 600m, as it too needed repair.

Marianne Kennerley asked whether assets such as boxes and junction cabinets had been included in the audit. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager explained that these had not been logged, as NIE had permission to install them. The audit focused on signage, bins and benches, some of which were located on third-party land. He noted that where assets were on land such as Crawfordsburn, there was a degree of uniformity that needed to be considered. Marianne Kennerley asked whether there was potential to address areas that bordered private property. The Manager said that while options were limited on private land, there was potential to enhance the surroundings—for example, by introducing artwork similar to installations in Ward Park, which could help change the atmosphere of the area.

Marianne Kennerley suggested that such considerations should be incorporated at an early stage, particularly in relation to raising awareness of shared-path use and addressing hotspots where private property adjoined the route. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager noted that in areas affected by graffiti or inappropriate language, one approach used elsewhere was to replace repeated repainting with organised, sanctioned artwork, as had been done in Ward Park.

Alison McQueen cautioned against following the example of Crawfordsburn Country Park signage, which she felt consisted largely of prohibitions.

James Hunter asked whether there were any plans to address antisocial behaviour along the route but, at the time of writing, this was not an action planned by Council.

Alderman Graham raised concerns about maintenance standards, noting that some seats were in such poor condition that they created a negative impression of the Council. He suggested that in some cases it might be better to remove certain items entirely rather than leave them in a deteriorated state, and that a smaller number of well-maintained assets could improve the overall appearance. He added that neglected spaces could contribute to antisocial behaviour and noted similar comments recently made about the Town Hall.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager responded that the issue was not simply the number of bins and benches but ensuring they were placed appropriately and used effectively. He advised that walkability and disability forums had been engaged to help shape the future design of the path, and that replacements would not be on a like-for-like basis. This would form part of the wider review.

He continued with an update on events, such as past events like the Outdoor Partnership inclusive walks on 30 October, a wintering birds and intertidal zone workshop on 4 December and the continued weekly mindful walks on Wednesdays from 10am to 12pm along the coastal path. Further walks were scheduled for 28 January at Seapark, 11 February at Helen's Bay, 25 February at Pickie Park, and 11 March at Groomsport.

The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager also provided an update on the cycle-friendly borough initiative. Work continued with the Department for Infrastructure on the active travel strategy, including discussions before Christmas regarding an interim link from Green Road to Bangor town centre. A cycling masterplan survey had recently been completed with over 300 responses. The greenway network continued to progress, with an official launch planned for 2 March 2026, at which point the Council's contribution to the project would be complete. A contractor had begun work on the section beside the floodgates, and a related application had been submitted to support that connection.

The final slide confirmed the next meeting dates as 27 April, 29 June and 28 September 2026, 18:00-21:00.

Councillor McKee referred to the previous slide on the cycle-friendly borough and questioned the purpose of an interim link, expressing doubt that the Department would deliver it.

[Councillor McClean left the meeting at 18:50.]

Councillor McKee asked what progress could realistically be expected, noting significant gaps between Green Road, Londonderry Park and Belvedere. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager explained that the greenway projects board

was working with the Department to advance the missing sections and that the new greenway would help highlight the need for further connections. He added that regular meetings took place outside the project board and that positive actions were expected to emerge from these discussions. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager noted that once the greenways were in active use, users would more clearly identify where gaps existed, which could help build momentum for completing the network.

6. ANY OTHER NOTIFIED BUSINESS

Councillor Brady asked whether there were any other AONB matters. The Parks and Cemeteries Development Manager said he had discussed relevant issues with Stephen McCrory before Christmas. Stephen McCrory confirmed that his points had largely been addressed during the meeting. The Head of Parks and Cemeteries noted that an invitation had been extended to DAERA regarding their work on the path, following a query raised by Councillor McKee.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

As had been displayed at the end of the presentation, the next meeting dates were 27 April, 29 June and 28 September 2026, 18:00-21:00.