

BUDGET SCRUTINY

Top three challenges for delivering within Portfolio budget for 2026/27

Councillor Tom Briars-Delve (Environment and Climate Change)



1. CHALLENGE 1 – PLAY INFRASTRUCTURE

It's important to ensure a sustainable, inclusive, and high-quality play network across Plymouth, where children and young people of all ages and abilities can be active, have fun, and learn through play. Our aim is for everyone using our play spaces to feel safe, confident, and excited, promoting healthier lifestyles and stronger connections to local nature. The challenge however is safely maintaining a significant play estate of 121 equipped play areas, much of which was installed in concentrated programmes and so is aging and reaching end of life at the same time. The required weekly inspections continue to identify health and safety concerns that sometimes lead to equipment removal. Investments in new asset management digital systems and their use by inspectors has dramatically improved the data we have available which has helped identify the scale of the challenge and a better grip on asset lifecycles. There is a legal requirement to ensure playgrounds are fit for purpose. Current revenue budgets are too small to manage the large number of play areas, which are expensive to maintain or rebuild.

1.a. MITIGATIONS FOR CHALLENGE 1 – PLAY INFRASTRUCTURE

Work to review how to deliver and maintain a sustainable play estate that meets the needs of children across the City is underway and the first action proposed is that the budget allocation for repairs to play equipment be doubled from 25/26 (£50k) to 26/27 (£100k) to provide additional resource for the maintenance of play equipment year on year. Additionally, work is underway to assess options for bringing forward a new ambitious investment programme to develop a long-term delivery plan (5–10 years) for sustainable play site development and maintenance. The team will deploy these monies alongside seeking opportunities through developer contributions and other external options to fund replacement equipment, repair and other creative options to extend the life of assets.

2. CHALLENGE 2 – FOOD WASTE

The Council is preparing the implementation of a brand-new, citywide, weekly food waste collection service with the first phase commencing in March 2026. This long aspired for service is required by legislation set out in the Environment Act 2021 and is anticipated to have a positive impact on our overall recycling rate. The waste is disposed of through an anaerobic digestion (AD) process which is environmentally advantageous, creating renewable energy in the form of electricity and biogas. The key challenges sit with ensuring household participation is as high as possible and matching resources for collection rounds, vehicles and staff, to the level of demand. The disposal cost per tonne of food waste through an AD plant is notably lower than that paid for residual waste disposed of through our energy from waste plant. Therefore, the new service creates a virtuous dual incentive to drive environmental benefits through increased recycling and also keep the cost of overall Council waste disposal as low as possible. The Government has further indicated that future income received by Councils through Extended Producer Responsibility requirements may be directly linked to recycling performance in future.

2.a. MITIGATIONS FOR CHALLENGE 2 – FOOD WASTE

Crucial to the success of the new citywide service will be ensuring a high-quality communications, resident engagement and behavioural change campaign. Residents will be given clear information on when services commence, where and how to present waste, and crucially what can and can't be placed

in food waste caddies. Utilising social media, leaflets, digital systems and letters. Residents who share communal collections such as those who live in flats will be given bespoke information and materials to provide additional clarity. This will be supported by a wider programme of engagement across schools, events and targeted door knocking to remove barriers, myth bust and encourage participation. A key enabler will be the reintroduction Recycling Officers in the city. The benefit of the phased approach will mean that resources can be adjusted and designed using the latest intelligence and experience to forecast demand for services, this will ensure services are efficient and costs are kept to a minimum.

3. CHALLENGE 3 – ENERGY MANAGEMENT

The City Council provides services across a number of buildings in its corporate estate. With capital investment there is a significant opportunity to deliver invest to save measures that will substantially reduce our energy bills. Additionally, by investing further in capacity to proactively monitor and manage energy and water usage in a coordinated way we will be able to yield even greater energy and utility cost savings across the whole estate. Through collaborative cross-departmental working between Facilities Management and Strategic Planning & Infrastructure on capital projects already delivered, savings on utility bills of around £500,000 per annum are being achieved. However, left unchecked utilities are projected to be around £100,000 per annum more expensive than at present primarily due to the addition of new buildings to the City Council's corporate estate. Furthermore, with a more proactive energy management regime, over time we would expect to yield a further saving of over £1 million per annum.

3.a. MITIGATIONS FOR CHALLENGE 3 – ENERGY MANAGEMENT

By realigning existing staff resources to create an Energy and Infrastructure Planning Team a proactive approach can be taken to deliver a more joined-up corporate energy and water management service which can deliver significant future savings on the City Council's utility bills. Existing specialist expertise will be focused on working with Finance and other departments to identify where utilities spend occurs; identifying where unnecessary spend is taking place; ensuring that utilities spend only occurs in relation to actual use; tracking spend against forecasts; identifying and advising on budget risks; ensuring that feed-in-tariff income is received and appropriately accounted for; and continuing to seek external grant funding to support upgrades in the energy infrastructure within City Council buildings. At a strategic level, this new approach to energy management will be overseen by a Corporate Utilities Management Board who will ensure long-term value for value for money, supported at an operational level by a Corporate Utilities Working Group.