

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at County Hall, Usk - Remote Attendance on Tuesday, 25th January, 2022 at 10.00 am

Councillors Present

County Councillor S. Woodhouse (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: C. Edwards, R. Harris,
V. Smith, J. Treharne, P. Murphy, S. Howarth and
P. Jordan

Also in attendance County Councillors: P.
Murphy, Cabinet Member for Resources

Officers in Attendance

Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Jonathan Davies, Acting Assistant Head of Finance
Paul Keeble, Group Engineer (Highways and Flood
Management)
Mark Hand, Head of Place-making, Housing,
Highways and Flood
Deb Hill-Howells, Head of Commercial, Property,
Fleet and Facilities
Dave Loder, Finance Manager
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Rhian Jackson, Cemeteries Officer

APOLOGIES: County Councillor A. Easson

1. Declarations of Interest.

There were no declarations of interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

No public submissions were received.

3. Budget Scrutiny: Scrutiny of the budget proposals for 2022/23. A summary paper for the Strong Communities Select committee on the areas falling within its remit will follow.

Cabinet Member Phil Murphy delivered the presentation, with additional comments from Jonathan Davies. Carl Touhig and Jonathan Davies answered the members' questions.

Challenge:

What will be the effect on waste and other services, such as grounds maintenance?

Waste has particularly struggled throughout the pandemic, notably in not being able to carry out intended improvements. On a positive note, we have an underspend that will hopefully help next year's budget; however, because we haven't been able to roll out everything that would have made savings for next year, we will need that same money next year. We have seen a substantial move from people using the CA sites to having kerbside collections, which has pushed up our recycling rates significantly – well in front of Welsh Government targets this year, though that comes with an additional pressure on frontline services.

In 2021, we implemented a staff succession and planning programme, training more people to be HGV drivers, senior loaders, helping new people to come into the service, etc. This comes

with an additional cost but improves career prospects for those in the front line. the Re-use shops and Repair Cafes are going very well but they again involve a cost, and we haven't been able to maximise the income generation opportunities, due to the Covid lockdowns.

The change to garden waste bins has been a massive success, greatly reducing the subsidy needed from the council to run that service but, again, the 'double-edged sword': the popularity of that service is pushing us into needing to acquire another vehicle. We didn't expect such success, with an increase of 2,000 customers. We will need to promote the service again, to get more customers to help to balance the books. Grounds maintenance workload has increased dramatically. We are trying new things all the time, such as No Mow May. Though there was a very good response to this from most people, it is still a work in progress. Recognising the difficulties of an ageing workforce, we have brought in progression succession planning to grounds maintenance, creating teams to do specific works, some of which generate income – but we are at our limit with these and need to invest in certain areas of the council.

We have been very successful in drawing down grant funding for regeneration projects and improving our town centres but for the towns to continue looking their best, we need to maintain the infrastructure that we have put in. This adds a cost but is the right thing to do, particularly in encouraging visitors into our town centres.

Ash dieback is hitting the whole county now, with a huge increase in the number of trees affected. This year we will bring in a new tree officer who will plot where all of the trees are. We have asked for Capital funding and can hopefully start to make a difference in the areas with a lot of ash dieback.

We went out to tender on the HWRC contract and transfer station: Suez has now taken over from Viridor. A lot of the principles that were put in place reduced the cost of the contract significantly – with an approximate £300k saving – and there is some income generation within the contract. So, we hope to see a bigger increase in income generation this year as well as the saving on the contract price.

There is mention of the reduction in crematorium service dividend of £46k – is that the amount of the reduction in the dividend, or the amount of dividend that we received from the crematorium service?

Yes, that is the amount of the reduction. We tended to receive around £140k per year in dividend, which is now going to change, for the reasons outlined: there's more competition, and there's less of a reliance on the crematorium service's built-up reserves. They are looking for a more sustainable way forward over the medium term, the first stage of which is reducing the dividend.

What might the 'different working arrangements' in Usk Post Office be?

We can't give a direct answer this morning but can come back to members with more detail.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you to officers. Putting together a budget in these difficult times is very demanding. Some services, such as Highways Maintenance and Waste are under considerable pressure. Our teams have been very successful in completing their duties, especially in light of staff shortages. There have been successful initiatives such as No Mow May, and secured grant funding for improvements to town centres, which have been effective. The Council has exhausted income generation to offset costs, so we are at the point of needing to invest in some of these services. This explains why costs have increased, and the committee recognises the challenging situation

with the pandemic and previously, the flooding. We have been assured that everything that can be thought of is being carried out.

4. Café Pavement Policy - Pre-decision Scrutiny of this revised policy (report to follow).

Paul Keeble delivered the presentation and answered the members' questions with Mark Hand.

Challenge:

In paragraphs 7 and 7.1, under resource implications: how much will the possible consultant cost? Will it be covered by the nominal £10 charge? If not, why not?

The £10 fee will not cover the additional expense of either internal staffing resource or a consultant, it is something we will have to take from our budget. We don't have time with the interim policy to set and consult on a new fee, and get that agreed by a Cabinet member before the pre-election period starts. The best approach is to carry on for this interim period and resolve that once we've worked out what the costs are of delivering the service and set the fee accordingly next year.

Can this survey not be undertaken in-house by our own employees?

We don't have enough staff. We had agreement back in July to fill a number of vacant posts and create additional ones; we are still working through that process. Filling those posts has been a time-consuming and problematic task, and a number of vacancies remain. We therefore don't yet have the in-house resource, given all the other work that the team is doing.

When the arrangements have been agreed, and the areas delineated, will there be some way of alerting the visually impaired with something on the ground, if there are no barriers?

Where there are barriers, they will be covered, to assist partially sighted persons. any other suggestions as to how we can improve awareness would be gladly received. This would be part of the reviewing process, when we engage with the various groups.

The report mentions 'pedestrians' i.e. those who are walking. But there are other users of the route – is there a better term that could be used?

This is a good point but we aren't sure what else could be used.

Everyone with a licence must have a minimum £5m liability insurance. What assurances do you have that all the licenced premises have and maintain this insurance?

Insurance is part of the licencing process – it is a legal agreed document, and we would need to see proof of their public liability insurance before granting a licence. It is a condition of the licence.

Are we dealing with cases of cafes over-extending their boundaries?

Yes, there is a tendency to this, which we picked up in the Evaluation section, as disabled persons are often affected when a business pushes its boundaries further out. This is why, as part of the interim policy, there needs to be a marked-up plan that is monitored regularly so that when we carry out our highways safety inspections, we will go out and inspect the areas and ensure that they match the arrangements on the plan. We could consider putting markers down on the carriageway, as we progress. We will have a better idea of how to manage this once the pandemic settles down.

We wouldn't want the policy to be so restrictive that people can't continue as they are now, unless it is unsafe to do so. For example, the matter of storing food and drink outside. Could there be special circumstances for this, such as during the Abergavenny Food Festival?

This probably relates more to the Environmental Health side, as food standards would need to be met. So, if the premises don't provide food or drinks then the interim policy we propose wouldn't allow them to have a licence because they wouldn't meet the food standards requirements. Food festivals are managed as different events – they wouldn't be appropriate to the pavement café licences.

Regarding removing furniture, is there a dispensation for furniture that is already there that hasn't been a hazard?

At the moment, we propose that everything should be removed outside the hours, to maintain a clear highway, as they could be vandalised or cause damage. Some structures are permitted on the highway, though these would still need careful consideration as access needs to be maintained for maintenance or utility works. The King's Head in Chepstow is an example: due to the slope of the seating area, an area was made to allow tables and chairs, which can't realistically be cleared away every night, so special arrangements were put in place for that. But in the majority of cases, it would be expected that tables, chairs and barriers are removed each night, as is done on the continent.

What's the policy with A Boards?

The intention is to widen the policy as part of the review, to cover A Boards and the advertising side of things, including advertising on umbrellas, banners, etc. Currently, in the policy there shouldn't be, to preserve the environment and make the towns more attractive but it is something to be considered in the future and would be an opportunity to take feedback from the businesses and consumers. We wanted to avoid the situation where any space available was being used to advertise.

Are there areas where a neighbouring business is willing for a café/restaurant to use the frontage of their premises?

If there were agreement by the neighbours then we might be able to consider it, but we would have to put that possibility in the policy, as most adjoining businesses wouldn't want encroachment in front of their premises.

Is it definitely wood or metal only? There is some strong and solid plastic furniture.

Yes, some plastics could be as pleasing in appearance, but this is also about the reduced use of plastic, where possible. Wood and metal are generally of a higher standard and therefore appearance, but it could potentially be considered further as we progress.

Apparatus will be placed on public highways. Would it be feasible to look into the option of leasing that section to the relevant business, rather than the council being solely responsible for it?

We could look at a lease for MCC's own land but not for the public highway because it is governed by the Highways Act, which sets out the legal framework. Any apparatus placed on the highway is considered to be an obstruction; the only way they can be permitted is via a licence from the Highways department. It's not uncommon for us to grant licences for many things, but that is the process, as we need to ensure a number of criteria are met in doing so.

So, the sole responsibility is with the Highways department to manage?

Mostly yes, but also in consultation with Licensing and Environmental Health colleagues – we all have an input.

Chair's Summary:

Thank you for the report. We have scrutinised the policy and proposal to review the policy, including the application fee, during 2022, to reflect changes in legislation and best practice with an amended policy

and fee structure reported to the Cabinet Member for approval. This will include consultation with business forums and other interested parties, whose suggestions will be considered as part of the updated policy. It is good to see that the policy will be consulted on and reviewed throughout the period, as that will be needed to make this work.

We hope that the points made by members will be taken into consideration, particularly relating to the visually impaired and exceptions made for leaving tables and chairs outside, materials used, and food and drink.

The committee wishes these points to be included as recommendations.

5. To consider a report produced by County Councillor V. Smith in relation to burials and cremations.

Councillor Smith presented the report. Debra Hill-Howells explained MCC's service, and Rhian Jackson answered the members' questions:

MCC has undertaken 7 publicly assisted funerals in the last 3 financial years. None of those related to families being unable to meet the costs of the funeral service, but to individuals not having next of kin or being estranged from their families. We look after the reservation of burial plots, undertake checks for things like rights to burial, organise burials themselves in conjunction with funeral directors, look after the headstones, and look after the sites through grounds maintenance teams. We also provide support and advice for the bereaved.

In considering how we might expand the service we need to be realistic, given that we have one designated Cemeteries Officer, Rhian Jackson. She has previously had discussions with the funeral directors about whether anything could be done with 'no frills' services, and what else could be done as an authority. At that time, there was limited appetite. The directors in our area already offer 'no frills' services but we are happy to look at any other ideas that might be beneficial.

Challenge:

Regarding the 7 funerals in the last 3 years, we have had no-one in such dire circumstances that they couldn't undertake a funeral?

That is correct, at this time. We only get assisted burials, where there are no next of kin. The hospitals will take on what we would consider to be an assisted burial if the person dies in hospital with no funds. If they did have funds, but the family didn't want to take on the burial if the person died in hospital, then we would take it on. So, there could be people out there that have trouble in financing the funeral but a lot of that would be hidden from us and dealt with by the hospital bereavement team.

Chair's Summary:

Officers will set up a meeting with the Cabinet Member and Councillor Smith to consider the recommendations in depth and further detail.

6. To confirm the minutes of the previous meeting.

The minutes were confirmed and signed as an accurate record, proposed by Councillor Treharne and seconded by Councillor Smith.

7. Strong Communities Select Committee Forward Work Programme.

There have been changes to the programme: the next meeting on 10th February will cover the Welsh Language Strategy and the Social Justice Policy – to discuss amendments to policy and the action plan. Public Spaces Protection Order on Dog Controls was on that day, which is a significant piece of work following a 3-month public consultation; that was deferred to the March meeting, which was originally proposed for later in March but due to pre-election considerations will need to be brought forward. 10th March is the suggested date.

10th March at 2pm was agreed by members.

8. Cabinet & Council Forward Work Programme.

9. Next Meeting: Thursday 10th February 2022 at 10.00am.

The meeting ended at **11.56 am**