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Foreword

Picture of Cllr Taylor

Stevenage has a proud history of organisations working closely together. The SoStevenage partnership has been working together for many years to achieve great outcomes for the town and the people of Stevenage.

As someone who was born and bred in Stevenage, I am passionate about the town and its communities. I am so pleased to see this passion in our partners and colleagues across the borough, who all are working hard together to make Stevenage a place of which we can be proud.

As a co-operative partnership, we have long recognised the benefits of working collaboratively with the wider community and local organisations. We know that it is only by working together that we can achieve the best for Stevenage; that we can help to forge a healthy economy, healthy communities and healthy people.

There is a lot to do, and we need to work closely together to overcome the challenges faced by the town. We have to decide what the most important issues are to address in Stevenage, but we can't do this alone. We have to base our work on what local people say is most important to them. The priorities and actions in this strategy have come about through extensive consultation with residents, businesses, community and voluntary groups and other organisations.

None of the issues are easy to tackle, but by working together we can build on the great successes we have already achieved. In this, our third community strategy, we are outlining our commitment as a Co-operative partnership to working together and sharing the dividends. Ultimately we want people to think of Stevenage like we do - as a great place to be.

Electronic signature

Councillor Sharon Taylor, Chair of SoStevenage

[exec summary]

Introduction

Stevenage's partnership

SoStevenage is our local partnership made up of a wide range of public, private, voluntary and community organisations working together toward shared goals for Stevenage.

The first co-operative partnership

In March 2012 SoStevenage adopted a set of principles in its terms of reference outlining our commitment to working co-operatively in everything that we do and making us the first local partnership to work in this way.

Our five co-operative principles are:

- The partnership as a strong community leader
- Working together with the community and other agencies to provide services based on needs
- Communities empowered to design and deliver services and play a role in their local community
- A clear understanding between the partnership and our communities – this is what we do, this is what we will help you to do
- Joined-up and accessible services that offer value for money and focus on the customer.

These principles underpin our common approach and are demonstrated in a number of successful projects and activities. These principles help us to achieve our strategic aim.

The current financial climate has placed increasing pressure on services and therefore we will develop our co-operative focus to work more closely with partners and the public to get the most out of every pound that we spend.

What are the benefits of being a co-operative partnership?

As a partnership, we want to ensure that the money we spend goes further. We need it to achieve its primary purpose of providing local services for those in our town, but also to bring even more social rewards and give back to the local community. We call this sharing the dividends. When we work in this way we can create “win-win-win” situations, where SoStevenage, the organisation we are working with and the community all collectively benefit.

One example of where we have achieved this is our Smokebusters project which aims to reduce the harm caused by second-hand smoking. Nearly 600 people have signed a pledge to stop smoking in their car or their home and this has helped both SoStevenage and NHS Hertfordshire to reduce smoking in the town. The lower numbers of heavy smokers should reduce the burden on the NHS, freeing up other services for those who need them. Cutting back on smoking not only saves people money, it also improves health and life chances. It's clear that Smokebusters has been a “win” for SoStevenage, for the council, for the NHS and for local residents.

We believe that by continuing to work in this co-operative way we can maximise the rewards or dividends that can be shared locally.

[insert diagram of structure of SoStevenage]

Our Community Strategy

The community strategy is the strategic five year plan for the partnership. It outlines our vision and how we are working together to improve Stevenage and contribute to the development of the town. This is our third community strategy. We published our first strategy back in 2004 and our second in 2007 and since then the partnership has achieved great things. Details of our successes are published each year in our annual report on our website: www.stevenage.co.uk/sostevenage.

Our community strategy sets out a long-term vision of how we want Stevenage to be, as well as the short term goals to get us there. It is impossible to include everything, so we have identified a group of priorities which we think are the most important in the current circumstances. We've taken into account a range of different views and evidence from different people in different ways:

- Stevenage Borough Council's Residents' Survey 2012 results
- Statistics and data from a range of government sources and local organisations
- Discussions with senior Stevenage Borough Council councillors
- Brainstorms with SoStevenage member organisations
- Café choice – residents' views
- Feedback from residents who attended the Stevenage Borough Council Community Conference
- We have also taken central government changes into account, including a range of national and regional policies relating to education, health, crime and disorder, the economy and the environment

It is also important to acknowledge the difficult financial times we are working in where we can no longer afford to provide the full range of services we have in the past, so we must prioritise where the partnership can have the greatest effect. We have therefore focused on three key themes and nine key priorities where our partners can work co-operatively, add value, and effect change.

Measuring success

Progress on the delivery of this strategy will be monitored quarterly and reported to the Partnership and published annually in Chronicle magazine and on the Stevenage Borough Council website: www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/so-stevenage/

Our vision for Stevenage

Stevenage: a prosperous town with vibrant communities and healthy people.

In order to achieve our vision for Stevenage, we are going to work towards nine top priorities, under three themes;

- Healthy Economy
- Healthy Communities
- Healthy People

These are some of the issues which we feel are important to the town, and which we believe can only be addressed effectively through partnership working. This doesn't mean that these are the only issues which are being addressed in the town – each partner has their own priorities in their specific areas. We know that we can make the biggest difference when we work co-operatively, so we've chosen priorities that we think we can address better together.

The following pages will go into more detail about each of these theme areas and the different priorities we will be working towards.

Healthy economy

The struggling economy is one of the biggest challenges that people all over the country are currently facing, causing businesses, public and voluntary sector organisations and individuals to tighten their belts. We know that rejuvenating the economy is vital to being able to support the residents of Stevenage and we want to help local people back into jobs. SoStevenage aims to bring growth and prosperity to the town by improving housing and quality of life, and attracting new people to the town.

What we've already achieved:

Recently SoStevenage partners have been working on a number of projects related to the development of a healthy economy. Stevenage Borough Council has begun an inward investment campaign to attract new businesses to Stevenage, as well as supporting existing businesses through the council owned Business and Technology Centre (BTC). The BTC is run not for profit by managing agent Wenta and aims to provide the complete solution for aspiring innovators and entrepreneurs offering advice and support, specialist training, access to finance and introductions to other knowledge based companies and agencies. The Citizens Advice Bureau has been giving free and unbiased debt advice to hundreds of residents who are struggling to juggle their finances. North Herts College has been helping those who are unemployed to gain new skills to get them back into work, promoting adult and family learning.

SoStevenage has also given a grant to Stevenage Solutions for a project called Money Money Money where they are working together to help more than 300 people with debts to manage their money, raise large scale awareness of the Stevenage Credit Union and give them a base in the town centre with the CAB. SoStevenage has also grant-funded Stevenage Solutions to undertake a project working to empower more than 80 young entrepreneurs to create new enterprises through mentoring, training and support. SoStevenage has initiated the mortgage rescue scheme, which has prevented 25 families from becoming homeless.

How things are at the moment:

In 2010-11 there were 2950 businesses in Stevenage. There are some world class businesses based in the town including; AVC, MBDA, Fujitsu, Astrium, GlaxoSmithKline, The Wine Society, DuPont, Server Choice, and many more. In 2010-11, 255 enterprises were set up, however, 315 were closed. Big industries in Stevenage include retail, construction and scientific and technical.

Over the last few years there has been a marked improvement in the percentage of young people achieving 5 or more A*-C grades at GCSE level increasing from 56.8% in 2008 to 77% in 2011. However, this is still below the county average of 83% and below the national average of 80.5%.

A small proportion of the population have no qualifications at all. Around 30% of residents have a HND, Degree or Higher Degree level qualifications or equivalent. 49.2% of residents have 2 or more A levels, advanced GNVQ, NVQ 3, 2 or more higher or advanced higher national qualifications (Scotland) or equivalent.

There are 7,209 people on the council housing waiting list and there is a large and increasing requirement for additional affordable housing. The housing advice service has recorded a 40% increase in the number of enquiries received in comparison with previous years, reporting over 5,000 in 2011/12. However, the Housing Advice and Homelessness team along with key partners (CAB and Herts Young Homeless Group) were able to prevent homelessness on 360 occasions in 2011/12.

What you said:

In the Stevenage Borough Council Residents Survey 2012, 20% of residents said that they would find it difficult to get a job in Stevenage because they don't have the right qualifications, training or skills. 13% had no recent experience of work which was preventing them from getting a job. Of the people who think it would be difficult to get a job in Stevenage, 61% said that this was because their skills or qualifications are out of date.

Our priorities are to:

- Improve the local economy and housing
- Increase skills and employability
- Help residents to manage their money
- Understand and address child poverty.

Improve the local economy and housing:

To increase the number of jobs and houses, along with improving infrastructure, it is important for us to maximise opportunities for economic growth within the town by supporting businesses, as well as working with partners to deliver housing growth. Stevenage Borough Council has been supporting entrepreneurs and small start-up businesses through the Business and Technology Centre for many years and will continue to do so in order to develop jobs in sustainable and local industries. The partnership wants to improve our engagement with all businesses in the town to find out what needs they have, and how we can best meet them. An important part of improving the local economy is to get more people into the town centre – we will explore opportunities to increase footfall in the town.

All partners will work with Stevenage Borough Council to support and implement the council's housing programme to provide new and affordable housing. We want to increase our engagement with registered social landlords and incorporate their views in service planning and design. We also want to work with social landlords and our own social housing stock to ensure decent social housing. The partnership intends to address some of the myths that exist around social housing through clear communications. We will promote Stevenage as a good place to live and increase people's sense of place and pride in their town. We want to tackle the negative misconceptions of Stevenage and make more use of communications to promote the successes of the town and the people and businesses within it.

Increase skills and employability

Having the right skills and qualifications is vital to find work and SoStevenage is committed to improving the skills of Stevenage residents. We want to ensure that skills are not only developed, but are also matched to local industries and jobs. We want to continue our work to engage hard to reach groups, such as those who are not in education,

employment or training, as well as increasing the number and range of work experience placements across the town. To achieve these aims we want to increase our level of engagement with the wider business community, as well as other agencies in the town such as the JobCentre Plus.

Help residents to manage their money

Whilst Hertfordshire as a whole is an affluent county, there are pockets of relative deprivation and some of these areas are in Stevenage. SoStevenage wants to support residents who feel financially excluded and address poverty in the town. We want to ensure that all residents have the skills and confidence to participate economically. We want to increase financial resilience by working with educational organisations and partners to ensure people of all ages can access training and support on financial matters including budgeting. In order to develop a culture of saving and a climate of financial prudence, SoStevenage will promote the Credit Union. We also need to make sure that we communicate the impacts of the ongoing recession as well as national financial and benefit changes so that people in Stevenage are aware of how changes might impact their financial situation.

Understand and address child poverty

Poverty can be defined as when people “lack resources to obtain the type of diet, participate in the activities and have the living conditions and amenities which are customary, or at least widely encouraged and approved, in the societies in which they belong.”¹

Child and family poverty is an important issue for SoStevenage with 20% of children in the town estimated to be in poverty in 2012. By 16, children from families who qualify for free school meals achieve on average 1.7 grades lower at GCSE. Evidence shows that children in poverty are more likely to have lower earnings, complex health histories and lower life expectancy.

The SoStevenage partnership is absolutely committed to working together to tackle child poverty. Multiple factors affect child poverty and all the priorities in this strategy contribute towards reducing it. The strategy helps us to address the opportunities and obligations arising from the Child Poverty Act 2010. Strong links will also be made with the Hertfordshire Child Poverty Strategy 2011-20.

¹ P Townsend, *Poverty in the United Kingdom*, Allen Lane, 1979.

Healthy people

While the health of many people in Stevenage is good, there are wards where life expectancy is lower than the national average. Life expectancy is shortened by unhealthy lifestyle choices which also increase the number of years individuals spend in ill health. We need to encourage healthier lifestyle choices, such as giving up smoking, exercising more, drinking alcohol sensibly and eating healthier foods. We must also make sure that we are helping people to take care of their mental health and wellbeing as well as their physical health.

What we've already achieved:

SoStevenage has been successful in tackling health issues in a variety of different ways. The Smokebusters project raised widespread awareness of the dangers of smoking and nearly 600 people pledged to stop smoking in their car or their home. Many have used this as a platform to stop smoking all together. This not only has a huge impact on the health of those who have quit, and their families, but also saves them a considerable amount of money. Those who are exposed to second hand smoke can develop asthma, breathing problems and even lung cancer. A reduction in the harm from second-hand smoke will see health improvements and reduce some of the burden on local health services. Similar schemes have been introduced in other Hertfordshire districts and it is anticipated that Smokebusters will be replicated county wide.

Healthy cooking classes in children's centres to educate, encourage positive food choices and raise awareness of obesity, which have been extremely popular and are always over-subscribed. In addition, the Health and Wellbeing Partnership have a budget of £10,000 which groups can bid for, for projects which encourage healthy lifestyles.

How things are at the moment:

The health of people in Stevenage compares with the England average but there are health inequalities as it is 5.9 years lower for men and 8 years lower for women in the most deprived areas of Stevenage than in the least deprived areas. Approximately 27.6% of adults smoke and 22.7% of adults are at risk from over-consumption of alcohol. 18.4% of children are obese, as are 26% of adults.

About one in six people in England has a mental health problem at any given time. The majority experience a 'common mental health condition' such as depression or anxiety. About one in 100 has a 'severe mental health condition' such as schizophrenia or bipolar disorder. Figures suggest that at least 25% of individuals with symptoms of mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety do not report this to their GP. In Stevenage we anticipate that this figure may be even higher due to the ongoing impacts of the recession.

What you said:

In the most recent Health Survey for England, only 11.6% of Stevenage residents said that they were physically active on a regularly basis, and only 27.2% of adults said that they eat healthily. However, this is an improvement from 2008 when 9.8% said they were physically active and 22.4% said they ate healthily. Many residents told us that they didn't know how to cook healthily for their family and they thought that it was more expensive.

Our priorities are to:

- Encourage healthy lifestyle choices
- Support good mental health

Encourage healthy lifestyle choices

We want to build on our recent successes, continuing to help people to stop smoking and keep their homes and cars smoke free. SoStevenage will continue to educate people and promote smoking cessation services, as well as the highly successful Smokebusters project. We want to promote improved diet, good nutrition and active lifestyles. We want to use our existing good communications channels to ensure a greater awareness of healthy eating and to tackle the myths around the expense of cooking healthily for a family. The partnership also recognises the huge importance of exercise for health and we want to encourage fitness and physical activity of all kinds, including making fitness classes more accessible. Again it is important for us to celebrate our successes and promote opportunities for people to get involved.

Support good mental health

Whilst the impacts of unhealthy lifestyle choices are well known, the impacts of mental health issues receive less recognition. We think it is important that there is more understanding and awareness of mental illness and recognise that we all have a role to play in reducing the stigma that comes with mental ill health. We want to work in partnership to ensure we do more to prevent mental health issues from developing. We want to engage with users of mental health services, their carers and local agencies in order to strengthen the voice of those who are affected in Stevenage. We want to encourage those who are affected to come forward for the support and advice which is available.

We know that there are some groups who are more likely to suffer from mental health issues, such as isolated older people, carers, those with drug or alcohol problems and those with ongoing financial problems. We will use the partnership to give those with mental health issues and their carers a voice. We will inform, support and signpost residents to resources and organisations who can help.

Carers are hugely valuable for any community and often do not receive the praise and support they deserve. Stevenage is therefore proud to be the first caring borough in Hertfordshire. Partners are committed to actively helping carers, which includes ensuring that carers know their rights and raising the profile of carers across Stevenage. Carers are entitled to a carer's passport, which provides them with discounts at a range of Stevenage shops.

Healthy communities

Stevenage has always had strong and active communities. There are over 300 voluntary and community sector groups and demonstrated community leaders. Many residents participate in “Friends of” schemes and local groups and we want to build on this. It is really important that people in our communities can rely on each other, help each other out and feel safe and happy in their local environment. We have some fantastic green spaces and facilities in Stevenage, and we want to encourage people to look after them, enjoy them and feel safe in them.

What we've already achieved:

SoStevenage has a good track record of working with a variety of partners to achieve our aims for the environment, for community safety and for volunteering. SoStevenage gave £25,000 to the Wild Stevenage project, helping to secure a successful £50,000 bid for Heritage Lottery Funding. This has enabled Hertfordshire and Middlesex Wildlife Trust working with the borough council, to deliver a number of activities related to improving the local environment. A dedicated Wild Stevenage Officer was appointed to raise environmental awareness and encourage local people to get involved in improving green spaces. This is another excellent example of working co-operatively with the community, and volunteers dedicated over 300 hours to improving local grasslands and woodlands.

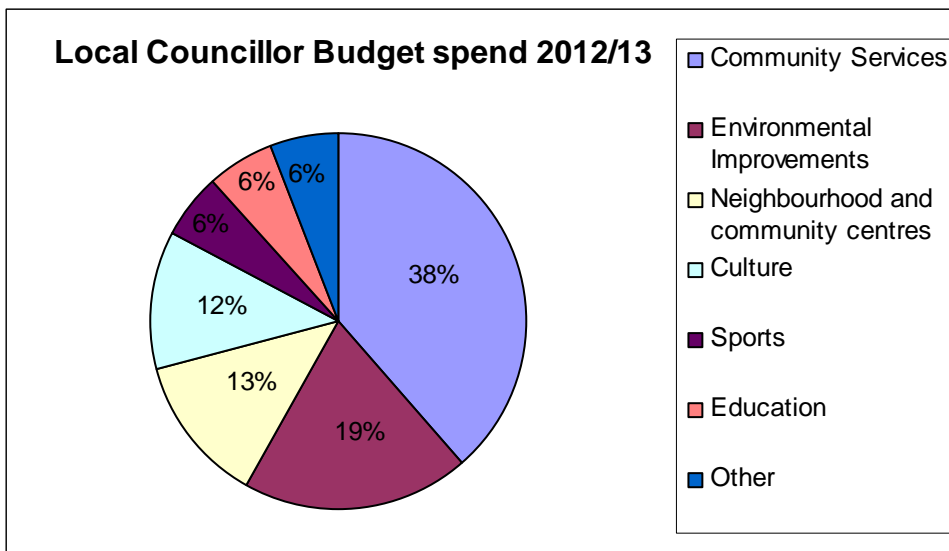
SoSafe, Stevenage's community safety partnership (CSP) has made great strides in reducing crime and antisocial behaviour (ASB), with falling crime levels and the highest detection rates in the county. SoSafe is a strong and effective partnership, which works closely together to maintain this momentum.

The partnership supports a variety of initiatives, including the Nacro XS project, where youth workers locate an activity bus in hot spot areas for ASB. They engage with young people and encourage them to get involved in sports or other activities, instead of 'hanging around' on the streets. Partners often work on seasonal proactive initiatives like Operation Sabre. These involve partners who patrol on bicycles, to engage with people.

Stevenage has a busy night time economy, and SoSafe funds taxi marshals, who help people to safely find a licensed taxi home after a night out.

SoStevenage also recognises that the voluntary and community sector is incredibly important to the life and vibrancy of the town and reserves ten spaces on the Board for voluntary sector representatives. In addition, SoStevenage has ring-fenced £26,000 to promote and encourage volunteering in the town and works closely with the voluntary and community sector, recognising that more can be done to encourage residents and businesses to get involved.

Over the last five years the council has provided approximately £2.8 million in direct community funding, rent in kind and other indirect support to local groups. Stevenage Borough Council Councillors have also used their local community budgets to distribute around £160,000 last year to community groups and to help extend the range and quality of services they offer. The council has an ongoing commitment to continue supporting voluntary groups.



How things are at the moment:

Over the last year over 900 people came into the Stevenage Volunteer Centre looking for volunteering opportunities, so we know that people want to get involved in their community. We surveyed 394 Stevenage businesses and 39% of them told us that they are already supporting the voluntary and community sector in some way, equating to more than 180 different voluntary and community organisations being supported by 147 businesses. Approximately 29% of businesses release employees to volunteer and we want to capitalise on this and encourage more businesses to get involved locally.

Overall, crime in Stevenage fell by 7.4% between March 2011 and March 2012. Anti-social behaviour has decreased over the last year with a total of 4810 incidents in 2011/12 compared to 5177 in 2010/11. However, domestic abuse has increased this year and incidences often spike around the time of large public events, bank holidays and sporting events of which we had many in 2011-12, such as the Royal wedding and Diamond Jubilee bank holidays.

What you said:

Many businesses in the town already release their employees to volunteer, or contribute to the sector in some way through corporate social responsibility activities. However, our survey highlighted that many businesses want to do more or get involved, but didn't know where to start. Many people come into the Stevenage Volunteer Centre each year keen to get involved but are unaware of the opportunities available. They often have the misconception that volunteering means dedicating many hours a week, not knowing that there are a wide variety of opportunities available.

There is still some fear of crime and anti-social behaviour in Stevenage, and 29% of respondents to the residents' survey told us that they are scared to walk through the town centre at night. The National Citizenship Survey found that across the whole country 21% of people are afraid of being outside at night.

Our priorities:

- Ensure clean and green spaces
- Help people feel safe

- Support and encourage volunteering

Ensure clean and green spaces

We have some fantastic clean and green spaces in Stevenage, including two parks with Green Flag awards, woodlands, cycling tracks and even a sailing lake at Fairland's Valley Park. We want to maintain the high quality spaces we have, and promote their use for a variety of activities, including exercise. We want to increase the involvement of local residents and community groups in actively managing the environment, and will look to create opportunities for people to get involved, such as "Friends of" schemes.

SoStevenage is keen to ensure that Stevenage residents have a strong sense of place and are committed to maintaining these spaces as a great legacy for future generations to enjoy and we will ensure that the council's Green Spaces Strategy and Biodiversity Action Plan are implemented to achieve this.

We also want to raise the profile of the climate change agenda and the impact of climate change on the town. To do this, we will seek to engage with the community and communicate what businesses, local agencies, residents and communities can do to help reduce their own carbon footprint, as well as working on reducing ours.

Help people feel safe

While crime and anti-social behaviour are going down in Stevenage, fear and perceptions of crime remain high. This impacts on people's feelings of safety, so it's important to address the myths surrounding crime – the true levels of crime are much lower than perceived and in fact Stevenage is the most improved district in Hertfordshire. We want to continue to tackle anti-social behaviour by encouraging good behaviour and building respect between individuals and communities and addressing anti-social behaviour effectively and quickly. We will also continue to implement the SoSafe community safety strategy and action plan.

As domestic abuse has increased, we will also be stepping up our action to focus on raising awareness across Stevenage. The Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse action group will implement a forward plan, emphasising partnership work to break the cycle of abuse that often continues within families. We will also employ a Domestic Abuse Coordinator to pull partners together – the first role of its kind in Hertfordshire.

Support and encourage volunteering

We know that volunteering is incredibly important to the sustainability and impact of the voluntary and community sector in Stevenage. The partnership will seek to promote volunteering to residents and encourage people to get involved. We will work with the sector to develop appropriate voluntary placements and ensure that robust support mechanisms are in place. We want to use our communications channels to promote volunteering and volunteers, as well as celebrating the successes of businesses that actively pursue corporate social responsibility. We will also be using these channels to celebrate the great successes the sector already has in the town.

Community cohesion is the ability of communities to live and grow in harmony together. Cohesion can be increased when people feel safe and enjoy strong and positive relationships with those in their communities. It is also important that individuals can

confidently contribute to their community through active citizenship, participation in volunteering and local decision-making. SoStevenage hopes that by more residents getting involved in volunteering and contributing to their local communities, community cohesion will be increased.

Integration of the strategy with other key plans and strategies

[insert diagram of how community strategy fits with other key strategies and plans]

How will we measure our progress?

The vision and objectives within this strategy will be addressed through the development and implementation of a detailed action plan, presenting a clear work programme for all members of SoStevenage. The plan will be produced by an action group consisting of council officers and partners from SoStevenage.

To ensure we deliver against our objectives it is important that we monitor the implementation of activities that fall within this strategy. This action group will ensure that the overarching principles of this strategy are turned into measurable actions and activities with SMART targets and milestones which are regularly performance managed. SMART targets are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound. The SoStevenage Executive will performance monitor the action plan quarterly to ensure delivery of objectives.

Equalities, Diversity and Governance

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed. The assessment considered the implications of the Community Strategy on equality groups to ensure this strategy is compliant with the Equality Act 2010. The assessment found that the strategy will help to support a range of equality groups across the town by striving for a prosperous town with vibrant communities and healthy people.

To continue to ensure that SoStevenage understands the needs of all our different communities, the partnership will use census and local data to develop the picture we have of Stevenage residents. This will be used to help inform the yearly action plans to deliver the community strategy.

SoStevenage Members 2012-13

Stevenage Football Club
Viewpoint / Mind Wellbeing Centre / Stevenage Mental Health Partnership
Social Inclusion Partnership and Stevenage CVS
Pro-Action Hertfordshire
Stevenage Extended Services Forum, Nobel School
Stevenage Learning Partnership and North Hertfordshire College
Hertfordshire County Council
Stevenage Rotary Club
The Comet
Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue
Neighbourhood Champion and Stevenage Borough Council
Third Thursday
Stevenage District Children's Trust Partnership
Sport Stevenage
Stevenage Borough Council
Stevenage Leisure Limited
Stevenage World Forum for Ethnic Communities
Hertfordshire Policy Authority
Stevenage Citizens Advice Bureau
Hertfordshire County Council
Ahmaddiyya Muslim Association UK
The Advertiser
Churches Together
HR Initiatives
Odyssey Gym
Health and Wellbeing Forum and East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust
SoSafe and Hertfordshire Constabulary
Stevenage 14-19 Partnership
YMCA Central Hertfordshire
East and North Hertfordshire NHS Trust
Stevenage Borough Council
Action for the Environment and Groundwork Hertfordshire
MBA Association
Westgate Shopping Centre
Stevenage Business Forum and Hertfordshire Chamber of Commerce and Industry