

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 January 2025 at 6:00 pm.

PRESENT: Councillor McKimm (Chairman)
Alderman Graham
Alderman McRandal
Councillor Cochrane
Councillor Alex Harbinson
Councillor Henessy
Councillor McBurney
Councillor McClean
Councillor McCollum
Councillor McLaren
Councillor Barry McKee
Mr David Lennon (Friends of Columbanus, Bangor)
Ms Alison McQueen (For Another Path)
Mr Stephen McCrory (Ards and North Down Cycle Campaign Group)
Mr Frank Shivers (Bangor Chamber of Commerce)

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

1. APOLOGIES & INTRODUCTIONS

Apologies were received from Councillors Irwin, Hollywood and McCollum as well as Marianne Kennerley (Boom Incl/ Boom Studios) and James Hunter (Greenspaces Bangor). The Chair, Councillor McKimm welcomed all those present to the meeting.

NOTED.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest notified.

NOTED.

3. MINUTES OF NORTH DOWN COASTAL PATH WORKING GROUP MEETING DATED 30 SEPTEMBER 2-24

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED: Minutes of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group meeting dated 30th September 2024.

NOTED.

4. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE MINUTES (UPDATE REPORT)

PREVIOUSLY CIRCULATED: Report from the Director of Community and Wellbeing detailed as follows:

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The minutes from the July 2024 meeting were approved by the Group at the meeting on the 30th September and were noted at the October Council meeting.

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

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

The draft minutes from the 30th September had been circulated to Members of the Working Group due to the time delay between meetings. These minutes would be considered for approval at the Council meeting and would be presented at the January Council meeting.

At the meeting on 30th 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.

2.0 MAINTENANCE

It was proposed that Council undertook some maintenance works on the Council owned sections of the path (Pickie to Swineley Bay), such as:

- Verge encroachment clearance to reinstate the full original width of the path exposing the tarmac underneath
- Cut back overhanging vegetation
- Temporary barriers will be replaced with railings similar to those adjacent to it at Downshire Road/Smelt Bay (this is necessary to prevent people coming down from the Downshire Road and potentially missing the turn and falling down the drop to the beach, a hedge is not suitable)
- Path will be surfaced on approach to Swineley Bay
- Address the drainage issues along the path such as at Skipperstone Beach

These works had been programmed to take place in January/February 2025.

3.0 MACHINERY

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

Additional equipment was also being researched by the Operational Teams with further purchases being made early 2025. Furthermore, an order had been approved for two mechanical sweepers which were to be delivered through Spring 2025. These sweepers bolster the ability to adequately maintain the path without the use of unnecessary, harmful chemicals. The budget for these was outside of that allocated to the Coastal Path.

4.0 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, approx. 2km long. This section was particularly narrow, uneven underfoot, had overgrown verges and 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. Discussions would be required with the respective landowners prior to the submission of the planning application. Certain surveys would be required, and these were being explored at the time of writing. It was proposed to compile photomontages alongside the planning drawings so that the proposed improvements could be clearly understood, these will be the minimal interventions to ensure the durability of the path and improve its condition only, however they would still require planning permission.

The majority of the path was in the coastal flood inundation zone and in places it may be prudent to create a raise in freeboard/levels by approx. 300mm to raise it slightly out of the inundation zone to ensure the durability of the path.

5.0 SIGNAGE AND PROMOTION

The existing North Down Coastal Path leaflet had been reviewed and updated and an order has been placed with the printers to deliver the new leaflets, which would be available in the Visitor Information Centres etc. Details in relation to the railway line and stations had been added as well as the locations of Changing Places, Tourist Information locations, the Columban Way and updated contact details etc.

There were six signs along the North Down Coastal Path, at Seapark, Cultra, Grey Point, Bangor, Ballymacormick Point and Orlock. These had perished over the years in the environment or had been removed. The content of these signs was reviewed and updated and new lectern stands would be produced with robust finishes to ensure

durability, and the signs reinstated at their original positions. The information displayed on them described the section of trail in the vicinity of the sign, the nature that could be seen in the area and the relevant points of interest. Details in relation to the railway line and stations had been added as well as the locations of Changing Places, Tourist Information locations, the Columban Way and updated contact details were included. There had been requests for the 6 signs mentioned above to be replaced by other Elected Members, so that is why they were being progressed at this stage.

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

The new Development Officer (Community Trails and Greenways) had facilitated and programmed a series of events along the coastal path as follows:

Inclusive Walks:

- 17 October, 2 sessions AM/PM from Pickie Park

Mindfulness Walks:

- 14 November: Helen's Bay Beach car park
- 12 December: Seapark Recreation Grounds
- 16 January 2025: Pickie Park, Bangor
- 13 February: Helen's Bay Beach car park
- 13 March: Seapark Recreation Grounds

A Bioblitz was being programmed for May 2025.

The path has also been 360 degrees photographed and mapped from Holywood to Stricklands Glen and can be viewed on Google Streetview. This will enable people to scope sections of the walk they may wish to use, and it is especially useful for people with mobility issues, in that they can see exactly what the path is like on the ground from an eye level perspective to see if it is suitable for their abilities.

A videographer was appointed to create promotional footage and arial shots of the Coastal Path and its surrounding landscape. The promotional footage would be taken in late Winter early Spring to capture the path coming to life whilst still showcasing the rugged reality of its coastal environment. Further footage would be shot in Summer so a full picture of the environment in which the path exists could be captured. The footage 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 would be meeting with representatives from the Ards and North Down Heritage groups at their cluster meetings. This will signal the beginning of

the Living History project for the Coastal Path, as well as other areas throughout the Borough.

6.0 ALTERNATIVE CYCLE ROUTE AT GREY POINT

Officers were exploring the potential for an alternative cycle/accessible route in the vicinity of Grey Point Fort where the path narrows considerably. There may be the option to direct people along Grey Point to The Fort and down alongside the fort to the path. There was an alleged Right of Way that links Sheridan Drive with the coastal path and Officers were exploring if that could also provide an alternative link to the path.

7.0 RECOMMENDATION

RECOMMENDED that the content of this report be noted.

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager, with the aid of a presentation provided an in-depth update on the above report. Some salient points that arose from the presentation included the budget of £80k for path repairs and surveys, £45k for machinery and maintenance and £25k for signage and promotion. The report did agree that some areas were to be cared for from Pickie Pool to Swinley Bay including the clearance of verges, overhanging vegetation, temporary barriers being replaced at Downshire Road toward Smelt Mill Bay on the approach to Swinley Bay and indeed, to address the drainage issues along the path such as Skipperstone Beach whereupon frequenting individuals may often find run-off from the grassy areas west of the pathway.

Upon queries from the room about asking questions amid the presentation, The Chair, (Councillor McKimm) agreed that questions could be asked throughout the presentation's progression.

Alison McQueen (From Another Path) alluded to the replacement of temporary barriers, asking for their specific locations as well as if the barriers could be painted green to remove the stark-grey colouration from affecting visual amenity. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that temporary fencing could be found at the bottom of the ramp from Downshire Road and stretched from there to meet the existing barrier. It used to be a permanent barrier but had deteriorated over the years. The problem with camouflaging the replacement barriers with paint was that it would be an additional, likely yearly maintenance cost. Alison McQueen was content however with the future solution of allowing surrounding vegetation to encompass the galvanised steel barriers.

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager continued with the presentation, explaining that small drainage channels would help with waters running across the pathway. The Machinery budget had allowed for a procurement exercise for non-herbicide weed control units which would look toward avoiding future encroachment

after the verges had been cleared. Two mechanical sweepers had been approved whilst the Operational Teams within the department were continuing to research additional equipment that could be useful within the Coastal Path's remit.

Meanwhile, the Planning Application was due to start this year, 2025 when agreement of which, would allow works to begin. This particular application was with regard to the pathway nearby the Royal Belfast Golf Club, stretching onward toward the bridge located at Seahill; approximately 2km. The state of the pathway at the time of writing these minutes was precarious at best with a risk of collapse in some locations due to the failure of sea defences and erosion that had led to undermining.

It was hoped that by way of photo montages created as supporting visuals to the Planning Application would aid the viewer as to what the proposed path may look like upon completion. In addition, due to the aforementioned undermining issues, Officers may have to look at the coastal flood inundation level as, in quite a few locations, the path sat below the sea level. By raising the path height by up to 300mm in some areas would greatly assist against such issues. The worst affected area of the 2km stretch was that which ran alongside the boundary walls of the golf course. The presentation provided an example of structurally sound sea defences made from rough hewn hard rock such as basalt and/or granite boulders which had been laid in position as to provide, '*rock armour*.' The area beside the golf course did in fact once resemble the reference photograph but over the years had deteriorated to its current state. The Planning Application therefore sought to reinstate sea defences.

Alison McQueen asked if sea defences were the only option, making reference to flora and fauna, specifically that of Eurasian Otters that made the coast their home and the effect that reinstatement of sea defences may have upon them. In addition, Councillor McKimm added that the subject of rock defences had been a very significant and delicate moment in North Down Coastal Path's history. Many had concerns, whether local burgesses, groups or those further afield and, as luck would have it, examples existed from other areas, such as Newcastle wherein the construction of sea defences/ man made structures had created an impact on sea currents, the effects of which were not visible at the site of said works but much further up-shore or down-shore. With such potentially foreboding consequences,

Councillor McKimm wanted to ensure that appropriate engagement occurred with the community and stakeholders before decision were made. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager agreed that such could be a possibility but that he had to ensure those present were aware of timelines associated with the project whilst the Head of Parks & Cemeteries explained that the previous example of coastal damage had been due to roadworks as opposed to sea defences.

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager added that, as had been previously shown, the area of sea defences that near the golf course were to be reinstated; they had previously existed as per the sound example of rock armour and had presented

with no impacts along the shoreline. Whilst Alison McQueen wanted to ensure alternatives had been investigated before deciding on the use of rock defences, in the event that they were reinstated, she hoped a critique could be provided which could be used to explain to stakeholders why the decision had been taken.

Alderman Graham regarded the working group and explained that, in enlarging it to encompass more stakeholders as had been done at September 2024's meeting, the Working Group was already effectively carrying out a public consultation as those present were representatives of wider communities and groups to whom information from meetings could be brought back. He suggested there were only two possible solutions; to use the precast concrete revetment sea defences as could be seen around Bangor Marina or to progress with the preferred rock-armour.

Councillor McLaren asked if machinery sourced under the Coastal Path budget would be exclusively used for the path or if it would become property of the department and be used across the borough as required. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that if the machinery were not in use, it could be used by the department across the Borough and exemplified the recent purchase of a Grillo that had been instrumental in the cutting of re-wilding areas. However, when it came to the areas requiring attention that the Grillo was originally bought for, it would be returned as a priority. Treating machinery this way avoided needless idleness, allowing the machine to be used to its full effect which in turn provided much better value for money for ratepayers. Steven McCrory (Ards & North Down Cycle Campaign Group) suggested the use of such a machine would be advantageous to the likes of Comber Greenway but was reminded that the Ards & North Down Borough Council did not maintain that particular greenway at this moment in time.

Frank Shivers of Bangor Chamber of Commerce queried why the need existed for a Planning Application given that proposed plans were merely to replace that which had once been, like for like rather than the development of something new, adding his concern that such a pathway could be construed as allowing for additional revenue to be gathered by another department. Councillor McKimm added to Frank Shivers' statement in asking if the requirement for a Planning Application had been a stipulation created by the Council or external bodies such as the NIEA. Both the Head of Parks & Cemeteries and The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that the reasoning was because of the area being protected. Designated areas, regardless of the project and scope required Planning Applications. It was also noteworthy for those present at the meeting to remember that a Consultant was being engaged who would not only look at the plans as laid before the Working Group, but also at alternatives. This plan was about improving what existed as opposed to enhancing the area and, of course there would be areas that, due to varying factors, the Working Group and agreed plan would be unable to change.

In the following slides, the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager showed photos of the pathway in areas where it had worn down which prompted questioning over ownership by Alderman Graham. Alderman McRandal recalled areas of the path

near Rockport School that were often in bog-like conditions with one area belonging to an adjacent dwelling and asked if areas such as this may be included in works. Frank Shivers added that, if parts of the pathway belonged to local landowners, whose responsibility it may be for upkeep and maintenance. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that as the Council did not own the majority of land along the coastal path, there would need to be engagement with local landowners. If the Planning Application was approved, a business case would be created before the end of 2025 in preparation for the following year.

Regarding inferences of responsibility, David Lennon (Friends of Columbanus) advised that many landowners may not be keen on partaking in maintenance and upkeep of their land where the coastal path intersects due to public liability. He suggested such landowners were safe if they were not carrying out maintenance at the time of writing but that if they began to do so then stopped, public liability would enter the fray. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that problems had been identified with drainage being a major player with slippage and the general state of land. Some landowners had seemed more than happy for maintenance and upkeep work to be taken over by Council during some early probing. Councillor McKimm asked to ensure that the legal point raised by David Lennon be addressed in the Planning Application in order to keep landowners safe from any liability to which the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager agreed that investigations would indeed be required.

Alderman Graham, in relation to Alderman McRandal's comments on bog-like areas, explained that there would no doubt be attention drawn if works were carried out to improve the path and land whilst others may prefer the natural, foot-worn state. As decision makers on what would inevitably be the custodianship of Council on the coastal path, the Working Group members had to establish local opinion rather than just agreeing to carry out works and upgrades which would lessen any issue down the line. Councillor McKimm agreed, reminding the Working Group that Community Engagement had been of great import whilst the Coastal Path Plans were still fledgling and that indeed, the Working Group were charged with responsibility. The Head of Parks & Cemeteries reminded the Working Group that the path wasn't natural to begin with, with foot traffic forging the path in the first instance and improvements being made by various entities over the years. As such, there was always the possibility to arrive at a decision where nature takes its course and the path be left alone.

David Lennon explained how large swathes of the path were muddy and in some ways, expected as could be seen in many other areas where paths gave way to mud and rocks. Though it could be possible for stonework to be laid to improve access, the problem would then be the maintenance. Alison McQueen added that some local residents of the area had taken it upon themselves to add gravel to areas to improve ground underfoot and added to David Lennon's point, suggesting that if parts of the path were to be stoned or tarmacked, how would it be decided where such work stopped.

Councillor McLaren believed the point of the Working Group was to include different parts of the community as it had done so and as such, it was already amidst the public consultation period. If the Working Group as it was could not make decisions, there was little point in its existence. The Group had already discussed how each of its members and participants represented particular areas of the community. Councillor McKimm explained that the group's collective voice would be heard throughout the community when it came to issues of decision making, adding that Section 75 would become applicable once a decision to carry out works had been made. The Head of Parks & Cemeteries explained that when new paths were agreed and works began, various responsibilities and parameters became involved and the same would apply here; if no works were carried out, Section 75 would not apply, but the moment any works would be approved, those additional requirements would come into play.

Frank Shivers queried whether it would be wise for the Council to survey the path's usage given ratepayer monies would be spent on the project. If there was to be little to no increase in usage, ratepayers could argue such expenditure's validity. The Head of Parks & Cemeteries explained that survey works had been carried out when planning for the proposed greenways but that the list of priorities identified with regard to the coastal path had been identified by Officers at previous meetings. Councillor McKimm reminded the Working Group that a multi-year budget had already been set aside for works on the coastal path.

Councillor Hennessy asked for clarification on what was being proposed for these boggy areas. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager advised that, where possible, ground works would occur to install a levelled gravel path and given the professional nature of such works, there would not be concern for the gravel washing away or sinking as it had done where local residents had attempted to alleviate issues. Stephen McCrory (Ards and North Down Cycle Campaign Group) advised that the area in question was five miles from Belfast and Bangor and could be considered an urban, countryside path where expectations would not be as difficult as in the middle of towns and cities. He believed members of the Cycling Group would be happy with gravel but would want to see nature respected nonetheless whilst Alison McQueen did not believe there would be much resistance from local groups given the leveling/gravel plans.

Alderman McRandal referenced the path alongside the golf course where tarmac had sunk and the works required to reinstate both it and the sea defences. HE suggested such works were of an entirely different nature to those closer to Seahill where there was talk of only using gravel and asked what the cost-benefit would be as he could understand the works closer to Holywood being required, but not so much those closer to Seahill. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that the Consultant's report would provide further information, but he suspected that the reinstatement of sea defences would be a significant piece of work which could potentially use the lions share of the budget. The Head of Parks &

Cemeteries reminded the Working Group that at this stage, they were only looking to agree on what works should be carried out which would inform the Planning Application, but it would be the work of the Consultant that defines what works would actually happen. In turn, the amalgamation of that information would feed into the business case that would be taken into the next financial year where the budget grouping panel would negotiate the budget.

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager continued with the presentation, moving onto Signage & Promotion whereby £25k had been budgeted. Within the current financial year (2024-25), the coastal path leaflet had already been upgraded with improvements relating to locations of Visitor Information Centres, railway stops and information on local amenities that link into the Coastal Path like the St Columba's Way and contact details. At the time of writing these minutes, six signs were in existence along the coastal path; Seapark, Cultra, Grey's Point, Bangor, Ballymacormick Point and Orlock. These would all be updated and show relevant points of interest as well as information on local flora and fauna. David Lennon asked what references would exist to St Columba's Way or if there was dedicated signage. In April, pilgrimages would be travelling from Italy to Bangor and it would be fortuitous should such signage exist. The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that there would be reference to the Columba Way on the aforementioned signs but suggested a signage audit with Friends of Columbanus may be required in the future with relation to dedicated signage.

Councillor McLaren's concerns of a budget existing for signage were assuaged by both the Chair, Councillor McKimm and the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager. The leaflets would also be given a digital format. Frank Shivers suggested adding QR codes to the new signs but, given the late hour of the process, such may be a possibility in the future. Frank Shivers was content with the suggestion as to avoid missing deadlines.

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager went on to explain how a new Development Officer had been installed who looked toward identifying and scheduling events to publicise the Coastal Path such as inclusive and mindfulness walks, some of which had already taken place. Information garnered from such events could be wielded as a tool in future endeavours. A videographer would be hired whose skills would add value to the promotion of the coastal path whilst Officers would meet with heritage groups next week (commencing Monday 13th January 2025) which would assist in developing a living history. The Coastal Path and surrounding areas were rich in history from the Mesolithic period, motte and baileys, old estates and right up to the modern industrial era with Smelt Mill Bay's links to the Leadmines, Grey's Point Fort and local legends such as Jenny Watts.

As a final point, there was one area of the Coastal Path, from Helen's Bay Beach in a North-Westerly direction where cyclists would find difficulty traversing. From the beach, the pathway to Helen's Bay leads up a slope and through a gate onto Grey Point Road. From there, a short distance is travelled along the road North to a bend

where the coastal path continues. This stretch of narrow pathway snakes its way along the coast to Grey's Point Fort and beyond. The specific section between Grey Point Road and the fort is of narrow stature with rugged outcroppings and drops which makes for a less-than-safe traversal on bicycles, especially considering its usage on foot. As such, it was proposed that an alternative cycling route may be in the best interests of all parties. Either cyclists could continue along Grey Point Road North by Northwest and find themselves upon Grey's Point Fort itself where two gravel pathways encircle the Fort as they lead down to the coastal path. Alternatively, cyclists could head due South, following Fort Road as it turns West and intersects with Sheridan Drive on the right (northerly) side. Sheridan Drive has a sweeping left bend some 500 yards from the Fort Road intersection upon which an old public right of way exists that connects with the Coastal Path. These options were to be explored in the future.

NOTED.

5. VISUAL WALKTHORUGH OF PATH (PRESENTATION)

The Park & Cemeteries Development Manager directed the Working Group's attention to the presentation screen where Google Maps was used to, '*drop in*,' on Streetview. In recent times, a member of the public who frequented the coastal path as a runner had taken it upon themselves to photograph the pathway using 360 degree equipment, thus allowing anyone wishing to digitally travel the coastal path the ability to do so. The Head of Parks & Cemeteries advised that this could be promoted in other facilities throughout the Council area.

NOTED

6. ANY OTHER NOTIFIED BUSINESS

The subject of Drainage had been an item of Any Other Notified Business. However, as questions had been taken during Item 4 of this meeting, all questions and queries and been answered relating to this subject and members of the Working Group were content that it need not be revisited.

Councillor McKee queried if the local Town Advisory Groups had all been invited to participate in the North Down Coastal Path Working Group. Both the Head of Parks & Cemeteries and the Park & Cemeteries Development Manager explained that many stakeholders had been contacted regarding these meetings though some had not yet confirmed or declined attendance.

7. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the North Down Coastal Path Working Group was scheduled to take place on the 31st March 2025, 1800hrs at Church Street Council Chamber, Newtownards.

CLOSE OF MEETING

The meeting terminated at 1921hrs.