



Christopher Wayman

PARTNERSHIP TO EMPLOYMENT

Christopher Wayman, Town Clerk to Buckingham TC, explains his council's innovative approach to using a devolved service to offer employment experience

Buckinghamshire County Council announced in 2014 that they would be looking to expand the devolution offer to Parishes within the County. The County Council were honest that the service was going to be reduced due to cost cutting exercises and gave the Parishes the chance to keep up the level of service or improve it. The offer focused mainly on the "Urban grass cutting area" namely those verges deemed to be in the built up area of a town/village. But also included were weed spraying, siding out of some footways and some hedge cutting. The County offered a £29,000 budget in the first year reduced to £20,000 for the three subsequent years.

The landownership in the town is complicated with a mixture of verge ownership, mostly between the County, District and Housing Associations. This results in a number of small verges isolated from others in the same ownership. Because of this and the limited budget it was not cost effective to employ our existing grass cutting contractor to undertake the work. The Town Council also did not have the capacity to undertake the work itself. A lack of space within the depot and not enough staff to carry out the extra work were the main factors in this decision.

Buckinghamshire County Council however, put us in contact with David Lett Co-ordinator at Stewkley Enterprise Agency. David had carried out the devolved service offer the year before in the village of Stewkley (about 7 miles away). He employed 4 young people to carry out the grass cutting with petrol

lawnmowers (the same you would use in your own garden) in the parish and it had worked out really well cutting down the cost. Whilst this was fairly labour intensive there was actually a saving to be made as there was no need for County grass cutters to travel many miles with large expensive machinery to carry out a quarter day activity.

Buckingham however, is much larger so we had to expand the scope of the project to accommodate the scale of the increase. In the end we came to a solution which incorporated all three options we had discussed to deliver the project. The verges around the bypass lent themselves to large ride-on mowers which proved more economical in the situation. The existing Town Council carry out the hedge cutting and other smaller or specialist jobs such as weed killing. The rest of the grass cutting area was divided into 16 small areas which could be walked easily and incorporated a similar amount of area to be cut.

We went on a recruitment drive and found 12 young people to cut these 16 areas. Each area would have 10 cuts over the season with the young people having a fortnight to cut their areas. Each person texts or emails David to advise when they are cutting their area, making it easy to check and monitor to ensure the work has been carried out.



Members really liked the idea of incorporating the development of young people through the devolved process. Each area earns the young person between £550 and £800 per year depending on the size. This is money which is likely to be pumped back into the local economy through things such as driving lessons etc. Each worker is employed through the

Stewkley Enterprise Agency and due to the amount earned are below tax thresholds.

The scheme in Buckingham has had a few teething problems, mainly areas which were not cut due to not being on the County supplied maps. However, on the whole the experience has been positive. Young people from this first year have gone on to University and used the experience as part of their applications. Members of the original Stewkley group have used the experience to obtain jobs.

We hope it is a conveyor belt to employment for many years to come. It has also encouraged the Town Council to start an apprenticeship scheme in the new year.