

CHIPPENHAM'S DEVOLUTION STORY...



Mark Smith FSLCC,
Chief Executive at
Chippenham Town

Council in Wiltshire, shares his experience of the town council's devolution (transfer of services and assets) journey.



FACT FILE: CHIPPENHAM

🏠 Population	40,000
👥 Councillors	24 in 8 wards
👤 Staff	Over 70, with 70 Volunteers
£ Precept Budget	Just under £3M
£ Budget	£3.7M
£ Band D equivalent	£239.61

OVERVIEW OF THE DEVOLUTION PROCESS

On the 1st June 2019 the town council completed 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 their Leader and Corporate Directors. We established a Working Party in February 2018, and established what we called our 'Basket of Opportunity'. Alongside this we 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 to the top of a long waiting list of councils. Negotiations have taken longer than we anticipated but we were able to take a report to our Strategy and Resources Committee in January 2019 that agreed what would be included in the Chippenham transfer, with responsibility for agreeing the final negotiations and costings being delegated to myself.

Wiltshire Council's contractual relationship with their extant 'streetscene' 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 and play a role in overseeing the contract until June 2020. In addition, it was agreed that the town council would provide a top up service until then to ensure that the service standards throughout the town are of a high quality. As from June 2020 the town council shall then assume sole responsibility for all 'clean and green' activity in the town.

In terms of the actual transfer the town council has taken on the responsibility for grass cutting, grounds maintenance, street sweeping and

litter clearance on a town wide basis as from June this year. We have employed an additional five staff as from this year and plan to employ more staff next year, we have purchased additional plant and equipment including; ride on mowers, pick-up trucks and a 17tonne road sweeper. We are currently hiring additional depot space but in the fullness of time we have an aspiration to build a purpose built depot on our own land.

We received 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 & Arts Centre, six play areas and various other properties and land around the town. We also took on responsibility for the Friday and Saturday charter 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 this year. 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.

Throughout the negotiation process the working relationship between the two councils was excellent, if anything it has strengthened our relationship and understanding of each other's pressures and priorities at a political and an officer level.

There is however a certain irony to the process, given that all of the assets that are transferring to the town council were in the ownership of the former Chippenham Borough Council from 1835 through to 1974, there's certainly a sense of 'they are back where they belong' within the council and the town!

THE LESSONS WE LEARNT?

- The process can take much longer than first anticipated.
- The Town Council and the unitary council have totally different perspectives on issues such as time scales, prioritisation and the level of councillor involvement.
- The bigger the council the slower and more fragmented the decision making process can be.
- Processes such as this aren't an exact science and one has to occasionally take a leap of faith.



MARK'S TOP DEVOLUTION TIPS

1. Take the game to the principal council, don't wait for them to come to you
2. Involve and engage your councillors at an early stage
3. Be clear about what you want to achieve from the process
4. Bring in some experienced external consultancy advice if required
5. Be prepared to walk away from the negotiating table