



Usk Town Council Annual Report 2020-2021



INTRODUCTION FROM THE CHAIR
Cllr Christine Wilkinson May 2020 to May 2021

I have found the writing of this report to be very difficult. Difficult to capture the anxieties, pressure, sadness and the optimism and hope of the past year.

In pre Covid years the Mayors' report was full of anecdotes about formal Civic occasions, joyful public engagements, festivals and fundraising events all memorable and easy to describe with enthusiasm.

This year has been memorable but for very different reasons.

I agreed to stay on as Mayor for a further term in what was initially thought to be a caretaker role. This was going to be a quiet year, an easy year, just ticking over until Covid was eradicated. How wrong we were!!

As a Council we have mastered Zoom (well almost) and as a Mayor I have attended 54 Zoom meetings and 21 Team meetings with outside agencies. I have lost count of the number of e mails, telephone discussions and site meetings with County Councillors and MCC officers.

Initially there was the fury around a possible one-way system being introduced, as part of Covid measures. It was a plan we opposed from the start but resulted in much of the flack being aimed at us and the creation of a cottage industry making protest signs. The introduction of the traffic lights was the most acceptable option when it was apparent that MCC were intent on introducing measures in line with Welsh Government guidelines. That too of course, resulted in criticism and constant complaints from businesses and motorists.

My sincere thanks go to the SLOBS team (Single Lane On Bridge Street) comprising Cllrs Williams, Howells, Tracey, and Diane who along with myself smoothed ruffled feathers, organised pull ins for 'drop offs' supervised deliveries, replaced barriers that had been moved and kept in constant touch with Highways to suggest improvements to the system, and arranged site visits to offer first-hand advice. I think I can honestly say, we took much of the fire intended for MCC and the group are to be congratulated for diffusing many difficult situations that could have escalated.

Further to our credit we provided and funded the new toilet block by the Play Park and part funded the Post Office, in its new premises, to ensure its survival. When we were faced with the threat of losing our Road Sweeper, we agreed to fund his salary to ensure we retained his services. All of the Town Council's work and responsibilities have continued without interruption and to the usual high standard thanks to our staff team.

We still await the resurfacing of the Memorial Hall car park, double yellow lines on Castle Parade and 20 mph speed limit throughout the town, all promised and constantly chased up but no action so far. The Usk Master Plan is still on the table, but discussions have yet to re commence.

In September we were faced with the closure of the Recycling centre. Despite a report to the Public Services Committee, a petition and letters of protest delivered to every household in the town, signed and returned in their hundreds, all our efforts fell on deaf ears. Thanks go particularly to the SURF group, a collaboration of Council members and residents and to Cllrs. McGowan and Ivin who prepared and delivered our arguments to MCC very eloquently. We now seek to find a way of re using the site for the benefit of the town and through Cllr. Graz have prepared a business plan for consideration.

There have been a few engagements during the year. In November, a simple ceremony to mark Remembrance Day held at the Cenotaph with representatives from the uniformed services, the Royal British Legion and the Town Council. It comprised a short service the playing of the last post and reveille and laying of wreaths.

In early December with no Reindeer parade Father Christmas took to a vintage tractor and trailer to drive around the town. It was a spontaneous event, no advanced publicity just word of mouth as Father Christmas and his elves set out on their journey. This simple event gave joy to so many people, children and adults alike.

On New Years' Eve we said our goodbyes to Cllr. Jill Jeremiah as her funeral cortege stopped at the entrance to the Sessions House for a minute's silence. I was honoured to attend her funeral representing the Council she had served for over 30 years.

Fundraising of course has been impossible this year with so many restrictions on numbers and venues, Last year I raised £4,000 and Ty-Hafen received a cheque for £2,000. My other charities agreed to the rest of the money being retained in the hope that I could add to it. In fact, that has been the case not through any fund-raising efforts on my part but to the transference of the Mayor's allowance into the pot. I'm pleased to say that I can now present a cheque for £2,000 to The Friends of Chernobyl's Children and £600 to Usk Brass Band.

In conclusion we have all witnessed the generous spirit of so many people in this town with the formation of the Help and Support group and the free meal service provided by the ladies of the Catholic Church. There have also been so many examples of individual acts of kindness. Our hospitality venues have diversified and provided 'take a ways', and deliveries, so that we could all have the occasional treat even in lockdown.

Sadly, we have also had the downside, the Social media detractors whose one aim in life seems to be to trash anything and everything we do for this town. These are people who would never put themselves in the firing line or make any worthwhile contribution to their community. Thankfully, they are the minority.

This is a year none of us will ever forget, we have worked together as a cohesive team and are stronger for it. As restrictions relax there is the possibility that we will soon meet again face to face but personally I will miss the cries of 'can you hear me' and 'you're on mute' or the sound of violin practice in the background.

I cannot end without acknowledging the constant help and support I have had from Tracey and Diane, quite truthfully, they have kept me sane. To my Deputy Cllr Watkins and to all my my fellow colleagues, thank you for putting your trust in me and always being there for help and advice.

Cllr. Chris Wilkinson
Mayor of Usk



Mayor of Usk

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THE COUNCIL

Usk Town Council (UTC) serves a population of just over 3000. It is currently made up of 12 elected members who represent the interest of the community and strive to improve the quality of life for Usk residents the people of Usk.

Usk Town Council is led by the Mayor who, together with the Deputy Mayor, is elected by fellow members of UTC. This takes place at the Annual Meeting in May each year.

UTC meets on the second Monday of the month for a couple of hours (with the exception of August when there's no meeting). There are also sub- committees within the council which meet periodically. All meetings are open to the public.

There is the opportunity for Councillors to undertake a small amount of training (usually, 2/3 hours training in an evening) provided by One Voice Wales; this enables councillors to develop their skills and knowledge on local government matters and to keep up to date with changes. During this past year councillors have taken part in eleven remote training events.

The role of a Usk Town Councillor remains completely voluntary, and members do not currently receive payments.



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The Town Council has several committees of which the main ones are:

- ❖ **Finance Committee** - responsible for the running of UTC budget
- ❖ **Community Engagement** - engaging with the public (including website & social media)
- ❖ **Environment Committee** - dealing with litter, dog fouling, and leading on environmental issues.
- ❖ **Planning Committee** - although the UTC is unable to grant permission, it acts as a consultee and comments on all planning applications to Monmouthshire County Council
- ❖ **Sessions House Management Committee** - taking on the running and maintenance of the Sessions House building
- ❖ **Tourism & Events Committee** - responsible for organising community activities and events.
- ❖ **Usk Masterplan Committee** – working, and in discussion, with Monmouthshire County Council on the future of Usk and on how services can best be improved.

The Town Council's main responsibilities are.

- Street cleaning
- Providing and maintaining the Usk Park Toilets
- The provision of, and paying for, the dog waste bins to be emptied
- Providing the Christmas lights and arranging the Reindeer parade
- Supporting local events and festivals
- Organising free events in the town
- Providing grants to local groups
- Maintenance of the Sessions House
- Planning advice to MCC

Apart from the above, UTC supports the community with the following.

- Noticeboards
- Church grass cutting
- Factory Lane Allotments
- Defibrillators
- Usk Action Litter Group
- Remembrance Day Service
- Commonwealth Day Service
- Usk in Bloom
- Usk Open Gardens

- Fundraising for Charities

The Sessions House – Home to Usk Town Council

The Sessions House was opened in 1877, having taken 20 years to complete. Built as the Quarter Sessions Court for the whole of Monmouthshire it is, in true Victorian style, perfectly symmetrical even to the use of a false door to ensure that symmetry.

Sadly, the building fell into disrepair and in 1998 Usk Town Council bought it for use, not only as Council offices, but as a community resource. The purchase was supported by the whole town with organisations and individuals raising funds, and successful applications to the Heritage Lottery and CADW raised grants of £90,000 towards the restoration. The restoration continues to date.

Today, the Sessions House continues as a home for Usk Town Council and is a prestigious base for local businesses and organisations. It provides meeting rooms, conference facilities, a concert venue and a stylish setting for parties and anniversaries. The building is now licenced for Weddings and Civil Partnerships, offering unique surroundings for those special occasions. The building plays an important role in the life of Usk.

This year has been a difficult year with our usual bustling building almost grounding to a halt because of Covid restrictions. Weddings have been postponed, events and meetings cancelled, and our regular groups and committees have found themselves conducting their business on Zoom. The Town Council has also come to grips with Zoom and Team meetings rather than face to face.

Our tenants too have spent most of the year on furlough, although our Town Council Officers have maintained their excellent service to the town by working between the office and home.

The maintenance of the building has continued as usual, and repairs made. We have also improved our facilities over the year with the addition of a common room, complete with kitchen facilities, for the use of groups hiring the meeting rooms. The tenants can now enjoy their own separate catering facilities.

A hearing loop has been extended to cover not just the Court Room but the Library and Main Hall and wi-fi is now available throughout the building.

As restrictions ease, life in the Sessions House is beginning to return to some form of normality with tenants returning and bookings again being made for weddings later in the year. There has been some outdoor hospitality and, although numbers will still be limited and regulations still in force, it is likely that indoor meetings can commence in the near future. We look forward to welcoming people back to our lovely building.



THE REPORT

It has been difficult to review 2021-21 due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Covid 19 has had an impact on all aspects of community life.

During this past year UTC has recognised the importance of local communities and volunteer groups working together. This has included the work of Coronavirus Support Groups which have helped so many residents by looking out for them, promoting available services and shops.

Work of the groups has included shopping, co-ordinating deliveries, providing meals and sharing information on social media sites. The Town Council played its part and has strived during lockdowns to ensure essential public services are maintained.

The pulling together of everyone during these difficult times is one of the elements that contributes to Usk being named "one of the best places to live in Wales 2021".

UTC is very proud of this and thanks everyone who plays a part in this achievement.

COUNCIL SPENDING

Usk Town Council's Spending and Finance

UTC's spending is controlled by a budgeting and monitoring process under the supervision of the Responsible Finance Officer, Mrs Diane Richards.

UTC aims to provide services, manage facilities and meet the town's priorities. It monitors expenditures whilst endeavouring to obtain value for money.

The work of UTC is funded mainly through the precept which is collected via Monmouthshire County Council.

Finance Report to the 2021 Annual General Meeting for the period April 2020 to March 2021, submitted by Cllr Alec Leathwood, Chair of Finance

Background

(Setting the budget)

The council is required to set its annual budget by the end of the year (Dec) so that it can be approved by Full Council at its January meeting. Our precept request must be submitted before the end of January, which allows time for the County to set its own budget in readiness for the new financial year (April). When setting our 2020/21 budget we were unaware of the Covid Pandemic and its effect on our activities. Therefore, our budget predictions for the year were somewhat wide of the mark.

Current Position

In setting our budget for this year, we planned for a whole range of activities including Summer and Winter festivals, Reindeer parade, and markets. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic and the resultant lockdown we were unable to provide any of these. Our overall spending was less than planned for, but our income from Sessions House activities was also much reduced.

None the less, we continue to provide substantial financial support to our community: -

Usk in Bloom	£8,000.
Post Office	£4,000
Play Park toilets	£14,585
Road Sweeping	£27,000
Christmas Lights	£8,000
Grass cutting	£4,000
Bollards, (grass verges at school).	£3,000
Dog waste removal	£600
Allotment maintenance	£1,000
Grant funding	£3,250

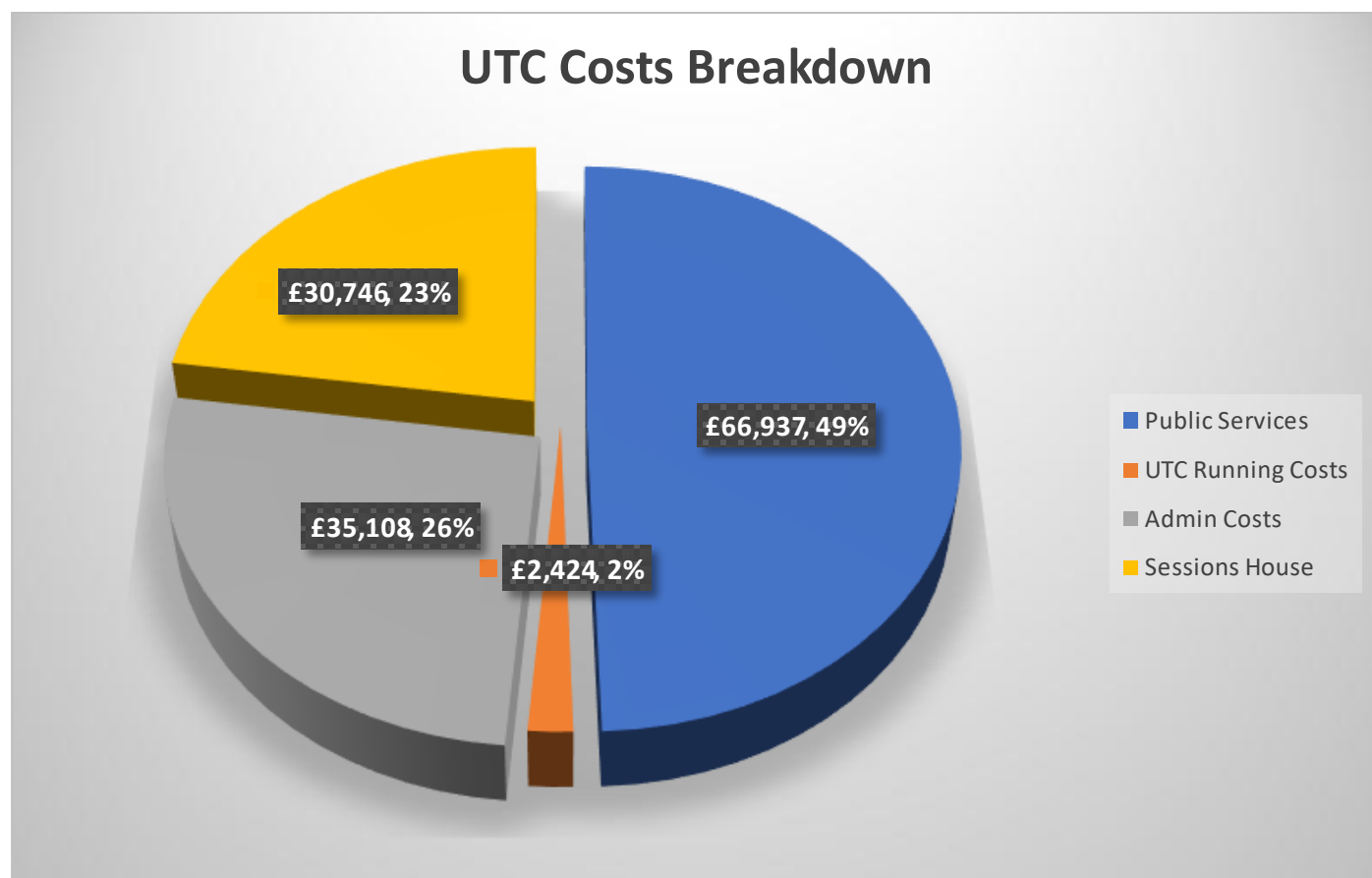
It is worth remembering, too, that Usk was faced with losing its Post Office had we not provided financial support. Likewise, the town was to lose its Road sweeper had we not committed to pay his employment costs.

Cash Position

General Fund Opening balance	£129,390.
Plus: Income for the year	162,732
Less: Expenditure for the year	119,321
Closing Balance	172,801
Earmarked reserves of	15,000 (ARUP fees)
	50,000 (car park resurfacing)
	<u>29,000</u> (Robert's Salary)
Total earmarked reserves	94,000
General Reserves	78,801 plus approx. £7,000 VAT

Councils are advised to retain a reserve equivalent to 6 months running costs, and we meet these guidelines. Our Financial position is therefore quite healthy, which enables us to respond to unexpected/unplanned events when they occur.

The attached pie chart shows a simple cost breakdown of our activities.



Conclusion

I would like to conclude my report by expressing my thanks to members of the finance sub-committee and particularly to Tracey and Diane. Both Tracey and Diane have completed the "Advanced Local Government Finance Module". With the support of Tracey, Diane manages our general finances daily throughout the year. Thanks to her hard work and dedication, all councillors are now provided with regular detailed reports covering all our financial activities, including cost centre reports, payments made, and receipts received. Although the new auditing procedure has been deferred for a year, I am confident that Tracey and Diane will ensure that the standards maintained will satisfy the toughest of audits. A huge thank you to both.

Councillor Allowances

Councillor Name	Payments for costs incurred in respect of telephone, broadband etc. (max £150 per member)	Travel & Subsistence expenses	Senior Role	Total
Mayor Cllr Wilkinson	Nil	Nil	Nil	
Cllr Watkins	Nil	Nil	Nil	
Cllr Leathwood	Nil	Nil	Nil	
Cllr Roderick	Nil	Nil	Nil	
Cllr Evans	Nil	Nil		
Cllr McGowan	Nil	Nil		
Cllr Howells	Nil	Nil		
Cllr Williams	Nil	Nil		
Cllr Graz	Nil	Nil		
Cllr Ivin	Nil	Nil		
Cllr Galletley	Nil	Nil		
Total				<u>Nil</u>

Donations

Several charities have seen a huge decrease in their income. UTC supported the following:

- Coronavirus Group/Food Kitchen
- Gwent Young Farmers
- SARS
- Mon Citizens Advice
- Noah's Ark Children's Appeal
- Cairngorm Reindeer
- Community Hub Reading Scheme
- Prizegiving
- Selection boxes for Primary School Children

Activities undertaken by Usk Town Council (UTC) during the year May 2020-April 2021.

Park Toilets

The Usk Park Toilets were opened in time for Summer 2020. They have become a great asset to the park. The building of the toilets was funded by Lottery money, although ongoing costs are met by Usk Town Council

Allotments

There are currently 62 allotments situated in Factory Lane, Usk. Although the land is owned by MCC, Usk Town Council manages the site. The current fee is £20 per % perch per annum.

The Usk Post Office,

UTC considers the Post Office an essential service and continues to work with MCC by offering support financially to ensure its opening. It is currently open Mondays and Thursdays 9-5pm and Saturdays 9-12.30pm.

Street Cleaning

MCC is not obliged to provide a road sweeper. UTC considers keeping Usk clean and tidy an essential service. As a result, UTC adopted this service and now totally funds our road sweeper, Robert.

Closure of the Usk Waste & Household Recycling Centre

MCC Cabinet members voted to close the recycling centre. Their decision was made despite the depth of opposition from Usk residents and UTC. Through the Save Usk Recycling Facility campaign, 2000 people signed an on-line petition and 550 letters were returned protesting about the proposed closure.

UTC is currently looking at ways to use the former site for the benefit of the whole town. Different proposals have been put forward and discussions with MCC about its future use and ownership are ongoing.

Usk Master Plan

Due to the pandemic the Usk Master Plan has been put on hold. The section dealing with Bridge Street and traffic issues was amended with the proposed option of a one-way system removed from the plan. UTC looks forward to exploring some of the great proposals in the document with 'interest groups' consisting of councillors, residents and businesses as soon as possible.

One area that has seen an improvement is outside the Usk Primary School. UTC and MCC jointly funded the installation of bollards which, apart from making this area safe, has improved the appearance.

Digital Noticeboard

UTC recently secured a grant from Welsh Government to install an interactive, digital noticeboard in the town. This will act as a town guide for visitors and residents alike, with information about places of interest, local businesses, accommodation, events, services, local news.

Events and Tourism

UTC usually hosts a vast number of fundraising events; however, COVID-19 has prevented any of these taking place. UTC hopes that as restrictions ease more events will occur.

The council's website www.usktown.org continues to provide useful information about the council and the community. In addition, the council has its own Facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/usk.town/>

There is also a Town Guide available at various points in Usk.

Usk Town Council's ongoing work & partnership with other local organisations

Usk Twinning Association

A report provided by Mrs Jan Richards, Chair of Usk Twinning Association

"2020/21 was the 40th Anniversary year, so we had two significant events planned with reciprocal visits, us to them in May and them to us in September. We usually limit ourselves to visits on alternate years. We had also expected the first take up of our annual 'team' grant in 2020. Planned local fund-raising events were also earmarked.

As 2020 progressed, neither visit could happen. The May trip was the first to bite the dust and led to some difficulties because flights etc. had been paid for and Lufthansa was in difficulties of its own! It was soon clear that our Graben Neudorf friends would not be able to come to us in September either, we had lots of plans, none of which could go ahead anyway. The grant was not taken up - understandably and one by one, our planned fund-raising events were cancelled.

Plans for 2021 are very much on hold. We won't be going to Graben Neudorf in the Spring, nor will they come to us in September. Our pre-existing issues of the increasing age of members along with low levels of interest from the younger generations have not been improved over the last 12 months and it's difficult to see how this might change, at least in the first half of this year.

We have continued with contacts and sent the usual greetings and good wishes but have had very little back from our friends in Graben Neudorf, which isn't unusual due to the way their association is managed and is likely also due to differing times and levels of Covid impact and guidance. There are more substantive and ongoing 'member to member' communications where long term friendships have grown and developed, but no new initiatives under the current circumstances.

Our current position is that we aim to meet again as an Association as soon as we are able and through that, look forward to better things in 2022. In the meantime, we have consulted and agreed that those roles held within the Association will be retained for the next two-year cycle."

Usk in Bloom

There were no competitions this year, but Usk in Bloom volunteers were all winners in continuing to make the Town look lovely by maintaining the public floral displays during the pandemic. Usk Town Council appreciates and continues to support all their hard work.

It was lovely to see the NHS being celebrated with the floral, butterfly display. Other displays included the 2021 (5000) new bulbs project planted around the town. The new WI bed celebrated a hundred years of the WI.

Usk in Bloom is preparing for the summer with the theme 'New Dawn' – in honour of the vaccine breakthrough and hopes to offer wellbeing, mindfulness and joy to visitors and the local community.

A full report can be found at <https://v6-5admin.visionict.com/VirDir/CoreContents/News/Display.aspx?id=40886>

Usk Civic Society

Usk Civic Society (UCS) aims to promote high standards of planning, architecture and design, and to inform people about the history, geography and conservation of the natural and built environment in Usk and surrounding areas. UCS takes an active and positive interest in planning policies and proposed developments. Like many other local societies, UCS has risen to the challenges of the pandemic and regular online committee meetings have continued. Matters discussed over the past year include:

- The much-anticipated Alfred Russel Wallace Memorial (which is scheduled for erection later in 2021).
- The digitising of the 1977 Silver Jubilee Celebration film.
- Old photographs of Usk.
- The extension of QR codes and History Points in and around Usk.
- MCC's temporary Covid traffic measures along Bridge St.
- Raw sewage being released into the River Usk by Welsh Water.
- Slow The Flow and what individuals can do to help lower the risk of flooding;
- Air quality on Bridge Street.
- Support for SWIPE's successful judicial review of MCC's decision that the applicant had planning permission to use extensions to agricultural buildings for non-agricultural purposes; and
- The Usk Trail Action Group's proposal for a family-friendly cycle route between Usk and Little Mill, linking ultimately with the canal network at Goytre.

UCS's intended programme of talks was inevitably curtailed in 2020/21 by lockdown, but two lectures were held via Zoom, both on Alfred Russel Wallace: John van Wyhe talked about the help with his specimen collecting that Wallace received from local people in the Malay Peninsula; and Ray Hale talked about the search for Wallace's Spider. During the year UCS and the Roger Edwards Educational Trust also sponsored the publication of John Barrow's study, *Exploring New Market Street, Usk*.

Usk Action Litter Group

Thanks go to this group of volunteers who work tirelessly to keep Usk litter free. They do a splendid job.

Usk Open Gardens

Usk Open Gardens weekend takes place on the last weekend of June every year. This is a very popular and unique opportunity to visit local, private gardens in Usk which are open to visitors. The gardens are in walking distance of the free car parks and there is a regular mini-bus service around the town. All proceeds go to raise money for local charities. Unfortunately, this event did not take place in 2021 due to the pandemic.

Dog Fouling Action Group

Since 2015 MCC has had a Working Group comprised of a number of members of Town and Community Councils (T&CC's) including officers from the Waste and Resources/Environmental Health sections.

The primary focus of the Group is to raise awareness of the anti-social nature of dog fouling and help develop a social conscience that dog owners should 'pick up' under the brand **Give Dog Fouling the Red Card**.

There are currently twenty-two participating T&CCs of which UTC is one. There are typically two or three meetings of the Group every year which have proved an excellent opportunity for those attending to share ideas on how best to bring about change and reduce the number of fouling incidents.

It has helped target 'hot spot' areas, fund signage with consistent messaging highlighting the need for dog owners to 'pick up' and collaborative working on a couple of Action Days each year.

In April, members of Usk Town Council and MCC Environmental Officers took part in an Action Day in Usk to help raise awareness amongst dog owners.

MCC officers and members of UTC talked to dog owners, all of which apart from one, were carrying bags so that they could pick up their dogs' poo.

UTC has adopted the Pooper Snooper App to help tackle dog fouling in the town. The App maps all the dog poo and litter bins in the town, so it is easy to find out the location of each bin for people with a new dog or who are visitors to the area. It also provides a method of reporting dog fouling incidents, which can help identify hot spot areas where patrolling could be increased, or a bin provided. The more people that use the App, the greater its usefulness in tackling the problem. The message that came across is that there is only a small minority of dog owners who do not pick up, although every dog owner is blamed. The vast majority of dog owners care for their community.

UTC will continue to reinforce the message and remind residents of its importance.





Jill Jeremiah – Former Mayor of Usk

The report could not be concluded without mentioning Jill Jeremiah, Councillor and former Mayor of Usk who died recently.

Usk was deeply saddened by Jill's passing. She was Mayor three times during her 30 years' service on the Town Council and worked tirelessly for the town and its residents. She started a Youth Club that ran for 15 years and organised many events, including The Late, Late Christmas Show which was a huge success in raising funds for charity. Jill even made a replica of the Usk Town clock to aid fundraising for its refurbishment.

Sadly, due to the current restrictions, only close family was able to attend Jill's funeral. However, the streets were lined with people paying their respects. Jill's funeral cortege included a procession through the Sessions House grounds where members of Usk Town Council remembered their dedicated and supportive colleague and clapped in her honour before Jill made her final journey through Usk.

In May, a noticeboard was installed in the grounds of the Sessions House in memory of Jill. The Rev. Sally Ingle-Gillis dedicated it to Jill and Usk Mayor, Chris Wilkinson - as the final duty in her term of office - delivered the following message in memory of Jill to her husband Haydn and those present.

"Haydn, Rev. Sally, Ladies and Gentlemen and fellow Councillors

This is my last duty as Mayor, and it is a very poignant one.

I have the honour to unveil a tribute to a very special lady, Jill Jeremiah.

Jill epitomised everything that is good about public service and dedication to your community. In over 30 years on this Town Council, she put her heart and soul into improving the lives of the people of Usk.

Nothing was too much trouble; no problem was insurmountable, and everything could be achieved with patience and good humour.

Jill will always be with us, at every Winter festival and Reindeer Parade we will think of her, her idea, her determination to make it happen.

When we read a town guide, we will remember her, her concept, and her hard work to publish the first edition.

Her name will be mentioned when there is talk of the Youth Club, which she ran with Georgina and who of us around at the time, will ever forget the Late, Late Christmas shows organised and directed by Jill.

Her legacy is all of that and much more but, most importantly, we have our own individual memories, and we will celebrate her life in our own way and miss her in our own way - as a supportive colleague, a role model, an inspiration, and a kind and loyal friend. "



Jill will be greatly missed by her family and many friends.

Usk Town Council Staff

Town Clerk Mrs Tracey Huxley

Responsible Finance Officer/ Sessions House manager Mrs Diane Richards

Sessions House Caretaker Ms Lyn Barrett

Town Constables Mr Robert Hamar & Mr Shaun Galletley

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