

Town and parish devolution: Summary of the proposed approach in Buckinghamshire

Introduction

Buckinghamshire County Council is keen to enable and fund town and parish councils and parish meetings to take on a devolved set of transport services across the county. Devolution enables communities to have greater control over service delivery and prioritisation, as well as creating capacity within communities.

Currently the County Council has devolved arrangements with 23 town and parish councils. The Council has carried out a review of the current devolved arrangements. This found that the current devolved services provide a high quality of service and also added value for residents. However the 23 arrangements now represent an unequal distribution of resources. The Council has been seeking to increase the number of devolved arrangements, but this will only be possible with a wholesale change to the approach across the county.

We now wish to begin negotiations with each town and parish about taking on devolved services. We will be transparent about the current costs to TfB for providing these services, and open to a range of ways for towns and parishes to provide services. This proposal is a first step; we are looking to work with local councils to identify the best local delivery solutions. The total budget available will not change, but we are open to discussing how it is used.

We will only be able to deal with clusters of parish councils for the new approach to be viable.

Benefits

Some towns and parishes are already asking to take on more devolved services. Devolved services can have the following benefits:

- **Improved quality of service:** Parishes and towns take pride in delivering services locally and will likely 'go the extra mile' to deliver a high quality of service.
- **Increased service provision:** For example increased number of cuts under the pilot devolution arrangement with six parishes led by Stewkley Enterprise Agency.
- **A more responsive service:** As service delivery is based locally parish clusters will be able to respond more quickly to problems and resolve complaints.
- **Increased satisfaction:** If the above two benefits are achieved then communities will be more satisfied with the service they receive.
- **Generation of local employment opportunities:** The Community Interest Company set up for the Stewkley Cluster employs local people on a part time basis and provides an

opportunity for NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) to gain employment. This is a possible but not essential opportunity for other parish clusters to take

- **Increased pride in local area:** Through devolving services to a more local level, communities will feel that they have greater control over local delivery and will more likely become involved in service delivery
- **More local decision making:** for example on the number of grass cuts, how the local budget is allocated, when grass is cut
- **Opportunity to expand on current service delivery:** Parish clusters, with support from BCC, will be able to take on additional services in their local area.
- **The opportunity to take ownership of the local environment,** and to combine contracts for grass cutting and other services where the parish already provides some of these services.

The approach

Cluster model

BCC will not determine how clusters of parishes and town councils should deliver services. However for practical reasons and to reduce our overhead costs we will not enter into or continue arrangements with individual towns and parishes. We are asking towns and parishes to form clusters which will decide the best form of service delivery for that area using their allocated resources. Clusters will likely have 5-20 members, but we are open to negotiation on this.

Parishes and towns will be required to cluster as part of the devolved budgets approach because:

- It is the only way for the County Council to effectively manage the arrangements
- Clusters enable parishes to share resources
- Clusters can enable larger parishes to deliver services to smaller parishes who do not have the resources to manage service delivery
- Clusters empower parishes to identify the most suitable form of service delivery for their local area
- Clusters will ensure that smaller parishes still benefit from these arrangements.

Towns and parishes will be entirely free to work out who to cluster with. These are likely to be geographic, but some parishes have already indicated that they may prefer to cluster with more distant councils with whom they have more in common.

Taking on a devolved service could involve very little work for an individual parish. Options that clusters could choose from include: a larger town council delivering services within the town and in neighbouring parishes using their own employees, a parish council delivering services through a community interest company which is training and employing local people for this purpose, and a parish council commissioning commercial subcontractors.

BCC's offer includes support to co-create the most appropriate model for each cluster, providing resources to work out costs and method of service provision.

Services in scope

Services will only be devolved which are of minimum risk to parishes if delivered by them. For example, this means that urban grass cuts within the 40mph limit will only be included in devolved arrangements on a case by case basis if parishes can deliver them safely. The essential services which will be included in every arrangement are:

- Urban grass cuts (within the 30mph boundary). (number of cuts to be set by the cluster)
- Weed spraying, including noxious and injurious types
- Siding out of overgrown footways to reinstate full width
- Hedge cutting
- Public rights of way clearance to the parish boundary
- Maintenance works such as:
 - o Cleaning of traffic signs
 - o Minor traffic sign repairs
 - o Trimming vegetation obstructing pavements and footpaths (or liaising with landowner to carry out where appropriate)
 - o Checking for obstructions to pavements & footpaths
 - o Serving of hedge cutting notices
 - o Verge maintenance including clearance, soiling and seeding
 - o Reporting potholes

Funding

BCC operates a rolling four year budget. For that reason the initial agreements would be for four years. Towns and parishes would be able to return services to BCC after the four years if they wish, although we hope to continue with the arrangements as 'business as usual'.

The County Councils' total budget for the services in scope is £909,000 in 2015/16 and £709,000 in the three following years. Every town and parish would receive a budget each year to support them in service delivery. Draft, indicative figures will be provided to each town and parish during the conference being held on 27 May, or subsequently for those not able to attend. We are open to discussions about the best way to allocate the available funding, although the total budget will not change.

Please note:

- The total figures available only apply if all parishes agree to deliver all services in scope. If fewer parishes sign up to the approach the figures would need to be recalculated, taking in to consideration the areas covered by the signed up parishes and the impact these parishes delivering services would have on the economies of scale under TfB's operations.

- The budget per parish is based on the amount of work per activity in scope (for example grass cutting is calculated per area within parish). This provides a cost per service in each parish which added together with other service costs within the parish gives an indicative figure. We will provide each town and parish with details of the areas of the amounts of grass, hedges and footways.
- The budgets provided will be the same as those we would spend on these services if they are not devolved.
- Where discussions identify unusual costs or particular challenges we would like to work through the best way to solve them with each parish. We recognise that some areas may require some additional initial funding to resolve such issues.

Operational

Responsibility

We are seeking hand responsibility for these services to clusters of town and parish councils. However we will look to establish alternative local delivery solutions wherever possible should a cluster fail.

Parish clusters will adhere to a minimum standard of service delivery; however, beyond this it is up to them how they determine service delivery. Parishes will have a formal role in quality and quantity of service provision.

Parishes and Town Councils are under no obligation to take on a service delegation but if they are unsure they are advised to seek legal advice.

Insurance

Clusters will be expected to arrange public liability insurance in delivering devolved services. As an example the Stewkley Social Enterprise cluster has secured its own insurance to deliver services locally. The equipment is insured by the parish council.

Each parish or town council should inform its insurers of its involvement in the scheme and is required to put in place a £10,000,000 public liability indemnity and the appropriate employer's liability insurance. Where a service contract is used, the operative should also have this level of indemnity.

Parish and town councils will be responsible for risk assessment of all activities and ensuring that all mitigation measures arising from this are in place.

Health and safety

Parishes would follow their own health and safety arrangements. Parishes will be supported to establish these as part of the programme set up. Parish and town councils will be responsible for ensuring that their operatives works in a safe an appropriate manner.

As such we recommend that the operatives used by each cluster will only be permitted to carry out tasks except for:

- Motorways;
- Trunk roads;
- 'A' and 'B' class roads where the maximum speed limit is 30 miles per hour or more AND the maintenance work would require entry onto the carriageway itself

If a parish operative is not able to undertake the work safely then the work must be passed to Transport for Buckinghamshire for completion.

Equipment

Parishes could use the budget to hire equipment from Transport for Buckinghamshire to deliver devolved services. The cost per unit, per parish, includes the expected cost of PPE, training and equipment which parishes will be expected to provide.

Monitoring

Local Area Technicians will not manage the performance of service delivery (whether contracted out, delivered in house or other). They will merely be a point of contact clusters. Any local complaints about the quality of service delivered within the cluster would be routed directly to the lead parish. Parish clusters may also be given technology to enable them to take photos and complete e-forms that feed in to Symology and enable TfB to fix problems outside the scope of devolved services. There will be no systematic monitoring of the network. Parish clusters will be trusted to maintain standards. Customer feedback will act as the barometer as to whether this is being done.

Next steps

1. We would like to meet with each parish once you have been able to consider this proposal. We will not be able to develop separate agreements with each parish; we are seeking to work with clusters of town and parish councils. Buckinghamshire County Council does not have a view about how clusters should be formed or which cluster each parish and town council should belong to. We have made some initial suggestions but these are intended only to help stimulate discussion.
2. Once you have an idea of your likely cluster, we would like to arrange to meet with representatives from the cluster to discuss the options available, support you may need, and possible time scales. We would like to meet with you during June or July for these initial discussions.
3. We hope to have sufficient understanding of the approach parishes and towns are taking by September. At that time Buckinghamshire County Council will review the viability of the proposal to devolve services, and will then either make formal offers or end discussions. This approach is designed to enable parishes and towns to have the maximum involvement in co-creating the best solution for each area.
4. The first tranche of clusters who adopt the model will aim to be in place by April 2015. We hope to have most arrangements in place to begin by April 2016.