

REVIEW OF DEVOLUTION OF STREETSMART SERVICES PILOTS - TASK GROUP REPORT

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Wards: Blunsdon and Highworth, Haydon Wick, Covingham and Dorcan, Wroughton and Wichelstowe,

Locality Affected: East, North and North East

Parishes Affected: Haydon Wick, Highworth, Nythe and Wroughton

1. Purpose and Reasons

- 1.1 The aim of this report is to review the pilots currently taking place where Streetsmart services have been devolved to participating Parish Councils.
- 1.2 At its meeting on 16 September 2015, the Streetsmart and Highways Overview and Scrutiny Committee agreed to set up a Task Group to review the devolution of Streetsmart services to Town and Parish Councils. Expressions of interest were sought from members of the Committee with a view to joining the Task Group. Membership of the Task Group:
 - 1.2.1 Cllr Joe Tray (Chair);
 - 1.2.2 Cllr Vera Tomlinson;
 - 1.2.3 Cllr Nick Martin;
 - 1.2.4 Cllr Derique Montaut;
 - 1.2.5 Cllr David Wood;
- 1.3 The objective was to review how well the pilots are working in terms of the quality of the service being received by residents. To review the cost effectiveness of the pilots and ensure that they are still providing value for money to residents. To establish any potential positive or negative outcomes of the devolution of these services in terms of recommending future participation in such projects.

2. Detail

Summary of the Parish Pilots Programme

- 2.1 From April 2014, four Parish/Town Councils were identified as pilot areas for the transfer of some StreetSmart services, namely grounds maintenance and street cleaning. This was aligned with the Localism Act 2011, which brought a greater focus to local decision-making and the role of parish councils.
- 2.2 The aspiration of focusing services on a smaller geographical area is that it may help increase community interest and participation in placed based services, and it will allow parish councils to focus on local needs and priorities. A further aspiration was that as well as maintaining existing service standards, we would see the Parish Councils improving the service standards provided to their communities.

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Parish Pilot Areas

- 2.3 The four Parish/Town Councils identified in this pilot were:
- 2.3.1 Haydon Wick Parish Council;
 - 2.3.2 Highworth Town Council;
 - 2.3.3 Nythe Parish Council;
 - 2.3.4 Wroughton Parish Council, who had already been undertaking a small amount of additional grass cutting work during 2014/15.

Services Transferred

- 2.4 Each of the Parish/Town Councils took on different levels of service from the Borough Council and used different delivery models to provide the services.
- 2.5 Haydon Wick Parish Council applied a delivery model that was partially contracted to an external contractor, and partially delivered by staff employed by the Parish Council and volunteers. A full breakdown of the services provided by the Parish Council can be found in Appendix A, but in summary they include grounds maintenance, street cleaning, playground inspection and maintenance, graffiti removal, fly tipping and fly posting removal, litter and dog bin emptying.
- 2.6 Highworth Town Council deliver their services through staff employed by the Town Council. A full breakdown of the services provided by the Town Council can be found in Appendix A, but in summary they include grounds maintenance, street cleaning, playground inspection and maintenance, graffiti removal, fly tipping and fly posting removal, litter and dog bin emptying.
- 2.7 Nythe Parish Council deliver their services through an external contractor. A full breakdown of the services provided by the Parish Council can be found in Appendix A, but in summary they include grounds maintenance, street cleaning, playground inspection and maintenance, graffiti removal, fly tipping and fly posting removal, litter and dog bin emptying.
- 2.8 Wroughton Parish Council deliver their services through staff employed by the Parish Council and volunteers. A full breakdown of the services provided by the Parish Council can be found in Appendix A, but in summary they include grounds maintenance, playground inspection and maintenance, and dog bin emptying.

Service Standards

- 2.9 The service standards provided by the pilot areas will vary between Parish Councils and will be dependent on weather conditions and local need / priority. In summary, the pilot areas are either maintaining the existing service standards provided by the Borough Council, or they are providing more frequent street cleaning and grass cutting services. Where higher standards of service are

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being delivered, this is being positively received by local residents and businesses.

Customer Feedback

- 2.10 During the first few months of the service transfer, we experienced a 46% reduction in the levels of requests for service received from residents in Haydon Wick and Highworth. This was supported by compliments being received for the higher service standards being provided and would indicate higher levels of satisfaction. We have received no complaints in relation to the increased parish precept in the Council Tax Bill from April 2015.
- 2.11 During the interviews with representatives from Wroughton Parish Council and Haydon Wick Parish Council, they confirmed their residents had noted the improved appearance of the local area and were supportive of the Parish Council taking on these services.

Parish Council Feedback

- 2.12 The Task Group sent meeting invitations to each of the parish pilot areas and enquired whether representatives of the Parish Council would be available to meet with the Task Group to discuss their experience of the pilot scheme. Two Parish Councils were able to send representatives, Wroughton Parish Council and Haydon Wick Parish Council. The notes from the meetings are found in Appendices B and C but a summary of the consolidated feedback is provided below.
- 2.13 After nearly a year of providing the services, both Wroughton and Haydon Wick Parish Councils have been able to provide the same or a higher level of service to the residents and businesses in their community. Neither Parish Council has completed a formal satisfaction survey as yet, but anecdotal feedback has been very positive towards the Parish Councils taking on and delivering these services.
- 2.14 Both Wroughton and Haydon Wick Parish Councils benefit from volunteers in their community mainly doing litter picks or some grass cutting. They also benefit from employed staff who live within the community and take a great deal of pride in their work. Haydon Wick Parish Council have commissioned a private contractor to deliver many of their services and they have a clause in their contract that would allow them to take on further services if they felt this was right for their community.
- 2.15 Both Wroughton and Haydon Wick discussed the benefits of being able to respond to local priorities with an agile and reactive local workforce. For example, Wroughton Parish Council highlighted the benefit of re-directing resources to do an extra grass cut during the growing season to keep on top of the appearance rather than being hampered by a fixed borough-wide schedule.

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Both Parish Councils explained they run a thin management structure which enables agile and reactive working as well as keeping overhead costs to a minimum. They also found their teams had the capacity to complete the detailed grounds work around street furniture such as lamp posts, benches, and utility boxes resulting in a smarter finish.

- 2.16 Both Parish Councils reported a modest increase in parish precept for which they had received no complaints from residents as they could see the benefit. The Parish Councils have no plans to increase parish council allowances, and they confirmed some parish councillors did not take up their allowance entitlement.
- 2.17 In terms of decision making, the Parish Councillors felt they had benefited from a non-party political approach and instead based decision making on a factual and resident feedback basis.
- 2.18 Whilst the Parish Councils have not completed a formal value for money exercise, they confirmed they felt they were able to realise savings from undertaking work locally where there was no travel time, the lack of overheads and wage structure. The Parish Councils also benefit from volunteers in their local community completing litter picks and/or grass cutting.
- 2.19 Given the success of the pilots, both Parish Councils are taking on further services from April 2016, however, they stressed they would look to approach this in a staged manner taking on services they felt they could manage and which benefited the local community.
- 2.20 Both Parish Councils noted Central Government may introduce the capping of parish precepts in the future. Although this is not a current issue, the Parish Councils recognised this may present a future challenge.
- 2.21 Haydon Wick Parish Council highlighted the potential of delay if anyone was seeking to take on larger third party contracts as these may be subject to EU procurement regulations so more time would be required to transfer these services.
- 2.22 Wroughton Parish Council identified the capacity of their current workshop as being a limiting factor in taking on additional services after 2016/17.
- 2.23 The support from the StreetSmart team was noted but it would help if the Borough Council provided more detailed information on background and scope of services together with fuller specifications and detailed maps.
- 2.24 There was some confusion for residents in areas where the parish council took on responsibility for maintaining some land and the Borough Council retained responsibility for other land resulting in different service standards in the same areas.
- 2.25 The above issues and wider learning from the pilots has been used to enable further service transfers from 1st April 2016 to be managed more effectively.

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Financial Impact

- 2.26 The four pilots operated with slightly different financial models as they were put in place under different circumstances.
- 2.27 Wroughton Parish Council approached the Council to request that they undertook some supplementary grass cutting work at a notional cost to the Borough Council of £250. Therefore, during 2015-16, the Parish undertook work at an estimated cost of £10k at their own expense with little financial contribution from the Borough Council.
- 2.28 Nythe Parish Council was a newly established parish in 2015-16 and from the first day of its existence it took over most grounds and street cleaning work within the area. No transitional funding was given to the Parish by the Borough and the new parish council built £25k of funding into the budget in its first year to cover work transferring to it from both the Borough Council and Stratton St Margaret Parish Council. In addition, the Parish Council agreed to buy mechanical street cleaning, gully cleaning and weed killing services from the Borough Council. In total, it is estimated that the pilot transfer saved the Borough Council £10k of on-going operational costs.
- 2.29 Both Highworth and Haydon Wick parishes were the first of the new wave of service transfers that operated under a transitional arrangement that both enabled financial and operational support from the Borough Council. £50k of services were transferred to each organisation, saving the Borough Council £100k of on-going operational costs. To smooth the transition and the cost of reflecting this into the parish precepts, the following transitional funding was made available to each Council:-
- Year One – 100% of Borough savings - £50k each
 - Year Two – 50% - £25k each
 - Year Three – 25% - £12,500 each
- 2.30 The change in the parish precepts, parish Council Tax charges and the Borough Council on-going base budget annual savings over the transitional period are as set out in Table One below. The Council Tax changes reflect the impact of wider funding issues for the parishes, as well as the impact of the service transfers.

Table One – Financial Impact of Parish Pilots 2015-16

	Band D 2015-16	Band D 2014-15	Change		SBC Savings (£k pa)
Haydon Wick	£31.35	£31.35	£0.00	0.0%	50
Highworth	£118.61	£114.19	£4.42	3.9%	50
Nythe	£42.00	£0.00	£42.00	100.0%	10
Wroughton	£109.87	£100.61	£9.26	9.2%	10
On-going annual savings to SBC					120
2015-16 SBC Transitional Funding					100

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3. Recommendations

- 3.1 That the report of the StreetSmart Devolution Task Group be received.

4. Alternative Options

- 4.1 None. The report sets out a report of the Streetsmart Devolution Task Group.

5. Implications, Diversity Impact Assessment and Risk Management

Financial and Procurement Implications

- 5.1 The financial issues arising from this approach will be fed into the Council's future budget setting framework.

Legal and Human Rights Implications

- 5.2 Legal and Human Rights implications were taken into account when preparing this report. It is considered that the report's recommendations are consistent with Convention Rights.

All Other Implications (including Staff, Sustainability, Health, Rural, Crime and Disorder)

- 5.3 There are no other implications that have been identified at this time. Any implications will be set out in any future report on Streetsmart service provision.

Diversity Impact Assessment

- 5.4 A Diversity Impact Assessment is not considered to be required.

Risk Management

- 5.5 There are no implications that have been identified at this time. Any risk management issues will be set out in any future report on Streetsmart service provision.

6. Consultees

- 6.1 The Board Director, Resources (Section 151 Officer) and Director of Law and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) are consulted in respect of all reports.

7. Background Papers

- 7.1 None

8. Appendices

- 8.1 Appendix A – Services Transferred;
8.2 Appendix B – Meeting with Wroughton Parish Council representatives;
8.3 Appendix C – Meeting with Haydon Wick Parish Council representatives;

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Appendix A – Services Transferred to the Parish Pilots

Services Transferred

From April 2015, the Borough Council transferred the following services to each of the parish pilots.

Service	Haydon Wick	Highworth	Nythe	Wroughton
Amenity Grass Cutting (some specific locations not transferred)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gang Mowing (large grass areas)	✓	N/A	✗	N/A
Hedge Cutting (<2m)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hedge Cutting (>2m)	✗	✗	✗	✗
Tree Works (<2m)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tree Works (>2m)	✗	✗	✗	✗
Shrub Bed Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓
Playground Inspection	✓	✓	✓	✓
Playground Maintenance	✓	✓	✓	✓
Litter Picking	✓	✓	✓	✗
Litter Bins	✓	✓	✓	✗
Dog Bins	✓	✓	✓	✓
Waste Disposal	Disposal to Euro Bins (SBC Trade Waste Service)	✓	Delivered to Waterside	✗
Graffiti Removal (minor)	✓	✓	✓	✗
Graffiti Removal (major)	✗	✗	✗	✗
Fly Tipping (minor)	✓	✓	✓	✗
Fly Tipping (major)	✗	✗	✗	✗
Public Toilets	✓ (as of Jan 2016)	✗	✗	✗

Figure 1 – Services Transferred to the Parish Pilots

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Appendix B – Summary of meeting with Wroughton Parish Council on 22nd February 2016

Attendees:

Wroughton Parish Council Chair – Cllr Steve Harcourt;

Wroughton Parish Clerk – Joyce Holman;

Task Group Chair – Cllr Joe Tray;

Task Group Member – Cllr Vera Tomlinson;

Task Group Member – Cllr Nick Martin;

Overview & Scrutiny Committee Clerk – Shaun Banks;

Head of StreetSmart – Leon Barrett

Meeting notes

- Historical issues of the maintenance of land and grass cutting of “grey areas” of land in the middle of Wroughton where there was confusion over who was responsible for carrying out work.
- Complaints from local residents that SBC maintained land wasn’t cut as regularly or to the same standard as that undertaken by the Parish Council. This led to a meeting with Swindon Borough Council regarding grass cutting.
- In February 2014, took decision to take on additional work as a contractor from the Borough Council from April 2014, which meant buying a mower and employing an extra member of staff.
- The Borough Council assisted with administrative issues such as supplying maps and technical advice on maintenance responsibilities but not with the cost of purchasing equipment or advice on where to purchase it (the Parish Council had in-house expertise on the sourcing of equipment).
- The Parish Council’s decision to take on services was related to the improvement of service delivery and to improve the appearance of the village, especially with regard to grass cutting.
- There has been an improvement through a responsive service through a team of three staff who understand and know the village and who take pride in their work.
- The services undertaken add about £1.00 per month to the Parish Council precept. There have been few complaints about the increase as local residents see a difference in the village.
- The improvements arise because Swindon Borough Council undertook work on a schedule. The Parish Council team are more responsive and have more time to

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undertake finishing touches such as edging, blowing grass off paths and cutting close and around poles/lampposts.

- Since the Parish undertook the service the amount of work residents have had to undertake to maintain grassed areas adjacent to their properties has fallen.
- Local residents were informed of the proposals through a village newsletter and invited to comment although they were not formally consulted on the proposals.
- The number of complaints regarding grass cutting standards has fallen considerably since the Parish Council undertook this role.
- Responsive work is managed through having flexibility in the three man maintenance team (there is also a fourth employee available if required in the summer months to cover sickness and holidays).
- The approximate cost of the service provision is £20,000 wages and the purchase of a grass mower for £22,000 which is being written off over a seven year period.
- The Parish Council continues to contract out the emptying of the dog bins; this is the only service it currently contracts out.
- There is a small but dedicated volunteer group within the Parish that undertake litter picking this supplements the work of the maintenance team but it has proven difficult to expand the volunteer base.
- The precept was increase by around 4% this year to fund an additional member of staff, this will be partly funded by taking on grass cutting of Housing Revenue Account land for which the Parish Council will be paid.
- The Parish is aware that if Parish Council precepts were capped that this would make it more difficult to take on additional work from the Borough Council.
- If there were a possibility of sharing Business Rates when these are devolved to the Borough Council it would have minimal effect given the limited amount likely to be raised within the Parish.
- The Chair of the Parish Council is entitled to a £1,100 allowance and Parish Councillors a £600 Allowance although not all Councillors choose to receive their allowance.
- The Parish would be cautious about taking on additional responsibilities from the Borough Council and would only consider this on a stage by stage basis. This would be for both financial and staffing reasons. The Parish currently has a workforce that has a skill set that matches the Parishes needs and would currently be reluctant to enforce new roles upon its staff. An example of this was fly tipping; currently staff removed minor examples but would not be keen to undertake larger removals that were the responsibility of the Borough as they

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were primarily a maintenance team and would alter the nature of their job. It also removed some graffiti but again the expansion of this service from the Borough Council was not seen as a good skill match currently.

- The Parish Council would also need to be convinced that should it undertake any new role that this would achieve quantifiable benefit for local residents.
- The Parish were also concerned that the current work shop/storage facility for equipment was close to capacity. It was noted the provision of a new facility would be a major decision.
- Savings from undertaking work locally were made from the lack of travel time, the lack of overheads and wage structure.
- There was also the issue of understanding the maintenance issues arising from the Wichelstowe development which would double the size of the Parish population. The use of service charges for maintenance was discussed although not favoured as it would give the impression of some residents paying three times for service delivery (to the Parish, Borough and through a service charge).

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Appendix C – Summary of meeting with Haydon Wick Parish Council on 29th February 2016

Attendees:

Haydon Wick Parish Council Chair – Cllr Linda Brown;

Haydon Wick Parish Clerk – Terry Powell;

Task Group Chair – Cllr Joe Tray;

Task Group Member – Cllr Vera Tomlinson;

Task Group Member – Cllr Nick Martin;

Task Group Member – Cllr Derique Montaut

Overview & Scrutiny Committee Clerk – Shaun Banks;

Head of StreetSmart – Leon Barrett

Meeting notes

- The Parish Council was in the process of creating a business plan in regards to extending the grass cutting trial in the Taw Hill area of the Parish when SBC offered the opportunity to undertake the full grounds maintenance package across the Parish.
- All eighteen Councillors had supported the Parish taking on the current package of StreetSmart services from the Borough Council. . The Parish Council is not based on party lines and is completely non-political.
- Feedback from residents had been positive since the Parish started to undertake the StreetSmart services agreed with the Borough Council.
- The Parish had wanted to undertake the StreetSmart services package because it believed it could undertake them in a more cost effective manner than the Borough partially because it didn't have the overheads Swindon Borough Council's StreetSmart team had, for instance travel time and wage costs.
- Grass cutting was undertaken 10-12 times per year by the Parish against 6-9 times by the Borough.
- The Parish Council's aim was to improve service delivery in line with the Localism Act 2011.

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- As the Parish Council had a clause in the current grounds maintenance contract that allowed additional works, transferred from the Borough Council, this was used for the first year.
- There would be a full tendering process later in the year for a three year contract.
- The cost of undertaking the additional works would be approximately £9 a resident per annum, which may be less dependent on other budget savings, at the end of the three year phasing of Borough Council financial contributions this would be paid for via increases in the Parish precept (it was anticipated that in the first year there would be no additional costs, £44,000 additional costs in the second year and £22,000 in the third year as the transitional funding expired – including travel time it had been estimated that the cost to Swindon Borough Council would be approximately £88,000). It was noted that whilst the intention of the Parish Council was to improve services these costs could be reduced through for instance undertaking fewer grass cuts per year.
- With the loss of transitional funding it was anticipated that the Parish precept would rise by £2-3 per month.
- The trial which was due to end on 31st March 2016 had proven successful and Parish Councillors were considering its extension in to other areas. A phased approach was being considered to allow the Parish Council to gradually test the effectiveness of the measures put in place by them, the review would be based on factual feedback.
- Any additional transfer of service provision would be based upon service improvement for residents and the ability to finance such work. The financing would rely on residents being willing to pay higher precepts because they saw defined benefits, which from the Taw Hill experience had been seen. This but would need to be put into the context of whether Central Government would bring in legislation to cap the Parish Council's ability to raise precepts over a certain level.
- Year three would see the Parish Council undertaking the full cost of the service.
- The Parish had not bought new equipment to undertake the StreetSmart services as their contractor provided their own equipment.
- We do not hold a direct comparison for a third party contractor completing grounds maintenance across the whole Borough, this would require a full soft market testing exercise.

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- The Parish Council wanted to improve services that it undertook on behalf of the Borough but would need to consider any additional services it was offered, for example, it currently did not wish to take on gully clearance or weed related work.
- The potential future roles of both Borough and Parish Councillors should there be further devolvement of services would need to be assessed.
- The need to properly assess the impact of services taken on by the Parish Council in order that it can assess value for money and whether it wishes to expand the range of services it undertakes.
- The Parish Council has a volunteer workforce which assists with litter picking on Monday and Thursdays. This tends to operate around the areas the volunteers live and generally consists of groups of around six people and is co-ordinated by the Parish Council.
- Parish Councillor allowances are based upon recommendations of the Borough Council's Independent Remuneration Panel however, these had not been accepted in full as to do so would have substantially increased the cost to the Parish. At this stage it was not anticipated these would rise as a result of the additional works undertaken under the StreetSmart agreement.
- The additional work for Parish Councillors under the StreetSmart agreement was largely dependent upon those individuals concerned.
- Parish services were seen as more reactive than Borough provided services.
- It had been intended to issue a three year specification to commence on 1st April 2016 however, downward changes in the OJEU contract levels had placed the expected three year cost in excess of these levels which by following the OJEU process would have prevented an implementation date of 1st April 2016. This may have delayed the transfer of work.
- The support from the StreetSmart team was noted but there was a need for the Borough Council to liaise more effectively with Parishes when considering service devolution to ensure that the Parish Council had better information on background and scope together with fuller specifications with plans provided.
- There hadn't been any satisfaction surveys undertaken as the Parish had concentrated on the transfer of services and ensuring their smooth operation. Some feedback was received via social media and this was predominately positive.