

Monmouthshire Select Committee Minutes

Meeting of Strong Communities Select Committee held at Remote Meeting on Monday, 28th September, 2020 at 2.00 pm

Councillors Present

County Councillor L.Dymock (Chairman)
County Councillor A. Webb (Vice Chairman)

County Councillors: P. Clarke, D. Dovey,
A. Easson, D. Batrouni, V. Smith, J.Treharne

Also in attendance County Councillors: J. Pratt
(Cabinet Member for Infrastructure and
Neighbourhood Services), T.Thomas, S.
Woodhouse, L.Brown, R. Edwards, L. Jones and
M.Powell.

Also in attendance: Alison Ivin, Usk Town Council

APOLOGIES: None

Officers in Attendance

Robert McGowan, Policy and Scrutiny Officer
Hazel Ilett, Scrutiny Manager
Carl Touhig, Head of Neighbourhood Services
Laura Carter, Senior Officer, Waste and Street
Services
Dewi Lane, Systems and Special Projects Officer
Matthew Gatehouse, Head of Policy and
Governance

1. Declarations of Interest.

2. Public Open Forum.

Following the video presentation of responses from Usk residents, Usk Town Council member Alison Ivin delivered a response to the report's recommendation to close Usk's HWRC as follows:

"There is a lot to absorb in the report. Due to the time limit, I will focus on a few key points. First, the cost saving in closing Usk is £40k – we don't accept that as a reason for closure. Usk and its surroundings have close to 19,000 dwellings; at an average council tax of £2000 for a three bedroom property, then that figure is paid for by council tax payments on just 20 dwellings. The cost of essential works is £30k; again, that can be carried by 15 dwellings.

One point that has been made is that the performance of Usk and Mitchel Troy is dragging down the recycling proportions, and therefore affecting performance against Welsh Assembly targets. That's not the case this year, as the pandemic has actually improved recycling rates. 2021 is quoted as achieving the highest recycling rate in Monmouthshire, of 74% – therefore, if Usk were left open and given the opportunity to be supported as other centres have (with education, booking systems, etc.), we do have the time to make an improvement. The procurement process is due to end in September 2021; it doesn't need to be delayed as procurement can be requested with two alternate scenarios. We don't need to make the decision to close Usk now.

There are some cost figures in the report, in terms of comparison with Mitchel Troy and Usk, that I cannot follow but, in any event, these are historic figures. We are now in a new time that we never expected to be in, with the pandemic, that has brought about changes that not only affect recycling figures for the county but also for Usk. We want the opportunity in Usk to show the benefit to recycling figures made from those behavioural changes that have been imposed and consolidated within pandemic time.

Work will be needed, it is said, to improve Usk, at a cost of around £30k, but large amounts have already been spent on works over the last few years to safeguard the future of the facility – we don't want that money thrown away. It was an investment; there are always investments to be made to maintain a service. To contrast with this, we are quoted over £1.5m to upgrade Mitchel Troy. One comment has been made that Usk can't reopen because of social distancing; there are two operatives on site. We've been told it isn't suitable for disabled people, but those operatives could help people. All of that can be managed with social distancing in the same way that we're managing walking down streets. There is a theme that we object to, that Usk is the poorest performing HWRC in the county, and that Usk will not improve. We challenge this.

One of the figures on Table 1, page 4, shows Usk performing at a Recycling vs. Residual waste rate of 47.92%, the closest otherwise being Mitchel Troy. These are the figures for 2018/19. It notes the obvious challenge that smaller centres do not recycle the complete range offered in the larger facilities. We have been given a list of the items recycled elsewhere: there are bulk items, white goods, rubble. Statistics only have value if one is comparing like for like – Usk figures should only be compared with other sites with those additional recycling items removed from the calculation. Otherwise, the zero measurement given for Usk is interpreted as Usk's failure to recycle it, rather than it having no opportunity to do so. In other words, rubble and plasterboard etc. being recyclable at other sites is tipping the scales against Usk. It should not be the case that the lack of a facility is used to demonstrate poor performance. The Eunomia report does give measurements to each head, and excluding just rubble and plasterboard brings Mitchel Troy to a 48.52% recycling residual, which is the same as Usk, and reduces recycle percentages at the two larger tips between 8 and 10% – so a closer comparison with Usk.

Food waste is seen as high here at Usk but it has been accepted that that was based on infrequent sampling, and might not be representative. The sample was too small and could have been provided by commercial use, rather than residents. Usk has great recycling overall, with facilities at the Hub and Fire Station that are in use but not included in the count. We have a new high street shop for zero waste and refillables. Good behaviours throughout the town impact negatively on recycling tonnages but they are the right thing to do. That should not put us at a disadvantage of comparison proportions on residual waste.

It is said that figures have improved startlingly across the county because of the Covid lockdown, necessitating improved kerbside figures and the benefit of booking systems. But an assumption has been made that Usk would not similarly benefit if reopened – we do not understand that. Time and time again statements are made that Usk will not improve, that it will be the lowest performing recycling centre in Wales – it is stated as a fact, but it is only an opinion. There are successes specified in the rest of the report attributable to re-educating or changed behaviours during Covid, improvements made to kerbside recycling because of the

booking system, and these successes have been denied to Usk, as it has not been allowed to reopen. It is not far different from the other three sites. Looking at the table, based on the consumer survey, the residual items and waste that could have been collected kerbside all account for broadly 65% of the total across all four sites. Usk can improve, as others have.

It is then said that Usk will not improve enough; again, we challenge this. The officer's recent experience is that improvements are made with education and the booking system, and we have a motivated team now with our SURF group to effect change. Indeed, we have an obligation to future generations to effect change. Officers and Members of MCC have confirmed to Usk Town Council that Covid will not be used as a device to close the recycling facility in Usk, yet by not allowing the facility to reopen, that is what is happening. Closure has been held in abeyance for further consultation on the wider HWRC provision, and for additional compositional analysis of waste streams. That has not happened, due to Covid and the lockdown closure of Usk continuing.

The countywide consultation was not what Town Council members expected following meetings with MCC. What was expected was an Usk-based survey. The consultation that did happen had only 959 responses, running mid-March to mid-April, when everywhere was reeling with the effect of lockdown and pandemic. Now that we have mobilised with the Town Council and SURF group, we could get a better, more targeted responses, and use that opportunity to educate people as to what can be recycled, and what improvements the use of kerbside will make. 75% of people that responded did not want closures. Consultation gave a perception only, but that perception was similar across all four recycling centres: that 65% of waste on all of the sites encompassed material that could be collected at kerbside. Usk was no worse. A far larger number responded to our petition and contact with SURF. Please do not ignore those residents. Close to 2000 people responded to the petition. There are over 540 personal letters supporting retaining the facility. More are arriving. All in a very short timescale. There is a feeling demonstrated in Christine Wilkinson's report that Usk is a repeated target for removal of services. Let us make a case together for retention of that facility. The report was ambiguous on this point but let me be clear that the overwhelming response from the town and surroundings is that this facility should remain. The SURF action group is absolutely committed to saving the facility. MCC has the time because of the Covid increase in recycling, and because of the delay in procurement, to allow the time for SURF and the Town Council to carry out targeted consultation, and make improvements. We ask that MCC gives Usk the deferral as previously agreed to allow time outside lockdown for a proper base consultation, and with the facility open – otherwise, Covid has deprived us of the chance to show change. MCC has the ability to retain a much-valued facility in the heartland of Monmouthshire, which promotes recycling at a level where everybody can appreciate and understand where daily actions matter and make a difference. Yet, MCC is minded to close it without giving us the same opportunities as elsewhere in the county, and to allow for the complete change in life that Covid has brought on us to work through to advantage. Those positive behavioural changes experienced elsewhere could help here, too.

The report notes that there has been a massive reduction in visitors, with the booking system now in place, compared to 2019, with increased recycling at the kerbside. There is nothing to say that this wouldn't also be the case in Usk. The report has picked on a negative but I would like to spin it to positive: we dispute that people will get frustrated from not being able to

recycle everything in Usk; it is just a case of knowing what is permitted. If the system is clear, requiring bookings, then learned behaviour will take over, so that people will know where to take their waste. That Usk does not recycle rubble and white goods is not a reason for all of the other recycling facilities to be taken away. A clear message that Usk does not recycle these items, and booking will be required in another centre, is all that's required to minimise disruption.

Mention is made of 18 parking spaces removed from the car park because of the new access arrangements – that figure is disputed by the Town Council, as alternative spaces were then made available. Nothing is said of the impact on the high street from another facility being removed. Usk has been a hub town for the rural areas around, time and again facilities are being eroded from the town that act as a draw to visits to the town, and ripple out to the benefit of higher footfall on the street. Once these facilities have gone, the report outlines how difficult it will be to recreate them, with planning and licences, etc. MCC deserves to retain this important service, and residents deserve the chance to show that lasting changes can be made here in Usk, for the benefit of us all.

The report sees ease-of-use and frequent visits as bad. But neither are bad, and both are easily controlled, if problematic, through the new booking system. Unchallenged use is seen as a bad thing; broadly, we agree. The officer will have heard that the overwhelming experience in Usk is that permits are never requested, nor the use of the residual skip queried or challenged. The report quotes statistics that cross-border waste was a problem until resident permits were introduced. If there's no inspection of permits then there are no controls on cross-border waste in Usk. Newport County is only fifteen minutes away, which is less than Usk residents would be required to travel if closure occurs. Waste Tourism is just as easy in Usk as it is in Abergavenny.

Examples are drawn that other local authorities have only one or two facilities across the county, but those quoted are built-up areas such as Cardiff. Monmouthshire is a rural county. Different considerations apply to rural counties if we are to minimise the impact of unnecessary journeys on our carbon footprint. Let us consider smaller, more local, recycling centres being a success, rather than conforming to the minimum statutory requirement, or what is provided in a city or smaller geographical area. There is a place for local recycling, and please do not forget that Usk is a town with an older population – not everyone has a car. Flytipping is a concern. It is expensive to clear. None of us knows in the post-Covid period what the loss of a facility will do to flytipping.

What we want to do is emphasise that kerbside collection is the most environmentally friendly way to manage household recycling and waste, and reinforce MCC's comment that not using kerbside collection for black bag and residual waste is not acceptable. We want to emphasise that this is a valid recycling facility, not a dump, and that disposal of black bags with mixed waste undermines the efforts of the vast majority that recycles effectively. We need to make people aware of Welsh Government penalties – nobody wants MCC to pay those. We note that black bag sorting is seen as desirable – we'd like to work together to see how we can achieve this at Usk, to capture additional recycle. What we would like the council to do is check permits – to stop cross-border use – stop commercial waste, support us with education and booking systems, and then the same as everybody else: review cost-saving measures such as shorter hours through Winter and on weekends, allow the savings from the reduced

days we already have to work through to have an impact on cost. Finally, to not let Covid be the reason we are closed, because doing nothing was the option. Work with us to reopen, and give us time to make a change.

Closure now, after a period of lockdown, doesn't give us the period of deferral that was promised, and it is entirely possible – indeed, probable – that the benefits and positive behaviour change seen in the rest of the county will also apply to Usk. Strong turnaround in recycling across the county due to a strong campaign of recycling messages and Covid closures should be allowed to benefit us. Please work with us in the same way that you are working with other facilities to improve the recycling rates. Please recommend that Usk be reopened so that we can work together and have that period of deferral and consultation. And please support this town, which is at the centre of Monmouthshire.”

3. Pre-decision Scrutiny of the Future Provision of Household Waste Recycling centres (including Usk).

Officer Carl Touhig presented the report.

Challenge:

Do the savings on staff, reduced hours and day closures include Usk?

The day closures and savings through reduced hours are separate from Usk – it hasn't been included in those figures. The closure of Usk is a £40k saving in its own right; the £240k saving for the day closures and additional hours is set across the other three sites.

Is the £40k reduction just for this financial year, or every year?

It is an in-year saving for this year. The site is currently open 5 days a week (50 hours per week), with 2 staff on site. This is where the saving comes from – roughly £20k per member of staff. With the current closure due to the pandemic, those staff are working at some of the bigger sites to help manage the Covid response. Viridor has agreed to give us the £40k this year, provided the site is closed, because they would then go in and clear the skips, take away the office facility, etc. The savings from our perspective are just on staff this year; we don't know what the savings would be next year but I would assume that without 2 staff on site for 50 hours, we would definitely save £40k next year. Not moving skips from Usk to Llanfoist will save more money again. I don't know what the total amount saved would be, but I would expect it to be around £60k next year if Usk is closed.

What is the answer to concerns that closing the site would increase the traffic and amount of travelling across Monmouthshire, especially in light of the council's Green Futures aim?

The distance travelled for everyone can be reduced by using the kerbside collections. In response to the argument of air pollution and carbon, the kerbside recycling is the best way forward. This stops pollution, and anyone needing to travel anywhere. Usk already has a problem with air pollution in the town centre – we therefore need to ask if it is right that, pre-Covid, we were bringing 170+ cars and large lorries through Usk each day to service the site, thus adding to the problem.

Has a 'halfway' solution been considered e.g. having a site elsewhere, perhaps in the County Council car park, which could use CCTV and therefore be unmanned?

We did look at moving the Usk facility somewhere else in Usk, but people don't want waste sites next to them. I am not convinced that we would get planning permission for a waste facility on the Rhadyr site or the riverside site, given the flood risk. Additional sites have not been popular in Usk, such as the additional AD plant and Biomass plant, among others, so another waste facility is unlikely to get planning permission, and permitting has to be acquired on top of that. National Resources Wales would certainly look at the flood risk for opening another facility anywhere in Usk. Today, if we tried to open the Usk site where it is now, I don't think we would get planning permission or permitting for a site so close to residential properties in a flood zone.

What is the consideration for the greatest impact of closure being on elderly residents?

There is a growing number of elderly across Monmouthshire, and we understand that we need to work with everyone across the county. It is not our intention to overlook the elderly. The comprehensive kerbside service is the best way for the elderly to deal with their waste. There have been a lot of queries by proxy, asking how the elderly will get their waste to site if they can't drive, but we don't see a large number of elderly people walking into the site. We are always looking to improve the kerbside service, and the amount of materials that we can collect, but people have to use it.

If kerbside collection is the only way forward, how much work has been done to increase what can be recycled at the kerbside? What about better education?

When people started using the kerbside collection more at the start of the pandemic, we saw a big increase in recycling – this is what we need to continue, and we need to continue with the message that proper kerbside recycling is the best way forward. Personally, as a Torfaen resident, if I go to the facility there once a year, it is once too often. I don't see why the majority of people should use the facilities that often, yet 71% of Usk residents at the site are there once a week. If that level of waste is genuinely being created, we need a different education campaign – one which suggests lessening the amount being purchased that then needs to be discarded. The message should be about reduction of waste, rather than focussing on sites.

If the site is this bad, why wasn't something done sooner, before reaching a crisis point?

We haven't let Usk get to a crisis point. We have known about the works needed there for a while, and have already invested in the site to keep it running. It has always been poor performing, with the rest of Monmouthshire being high performing and able to carry Usk. We had the survey work done with Eunomia on site in 2018, which highlighted the issue with the drainage. The report was then put together in 2019 proposing the site's closure. Matters such as these take time to be processed. There wasn't a crisis point, but everyone else is doing more. We were faced with potential fines of upwards of £120k last year, and we needed to make decisions about how we would drive up recycling rates – that is when Usk's closure was considered.

We use Viridor on our sites. When Torfaen cancelled this service, they saved £167,000 a year – was this possibility explored?

Viridor operated the kerbside collection bulking facility in Torfaen, which the council took back in-house. Torfaen's household waste recycling centres are run by FCC, a company similar to Viridor. It therefore wasn't quite as simple as the council taking the service back – it was a very different service that they were operating. We have looked at bringing the service in-house

here as part of the tender process, and we are quite happy to consider that if the tenders come back at a price where we feel we could do the service ourselves at the same cost.

As garden waste affects everyone in the county, but Usk's closure only affects Usk residents, surely the survey response numbers aren't comparable?

I hope to have done justice to the Usk responses – there were a lot of them and I have tried to answer them.

In terms of the elderly population, the point about better kerbside recycling is noted, but some things are still unrecyclable and need to be taken to a centre – an older population will find this difficult, and Usk's proportion of elderly is greater than, say, Chepstow.

There is a more elderly demographic in Usk, but the kerbside facilities should be used to support them. Many of the letters we received were from older people saying that they use the site every day. What we are trying to do is encourage better use of the kerbside facilities, and move the residents away from relying on these sites, especially as the Usk site is so poor performing, with so many black bags going into it. There will be a bigger element of travel for residents of Usk to other sites, but not if they use the kerbside system. There are some materials that can't be recycled at the kerbside, but we offer other solutions: Homemakers will come and collect three bulky items for £15, which is a very good scheme.

Usk Town Council has always made up shortfalls in cost when told by MCC that there is a problem, e.g. the Hub, Post Office, renovations, etc. – could they not be given a chance in this situation, too?

Cost sharing has not been discussed with Usk Town Council, and they have not offered to share costs, to my knowledge. It's not just about the cost of running the facility; it is about achieving our recycling rates. For the waste that goes into Usk, if we miss our targets by the same proportion of waste, we will pay almost £200k in fines. I'm not sure how those costs would be shared with Usk Town Council – it is not just the cost of £40k, which is a relatively small one, compared to the potential fines.

In terms of disproportionate costs, Usk surely can't be compared with urban centres, as it's more rural?

Five Lanes is not an urban site, it is a rural site that services urban areas. Residents of urban areas (Caldicot and Chepstow) travel to Five Lanes, which is relatively rural. In having to do so, they think about the waste they are taking, and recycle more. That is the data that we have. In Usk, the ease of access is driving bad behaviour. The site is also too small, but there is a larger number of black bags being taken to the site than we would see at Five Lanes.

Usk presents 25% Black Bags, which is the same as at the other sites, as is garden waste at 30%, so why are the numbers a particular problem for Usk?

The charts with those figures are the residents' perceptions of what they bring to the sites. The numbers are not reflected in what is actually brought to the sites. There is a much larger amount of black bags brought into Usk than the 25% figure assumed by users. The actual data is that 53% of waste at Usk is black bags. We have agreed, and are about to implement, black bag sorting at all the sites, which will include Usk if it stays open. This would be very difficult at Usk though, because we lack the facilities to take that material and put it somewhere else. This is a big concern when it comes to black bag sorting.

Is it possible to have a receptacle for small electrical items in Usk?

Some of the bigger supermarkets have offered to take small electrical items; we could look at whether that could be done in Usk. The difficulty with unmanned recycling facilities is that they attract a lot of flytipping, which is why they were removed in the beginning. There were also incidences of arson at some Torfaen sites. But we could look at having a small WE (Waste Electrical) bin in Usk.

Emphasising that Usk residents could use the new green waste scheme, what is the response to elderly residents concerned about being able to move a wheelie bin?

There was some confusion evident in the survey responses that we are reducing the garden waste scheme – this is not the case. We are looking at a different option i.e. bins instead of bags.

Does green waste help with recycling targets? If so, if we take Usk away, will that affect these?

Green waste contributes to our targets, whether through the HWRC or the kerbside scheme.

Could black bags simply be refused, as at Crickhowell, for example?

The Bring sites in Powys take a range of domestic recyclate – paper, cans, plastic bottles, etc. – which we collect at the kerbside. Powys now collects more at the kerb too, and has therefore now reduced its number of sites. They took out the unmanned skips that were at the unmanned Bring sites because of the abuse that they got.

I'm sceptical that we would need planning permission for another site?

We can look at Bring sites. I wasn't suggesting earlier that we would need planning permission for these, though we probably would. I was suggesting that a full-blown recycling centre would definitely need planning permission and NRW permitting. That is not to say we couldn't have small bins or skips like the supermarkets used to have – we could probably do something with that idea. However, those would only take material that can currently be put out for kerbside collection. So we would rather push people to use that system more, especially as Bring sites create problems with flytipping.

The £30k expected cost for upgrades is a capital item, and is not therefore costed in one year, but is spread across the number of years it depreciates over – so it could be as little as £5k, if spread over 6 years?

This is correct: it is capital money that could be spread across a number of years. The report intended to highlight that the cost needs to be spent in general, regardless of however that spending actually happens.

£40k is given as the annual cost but we're already halfway through this year, so the saving would actually only be £20k in the current year if the site were closed immediately.

£40k was agreed with Viridor. If the site must close, they would give us a £40k saving this year, regardless of what point we are in the year. As we get closer to the end of the year, obviously that's going to change, and Viridor will not pass those costs back to us. With Usk being so small, we wouldn't suggest that it re-open at the moment with Covid continuing – we can't manage the site *and* manage Covid safety. I understand that people are saying to give Usk a chance to improve, but it certainly wouldn't be a recommendation from officers to re-open the Usk site with the pandemic continuing.

Councillors' general comments:

Councillor Laura Jones: Geographically, Monmouthshire lends itself to having more than one recycling centre; it is credit to the council that we have more than one in the county, but we should remember that that is necessary. The Usk closure would have the greatest impact on

the elderly, while for those able to travel it will increase the traffic and amount of travelling across Monmouthshire. While it has been rightly observed that everyone else does that, it doesn't make it any better that Usk would have to also do so. I therefore have some concerns in that regard. The kerbside behaviour has improved during the pandemic. We must do everything we can to actively encourage that. Much of the evidence that we received showed that greater education is needed – I agree that this is something the committee and council need to look into for the other sites, if not for Usk going forward. I share the concerns that Usk's safety is below standard, and that £30k is required to improve it, car parking spaces could be increased, etc. There are certainly positives to the closure option. But, it has become clear that even though the kerbside collection is increasing, the residents don't feel that their needs are being fulfilled.

Councillor Batrouni: Yes, Five Lanes is a rural site but it services an urban population, and therefore the demographic and usage are presumably different. Of course, Usk needs to improve, but the residents are asking for the time to make that improvement, working in conjunction with the Town Council – it seems that message is being ignored. I would like this committee to see the business plan regarding bringing the costs in-house, when it is ready. Torfaen reputedly halved their costs when they did that – an equivalent saving would be significant for MCC, and would help with any Usk business plan. In terms of the potential fines being discussed, any fine would be applied countywide, and would not be applicable to a Town Council. There should have been a conversation with Usk Town Council about sharing the operating cost of £30k, and additional transport cost of £60k. I propose, in line with the Cabinet's focus on local services, that we give Usk more time, informing the residents of the issues and asking for a practicable, workable plan to deliver what is needed.

Councillor Eason: We don't seem to have sufficient monitoring of black bags at any of our sites. I agree with Councillor Batrouni that we should review this matter over the next period, rather than make a decision today. If we monitor the situation more closely, Usk might end up in a better position than it is now. Car parking is a problem, but we should look at how we can use Usk in a better way. Perhaps we should also look at the number of days that it could be open, and encourage everyone – at all the sites – not to dump black bags. I would like to see further surveys done and initiatives taken. I think that including figures in the report that aren't factual, but represent people's impressions, is confusing. I have no problem with the hours being reduced from 8-4 but I would like this to be re-assessed in April next year. I am also happy with additional day closures at Five Lanes and Llanfoist, and for Item E to go ahead.

Councillor Webb: I thank the officers for putting together the number of detailed reports and reading materials. I suggest that if a WE bin were installed in Usk, residents would monitor use to ensure it wasn't misused.

Councillor Smith: It is a matter of money. If this service is continued at a cost of £40k, members need to consider where the money will come from i.e. from which other service will the money be taken. And the service certainly can't be retained in its current condition. There are many problems. I liked Alison's logic that the Council Tax of 20 properties in Usk would cover the cost of the site, but we deliver many other services from that tax. It is quite intriguing to consider what people are putting in black bags so frequently. The inability to sort at Usk is an important point – the site is very constrained. We should also note that Torfaen has access to grants money that is not available to Monmouthshire. Torfaen shows how recycling should

be done, and I would encourage members to go and see proper segregation and sorting of items. I have a strong concern about the skip's removal from the site in Usk: given the car park location and the small streets, it is a danger and a pollutant. It is regrettable to lose any service but we need to look to the future, including the positive point of having more parking spaces – I have been unsuccessful in finding a space on numerous occasions when going to the doctors.

Councillor Howarth: I am fearful of 'tinkering' with waste, and the ramifications of taking a facility away, particularly in regards to recycling targets, as well as the implications for bonfires and waste burning. There are successful sites at Crickhowell and Llangynidyr that don't take black bags, perhaps Usk could be retained in this fashion. I believe that we need to investigate further, including whether Usk Town Council can provide some of these facilities.

Councillor Powell: I support what Councillor Smith said. My main concern is not to stop anything but having a waste facility at the edge of a car park doesn't feel right or safe. It seems a Bring site somewhere else would be safer. There are as many elderly people in Abergavenny, and as Abergavenny residents, we only go to a recycling site once or twice a year. We find we can recycle everything we need to at the kerbside. Yes, a lot of the elderly can't drive, but surely it's safer for them to use the kerbside facilities.

Councillor Clarke: Alison's presentation was very good, as were the officer's responses. As an authority, we are going to spend £150m this year – despite Covid – so I don't think it should be beyond us to somehow find the amount needed to ensure the site's continuation. I would urge the council to use mathematical and practical sense to resolve this matter. Usk should be given a chance to improve, and if it doesn't, it would then deserve to be closed.

Councillor Groucott: I have been very impressed by the arguments put forward by the residents of Usk, and would therefore support the notion of finding a way forward with them that saves the facility. Travelling to a site elsewhere assumes that time would be given at other facilities to the extra traffic, but the report also says that time at the other sites will be reduced. That doesn't make much sense to me. I think it shows that the intention is to cut the service, rather than improve it.

Councillor Thomas: I support what Councillors Groucott and Batrouni have said. At the Members' Seminar, I was more sceptical about the Usk site, and I can understand the officers' concerns, but Usk has made a very strong case today. There have been many responses, and the Town Council is clearly behind the movement to keep the facility in some form. If the residents and Town Council want to go into a joint venture of sorts to subsidise the facility, then that is their choice. I hope that this is a true consultation today. I agree with Councillor Clarke that the money being discussed is not a huge amount – we should look at it, and not make too hasty a decision, which otherwise appears to be the case. I think there is need for reconsideration.

Councillor Woodhouse: I have been struck by how the residents are clearly missing this facility while it is temporarily shut. I would like to see consideration given to some sort of unmanned facilities while we are in this crisis, and as a possible way forward for the future. I'm sure the people of Usk could monitor such a facility themselves to prevent misuse.

Chair's Summary:

We have considered the low recycling rate at Usk, and that it is the worst performing site in Wales. We understand Usk Town Council's view, but it is not a good site: it is too small and there are health and safety concerns. We have analysed the waste composition, with the

frequent visits to the site being to dispose of black bag waste that could be recycled at the kerb, which includes food waste. The community concerns highlighted include flytipping; we shouldn't excuse this, and the closure of the site shouldn't give the impression that flytipping is acceptable, but flytipping also can't be used as an excuse not to make the proposed changes. Distance to travel was another concern of both members and the community; Chepstow residents travel 7 miles, some residents travel 14 miles – so it is a matter of perception. The distance to Llanfoist and Five Lanes from Usk is 10 miles, and Covid has given us a new lens to analyse waste. It's not an excuse for the decision, but it has allowed us to analyse usage rates, and make the recommendations in this report.

The clear response from the officer today to Usk Town Council's concerns about what residents will use instead is that kerbside recycling will be used, reducing unnecessary journeys and air pollution. It is not viable to reopen the site during Covid. The potential distances to travel are not hugely different from what other residents in Monmouthshire are expected to travel. The themes in the public responses are very similar; we have read them all and discussed our responses to them. We have data that evidences the rationale for the option proposed. The report explores different options, such as whether the site could be run externally, but it's not recommended if the site is managed correctly.

When we did the composition analysis, in the timepoint between the consultation exercise and the point where the decision was put into abeyance, the situation was worse. With even less recycling now being done we need the kerbside recycling rate to improve. We need to reduce the amount of waste created, and journeys made to dispose of the black bag waste. When we asked the residents' views on whether black bag waste facilities were a key resource for them, it wasn't as important to people as we thought.

Regarding Members' comments, they have asked if self-service could be considered, but the officer has highlighted that it would only accept things that can be recycled at kerbside or disposed of in general waste anyway. Councillor Batrouni has asked that we consider how Usk Town Council has previously taken over operation of facilities, and give them more time, and the opportunity, to turn this around. The Councillor also made a point about protecting our rural areas and their services, and for the council to apply its message. Councillor Howarth requested that a residual waste drop-off be allowed for.

Vote on Recommendations

On some of the issues, such as revised opening hours for HWRCs, the committee supported the recommendations. When discussing the future of Usk household waste recycling centre the committee was against the proposals by a margin of 4 votes to 3.

4. Pre-decision Scrutiny of the Garden Waste Service.

Following the video presentation of responses from Monmouthshire residents, Officer Laura Carter delivered the report.

Challenge:

An increase of £18 to £35 is 94%, and therefore very excessive. What sort of drop-off is expected for this service, given such a large increase? Are we trying deliberately to cut off this service?

We have highlighted that there is a funding gap, and have worked out what we would need to charge in order to close it. The recommendation for today is to consider and approve the charge levied. From today, we hope that the idea of a charge will be agreed, to take to Cabinet subsequently. The report does not propose that the full cost be charged – we are asking Select today to make a recommendation on the cost for us.

The report states that many authorities use the recycling service, and keep it free, to keep their recycling targets high. How will such a steep increase help us in this endeavour?

Yes, councils do subsidise garden waste collections. Some are in the situation where they would fail to meet their targets without doing so; Monmouthshire isn't quite in that position, though we were very close to hitting the 65% last year. It is a concern. 8% of our garden waste is collected kerbside; we believe that even if there were a drop-off, most of the garden waste would be presented at our HWRCs – so it would still be in our recycling rates, just through a different means.

Regarding manual labour and crews, have we not consulted the unions?

Our Operations Manager is in close contact with the unions, and has discussed matters with them.

Why are these changes happening now? There have been many phases of changes with bags – why weren't wheelie bins introduced earlier, especially given their prior use in other authorities?

We have talked for some time about moving over to wheelie bins from a manual handling perspective. A recent HR report cited muscular-skeletal injuries as the highest form of sickness for crews. We need to procure vehicles: the 2012 vehicles that we have should have already been replaced, and we are encountering a lot of problems with them. Hiring vehicles is very expensive, so is not an option. Waste is facing massive in-year budget pressures, so we were asked to look at possible ways to alleviate them.

The report mentions an Abergavenny company taking the garden waste – do they pay for that, or do we pass it on for free?

Abergavenny Garden Waste Compost has the contract to compost Monmouthshire's garden waste, for which we pay them, x amount per tonne. There is no income back.

The report mentions possible redundancies/redeployment – where would those workers be redeployed? Have those discussions taken place?

Fortnightly wheelie bin collections would mean that one crew that currently collects garden waste would be redeployed. Next year, we are introducing reusable red and purple bags that need additional crew members. Our loaders are employed as loaders, whether they load garden waste, refuse or recycling – they would simply shift on to a different round.

What is the rationale for two-weekly collections – will this not overload vehicles?

Whatever the council's decision, we need to procure vehicles urgently. If we continue with reusable bags, we will need to procure vehicles that are very similar to those we have now; if the decision is for fortnightly bins then we will need vehicles with specialist lifts to make the collections quicker and more efficient. The weight for fortnightly collections would be comparable with now. The round size would be reduced, as we would take on more capacity per household.

Have 120L wheelie bins been considered, as used in Powys, as they might be easier to move when full?

We spoke with Torfaen this morning about this, as that is what they offer their citizens who can't manage a 240L bin, whereas we have offered a reusable bag. It is something we could look at, but the collection charge would have to remain the same as for a 240L bin, for the proposal to work financially.

In terms of assisted collection, what are the criteria for qualifying on a case-by-case basis?

If someone applies for an assisted collection, one of our Waste Education team will either make a phone call or visit in person, to assess various criteria. Some of these include, 'does the applicant live with someone who is able to put out the bin for them?', 'how far will our crews need to travel to make the assisted collection', etc.

It could be disputed that a wheelie bin would be easier to clean than the current bags.

We could offer the reusable bag to anyone who feels they will be unable to clean their bin sufficiently.

Can we be reassured that those who live in terraced houses, or have steps or other difficulties, would be allowed to keep their brown bags?

Yes, if members of the public live in a terraced property, and there's no storage, we will offer them the alternative equivalent litreage of reusable bags.

Can the new vehicles be used to collect wheelie bins and bags? Could the public be given the choice?

No, the specialist lifts would not be suitable for loading manual bags simultaneously. Officers have discussed the option of providing a choice to residents. When we've looked at this though, we wouldn't be able to procure the specialist lifts, and would need to continue the service with the 'tuck under' bar lifts. This would push our collection costs back up to where we are now, at £660,000. By offering bags to those in terraced houses, or who can't manage a bin, we believe we can offer small amounts of bags to these customers; we will probably put on a separate round on a different day using a different vehicle without a lift. But we don't think that we will be able to provide a choice to people to use either the bin or bag.

What would be the cost for those able to continue using a bag?

In the report, we propose the same cost for a wheelie bin or the equivalent litreage in bags. So it would be £35 for one bin or three bags, fortnightly.

Could residents have the option to purchase bags to supplement their garden work e.g. for those with uneven ground who need to carry their weeds to the bin?

Once we are at the point of residents with uneven land or long drives, it becomes extremely difficult to quantify, to agree/disagree. At that point, the scheme would probably be undeliverable. If we were to give people the choice and we ended up with too many reusable bags, we wouldn't be able to manage them within our existing rounds, and potentially would need additional costs for additional crews and vehicles.

Councillors' further comments:

Councillor Batrouni: I thought that the 94% increase was being recommended because in Appendix 4, it says 'Monmouthshire proposed change and cost.' If that is not the specific intention, it needs to be clarified. If the real reason for the changes is cost pressure, I feel that that needs to be stated outright. If the unions have been consulted, the report should reflect that. I would like to know the potential implications in terms of drop-off, whether it is a 94% increase or less, and would like the committee to see the HR reports pertaining to muscular-skeletal injuries.

Councillor Pratt: What is being proposed will be the best value for money for our customers, and for us to continue with this service. It is highly valued by our residents but we must remember that it is not statutory – as it is not something that we have to do, we need to think about how much we would be willing to subsidise it. Many of our residents don't use this service (they have a small garden, or no garden), so we need to consider whether they would be happy subsidising it for others. Yes, we pay for services that are not for everyone's use, but these tend to be mandatory e.g. schools. We get through 12,000 bags a year; as we have declared a Climate Emergency, we must think of ways in which we can reduce this waste. The bins are made from 95% recycled plastic, and are produced in the UK – unlike the existing bags. Subsidising this service would mean cutting the budget of another. Many customers will still be paying under £1 per week for this service.

Councillor Easson: I don't think the difference between taking purple and blue sacks now, and taking the purple and blue hessian sacks is clear. I am concerned about the criteria for assisted collection qualification, as the decision would be made by the council, though the individual would know their own capabilities and circumstances better.

Councillor Powell: Regarding subsidies, it should be remembered that Monmouthshire is the worst funded County Council – other councils can make the service free because they have the funding, whereas if we were to do so the burden would go back on to the taxpayer.

Councillor Woodhouse: My ward is around 95% terraced properties. It is reassuring to hear that they could have the bags. I would like to see this opportunity given to people without them having to go through a vetting process – give them the choice. Many properties don't have a side access, so they would need to bring the bin through their house. I am concerned about narrow streets in which cars are partly or wholly parked on the pavement. Bins might be left out all day with people working, whereas at least an empty bag can be pushed aside to stop it being an obstacle. Safe routes to schools are a particular concern. I would ask that bags are made readily available for these sorts of streets. I am concerned that people currently with one bag will drop off, as they will have to pay £35 for a bin without needing that capacity.

Councillor Webb: I am also concerned about the residents not being allowed a choice, particularly considering the instance of someone with a small garden only wanting one bag. I think they should be given the choice.

Councillor Brown: In my ward, there are very high slopes on drives: I am not sure how easy it will be to manoeuvre a wheelie bin in those circumstances. It would be good if the flexibility officers have described were included in the recommendations, to reassure residents and members. I therefore suggest having flexibility in the garden waste collection system to allow for garden bag provision for the elderly and infirm, those with uneven sloping and/or topography of land issues, and storage issues. Regarding cost, there is a balance between the charges that are increased, and the customers that are lost. On a bulk basis, I wonder how cost-effective this actually is.

Chair's Summary:

We have debated the ease-of-use of bags or wheelie bins; it seems to be a personal preference. Whichever option we decide would depend on the type of vehicle we procure, which will collect both bags and wheelie bins, or there will be different collections with a separate vehicle. The possibility of smaller 120L bins can be explored, but the collection charge would need to remain the same. When we do assessments for people needing

assisted collections, it will be done either over the phone or in person (though not under the current Covid guidance.) Cleaning bins has been mentioned, which again seems to be a matter of personal opinion. Members have asked for reassurance that residents with difficulty of access can have a bag instead, and have asked for flexibility, especially owing to concerns of age, inclined land, etc. However, this will incur more charges. Officers will ensure that the HR report goes out to all members of the committee, and will supply the figures for the expected drop-off in customers.

Vote on Recommendations

On the introduction of wheeled bins, the committee was against them.

The meeting ended at **5.55 pm**

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