



**MINUTES OF THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE MEETING OF THE COUNCIL HELD  
AT MOSSLEY MILL ON MONDAY 27 APRIL 2020 AT 2 PM**

- In the Chair** : Deputy Mayor – Councillor A M Logue
- Members Present** : Aldermen – P Brett and M Cosgrove  
Councillors – P Dunlop, N McClelland, J McGrath, M Magill,  
R Foster, S Ross, M Stewart and B Webb
- Officers Present** : Chief Executive – J Dixon  
Member Services Manager – V Lisk

The Deputy Mayor welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised Members of the audio recording procedures.

In order to protect public health during the current COVID-19 emergency it was not possible to allow the public or the press to attend the Council meeting. The Council minutes and audio recording would be published on the Council's website.

**1 APOLOGIES**

Members' attendance reflected the Council's Emergency Governance arrangements and the need to restrict the number of Members and Officers who could attend the meeting due to social distancing. Group Leaders had liaised with their respective Members in order to include them in the decision making process.

**2 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

None

**3 MINUTES OF THE ANTRIM AND NEWTOWNABBEY BOROUGH COUNCIL MEETING**

Moved by Alderman Brett  
Seconded by Alderman Cosgrove and

**RESOLVED - that the Minutes of the proceedings of the Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council Meeting of Monday, 30 March 2020 be taken as read and signed as correct.**

*NO ACTION*

The Chief Executive advised that in order for the Group Leaders to vote on behalf of their Parties Section 24.1 of Standing Orders would have to be suspended.

Moved by Alderman Cosgrove  
Seconded by Councillor Webb and

**RESOLVED - that Section 24.1 of Standing Orders be suspended.**

*NO ACTION*

#### **4. ITEMS FOR DECISION**

##### **4.1 G/MSMO/1 SCHEME OF ALLOWANCES PAYABLE TO COUNCILLORS 2020-21**

Members were reminded that the Council is required under the Local Government (Payments to Councillors) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 to make a scheme for the payment of allowances to Councillors and Committee Members in respect of each year.

Circular LG 08/2020 Consolidated Councillor Allowances – Updated April 2020, circulated, had been received from the Department for Communities reflecting an increase in the maximum rates for Dependants' Carers' Allowance applicable from 1 April 2020. The Council's Scheme of Allowances Payable to Councillors (circulated) had been updated to show the new maximum rates.

Should the Department for Communities issue any future notifications in relation to changes to the allowances payable for the 2020-21 financial year, the Scheme would be updated and reported to Members for their approval.

Moved by Alderman Brett  
Seconded by Councillor Magill and

**RESOLVED - that the Scheme of Allowances payable to Councillors for 2020-21 be approved.**

*ACTION BY: Richard Murray, Management Accountant*

##### **4.2 G-LEG-44 PLANNING PROTOCOL DURING THE COVID-19 EMERGENCY**

Members were aware that the normal operation of the Planning function has been impacted by COVID-19. To date the Council had agreed to relax its approach to enforcement, specifically around essential deliveries and also for pubs, restaurants and cafes providing takeaway services during this period.

With respect to decision making on applications during this period, a new Protocol had been developed, a copy of which was circulated. In terms of general arrangements the Protocol stated that Planning Committee meetings had been suspended until further notice and that no planning refusals will be issued until further notice. Routine enforcement is suspended with the

exception of priority breaches which will be considered for appropriate action. The Scheme of Delegation through which Officers determine planning applications will continue as normal and Officers will continue to issue the weekly list of applications, provided it is possible to upload and validate applications received onto the NI Planning Portal. The normal 'call in' procedure would apply.

The Protocol also set out the arrangements to manage applications which would normally come before the Planning Committee for determination. For reference purposes the key dates linked to the Protocol for the month of May were circulated.

The Chief Executive confirmed that any breaches of Planning Regulations would be addressed when normal business resumed. In the meantime if a Member had any serious concerns they should report these to the Chief Executive.

Moved by Councillor Webb  
Seconded by Alderman Brett and

**RESOLVED - that the new Planning Protocol be approved until normal Council business resumes.**

*ACTION BY: Majella McAlister, Director of Economic Development and Planning*

#### **4.3 ED/ED/070/VOL2 ENERGY STRATEGY CALL FOR EVIDENCE**

The Department for the Economy has undertaken a Call for Evidence in relation to the new Energy Strategy for Northern Ireland. This exercise seeks to gather the views of key stakeholders and the general public in relation to the approach which should be adopted here, the specific considerations and implications for the region and the role that local government and others can play in supporting and advancing the transition to a zero carbon society.

Officers had completed the required response template, a copy of which was circulated.

It was noted that both NILGA and Sustainable Northern Ireland had submitted responses, which it was proposed should be endorsed by the Council.

Moved by Alderman McGrath  
Seconded by Councillor McClelland and

**RESOLVED - that the Council's response to the Energy Strategy Call for Evidence be approved.**

*ACTION BY: Majella McAlister, Director of Economic Development and Planning*

#### **4.4 PT/GEN/22 NILGA CONSULTATION – COUNCIL REFORM/DRIVING WHAT'S TO COME**

Members were advised that correspondence had been received from NILGA inviting the Council to complete a questionnaire to ascertain the Councils views in relation to reform to date and developing additional and improving existing powers, resources and services of local government in Northern Ireland.

A response had been prepared and was circulated for Members' consideration.

Moved by Councillor Webb  
Seconded by Councillor Dunlop and

**RESOLVED - that the response be approved.**

*ACTION BY: Helen Hall, Head of Performance and Transformation*

#### **5. ITEMS FOR INFORMATION**

##### **5.1 EMERGENCY GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS**

Members were aware of the Emergency Governance Arrangements currently in place. Decision Logs were being circulated on a daily basis. The Decision Log as of Friday, 24 April 2020 was circulated to Members on Friday afternoon and noted at the meeting on Monday 27 April 2020.

The Deputy Mayor and Members commended the Chief Executive and Officers for the detailed and timely communications.

Councillors Finlay and Kelly's preference for meetings to be held remotely was noted.

Members raised concerns regarding the protocol for allocating the food boxes being provided by the Department for Communities.

In response to a query from a Member, the Chief Executive provided an update in relation to recycling centres.

Moved by Councillor Webb  
Seconded by Alderman McGrath and

**RESOLVED - that the report be noted.**

*NO ACTION*

## **MOTION TO PROCEED 'IN COMMITTEE'**

Moved by Alderman Cosgrove  
Seconded by Councillor Magill and

**RESOLVED - that the Council proceeds to conduct the following business 'In Committee'.**

## **6. ITEMS IN COMMITTEE**

### **6.1 IN CONFIDENCE FI/FIN/043 EMERGENCY FINANCIAL PLAN**

A report on the Emergency Financial Plan was circulated to Members in advance of the meeting.

#### **Approved Budget 2020/21**

The rates estimate budgetary process for the 2020/21 financial year progressed as per the approved timetable and resulted in a 1.99% increase in the district rate which was approved at a Special Meeting of Council on 10 February 2020. These budgets were deemed appropriate to deliver the level of service & facilities required by the Council.

The budgets included an estimated gross spend of £66m for the 2020/21 financial year including an estimated £14m of grants & earned income. This meant that £52M was required to be raised through the rates process.

#### **COVID-19 & Emergency Response**

On 27 February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in N Ireland and on 19 March 2020, the first NI death was confirmed. Council departments had been updating their business continuity plans as the situation unfolded. On 4 March 2020, the Emergency Plan for Council was invoked and the Emergency Management Team first met to begin to manage the impact of the pandemic on Council service delivery.

On a daily basis thereafter the Chief Executive and Directors ensured that essential services continued to be delivered.

The requirement for social distancing meant that on 18 March 2020 a decision was made to close all Council facilities to the public except for Civic Centres and some Community Centres that provide essential community resources. (Decision 4). This combined with reductions in Planning and Building Control activity had resulted in an immediate estimated loss of £750k income monthly.

All Council events were cancelled (Decision 9), Council building lease/franchise holder payments were cancelled Apr-June (Decision 18), the capital plan was reviewed (Decision 36) with only the crematorium and a few other grant funded capital projects being progressed. All discretionary spend

above £3k was approved by CLT (Decision 13). All staff continued to be paid (Decision 8)

These and other decisions made during the intervening period to reduce risk for the public had significantly impacted on Council finances. In addition, the Council had incurred costs specifically in relation to COVID-19.

The Council had also been involved with DfC, the Northern Health Trust, Advice NI and the local Community Groups in delivering a Community Relief scheme which sought to assist the most vulnerable in the community. This had included assistance in relation to food, fuel and medication and was delivered using a number of redeployed staff.

### **Financial Impact of COVID-19**

There had been a significant financial impact in relation to the decisions that had been made by Council to maintain public safety during the emergency period and additional costs incurred to comply with government directions as a result of the pandemic.

The total direct spend specifically related to COVID-19 incurred by Council to date is █████ with ongoing spend estimated at █████ per week.

It was anticipated that some of the expenditure would be recovered from central government but it was not clear what the extent of this would be and how long this would take. Council officers continued to monitor cash flow to ensure there were sufficient cash balances to pay staff and suppliers.

DfC had issued a Scheme of Emergency Financial Assistance for COVID-19 LG 11/20. This scheme continues up to 3 October 2020. The scheme is designed to cover costs incurred in preparing for and responding to COVID-19 related issues. It is claims based and will only cover additional costs incurred by Council. (I.e. normal working hours of non-essential staff diverted to the emergency & other regular costs are not included)

DfC had recorded the weekly cost of the community and voluntary support effort that was being provided in terms of staff, vehicles, connectivity etc. It was anticipated that Council may be able to recover these costs from DfC.

The Government had put in place a temporary job retention scheme. It is designed to support employers who have been severely impacted by coronavirus. Employers can claim for 80% of furloughed employees' usual monthly wage costs up to a maximum of £2,500.

It was noted that the public sector cannot avail of this scheme.

There is a limited exception if an organisation receives a significant level of its funding from earned income which has been disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly where that the organisation is unable to redeploy staff and as a result may have to consider redundancies. Given that a very small proportion of our staff costs are funded by earned income, if we are eligible

for this it will cover only a small part of our unessential staff costs and will be non-material.

On 18 March 2020, the Government announced £1.6 billion additional funding for local authorities. There was no indication that any of this money will be allocated to Councils in Northern Ireland.

### **Broad Assumptions for Emergency Financial Plan**

At the end of the first month of the new financial year, we are in a position where our overheads remain constant and we are losing significant income. We also have very grave concerns about the level of rates income we will receive this year due to the economic downturn.

As a result of the uncertainty around the extent and longer term impact of COVID-19 on the finances of the Council, Officers had taken the opportunity to review the 2020/21 Budgets.

This review had been designed to highlight essential spend for the remainder of the 2020/21 year and that the longer term financial health of the Council can be restored following this financial shock.

The Council needed to be mindful that social distancing is likely to impact income streams well beyond the lockdown period, for example we do not foresee any recovery to meaningful income levels in leisure, arts and culture in this financial year.

By taking a pro-active approach, Council officers were identifying the financial issues that currently impact as a result of the pandemic.

Council Usable Reserves at 31 March 2020 were estimated at £7.0m (10.7%). The Council reserves policy was set at 9% of Gross Revenue spend of £66m (£5.9m).

Use of Reserves beyond this would require a change to the Reserves Policy of Council. Members were aware that it is prudent to hold a minimum of 1 month's expenditure in reserves (£5.5m).

The Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 (Part 1 para 7) stipulates that if in any financial year it appears to the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of a Council that reserves are likely to be inadequate, the CFO shall report to Council on:

- o The reasons for that situation; and
- o The action which the CFO considers appropriate to prevent that reserve continuing to be inadequate in the next financial year

Therefore, the use of Reserves was not a solution to the current financial challenge.

In considering a reasonable worse case emergency financial plan, a number

of assumptions had been made using the best information that was available as follows:

**ESSENTIAL SERVICES**

Until our financial position becomes clearer, we would continue to provide essential services only as follows:

[REDACTED]

Within the context of the above, we assumed that all grants programmes not related to the current COVID-19 emergency were suspended for the current financial year unless there was no cost to the Council.

All new Capital schemes were suspended with the exception of the Crematorium, Planning Portal and Finance system (The previously approved capital list had been circulated for information).

We were also assuming that all events, activities and programmes were suspended for the current financial year. All Economic Development Support /Programmes were also suspended unless there was no cost to the Council with the exception of programmes where the Council already had a contract in place or where there is a statutory obligation.

Economic Development activities would be kept under review to make sure they meet the needs of our local businesses during the economic downturn.

**NON ESSENTIAL SERVICES**

The following services were deemed non-essential:

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

**INCOME**

[REDACTED]

**EXPENDITURE**

[REDACTED]

As stated earlier, The Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 (Part 1 para 7) stipulates that if in any financial year it appears to the Chief Financial Officer (CFO) of a Council that reserves are likely to be inadequate, the CFO shall report to Council on:

- o The reasons for that situation; and
- o The action which the CFO considers appropriate to prevent that reserve continuing to be inadequate in the next financial year

The current reduction in income was having an immediate impact on Council's cash flow. The estimated cash deficit for Council at the end of April 2020 was anticipated to be [REDACTED].

In order to address this situation Council's overdraft limit with the bank had been increased to [REDACTED]. This temporary arrangement had been put in place to ensure that staff and suppliers continued to be paid, however, this would not be sustainable beyond the end of June 2020 without immediate intervention or remedial action.

At that point, the Council would need to consider sourcing finance using other mechanisms potentially in the form of additional loans.

The Council was required to be mindful of its legal responsibility to avoid insolvency and maintain an adequate level of reserves: Local Government Finance Act (NI) 2011 states that 'A council shall make arrangements for the proper administration of its financial affairs'.

Unless measures were put in place now to mitigate the deficit situation as outlined above and to make up for the potential loss in rate income in 2020/21, it was anticipated that there would be a substantial rate increase next year (2021/22).

It was noted that to cover for every £1 million deficit there would be an additional 2% rate increase.

Councillor Ross's objection to the continuation of the crematorium project was noted.

The Director of Finance entered the Chamber to answer some questions.

Moved by Alderman Cosgrove

Seconded by Alderman Brett that the Council approves the Emergency Financial Plan and a high level report on action to be taken be brought to a future meeting of the Council.

On the proposal being put to the meeting and a recorded vote having been requested by Alderman Brett, Members voted on behalf of their parties as follows:

<b>In Favour</b>	<b>Against</b>	<b>Abstentions</b>
Alderman Brett Alderman Cosgrove Councillor Logue Councillor Stewart Councillor Webb	Councillor McClelland	

The Motion was carried and it was

**RESOLVED – that the Council approves the Emergency Financial Plan and a high level report on action to be taken be brought to a future meeting of the Council.**

*ACTION BY: Jacqui Dixon, Chief Executive*

## **6.2 IN CONFIDENCE P/PLAN/016 REPLACEMENT OF THE NI PLANNING PORTAL**

A report was presented to the Planning Committee in December 2019 which advised Members that extensive work had been undertaken over the last 24 months in relation to procuring a replacement Planning IT System for Northern Ireland. The report reminded Members that an Outline Business case and a Memorandum of Understanding were presented in confidence to full Council on 25 March 2019. At that meeting it was resolved to support the preferred option in the Outline Business case and contribute financially to the new IT system in line with the estimates provided. The Council further agreed to sign up to the Memorandum of Understanding which included a commitment to share the costs of the project at least until Full Business Case stage following a public procurement exercise.

The December 2019 report also updated Members on progress in relation to the procurement exercise for the replacement of the existing system which had involved Council Officers from Planning teams across Northern Ireland working with colleagues from the Department for Infrastructure with independent expert consultancy support as necessary. Members were advised that the timetable being set for completion of the remaining steps of the procurement process and the approval of the Full Business Case would be challenging, but necessary to minimise any requirement for further contract extensions to the existing system, which is already well beyond its anticipated lifespan.

Julie Thompson, Deputy Secretary of DfI had written to all 11 Councils (circulated) to advise that the procurement process for the replacement system has been completed and to indicate that [REDACTED] had been identified as the preferred supplier for the new system. The DfI letter also advised that a Full Business Case (FBC) had been prepared (circulated) which outlined the project costs (including contract costs) and the timeframe for delivery.

The FBC outlines that the preferred option for a new Planning IT system as being:

- A single regional IT system shared between the 11 Councils and the Department for Infrastructure; and
- An off the shelf IT system tailored to meet the business needs outlined in the contract specification agreed by all Councils and the Department

The estimated cost of the preferred option is [REDACTED] over the 20 years of the project i.e. from 2019/20 to 2039/40. The cost is made up of [REDACTED] capital and

■■■■ revenue expenditure. The project timescale anticipates the new IT system being fully operational across all Councils by February 2022.

Whilst this represents an increase in the costs previously identified as part of the Outline Business Case (OBC), this is primarily because the project is now covering a much longer timeframe of 20 years (comprised of an initial 10 years with two 5-year contract extensions allowed for) compared to the original 11 years outlined in the OBC. When compared against the original timeframe the estimated project costs in the FBC therefore actually represent a reduction of just over ■■■■ compared to those estimated in the OBC.

In line with the previously agreed principle of shared costs the Department has advised that it will contribute ■■■■ over the lifespan of the project with a focus on contributing towards the revenue expenditure associated with the new system (see below).

- ■■■■ (revenue expenditure) per annum for 18 years (2022 to 2040) in line with historic day to day costs
- ■■■■ over the period towards the capital cost of the new system
- ■■■■ over the period to cover the cost of the Department's project team

Accordingly, the cost to local government will be ■■■■, which if apportioned on an equal basis among the 11 Councils will equate to ■■■■ per Council comprising a split of some ■■■■ towards capital expenditure and ■■■■ revenue expenditure (or ■■■■ per annum) over the 20 years of the contract.

Provision has been made within the Council's financial plan to meet this commitment.

The Department in its letter is seeking the agreement of all Councils on

- The preferred option outlined in the FBC; and
- the Council's estimated contribution of ■■■■ ■■■■ capital and ■■■■ revenue expenditure per annum for 20 years)

In the report provided to Members on the OBC, advice was provided that Belfast City Council had at that time explored the option of a standalone system but subsequently decided to commit to the regional solution. The main considerations in this regard were as follows:

- The regional approach would be a new fit for purpose NI wide IT solution
- A standalone system alongside a regional solution would be detrimental to customer service as there would be two different public website interfaces which would be frustrating and confusing
- The standalone and regional costs are likely to be broadly similar if the cost to local government is split evenly. However, if a council goes alone its upfront capital costs are likely to be significantly greater than the regional approach.
- The Department will not provide any funding to a council, which decides to go alone.

- The risks and costs associated with data migration are considered too great for any council that decides to procure their own system
- Staff resources are likely to be significantly higher than those required for a regional system
- Procurement of a standalone system will be shorter (possibly by 12 months) however it is not considered that the time advantage outweighs other factors
- The risk of reputational damage in not supporting a regional solution and the increased cost that would as a result be attributed to other Councils.

Moved by Alderman Brett  
Seconded by Councillor Magill and

**RESOLVED - that the Council approves the preferred option in the Full Business Case and contributes [REDACTED] of capital and [REDACTED] of revenue over 20 years towards the new Planning Portal.**

*ACTION BY: John Linden, Head of Planning*

**MOTION TO PROCEED 'OUT OF COMMITTEE'**

Moved by Alderman Brett  
Seconded by Councillor Dunlop and

**RESOLVED - that the Council proceeds to conduct any remaining business 'In Public'.**

The Deputy Mayor thanked Members for attending and adhering to the social distancing restrictions and the meeting concluded at 2.55 pm.

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**DEPUTY MAYOR**

***Council Minutes have been redacted in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Data Protection Act 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation, and legal advice.***