



Stevenage Borough Council
Peer Challenge

October 2013



This short introduction to Stevenage can only provide a small insight into the achievements, challenges and future plans of the town. During the Peer Challenge both politicians and officers will provide many further examples to support the following narrative.

The Challenge

It's late February, the Council Chamber is packed for a meeting discussing the coming year's budget and future resource prioritisation of Council services. During the debate the usual cry from the public gallery occurs – “so what do I get for my Council Tax?”

The Leader of the Council and Chief Executive once again prepare themselves to outline the challenges facing local public services and the audience brace themselves for a long list.

These meetings are being played out up and down the country, although the size of the looming cuts in light of the government's deficit reduction programme is creating difficulties not just for political leadership and operational management but also for organisational culture.

When faced with such choices there is invariably an auction of competing demand as portfolio holders and directors fight their corner for a share of the ever-shrinking resources that are still available. This usually leads to “salami slicing”; where a series of small cuts are made as individuals sacrifice some programmes and projects to preserve others. However, Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) believes this is damaging in the long term; the lesson from previous recessions is that those who can quickly and reasonably accurately assess the sort of organisation that they will need to be post-recession – and get themselves into decent shape to deliver that when upturn comes – will lead the way and survive in the new world.

The hallmarks of what will make a successful local council over the next 10 years are going to look very different than those of the past 10 years, which have been about winning funding bids and running pilots. What is clear is that councils that have a passion for determining clear priorities and relentlessly pursuing efficiencies and delivering value for money are more likely to flourish than those with a passion for winning extra money. SBC very much sees itself in the former category.

Introduction to Stevenage



Stevenage was Britain's first new town with the first fully pedestrianised town centre. Much of the town infrastructure dates from the development of the new town. The Stevenage concept, based around residential neighbourhoods with strong communities, each with shopping, health and school facilities, should be celebrated. However, in common with other early post war new towns, Stevenage is in need of regeneration.

Technology and pharmaceutical are the main employment sectors and whilst economic conditions have been severe in recent years, Stevenage communities pulled together to ensure that a vibrant economy was maintained. The council continues to work with stakeholders to strengthen the local economy in future years through an inward investment campaign which aims to bring in new business to grow the local economy. The Business and Technology Centre (BTC) is the primary



innovation and technology centre in Hertfordshire. The BTC support the start-up and growth of businesses; providing business advice and helping existing businesses to flourish. [Link to page of website: http://www.btcstevenage.co.uk/about-us](http://www.btcstevenage.co.uk/about-us)

The town has 84,000 residents in 35,000 households, of which 8,500 are owned and managed by the council. Approximately 83% of the population is White British. In relation to religion, 54% state their religion to be Christian and 34% state that they have no religion. The town also has a range of other faiths, including Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim and Sikh.

One of the council's aspirations is for Stevenage to be clean and green and the council is proud of the level of green space across the town; both Fairland's Valley Park and the Town Centre Gardens have been awarded (and retained) green flags.

Stevenage also has over 45 km of cycle-ways making it one of the best towns in the UK for travelling by bicycle. [Link to page of website: http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/52710/52714/](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/52710/52714/)

Stevenage is also a safe place to live and work, with lower rates of crime than the national average (As of April 2013, data relating to crime overall showed a year on year decrease of 11.2%).

In the council's most recent resident's survey, 80% of residents were satisfied with Stevenage as a place to live. (Supporting document provided: [3] Residents Survey 2012)

Introduction to the Council

Stevenage Borough Council has been governed by a labour majority for over 35 years and there is currently a labour majority administration, with 31 of the 39 Councillors. This consistency of political governance has provided a clear vision of the role the Council plays in community leadership for the town.

The council have made a clear policy choice to retain management of key services such as housing management, refuse collection and grounds maintenance, believing it to be the best way of providing a flexible and responsive service for our residents.

The council has always prided itself on being customer focused and in August 2003 was one of the first districts in Hertfordshire to open a dedicated Customer Service Centre. The Customer Service Centre has won numerous awards and is held in high regard by our customers.



The council employs 730 staff and 82% describe themselves as White British, reflecting levels in the local population.

In the latest Staff Survey (July 2013):

- More than two thirds (68%) of employees agree that they are satisfied in their current role.
- More than four fifths (88%) of employees agree that they understand their role.
- Eighty-four per cent agree that they are confident and able to successfully complete work assigned.
- Fifty-nine per cent agree that they would be proud to say they work for the council (an increase of 9% on the previous survey)

(Supporting Document provided: [4] Staff Survey)

We want our employees to continue to feel confident, valued and proud to work for the council and consequently the council will continue to provide opportunities for staff to enhance their skills through our Training and Development Programmes. To support this, the Chief Executive has made a commitment to protect the Training and Development budget through the latest round of budget cuts.

The council work closely with the Local Partnership, SoStevenage, which is well regarded in the county - SoStevenage is committed to encouraging participation from as wide a range of Stevenage organisations, businesses and residents as possible as part of its co-



operative focus. Some of the key achievements of SoStevenage in 2012/13 are highlighted in the SoStevenage Annual Report. [Link to SoStevenage page of website: http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/so-stevenage/33643/](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/so-stevenage/33643/)

Future plans are outlined in the Community Strategy 2013 and include nine priorities under three themes:

- Healthy Economy
- Healthy Communities
- Healthy People

Supporting document: Community Strategy report to Council: <http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/council-meetings/87870/92257/>

The council has a good reputation for providing high quality services that are value for money and reflect our communities' views and needs. In the council's most recent resident's survey, 66% of residents were satisfied with the way the council runs the town.

Our corporate plan, 'Sharing the Dividends', reflects the priorities identified by residents through the variety of opportunities for consultation we offer:

- A Vibrant Town
 - Improve the economy and encourage financial resilience
 - Regenerate the town centre and neighbourhoods
- A Quality Environment
 - Provide affordable homes and housing growth
 - Help people feel safe
- An Excellent Council
 - Deliver value for money
 - Putting residents first

(Supporting document: Corporate Plan report to Council: <http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/council-meetings/87870/92257/>)

Context for Peer Challenge

The challenge for the council is developing an organisation that is fit for the future in a world of diminishing resources, whilst ensuring that residents are provided with a clear understanding of what we are able to deliver. Our intention is to deliver the best outcomes possible for Stevenage residents following significant funding reductions, and we anticipate that this will require enhancing or re-defining the current relationships and engagement with our communities. We have started to develop plans to transform the way the council will work and request that the Peer Team test, challenge and inform the council's transformation programme and future strategy.

We advised three particular areas of focus:

1. Support our plans for improving the relationships and engagement with our citizens, organisations and businesses through the development of our Co-operative Council principles.
2. Challenge and feed into our approach to Priority Based Budgeting and our future plans for financial and organisational resources
3. Assess and contribute to the development of our 'Forward Together' transformation programme, looking at how we are building capacity to deliver our future priorities.

Focus 1: Developing cooperative community relationships

Stevenage Borough Council has a good record of maintaining positive relationships with communities in the town. However, in future, the organisation will need to work in a different way to deliver services – The historic expectations of our residents that the council is able to deliver all the current services to meet everybody's expectations will need to change. The council's focus will need to be on prioritising the needs of the most vulnerable in our community, whilst ensuring that all the services we deliver are value for money.

This is reflected in the council's mission, 'A flexible council that works with the community to provide value for money services for all and effective support for the most vulnerable.'

The council has adopted a set of five cooperative council principles. The principles reflect a desire to involve the people that use council services in deciding how to provide and manage those services, to ensure they match local needs:



- The council 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 the local community
- A clear understanding between the council 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

The council work alongside community and voluntary groups, and residents to shape and deliver services, embracing a cooperative ethos.

(Supporting document: Co-operative Commitment publication:
<http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/content/15953/39051/39054/Co-op-Commitment.pdf>)

We work with partners through the local partnership, SoStevenage, a cooperative partnership with 32 members from the public, private, community and voluntary sectors that provides organisations and residents of Stevenage with an opportunity to shape the strategic direction of the town, share information and network

The community leadership role of our Councillors is a vital part of the council's cooperative approach. As our direct link to the views of the communities we work with, they are able to provide a wealth of knowledge and information about community needs and expectations.

The Leader of the Council has arranged for every Member to control and spend a Local Community Budget (LCB) of £3,300. [Links to supporting information: Annual Council Minutes, 25 May 2011 - http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/55239/23320/23086/](#)
[LCB page of website - http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-stevenage/community-grants-funding-advice/local-community-budgets/](#)

There are many examples where the funding has resulted in marked improvements for the community.

Local Community Budget Case Studies

Youth DI: Councillors felt that there was a need for more youth activities in an area of Stevenage where there were limited youth facilities, which was contributing to anti-social behaviour in the area. The three ward councillors worked with neighbourhood development staff to get a youth club established and Youth DI was born from this intervention. Every Friday night a team of youth workers, college students and volunteers run a youth club for up to 50 young people. £2,700 has been donated to the group from the LCB. The group has become an established service for young people in the area and has won a string of awards (a Pride of Stevenage, two High Sheriff awards and a national crime beater prize). It is now being run through POD 53, a dynamic youth and community social enterprise.

Stevenage Credit Union: Stevenage Credit Union has ambitious plans for developing their service which they feel is needed now more than ever before. Over £5,500 has been granted to the organisation this year alone to expand their service and make it more accessible. This is hoped to turn residents away from pay day loans. The grant will give the resources to the credit union to enact their new business and marketing plan which they have developed over the past year. The corner stone is an investment in their IT and web based systems to let them have a stronger presence in the town centre and on-line. The intention is to be able to attract hundreds of new members and to build up the reserves of the organisation to meet new fiscal guidelines in order to provide low cost loans to as many people as possible.

Our Youth Council are also a vital link to the young people of Stevenage, providing a voice for the issues and opinions of young people across Stevenage. Stevenage Youth Council has been involved in and initiated a wide range of projects, hosts the Annual Youth Conference and has also campaigned on a number of issues including local public parks, the environment, young people and the Police, and better facilities for young people. [Link to Youth Council page of website: http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-stevenage/66910/](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-stevenage/66910/)

The council realises that in order to continue to support and deliver sustainable services for our residents, existing relationships with the wider community, partners and businesses should be celebrated, encouraged and enhanced.

Celebrating and encouraging the work of the voluntary and community sector

As a co-operative council we know that we need a strong, vibrant and flourishing voluntary and community sector to work with us as an equal partner in continuing to improve the lives of Stevenage residents - we aim to encourage groups to adopt new ways of working to protect the services that are so vital to residents.

The Stevenage Community Network established in November 2011 aims to bring together voluntary and community organisations wishing to make a difference to the sector for the benefit of Stevenage residents. It acts as a forum to exchange ideas and explore innovative ways of working that can be brokered across agencies. The network currently has over 60 local voluntary and community sector organisations on its distribution list. In July 2013, the Network hosted a business brokerage event to bring local business and voluntary sector organisations together to share learning, skills and expertise.

In addition, in April 2012, the Stevenage Community Associations Network was set up to bring community centre associations together to strengthen the link with the council and identify opportunities for partnership working, the sharing of good practice and to work as a collective to develop community buildings in Stevenage. The council support the network, provide an annual allocation of community funding and with external partners has offered a programme of training and capacity building initiatives to all community associations.

Future aims:

We plan to support and maximise volunteering in the town - The council recently commissioned a service level agreement with North Hertfordshire Community and Voluntary Sector (through community performance reward grant funding) to strengthen levels of volunteering.

We aim to move towards a stronger, fairer system of commissioning ensuring priority need is met. We value every organisation operating in the community, but with funding limited, we will need to prioritise and support the most vulnerable. – The council will commission services in three tranches to address the following priority areas:

- Financial Inclusion services
- Infrastructure and specified front line services
- Neighbourhood services

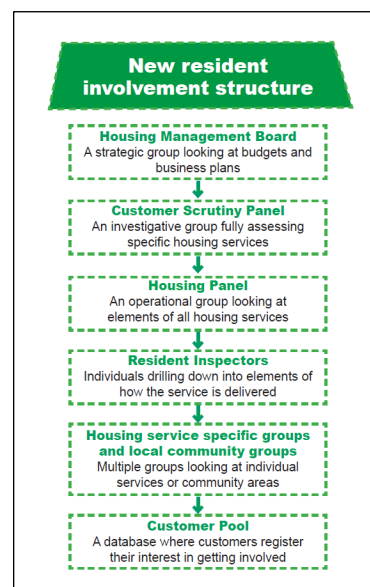
Enhancing resident involvement and governance

As a cooperative council, we see great value in effective community engagement to understand local need and inform our plans for future service delivery in the town. Many opportunities are provided to ensure we seek residents' views

Customer involvement is considered vital to the continuing improvement of council services - The council's housing service have introduced a resident involvement structure that allows housing customers to have a voice and get involved in improving housing services in a variety of ways.

Alongside this, the Housing Customer Scrutiny Panel carry out regular reviews of the work that the council's housing service provides to ensure that customers are getting a good service.

Facing resource reductions, it is more important than ever that we listen to what residents have to say. Technology such as the internet and social media has opened up new avenues for people to interact and get involved with the world around them. We want to empower residents and strengthen the local voice so that they can help design and shape local services using the wide range of avenues available.



Future aims:

Future plans to enhance opportunities for resident involvement include the development of a portal to simplify how residents are able to interact with us – The new portal will introduce a menu of involvement opportunities for customers. We aim not only to enhance opportunities for residents to have a say, but also improve our communication with residents on how their views have helped shape decisions.

We will review the corporate communications strategy to ensure that our approach to communications keeps residents informed about council decisions, policies and services.

We aim to improve the customer experience by promoting effective, well designed online opportunities for customers to interact with us and reduce Face to Face and telephone interactions.

[Supporting document: Consultation and Engagement Strategy report to Executive: http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/council-meetings/88468/91190/](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/council-meetings/88468/91190/)

Working with partners to provide support for businesses

The council invested £7.2m to increase the size of the Business and Technology Centre and it is now the primary innovation and technology centre in Hertfordshire. As a result of the council supporting the centre and the management of the BTC Management Company, 'Wenta', the facility has allowed businesses to grow and develop, as well as providing advice, mentoring and financial support. Wenta will continue to manage the BTC and have increased occupancy to over 80% in 2012/13.

The So Stevenage Economic Taskforce (SSET), a SoStevenage Theme Group, brings together local service providers to deliver projects and schemes that are of economic benefit to the local community in Stevenage. The Taskforce have delivered partnership projects including a jobs and skills fair, business support events and inward investment campaign. The SSET is continuing to work together in 2013/14 to provide support to grow the local economy - The Taskforce has been a key driver in developing the Jobs250 Programme that aims to provide 250 new training and employment opportunities for people in Stevenage during 2013-2015.

The council have also engaged with local businesses through the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Federation of Small Businesses, Hertfordshire Business Buzz and various events undertaken in partnership. These forums have provided opportunities for the council to provide advice and support to local businesses. The council will continue to develop good relationships with local businesses, and through the inward investment campaign, bring in new business to grow the local economy.

As one of the largest employers in the town, the council is setting an example by encouraging the employment of apprentices to support the provision of employment opportunities for young people. As many of the council's staff are also Stevenage residents, investment in staff is considered an investment in community skills - The council has protected development budgets and committed to all staff receiving at least the 'living wage' (with the introduction of new pay structure as a result of implementation of Single Status), viewing it as investment in the town.

Future Aims:

Stevenage Town Centre was built during the 50s/60s to an innovative, pedestrianised plan. However, it is considered to suffer from a poor image, an ageing fabric, weak secondary shopping areas, lack of a substantial anchor store and a weak evening economy. Notwithstanding these shortcomings, the town centre has shown resilience in the face of change and developers and investors have also shown continued confidence in the town.

The council secured commercial partners in 2003 to develop a substantial regeneration of the town. An outline planning application was submitted for a comprehensive redevelopment for a mix of uses to include the full range of retail and facilities, a replacement bus station, and ancillary and associated developments.

Due to the weakening national and local economies this was amended to reduce the scale of it and it was eventually resolved to grant planning permission for the scheme in January 2012.

However by this stage the viability of a major regeneration of the town had been undermined by the recession and the council's commercial partners decided they could no longer pursue the scheme in Spring 2012.

Since August 2012 the council has commissioned specialist consultants to assess current market conditions and bring forward a new scheme for the regeneration of the town centre which is deliverable in the current economic climate. This work is on-going.

Future Aims (cont.d)

The council have also submitted an application to the Heritage Lottery Fund Townscape Heritage Programme - The Townscape Heritage programme is the Heritage Lottery Fund's urban regeneration programme which makes grants that help communities to regenerate conservation areas displaying social and economic need.

The aim is to regenerate and transform the town centre conservation area and create an attractive and vibrant town centre where people will want to live, work, visit and invest.

The application has been made for the council to:

- Restore public realm and building frontage in the main thorough-fare of the town centre
- Re-introduce feature / design lighting to these areas
- Conserve public art in Town Square
- Increase training opportunities in heritage skills/improve approaches in Conservation Management & Maintenance.
- Increase community participation / learning about heritage.

Working with partners and the community to deliver housing

Despite the recent economic climate, the Council has continued to pursue its priorities of regeneration, housing growth and providing affordable homes.

Future Aims:

We are advancing the preparation of our new Local Plan in accordance with the timetable set out in our Local Development Scheme and anticipate that the Plan will be adopted in Spring 2015. We have recently consulted widely on options for the number of homes for which the Plan will make provision. The responses to that consultation will be considered by the Executive towards the end of the year and will be taken into account in formulating our affordable housing policies and generating site specific housing allocations to meet the town's housing needs to 2021.

In the meantime, the Council will continue its pre-application discussions with the landowners and potential developers of urban extensions to the north and west of the town to achieve "shovel ready" schemes for those sites at the earliest opportunity. We will also actively pursue opportunities to use Housing Revenue Account funds to secure smaller scale, housing led regeneration and development schemes either through direct provision or in partnership with affordable housing providers.

Working with partners to provide financial advice and support to residents

The raft of welfare reform changes will place some residents in a vulnerable financial situation. The council have put a corporate steering group in place to monitor impact, take mitigation measures where possible and support residents facing difficulties. Initial preparation has included communication with tenants directly affected offering advice and support, and wider communication to the Stevenage community regarding the changes. The council has also procured a three year contract with the Citizens Advice Bureau to provide residents with debt advice, income maximisation and financial inclusion services. A Voluntary and Community Sector hub has been established in Swingate House (the town centre) that currently co-locates the

Citizens Advice Bureau, Stevenage Credit Union and Shop Mobility. Support totalling £1/2m was provided to the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in 2012/13 (£2.8m in the last five years).

Future Aims:

- Raising the profile of Credit Unions
- Encouraging additional VCS services to co-locate in the Voluntary and Community Sector hub.
- Monitoring the impact of Welfare Reform to redirect support accordingly.

Working with partners to safeguard residents

Safeguarding our residents from harm is viewed as a vital part of our role. We aim to ensure that residents feel safe in our communities and work with partners to create safe environments for all our residents. Our support to the Community Safety Partnership (SoSafe) has contributed to a reduction in crime across the town. However, helping our residents to feel safe will continue to be a priority for the council.

SoSafe partners engage in a variety of multi-agency operations and activities, in order to address immediate issues or identified trends. In summary:



- Community action days (CAD) – focussing on residential areas according to greatest risk of crime and Anti-social Behaviour (ASB); utilising Community Payback; and engaging in community projects, engagement opportunities and events that lead to enhancement of the locality. By April 2014, the partnership will have conducted at least six CADs, and will have engaged with residents from all areas in Stevenage, covering topics like safe alcohol consumption, fire safety, carbon monoxide awareness, burglary protection and environmental ASB.
- Joint initiatives – such as the Elderflower Project which aims to bridge the gap between young and elderly people by bringing the two groups together for joint activities.
- Operation Night Owl – led by SBC ASB officers, with the participation of Stevenage Police, to address tenancy related ASB after normal office hours.

SoSafe is considered an exemplar of the benefits of partnership working. SoSafe has seen a year on year reduction in crime figures that include:

- Significant decreases in Anti-Social Behaviour – in April 2013, data showed a 27% decrease for the year, equating to 1329 fewer reported incidents, assisted by the council's 'No More' (alcohol) project.
- Environmental Anti-Social Behaviour now counts for less than 200 of all reports
- Significant decreases in criminal damage – in April 2013, data showed an 18.6% decrease for the year
- Significant decreases in acquisitive crime – in April 2013, data showed a 20.4% decrease
- Sixty per cent decrease in all arson incidents

In 1996 the council was instrumental in setting up the Hertfordshire CCTV Partnership, jointly with North Herts District Council. Since then the Partnership has grown to include East Hertfordshire District Council and Hertsmere Borough Council. Between them the Partners have over 160 public realm community safety cameras that support the work of the police and PCSO's. The network also includes cameras for other public bodies, including schools, and an increasing number of private clients such as retail developments. The Partnership, and the network that Stevenage runs on its behalf, is recognised as an exemplar of best practice community safety CCTV.

Future aims:

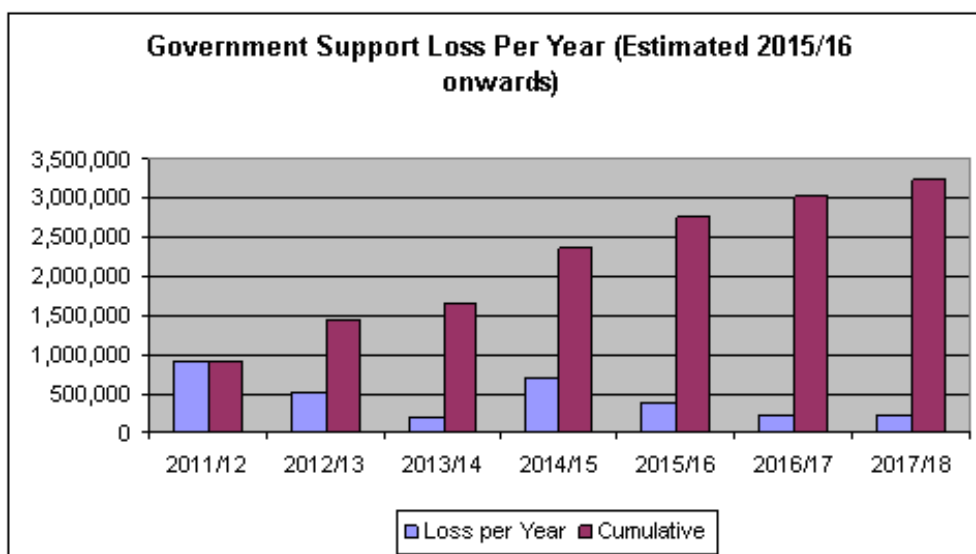
Currently Domestic Violence is considered the biggest community safety issue in Stevenage. Following research by partners, a Domestic Violence Coordinator is being recruited by the council to deliver activity aimed at raising awareness of the issue and reducing domestic violence.

Focus 2: Delivering sustainability in a world of diminishing resources

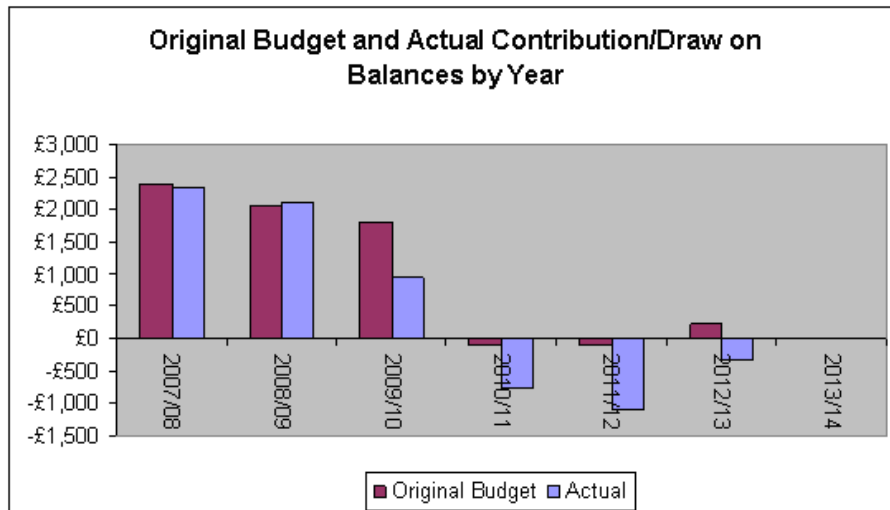
The council is now facing unprecedented pressures on resources to deliver priorities for the town. The council's Financial Strategy balances the council's commitment to a regime of financial rigour, prudence and discipline with the need to facilitate innovation and strong financial management.

The financial position of the council has been difficult over recent years, with each budget round bringing further cuts, fee increases and drives for efficiency savings. However, front-line service reductions have been kept to an absolute minimum. The Corporate Planning process and Leaders Services Priority Group (LSPG) approach has helped focus and redirect resources to priorities. However, in setting the last two budgets, with increasing pressures and expectations on the council to deliver more with less, continuing recession pressures, and most significantly a **14%** reduction in government grant, Members have remained committed to achieving a balanced budget for the council.

In summary the Council has seen Government funding reductions of **£1.65 million** since 2011/12, and is expected to have seen reductions of **£3.2 million** by 2017/18:



This commitment has led to the most significant downsizing of the council in the last 20 years. In 2011 this was clearly the correct decision with the level of grant cuts in excess of the levels predicted both nationally and locally. In addition, with the government incentive the council was able to achieve a Council Tax freeze for 2011/12, 2012/13 and 2013/14, and make a forecasted contribution back into balances. This contribution to balances helped replenish our depleted reserves, and must be considered a significant achievement whilst protecting priority services. The chart below shows the level of budgeted and actual balances since 2007/08 when the budgeted gap was £2.4 million between expenditure and resources.

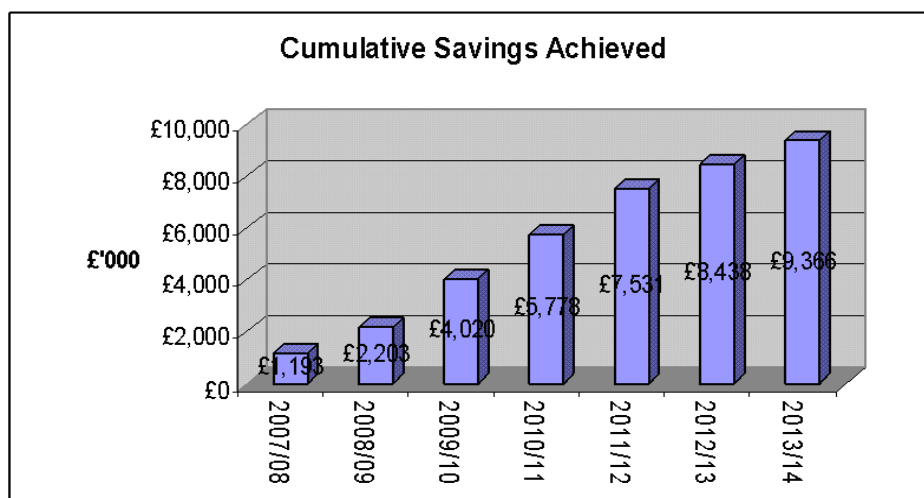


Delivering improvement with reduced resources was a key consideration in the recent review of the council's corporate plan. Effective management of our resources is vital to ensure that we can meet our priorities.

The council has excelled in its response to economic pressures yet retained its commitment to customer service in its recent journey of improvement. Many of our achievements have been celebrated in our resident magazine, 'Chronicle'.

Link to Chronicle page of website: <http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/news-and-events/27580/>

Whilst continuing to provide a wide range of services, beyond statutory requirements, the council has achieved savings of £9.366million between 2007/08 and 2013/14.



However, delivery of these savings has meant that elected Councillors have needed to cut back or stop popular policy choices.

The ability to deliver savings and appropriate investment is testament to the strong working relationship between politicians and managers, and the commitment of staff.

Whilst excelling in our delivery of savings to date, the council recognises that there are further significant financial challenges to overcome in order to deliver a sustainable budget. The impact of Local Government Finance Settlements and other pressures on the Council's General Fund means that a further £3million savings are required over the period 2014/15 to 2016/17. [Link to Executive Reports: http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/council-meetings/88468/92632/](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/have-your-say/council-meetings/88468/92632/)

In preparation for the financial challenges ahead, the council are implementing a three year Priority Based Budgeting (PBB) Framework to support transformation plans and ensure resources are aligned to council priorities.

Key to the success of the PBB process is engagement with residents, staff, partners, businesses and other stakeholders. Arrangements are in place to obtain staff input to the process, obtain residents input to any proposed customer service transformation, and ensure community groups affected are engaged at the earliest opportunity.

To ensure that Members are fully involved in the process related to the Priority Based Budgeting process, savings and growth options identified through the Priority Based Budgeting framework are reviewed by a cross party group Leader's Services Priority Group over 10 weeks, before approval by the Executive and Council. ([Supporting document provided: \[15\] Presentation to Leader's Services Priority Group](#))

Staff are well-informed about the financial situation and the PBB process. The Strategic Director Resources has carried out explanatory presentations for all staff, and staff have been invited to focus groups to share their thoughts and ideas about where they think we could save money or work more efficiently. ([Supporting documents provided: \[16\] Finance road-show presentation and \[17\] staff 'message of the day'](#))

Engagement with residents is scheduled between August and December 2013 using various methods:

- Residents Survey
- Telephone surveys
- Café Choice - our pop up café
- Business telephone surveys
- Customer Conference or Forum

SBC has a proud history of strong financial management whilst delivering a range of services our residents have told us they want. It is anticipated that the next 3 years will be the most challenging yet, in maintaining a balanced budget, meeting resident's expectations through the services delivered and supporting the community through the long lasting effects of the economic downturn. The Council is starting the PBB process from a strong / stable position, but a range of difficult decisions must now be faced.

The PBB process is a comprehensive programme of reform for the council with the intention of delivering better outcomes for Stevenage residents for less money. PBB will also help determine the future focus of the council in a world of diminishing resources. ([Supporting document provided: \[18\] PBB Timeline plan](#))

Focus 3: Working in a world of diminishing resources

As we enter a period where we have less staff and less financial resources, but increasing needs in our community, we need to reshape our workforce to deal with different challenges.

We need to be a leaner, more efficient and effective organisation, with staff who are more flexible, with different skills.

We are developing a programme called Forward Together, which will:

- Develop new core values for the organisation
- Make our corporate priorities real for all staff and Members
- Make decision making quicker and easier by reducing red tape and bureaucracy
- Empower staff by devolving decisions to the lowest possible level in the council
- Develop a "fix it, don't walk past it" culture
- Develop a toolkit to introduce Lean processes to make all areas more efficient and effective
- Transform service delivery by the use of new technology and new ways of working
- Develop and train our staff at all levels so we are more flexible and better skilled.



As part of this programme we are developing a new people strategy for the council. We are already exploring new ways of working and have established a partnership with East Herts to deliver Revenues and Benefits, and are extending that to include ICT, print and design, and business improvement. This adds to existing partnerships for Audit and CCTV.

We have also embarked on the roll out of a major investment in new IT equipment and up to date software and systems to improve our effectiveness, delivered across both authorities.

Our objective is to create an organisation with a new, modern culture, better able to deliver the Council's key priorities effectively in a difficult future.

[\(Supporting Forward Together Programme Information provided \[19\]\)](#)

Core Components

1. Does the council understand its local context and has it established a clear set of priorities?

Development of the council's vision and priorities considers national and regional policy and local issues, and priorities are shaped by the views of residents obtained through a variety of consultation activities.

The plan sets out the structure and key demographics of the town and outlines the council's vision for a strong, but sustainable Stevenage to be achieved in co-operation with residents and community organisations.

The plan also articulates our framework of co-operative principles that reflect our aim to enhance involvement of the town's residents and organisations in shaping and providing services in Stevenage to address local priorities.

Sharing the development and provision of services in a co-operative way will help the council ensure long term viability.

2. Does the Council have a financial plan in place to ensure long-term viability?

The council is facing a significant funding gap over the next three years as a result of the simultaneous occurrence of a number of significant economic and social challenges:

- a) The impact of the economic downturn on local citizens and businesses.
- b) Pressure from reduced national funding and reduced local income generation.
- c) Pressures on capital funding and reserves.
- d) Demographic growth – at both ends of the age spectrum.
- e) Increasing pressure on public sector pensions.

As a result of these pressures, a further £3million savings are required over the period 2014/15 to 2016/17. The Priority Based Budget Framework has been introduced to ensure that the council can maintain a balanced and sustainable budget that will support transformation plans and ensure resources are aligned to council priorities.

3. Does the council have effective political and managerial leadership and is it a constructive partnership?

The Council acknowledges that a successful working relationship between the Leader and Chief Executive is critical to its success and the achievement of its policies and strategies both in terms of the Council itself and its relationship with partners. A mutual understanding of each other's responsibilities has built up over many years of working together, which has led to a respect, tolerance and shared appreciation of each other's roles both individually and to set the tone for good Member/officer relationships throughout the authority.

Mutual respect and trust has been established on the ten principles of public life which the Leader and Chief Executive have undertaken to uphold.

Importantly they also acknowledge –

- The Leader's position as leader of the majority political party group
- The Chief Executive's wider role to serve the Council and Members as a whole, irrespective of political party.

This openness in their relationship has ensured that any tensions that may arise are resolved swiftly and amicably.

Strategic level officer leadership is led by Strategic Management Board and the Strategic Management Team (Heads of Service). The primary link to Executive decision making for officers is through Portfolio Holders – Regular opportunities

for Portfolio Holder briefings are in place to ensure that both Members and officers are fully aware of both achievements made and challenges faced in respective portfolios to meet council priorities and ensure effective communication of key issues.

Middle management is also considered effective by staff - In the Staff Survey 2013, 82% of staff agree that their line manager is approachable and 75% agree that they are generally supported by their line manager, and that their line manager acknowledges their contribution.

4. Are effective governance and decision making arrangements in place to respond to key challenges and manage change, transformation and disinvestment?

The Council's Constitution sets out how the council operates, how decisions are made and the procedures that are to be followed to ensure that these are efficient, transparent and accountable to local residents. [Link to Constitution: http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/councillors-and-democracy/17074/](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk/about-the-council/councillors-and-democracy/17074/)

A key challenge in the current year is the implementation of new pay and grading policies and practices across the council to bring us in line with legislation and national agreements with the trade unions (Single Status). Discussions with the unions are on-going and preparations are being made for implementation once a formal decision on structure has been made.

Decisions regarding Single Status follow a series of difficult changes made in order for the council to manage budget cuts – Downsizing of the organisation has meant organisational structural change. The Council has a strong track record of managing organisational change well, and maintaining high levels of employee engagement through challenging times, as evidenced by the results of our recent staff survey.

Building on this success, we're currently in the process of adopting 3 new HR Policies; a new Redundancy Policy, Redeployment Policy and a Pay Protection Policy.

These 3 policies will work cohesively together to ensure the Council complies with recent changes to employment legislation, that all our managers understand the process, that employees who are subject to organisational change are fully informed of their rights and entitlements and that, wherever possible we retain redundant staff within our employment thereby avoiding job losses and unnecessary redundancy costs.

Aside from implementation of Single Status, the key challenges and transformation plans currently facing the council relate to the focus areas we have requested for this peer challenge. The aim of both the Priority Based Budgeting Framework and 'Forward Together' transformation is to manage change by considering appropriate disinvestment and creating synergy across services that will enable the council to respond to key challenges.

Officers recognise that our Members are the vital link to our communities to ensure that the decisions the council make with regard transformation plans and changes to service delivery reflect the needs and priorities of the residents of Stevenage.

However, our aim is to ensure that the process of decision making is as streamlined as possible and for this reason one of the aims of the Forward Together Programme is to formulate and enhance the leadership style required

to drive the council forward, focussing on leaders leading by example and measured against a clear focus and set purpose.

5. Are organisational capacity and resources focused in the right areas in order to deliver the agreed priorities?

The new Corporate Plan, 'Sharing the Dividends', consists of clear and focussed improvement priorities that are achievable with the council's resources in the current financial context.

The council has embedded robust project methodology to ensure that resources are allocated to improvement activity with achievable outcomes that will contribute to delivery of priorities.

Our practices for determining priorities and seeking efficiencies means that demands for resource and capacity are consistently challenged by directors and Portfolio Holders.

However, pressure on resources can lead to 'salami slicing' of resource across the organisation. Our aim is to take a more cohesive approach to managing resource reductions 'forward together' - The primary aims of both the Forward Together Programme and the Priority Based Budgeting Framework is to enhance the provision of capacity and resources to the right areas (in the right way) in order to deliver agreed priorities. This will help ensure that the Council is focused on improving and delivering what customers need.

Conclusion

The first generation of new towns were arguably the most successful examples of social engineering in the 20th century. It is believed that Stevenage has demonstrated what can be achieved by robust national land use and planning policies, proactive economic development and a strongly community based Council administration.

The Council accepts the future looks challenging, and no-one can be sure about the length or depth of the current economic downturn. We are entering uncharted territory, and the rule book developed over the past 10 years of relative prosperity is no longer valid. As the rules change, the Council, our partners and local businesses are having to innovate and work co-operatively.

Co-operative working is not new in Stevenage. The town has a strong history of residents and community leaders coming together to effect change. The early residents of Stevenage New Town worked together to secure necessary services, establish local groups and develop Stevenage into the strong community minded town it is today.

We hope that we have demonstrated that the Council has a clear understanding of what it needs to do in response to its Community Leadership role during these challenging times. The motto of the town is "The heart of a town lies in its people" and we expect the Peer Challenge team will soon be welcomed to a town and Council that demonstrates that commitment every day in the work we do. Together, we strongly believe that we can achieve a town of which we are all proud and where we can truly share the dividends.