



**MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING OF THE POLICY AND GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE HELD IN THE ROUND CHAMBER, ANTRIM CIVIC CENTRE ON TUESDAY 7 NOVEMBER 2023 AT 6.30 PM**

- In the Chair** : Alderman L Clarke
- Members Present (In person)** : Alderman – L Boyle  
Councillors – H Cushinan, N Kelly, H Magill, M Stewart and B Webb
- Members Present: (Remote)** : Aldermen P Bradley and P Michael  
Councillors – M Brady, S Flanagan, E McLaughlin, L O'Hagan
- Officers Present** : Director of Finance & Governance – S Cole  
Director of Organisation Development – J Close  
Head of Internal – P Caulcutt  
Head of Organisation Development - L Millar  
Manager of Customer Services – J Porter  
ICT Help Desk Officer – J Wilson  
Member Services Officer – E Skillen
- Officers Remote** : Deputy Director of Finance – J Balmer

**CHAIRPERSON'S REMARKS**

The Chairperson welcomed everyone to the November Policy and Governance Committee meeting and reminded all present of the audio recording procedures.

The Chairperson expressed condolences on behalf of Members to the Mayor, Councillor Mark Cooper on the passing of his Mother.

**1. APOLOGIES**

Councillors S Cosgrove and A O'Lone

**2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

NONE

**3. INTRODUCTION OF NEW STAFF**

NONE

**4. PRESENTATION**

**4.1 CCA/COM/069 REVISED COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE PRESENTATION**

The Customer Services Manager provided a presentation on Revised Complaints Handling Procedure and responded to Members questions.

The Chair and Members thanked him for his presentation.

Proposed by Alderman Boyle  
Seconded by Councillor Kelly and agreed that

**the presentation be noted.**

*NO ACTION*

**5 ITEMS FOR DECISION**

**5.1 CCS/COM/069 REVISED COMPLAINTS HANDLING PROCEDURE**

Members were reminded that the Council's Complaints Handling Procedure (circulated) was approved in September 2021 and was established in anticipation of the Northern Ireland Public Sector Ombudsman (NIPSO) Model Complaints Handling Process.

NIPSO was leading a public sector complaints process to develop and support the implementation of new Complaints Standards. This would establish a consistent and streamlined approach to complaints handling throughout public bodies. The aim was to help complainants understand how to make a complaint and what level of service to expect when they do so.

The new Local Government Model Complaints Handling Procedure (circulated) was published on 1 July 2023. It set out a two stage complaints procedure and key operational guidance. It also set out specific guidelines on what constitutes a complaint, alongside guidance for staff and Elected Members in handling complaints.

From 1 January 2024 all local government organisations must adhere to and manage complaints according to the Local Government Model Complaints Handling Procedure. A revised Complaints Handling Procedure was circulated for approval which reflected the recommendations contained within the NIPSO Complaints Procedure, summarised in the short presentation

provided previously.

A Complaints Training Plan was circulated and set out the timelines and content that would be delivered to staff and Elected Members during a phased rollout.

An Unreasonable Customer Behaviour Policy was in development, and would follow in due course.

Complaints performance statistics would be reported quarterly to Policy & Governance.

Proposed by Councillor Brady  
Seconded by Councillor Webb and agreed that

**the revised Complaints Handling Procedure and Complaints Training Plan be approved subject to information sought from NIPSO on collective complaints.**

*ACTION BY: James Porter, Customer Services Manager*

## **5.2 FI/AUD/079 RAISING CONCERNS POLICY**

Members were reminded that in November 2020, the Policy and Governance Committee approved a new Raising Concerns Policy which replaced the previously known Whistleblowing Policy.

In accordance with the Council's Policy Framework and Schedule the Policy had been reviewed and updated.

The amendments made included redefining complaints in accordance with the revised Complaints Handling Procedure and providing additional clarity on timeframes for acknowledging the receipt of concerns. The Policy had also been reformatted to comply with the requirements of the Policy Framework.

A copy of the updated Raising Concerns Policy was circulated with amendments highlighted in red for Members' information.

The Policy had been reviewed and approved by the Corporate Leadership Team in October 2023.

Proposed by Councillor Webb  
Seconded by Councillor Kelly and agreed that

**the Committee approves the Raising Concerns Policy.**

*ACTION BY: Paul Caulcutt, Head of Internal Audit*

### **5.3 G/MSMO/031 SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS OF ANTRIM AND NEWTOWNABBEY BOROUGH COUNCIL – SPECIAL MEETING FEBRUARY 2024**

Members would recall approving the Schedule of Meetings of Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council for the period 1 January – 31 December 2024 at the September Policy and Governance Meeting.

At this time, it was agreed that the meeting for striking the Estimates and District Rates be held on 12 February 2024 prior to the Community Planning Committee.

At the Corporate Planning Finance Workshop on 26 October 2023, Members requested that the date of this Special Council meeting be changed to 14 February 2024.

Proposed by Councillor McLaughlin  
Seconded by Councillor Magill and agreed that

**Members approve the change in date of the Special Meeting to agree the Estimates and District Rates to 14 February 2024.**

*ACTION BY: Liz Johnston, Deputy Director of Governance*

### **5.4 CE/GEN/030 APSE**

Members would know that the Association of Public Service Excellence (APSE) is a best practice organisation which works with over 300 councils from across the UK promoting excellence in public service.

The Council is a member of APSE and also the NI Performance Network (for benchmarking purposes). Members would also remember that most recently Jacqui Dixon, former Chief Executive was awarded the APSE Van Coulter Lifetime Achievement Award and as an organisation over many years we have been finalists and winners of the APSE Service Awards.

APSE was regarded as the foremost specialist in local authority frontline services. It offers many services including, training solutions, regular briefings on the latest policy developments, conducts research, publishes reports, and campaigns to create a positive role for local government.

One of the most important benefits APSE membership offered was the opportunity for local authority service providers to have their views voiced and represented at a national level.

To understand more fully the benefits of the APSE memberships, it was proposed that a representative from APSE be invited to make a presentation to the Policy & Governance Committee at a future date.

Proposed by Councillor Kelly  
Seconded by Councillor Webb and agreed that

**a representative from APSE be invited to make a presentation to the Policy &**

**Governance Committee on how the organisation promotes excellence and best practice across the sector.**

*ACTION BY: Helen Hall, Director of Corporate Strategy*

**6 ITEMS FOR NOTING**

**6.1 CCS/EDP/7 QUARTERLY SCREENING REPORT AND RURAL SCREENING**

Members were advised that in line with the Council's Equality Scheme it was agreed to provide quarterly updates on the screening of policies under Section 75. Within the scheme, the Council gave a commitment to apply screening methodology to all new and revised policies. Where necessary and appropriate, these new policies would be subject to further equality impact assessment.

**SECTION 75 AND RURAL SCREENINGS**

The policies noted below had been screened between **April – June 2023**.

<b>POLICY</b>	<b>SCREENING DECISION</b>
Hazelbank Park Redevelopment	1
Jordanstown Loughshore Park Redevelopment	1
Leisure Centre Investment Programme (Antrim Forum, Sixmile Leisure Centre, Valley Leisure Centre)	1
Statement of Community Involvement	1
Elected Members Continuous Professional Development Policy	1

- (1) Screened with no mitigation
- (2) Screened with mitigation
- (3) Screened and EQIA required

There had been no policies screened within the period of **July – September 2023**.

In response to a Member's query regarding the five screening forms and if they could obtain a copy of these, it was agreed that the Director of Organisation Development would follow up with the Accessibility and Inclusion Officer and they would respond to the Member on this request.

Proposed by Councillor McLaughlin  
Seconded by Councillor Kelly and agreed that

**the report be noted.**

NO ACTION

## 6.2 HR/GEN/019 MANAGING ATTENDANCE, APRIL-SEPTEMBER 2023

The purpose of this report was to update Members on the management of attendance for April 2023 to September 2023 (summary circulated).

Members were advised that absence at the end of September was above target by 1.19 days with 7.31 average days lost per employee against a target of 6.12 days. Covid absence was not included in the reported figure as a significant number of these cases work from home during the isolation period.

There continues to be a positive return to work of short term cases along with 18 long term cases ending in September 2023, 2 of which left the Council's employment.

Further analysis of Absence Figures for September 2023 indicated the following:

### **100% attendance**

The 100% attendance rate continued to be well above target with 75% of our workforce achieving this to the end of September 2023 against a target of 60%.

### **Formal Case Reviews from April 2023 to date**

Formal Case reviews (FCRs) were normally held where all possible steps had been taken and had failed to secure the employee's return to work within a maximum of 9 months.

- **Concluded cases – 9**, with employees at Formal Case review stage either returned to work, obtained ill health retirement or left the organisation.
- **In Progress – 3**
- **Approaching – 0**

### **Long Term Absence – 88% of the overall absence figures**

Long term absence was defined as continuous absence greater than 20 days. Although there was a slight increase in long term absence from 87% to 88% compared to the previous month, 18 long term absence cases had ended and it was expected that this figure would decrease in the coming year. This was due to our continued efforts to address complex long term absence cases, conduct regular wellbeing meetings with employees, utilising Occupational Health services, promotion of the Staywell App, and holding timely absence review meetings.

- **% of Challenging long term cases – 60%**, this included absence related to road traffic accidents, disability related illness, post-operative recovery and general injuries.
- **Returned to work – 16 cases** had successfully returned to work with a

further 2 leaving the Council's employment.

### **Short Term Absence – 12% of the overall absence figures**

Short term absence was defined as absence less than 20 working days. Whilst it was understood that short term absences were inevitable, it was crucial for Managers/Supervisors, Human Resources and employees to work together to minimise the impact of these absences on service delivery.

#### **Main Reasons:**

- Cold/flu, stomach bug, infection (accounting for 25% of short term absence)
- Stress Depression, Mental Health
- Chest and respiratory issues
- Musculoskeletal problems
- Back and neck problems

#### **Overall Absence**

Stress-related absence (including work related stress) accounted for 52% of total absence. Proactive work was ongoing to address this by:

- Encouraging open communication to address stress and mental health concerns in wellbeing meetings.
- Providing mental health awareness training for employees.
- Providing access to mental health support services, through Inspire Counselling service, the Council's Occupational Health service, Northern Recovery College and additional information available through STAYWELL.
- Implementing flexible working arrangements, supporting phased returns and reasonable adjustments where possible in the workplace.
- Encouraging physical activity through the promotion of the Council's employee subsidised Gym Membership Scheme.
- Encouraging participation in our wellness programme with regular wellbeing activities and health advice promoted weekly through the STAY MORE CONNECTED kudoboard.
- HSENI Managing Work Related Stress training "A Line Manager's Approach" was scheduled for October 2023.
- Line Managers would be invited to attend the HSENI training on "Burn Out and Fatigue" on 15 November 2023.
- Partnering with legal advisors and Employers for Disability NI to arrange awareness sessions on mental health illnesses, to provide training to managers on managing stress and how to encourage open communication to reduce stress-related absence and to promote a healthy work environment.

#### **To improve absence rates and encourage earlier returns to work, the following actions are being undertaken.**

- The consultation for the alignment of Terms & Conditions of employment had commenced and this included the proposal of one single policy for managing attendance. Subject to the successful outcome of a workplace ballot, it was anticipated that the agreement of a single policy would

- support staff, line management and HR in the management of absence cases.
- Case management discussions were held with legal advisors to support a targeted approach for complex cases. These help Directors, Heads of Services, and HR to review cases, consider reasonable adjustments, and understand the legal context, enabling specific action plans for individual cases.
  - Meetings held with directorates with high or complex absence cases had been increased to analyse cases and agree on next steps, with attendance from relevant Directors, Deputy Directors, and Heads of Service. Formal case reviews were scheduled as needed.
  - The HR Business Partnership team was working closely with managers and Occupational Health on an individual case management basis. This ensured prompt action was taken to keep absences within target and provide support to managers in absence review trigger meetings for fair and consistent approach.
  - Monthly case management discussion meetings were scheduled as needed to review complex cases with an Occupational Health consultant. Case managers attended these sessions to ensure effective use of the Occupational Health service and support earlier returns to work where possible.
  - The Corporate and Human Resources Risks registers had been reviewed to reflect the current absence rate position, with actions and interventions recorded to mitigate risks.
  - Managers within Parks and Planning had received training on effectively managing absence caseloads. A number of toolkits had been identified and shared on STAYWELL to further assist managers and employees.
  - Targeted training was being planned in areas of high absence provided by Human Resources, legal advisors, and in partnership with employers for disability or other relevant organisations.
  - Development continues on an online training module to promote the importance of attending work. This would be rolled out to new staff initially and then across the wider organisation.
  - Annual flu jab clinics had been scheduled for October and November 2023.
  - There were a number of health and wellbeing initiatives scheduled in November 2023 as part of the Employee Engagement Framework including: Action Cancer Big Bus and International Men's Day event.
  - The use of the Wellbeing Calendar was promoted to continue to support employee wellbeing.
  - Physiotherapy services were being provided for appropriate cases of back and musculoskeletal-related absence.
  - HR would review the absence paperwork, including the absence notification and return to work forms.
  - HR were designing and developing an Absence action plan.

Proposed by Councillor Webb

Seconded by Alderman Bradley and agreed that

**the report be noted.**

NO ACTION

### 6.3 HR/HR/019 AGENCY UPDATE

Members were reminded that agency staff were used across the Council to provide temporary cover for absence such as:

- Maternity leave
- Secondments
- Sickness absence
- Vacant posts
- Seasonal Events

The use of agency staff was subject to a rigorous approval process, which required the approval of the Corporate Leadership Team and there was budgetary provision for the majority of posts filled via departmental salary budgets, salary contingency and grant funding.

#### **Current Agency staff**

The table appended provided an update for Members on the use of agency staff in September 2023 compared to September 2022. It excluded limited ad-hoc agency cover, which was necessary to provide operational cover, at short notice (circulated at Appendix 1).

In reviewing the number of agency workers it should be noted that:

- 29 Seasonal Operatives (GMO driver and non-drivers) commenced between March and June 2023 for 26 weeks.

#### **Cost of Agency**

Appendix 2 (circulated) sets out the expenditure on agency workers in September 2023.

The cost of agency staff had reduced for the period 1 April 2023 to September 2023 at 8% of all staffing costs compared to April 2022 to September 2022 which was 8.12%.

#### **Current recruitment:**

Following recent recruitment exercises 14 current agency workers had been offered Parks Operative roles with anticipated start dates in October 2023. A number of other posts (Parks and Sustainability) that had been covered by agency workers had been recruited and commenced in post in September 2023.

Further recruitment exercises were ongoing and this would further decrease our reliance on agency cover.

We were committed to reducing our dependence on agency workers and would continue to recruit directly for vacant positions. However, we may still use agency workers for more ad hoc, seasonal, or temporary coverage as needed.

The Director of Organisation Development responded to a Member's query in relation to seasonal agency workers.

Proposed by Alderman Bradley  
Seconded by Councillor O'Hagan and agreed that

**the report be noted.**

*NO ACTION*

#### **6.4 FI/FIN/9 PROMPT PAYMENT PERFORMANCE**

Members were reminded that the Department for Communities (DfC) issued revised guidance (Local Government Circular 19/2016) on prompt payments and the recording of invoice payments in November 2016. This guidance requested Councils to record specific performance targets of 10 working days and 30 calendar days and continue a cycle of quarterly reporting on prompt payment performance by Councils to the DfC and its publication on their website.

The Council's prompt payment performance for the period **1<sup>st</sup> July 2023 to 30 September 2023** was set out below:

The default target for paying invoices, where no other terms are agreed, was 30 days.

(N.B. 30 days target is 30 calendar days and 10 days is 10 working days).

During the above period, the Council paid invoices totalling £20,306,295

The Council paid 5,131 invoices within the 30-day target. (79%)

The Council paid 4,025 invoices within the 10-day target. (62%)

The Council paid 1,367 invoices outside of the 30-day target. (21%)

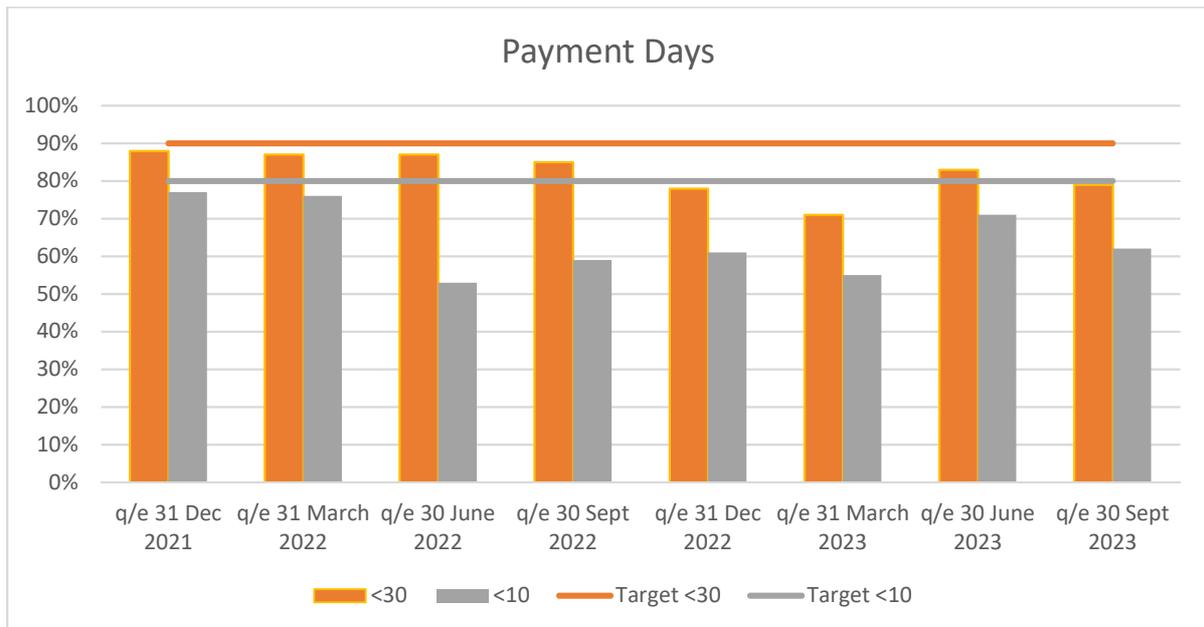
The Council had set a target of paying 90% of invoices within 30 days and 80% within 10 days.

This compared to previous quarterly results as below:

<b>Period</b>	<b>Total Number of Invoices Paid</b>	<b>% Paid Within 30 Days</b>	<b>% Paid Within 10 Days</b>
<b>Target</b>		<b>90%</b>	<b>80%</b>

q/e 31 December 2021	6,575	88%	77%
q/e 31 March 2022	5,539	87%	76%
q/e 30 June 2022	4,254	87%	53%
q/e 30 September 2022	6,090	85%	59%
q/e 31 December 2022	5,780	78%	61%
q/e 31 March 2023	5,558	71%	55%
q/e 30 June 2023	7,050	83%	71%
q/e 30 September 2023	6,498	79%	62%

The performance presented graphically highlights the performance metrics for the above.



The table and graph above showed the performance over the last two years. In comparison with previous quarters, performance levels had been maintained for the 30-day figure and 10-day figure. There was now a full complement of staff within the Finance section and work was ongoing with all departments to make further improvements.

Service improvements had included:

- Additional reporting capability to monitor performance
- Staff training/refresher sessions
- Process review for high volume suppliers

The prompt payment performance for Councils in Northern Ireland was published quarterly by the Department for Communities (DfC). The prompt

payment performance for the quarter ended 30 June 2023 was shown (circulated). The Council's performance for Quarter 2 against the average performance for the other Councils for Quarter 1 of 2023/24 was set out in the table below:

<b>Council</b>	<b>% Paid Within 30 Days</b>	<b>% Paid Within 10 Days</b>
Antrim & Newtownabbey BC (Quarter 2 23/24)	79%	62%
All Councils (Quarter 1 23/24)	91%	71%

The Director of Finance and Governance and the Director of Organisation Development responded to Members' queries regarding performance improvement strategies.

Proposed by Councillor Brady  
 Seconded by Councillor Webb and agreed that

**the report be noted.**

*NO ACTION*

## **6.5 G/DPFI/2 QUARTERLY REPORT ON FOI/EIR/DPA REQUESTS**

A report had been prepared on requests received in the second quarter of the year (1 July to 30 September 2023) under the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) and the Data Protection Act (DPA) and this was circulated.

A summary of the quarter's statistics was as follows:

- The number of requests received was significantly higher than the number in the same period the previous year – an increase of 38%.
- Of the 106 requests received, 83 were under FOI, 22 under EIR and 1 under DPA.
- 83 requests were completed within the quarter.
- 96% of the requests were completed within the legislative deadlines of 20 days for FOI and EIR requests and a calendar month for requests made under DPA.
- The sections that received the most requests in the quarter were), Finance (34), Planning (16), Legal (15), Environmental Health (15) and Governance (12).
- Five appeals were received during the quarter. In all of these appeals the Council's original decision was upheld.

- One complaint to the ICO was notified within the quarter. The Council responded to the ICO within the timescale and no further action had been requested.

Proposed by Councillor Brady  
 Seconded by Councillor Webb and agreed that

**the report be noted.**

NO ACTION

## 6.6 CCS/CS/006 CUSTOMERS CHANNELS QUARTER 2 UPDATE (1 APRIL 2023 – 30 SEPTEMBER 2023)

Members were reminded that the Corporate Performance and Improvement Plan for 2023-2024 set out the following Performance Improvement Target, **“We will achieve high levels of customer satisfaction”**.

The purpose of this report was to provide a Quarter 2 performance update on the indicators that the Plan set out as measurements of progress towards this target.

### **We achieve at least 80% satisfaction with overall Council services:**

Each issue of the Borough Life magazine had a specific, themed survey, and within each one, residents were asked to rate their satisfaction with Council services. In addition, further surveys throughout the year would request feedback on satisfaction with Council services and other areas of interest.

During July and August, residents replied to surveys on Council digital services (Borough Life), V36 Skate 100, Muckamore Community Centre, the Six Mile Festival, and Spinning Yarns Festival with 144 responses. There had been 210 total responses so far in 2023-24.

Further surveys would follow in quarter three for Feeling Safe in our Borough (Borough Life) and Enchanted Winter Garden (Residents).

2021-22	2022-23	Target 2023-24	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	2023-24	Status
87.5%	92.9%	80%	91.9%	94.4%	92.9%	On Track

### **The percentage of abandoned calls will be 6.5% (or less):**

A total of **46,625** calls were presented from 1 July to 30 September, with **4.8%** abandoned, this compared to **6.0%** in quarter 1 2023-24, and **4.7%** in the same quarter in 2022-23. There was a **3.1%** increase in the number of calls year-on-year.

2021-22	2022-23	Target 2023-24	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	2023-24	Status
6.0%	5.1%	6.5%	6.0%	4.8%	5.4%	On Track

**We have achieved at least 650,000 online transactions:**

Officers continued to promote and monitor the shift of transactions to an online basis, where practical and beneficial. For the purposes of maintaining consistency with previous benchmarks, this indicator focuses upon the number of online transactions including:

- Caravan bookings
- Online theatre and events bookings
- Leisure bookings
- Dog licensing applications
- Bulky waste bookings

2021-22	2022-23	Target 2023-24	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	2023-24	Status
652,593	874,100	650,000	151,743	138,264*	290,007	On Track

\*Enchanted Winter Garden online transactions reported in quarter 3

**There are at least 8,000 downloads of the Residents App:**

Downloads of the ANBorough App were measured through official app stores (Google and Apple).

There were **4,494** downloads during quarter two, 44.55% of downloads being for iOS devices and 55.45% for Android.

2021-22	2022-23	Target 2023-24	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	2023-24	Status
14,481	13,963	8,000	3,355	4,494	7,849	On Track

Progress on the Corporate Performance and Improvement Plan 2023-2024 was reported on a quarterly basis to the Policy and Governance and Audit and Risk Committees, and final, validated figures were contained within the Annual Report on Performance 2023-2024 (Self-Assessment), which would be reviewed by Council and published on the Council's website by 30 September 2024.

Proposed by Councillor Brady  
 Seconded by Councillor Webb and agreed that

**the report be noted.**

NO ACTION

There being no further Committee business, the Chairperson thanked everyone for their attendance and the meeting concluded at 7.10pm.

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MAYOR