

# Council focus

Mark Smith, chief executive at Chippenham Town Council in Wiltshire, provides an overview of the town council and explains its devolution journey

Chippenham Town Council is one of the largest councils in the sector, serving a population of around 40,000. As from April 2019, the council will have a precept of just under £3m and a revenue budget of over £3.6m, with a Band D council tax equivalent of £239.61. The council has 24 councillors in eight wards, with the next elections in 2021. We have around 70 members of staff and another 70 volunteers who help to support Chippenham Museum. In terms of governance, the council has four standing committees: strategy and resources; amenities, culture and leisure; planning, environment and transport; and human resources. We operate with a leader and a chairman of council/mayor. We have a clear separation between the roles of the town mayor (civic and ceremonial) and the leader (the business element of the council) with the leader forming the pivotal link between the chief executive and the 24 councillors. We are piloting a corporate peer review in 2019 with NALC and the Local Government Association (LGA). Our scale, scope and ambition suggest that we are probably more like a small district or borough council than the typical parish council.

We have good working relationships with a range of town partners and stakeholders, such as Wiltshire Council, the police, Town Centre BID, the Chamber of Commerce, third sector partners and local schools. We have an ambitious corporate strategic plan to take us through to 2022, with five key priorities: health and wellbeing; collaborative working with partners; clean, green and safe; promoting Chippenham as a destination market town; and the effective and efficient use of resources.

## Devolution

This summer, the town council is set to complete a major transfer of services and assets from Wiltshire Council. Rather than passively waiting for Wiltshire Council to

come and talk to us, we went to County Hall and commenced the conversation with its leader and corporate directors. We established a Councillor Working Party in February 2018, which took ownership of the process and we established what we called our 'Basket of Opportunity'. We also appointed a highly experienced consultant to help us on the devolution journey, to bring some best practice and external challenge to the process.

Our willingness to organise ourselves and essentially take the game to the principal council elevated us up the waiting list. The negotiations have taken longer than we anticipated but we were able to take a report to our Strategy and Resources

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Committee which agreed what would be included in the Chippenham transfer, with responsibility for agreeing the final negotiations and costings being delegated to the chief executive. The principal council's contractual relationship with its extant contractor added an interesting dynamic to the negotiation but we settled on a solution whereby the town council would make a contribution to contractual costs for the remainder of the contract, with the town council providing a top-up service until then.

In terms of the actual transfer, the town council will be taking on the responsibility for grass cutting, grounds maintenance, street sweeping and litter clearance on a town-wide basis from June this year.

We shall receive the freehold transfer of Monkton Park (an historic town centre park) and golf centre, the 15th century Yelde Hall (former Guildhall prior to 1835),

the Neeld Community and Arts Centre, play areas and various other properties and land around the town. We shall also take on responsibility for the Friday and Saturday markets in the town.

In order to pay for all of this, we have budgeted an additional £550,000 to go into our base budget for 2020. The council unanimously agreed to increase the precept by 37.5% next year (we are a political council and the decision was unanimous across the two main groups and the independent councillors). We are now into the mobilisation phase, with the chief executive chairing a fortnightly Devolution Programme Board. Throughout the negotiation process the working relationship between the two councils has been excellent. If anything it has strengthened our relationship and understanding of each other's pressures and priorities at a political and an officer level.

## The future

Who knows what the future holds for the local council sector, yet alone local government, or even the wider public sector? What we do know is that the creation of the county unitary councils has left delivery, funding and capacity gaps, particularly around those highly visible universal services that our residents experience on a weekly, if not daily, basis. The espoused solutions are bound to emerge over the next few years. However, history tells us that things never stand still, change is inevitable and things sometimes go around in circles.

Perhaps we shouldn't rule out a return to Alfred's Wessex for some of those big ticket activities such as strategic highways, waste and social care, with a return to a pre-1974 model of locally accountable rural district and urban borough councils delivering those highly visible universal services to our communities.

That's perhaps a conversation for another day! ■