

Select Committee	date	(Draft) Minute
Strong Communities Select Committee	25 th January 2022	<p>Cabinet Member Phil Murphy delivered the presentation, with additional comments from Jonathan Davies. Carl Touhig and Jonathan Davies answered the members' questions.</p> <p>Challenge:</p> <p><i>What will be the effect on waste and other services, such as grounds maintenance?</i></p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>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.</p>

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.