

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 on Tuesday 23 January 2023 at 6:00 pm.

PRESENT:

In the Chair: Councillor McKimm

Alderman: Graham (6.08pm)

Councillors: Cochrane
Harbinson
Holywood
Irwin
W Irvine
Martin (6.05 pm)
McKee
McRandal
Rossiter (6.27 pm)

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 (H Loebnau)

1. APPOINTMENT OF CHAIRMAN

The Director of Community and Wellbeing presided over the election of a Chair for the Group.

Proposed by Councillor McKee, seconded by Councillor Cochrane, that Councillor McKimm be nominated to the position of Chair.

AGREED.

There being no other nominations, Councillor McKimm took up the position of Chair and welcomed Members to the Working Group and hoped that it could lead to something positive which the community could look forward to.

NOTED.

2. APOLOGIES

Apologies for non-attendance had been received from Councillors Creighton, McCracken and McLaren.

NOTED.

(Councillor Martin entered the meeting at 6.05 pm)

3. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Chairman asked for any Declarations of Interest and none were made.

NOTED.

4. INTRODUCTION

Members' attention was drawn to the presentation which had been circulated previously. The Director stated that the agenda detail was contained in this presentation and encouraged the group to reflect and move forward and consider decisions for the new Working Group, beginning with governance.

(Alderman Graham entered the meeting at 6.08 pm).

NOTED.

5. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The historical background to the Ards and North Down Coastal Path Working Group was outlined by the Director, beginning in 2016 when the Department for Infrastructure had published 'A Strategic Plan for Greenways' to the decision locally in January 2023 to remove the Greenway project from the North Down coast.

The road ahead was now to get Members involved in a different way than previously and when asked by Alderman Graham what planning permission existed for the Greenway it was explained that there was no permission in place for the North Down coast but planning permission had been granted for other sections of the Greenway network agreed in 2016.

NOTED.

6. GOVERNANCE (EXTERNAL MEMBERSHIP, TERMS OF REFERENCE, ETC)

Members of the Working Group were reminded that the Terms of Reference had been agreed by the Council in setting the group up in September 2023.

Under those Terms of Reference, the Working Group was able to consider a number of things in order to make further decisions, including how the Working Group would involve Social Partners and Expert Guests. Those represented could include a diverse range of interests in areas such as cycling, walking, environmental and outdoor recreation groups and be made up of people of all backgrounds and ages.

It was proposed that the position of Social Partners would be advertised requesting applications from interested parties with up to ten groups being represented. Only one Member would attend from each of those groups to represent its interests.

It was proposed that a vetting process would take place: a written application process with the Chair and two Council officers putting a recommendation to the Working Group. The application form would include, name of person, group represented, contact information, how often they used the coastal path and a brief written description of why they wished to be a member of the Ards and North Down Coastal Path Working Group and what skills and expertise that they would bring.

Councillor McKee asked if changes could be made to the Terms of Reference and stressed the need to ensure Section 75 interests were adhered to. He welcomed the Social Partners and Non-Permanent partners for those who had specific interests. It was explained that Permanent Members did not have to be from a constituted group so there was no barrier to being represented. The Director advised that the Terms of Reference were set by the Council and as such the process in standing orders was applicable in terms of making changes in advance of any formal review and recommended updates. However, the detail under discussion could be decided by the group now under existing terms covered in the current document.

Councillor McRandal thought that there was merit in also splitting consultations into distinct geographical areas such as Holywood, Helen's Bay and Crawfordsburn as opposed to the Working Group risking being Bangor centric. Many local areas had strong and active interest groups and those should be considered.

Alderman Graham referred to the suggestion of having up to ten Social Members on the Working Group and expressed concern about that becoming too large and therefore could lead to the group becoming cumbersome. He also thought there could be a degree of overlap in the interests of social groups.

Councillor Martin concurred with that view noting that one of the failings or challenges previously had been the lack of engagement with a wide variety of stakeholders and he was aware that many people felt very passionately about the path and wanted to be involved. Generally, he considered five to eight people was best for a working group, but the proposal laid out could result in the North Down Coastal Path Working Group easily having thirty members which made it almost the size of the full Council.

Councillor McRandal disagreed with the views expressed by Alderman Graham and Councillor Martin and thought that if the size of the Working Group was constricted it would miss having consultation with a varied group of interests and that had been a criticism previously.

(Councillor Rossiter entered the meeting at 6.27 pm).

Councillor Irwin stressed the importance of rebuilding trust within the local community and the Working Group would stall if it was seen to be excluding people.

The Chair referred to the engagement the Council made in other areas such as the rural partnership meetings and suggested that that could be an example of how to include a diverse range of stakeholders effectively.

In response to Councillor McRandal and Councillor Irwin's comments, Councillor Martin made it clear that what he was suggesting did not have the intention of excluding any interest but saw a tension between wanting to see action and the efficiency of the Working Group if it became too large. He pointed to the fact that larger groups often produced slow decision making and might not deliver outcomes effectively.

Alderman Graham was also queried the idea of Permanent Members and the word 'permanent' troubled him so he asked why groups could not make representation without the need for them to be permanently represented on the group.

Councillor McRandal was confident that Members and the larger Working Group would come to agreement on the way forward.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries did not believe that all the groups would be represented or would be needed at any one time to sit on the Working Group and he agreed that lessons had been learned by the Council. The Director agreed to bring back a report on how communities and statutory organisations could be represented and the way the Rural Partnership was made up would be examined.

AGREED.

7. LESSONS LEARNED FROM PREVIOUS ACTIVITY

The lessons learned from the Greenway experience were listed:

- 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
- Need for Non-Technical Drawings

The Director explained that there was a revenue budget set aside for the decisions of the Working Group and the 'One Path Initiative' remained which was of great importance since everyone would share the path and that would need to be done in a respectful way. He added that in hindsight the previous planning application could have been split into smaller sections to make it more manageable.

Councillor McKee believed that the Greenway plans had been officer and Council centric and the uniqueness of the path as a natural resource seemed to have been lost in the planning, so the Working Group needed to make sure that these two points were addressed as the plans moved forward.

Councillor Martin was of the opinion that the Greenway had failed because it seemed inappropriate to many people so he stressed the importance of setting what the goal should be for any part of the path and look for the funding to meet that.

The Director stated that it was the intention for the Working Group to gather the thoughts of all its Members and the Chair added that the views expressed would come to the Council and would be in the public domain.

Alderman Graham agreed with Councillors McKee and Martin and suspected that the Council had let the project slip too far before it was eventually stopped. Most of the comments he had heard came from people who referred to the uniqueness and the natural beauty of the path and was of the view that rugged could be more attractive in the natural environment against something too 'shiny' or artificial.

The Head of Communications and Marketing stated that those opinions would be examined along with the best method of addressing them. The Head of Parks and Cemeteries agreed with that and suggested that those comments be brought back to the Working Group with a final document on how to move forwards.

AGREED.

8. ROUTE AND OWNERSHIP OF NORTH DOWN COASTAL PATH

It was explained that along the length of the North Down Coastal Path there were 115 plots of land in total of which 78 were registered. The owners included; Ards and North Down Borough Council, Northern Ireland Water, Department for Infrastructure, Ministry of Defence, Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Department for Environment, Crown Estate, National Trust, Ulster Folk and Transport Museum and other private landowners some of which were unknown.

Photographs were shown of sections of the existing path and some were in need of repair, and some straightening in places. Flooding frequently occurred in some places too and that should be addressed.

Alderman Graham suggested that not many people set out with the intent of walking the entire length of the coastal path and it might be appropriate to think of the path as being made up of many different and distinctive parts. Councillor McKee was in agreement and thought that by greatly straightening the path something vital could be lost and therefore it may be impossible to view the path as an A to B route. The path was varied and therefore suitable for the differing needs of walkers and cyclists.

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries stated the importance of identifying a vision for the path with the knowledge that there was a limited supply of funding.

Councillor McRandal considered that the maintenance issues that already existed were priorities, but he would be uneasy to have plans in place which straightened or widened the road in some places. Since the Greenway plans had been stopped Councillor McRandal had become aware of some of the ramifications such as at Station Road, Craigavad, a private road at risk of erosion. Residents there were putting off doing repairs to their road in the hope that the Council would take initiative for that as a maintenance issue.

The Working Group was informed that the Council owned very little of the path and agreements would need to be put in place to deal with the large numbers of landowners. The Director also suggested that the work would need to be done in manageable chunks and not all at once pointing out that the North Down Coastal Path was almost 30 miles long.

Councillor McKee agreed that there could be many quick wins but there was time to do the improvement works right. Referring to coastal erosion he thought that flooding should be kept in mind as a priority.

NOTED.

9. BENEFITS OF THE COASTAL PATH

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries outlined the benefits of the Coastal Path:

- Connecting communities
- Providing safe, traffic-free routes
- Safe and easy access to fresh air and exercise
- More people journey by foot or bicycle
- Promoting physical/mental health and well-being
- Supporting climate change adoption plans
- Can improve quality of life for everyone
- Can create business opportunities
- Can increase property values

The officer encouraged the Working Group to consider what the vision was for the Coastal Path. Across social media there was talk of the tensions between cyclists versus walkers and that needed to be considered as well as the possibility of creating a hierarchy of use on the Path. In respect of accessibility, it might be considered that not all parts of the Path needed to be accessible. He explained that if changes were made to any part of the Path Section 75 would come into play. When consultation had taken place, many people did not believe the entire path should be accessible to all. He referred to the development of Cairn Wood close to Hollywood which had been improved for walkers and was now much more widely used leading to criticism by some that it had been more enjoyable to walk in that place when fewer people visited.

Councillor McRandal thought there was a need to clarify the Terms of Reference and if the path should be made accessible to everyone and the Chair suggested that some reasonable adjustments could be made.

Councillor McKee thought that biodiversity and the natural environment should be front, and centre of all considerations and the Director thought there was an opportunity to engage with the Council in the Local Biodiversity Action Plan.

Alderman Graham referred to the tension between cyclists and walkers and while the majority of users were mannerly in conduct a small number caused problems and there was a need to reconcile those different priorities.

Councillor Rossiter believed the Path to be a wonderful asset of the Council's and thought that more could be done to maximise it through the tourism strategy. In response the Head of Parks and Cemeteries said that tourism potential had been excluded since that had been a criticism of the Council's previous plans. That was a matter that needed further careful consideration.

NOTED.

10. SUPPORT AND SURVEY

The Head of Parks and Cemeteries explained that in March 2022, the Council commissioned Social Market Research (SMR) to undertake a programme of research to inform the previous proposal.

The research was based on two elements:
 A survey among a representative sample of Council residents
 A survey of existing users of the North Down Coastal Path

Use of the existing path

74% used the existing coastal path (50% do so at least monthly: existing users, 84%).

There was greater use among residents who were younger, economically active and better educated.

Residents used the path mostly for walking (73%), dog walking (21%) and running (18%)
(existing users: walking (57%) dog walking (42%) and running (13%))

Benefits: exercise/health reasons (26%), fresh air/outdoors/open space (15%)
(existing users: exercise/health reasons (18%), sea air/fresh air (15%))

76% were satisfied with the existing path (dissatisfied, 2%, neither 22%, don't know 1%)
(existing users: 90% satisfied (4% dissatisfied, 6% neither))

Council's Proposal to Develop the Path

40% of residents were aware of the proposal (existing users, 54%)
85% of residents would likely use the path if developed in line with the proposal
(existing users, 98%)

Poor mobility, not going out, distance from the path were reasons for not using it.
Walking (79%), dog walking (24%), cycling (21%) and running (76%)
75% of residents said they would use it at least monthly (existing users, 76%)

Survey of Residents (323)

Good development for the area (19%)
Good for area and people / families living nearby (16%)
Encourages people to get out more (9%)
Extra green space / longer more enjoyable walks (7%)
Safe area for families (6%)
Brings communities together / good for communities (6%)
Good for exercise and health (5%)
Good for walking / hiking (5%)

Existing Users (65)

Longer path – good for commuting / connecting areas (22%)
Encourages more people to get out and about (19%)
Bring more people / tourists into area (10%)
Exercise / health and fitness (8%)
Better access for disabled / older people (5%)
Good and safe for families / children (5%)
Pathway surface needs upgrading / improved (4%)
Makes most of beautiful area /scenery / wildlife (5%)

The Head of Communications and Marketing explained that the survey specification was considered robust and representative proportionally but the size was dictated by the budget, which was limited.

Some Members asked for clarification on what the North Down Coastal Path comprised and were informed that it stretched from Holywood to Donaghadee.

NOTED.

11. OPPORTUNITIES AND LOOKING AHEAD

The Working Group was informed that £150k had been added to the estimates process for the group in its first year. Priority areas for improvement could be investigated with surveys and evaluation works and the Council's Head of Assets and Property Services would provide technical expertise for the minor improvements to the existing facilities.

The Director thought that the first meeting of the Working Group had been successful and suggested a further meeting in one month's time to bring back further reports on the Group's objectives.

NOTED.

12. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

It was suggested that the date of the next would be set for the end of February and that officers were open for further views and communication up to that point.

CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting terminated at 7.57 pm.