

Voluntary and Community Sector Strategy 2012 – 2015



Contents

Introduction	3
Background.....	4
• Defining the voluntary and community sector	4
• A note on faith groups	4
• Infrastructure services.....	4
• The voluntary sector in Stevenage.....	5
• Co-operative council	6
Why do we need a strategy for the sector?.....	6
• We need to improve outcomes for all in difficult economic times.	6
• The community commissioning cycle.....	8
• We need to reduce public spending and improve efficiency.	9
• We acknowledge the importance of the sector in meeting residents needs.....	9
• The need for new delivery models	9
• National drivers for change	10
Priority - Voice and Representation	11
• Building on the Compact	11
• Strengthening links and increasing voice	11
Priority - Sustainability	14
• Partnerships, collaborations and mergers.....	14
• Transforming Infrastructure Services	14
• The changing face of public services	15
• Sustainability through co-operative working and enterprise	15
• Towards co-operative working	17
Priority - Harnessing corporate giving	18
• What is the local picture of corporate and community collaboration?.....	18
• How can the business sector be enabled to help?	19
• Resourcing business brokerage.....	19
Priority - Volunteering	21
Measuring Performance.....	23
Our commitment to Equality.....	23
Contact details	24
Appendix one – A profile of Stevenage.....	25
Appendix two - How the council supports the sector.	27
Appendix three – the Localism Act explained	28

Introduction

We are pleased to present the voluntary and community sector strategy for 2012 to 2015. The strategy proposes how we will build on the strong relationship we have with the voluntary and community sector in Stevenage and looks at the ways we can work together in the future.

As a co-operative council we know that we need a strong, vibrant and flourishing sector to work with us as an equal partner in continuing to improve the lives of people in Stevenage.

The voluntary and community sector in Stevenage is diverse and has continually evolved to meet the needs of our residents. We are all facing financial constraints and we need to work differently in order to protect the services that are so vital to people, especially during the current downturn.

The council has been talking to the sector for some time, looking at its needs, as well as exploring how groups could work together in new ways. We've also spoken to businesses to learn more about what they can offer the community and how they can work in partnership with the voluntary and community sector.

Our Vision

By building on the vibrant, diverse and thriving voluntary and community sector in Stevenage we will work in partnership to increase its resilience and sustainability, preparing the sector for new opportunities.

Our vision is to see the talent and experience in the sector come forward to offer a high quality, innovative service to groups in the community.

We want the voice of the sector to be central to the way we work in the future.

This strategy will lead to an agreed plan of action for the council to achieve the goals and ambitions presented here.

We know that by working co-operatively we can achieve excellence. We look forward to seeing this strategy make a lasting difference to the lives of those in Stevenage.

Cllr Sharon Taylor
Council Leader



Cllr Sherma Batson
Portfolio Holder for Communities, Health
and Older People



Background

- **Defining the voluntary and community sector**

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) defines the characteristics of the voluntary and community sector. These groups are value-driven, reinvest surpluses to further their aims and are committed to reflecting user need.

Their work includes:

- delivering services
- advocating or lobbying on behalf of community causes
- facilitating international, community and economic development
- advancing religious faith and practice
- raising funds
- providing financial and other support to other voluntary and community organisations.

For the purposes of this strategy, the terms voluntary and community sector and voluntary and community organisation will refer to the diverse range, size and scope of organisations in Stevenage including the following:

- ✓ Voluntary organisations
- ✓ Registered charities
- ✓ Faith groups (see note below)
- ✓ Community groups
- ✓ Tenants and residents groups, community associations
- ✓ Housing associations
- ✓ Co-operatives and social enterprises¹
- ✓ Most sports, environmental, arts and heritage organisations
- ✓ Grant making trusts.

- **A note on faith groups**

In referring to the voluntary and community sector, this strategy includes all faith-based groups in Stevenage. The council recognises the importance of all faith groups' contribution to the wellbeing and cohesion of our community and they are included in our definition of the voluntary and community sector.

The council's Equalities Action Plan outlines a commitment to support the development of a Stevenage inter-faith group and we are committed to ensuring that faith groups feel suitably represented within the sector.

- **Infrastructure services**

Infrastructure organisations are organisations that exist to support frontline groups in the voluntary and community sector or social enterprises in achieving their aims. They offer an

¹ Where 'profits' are reinvested for the benefit of members or community

extensive range of support services including funding advice, equipment and room hire, training and networking, volunteering services and more.

• The voluntary sector in Stevenage

Stevenage was the first designated new town designed to provide homes and jobs for people after the Second World War and the voluntary and community sector has continually evolved in line with its needs.

Many of the early residents formed the first associations and groups to represent their interests and to support a range of social and welfare issues.

'the new residents were all very much together in those days; we all shared the same problems...so naturally we all pulled together with the same sense of purpose – and a wonderful community spirit resulted.' M Cotter - early resident of Stevenage²

By 1977 at least 300 community and voluntary groups existed in the town serving the diverse range of social, welfare and recreational needs of the town³

Today the voluntary and community sector in Stevenage is unique in nature and size and its diversity is reflective of the range of needs of people in the town. In broad terms there are particular beneficiary groups that have significant representation from the sector. These include people with disabilities, older people and children. Importantly the sector offers niche support to minority groups or people with needs not traditionally met by mainstream service provision.

A breakdown of the diversity of beneficiary groups of these organisations provided by Stevenage CVS⁴ supports this view, illustrating that there are groups supporting every area of the community from housing and homelessness to isolation and social exclusion.

Stevenage Borough Council has adopted co-operative council principles:

- 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 an active role in their 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 principles recognise that the support and partnership of organisations, residents and staff is needed to run services.

They 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.

² Taken from 'First New Town' by Jack Balchin

³ Stevenage Development Corporation's public relations unit 1977.

⁴ CVS provide a range of support services to the voluntary and community sector.-

The council ensures that the voluntary and community sector has representation and voice by providing ten seats on the SoStevenage Partnership, where members can help to shape policy and the Community Strategy.⁵

- **Co-operative council**

Being a co-operative council is all about partnership. Because of its new town heritage Stevenage Borough Council has always worked co-operatively with the community. The guiding principals for a co-operative council help communities to take control of their lives and the services with whom they interact.

Stevenage Borough Council would like to see greater involvement from citizens and service users, but will continue to offer support to the voluntary sector. The council has a long tradition of supporting the sector both in terms of direct funding and in-kind contributions.⁶

As a co-operative council we wish to continue to support local groups within available resources, listening to needs, identifying opportunities for new kinds of support and exploring new forms of collaborative working.

The council is moving towards a vision of a single or co-operative organisation resourced to provide robust, high quality infrastructure support services and helping Stevenage's voluntary and community organisations grow as resilient, independent partners.

Why do we need a strategy for the sector ?

- **We need to improve outcomes for all in difficult economic times.**

Despite the severe financial constraints affecting all sectors, there remains the need to protect the social capital that the sector has worked hard to build in the town, while ensuring that effective, value for money services are provided.

A system that effectively identifies priorities and outcomes as well as the best providers must be in place to ensure good use of public money. The system needs to be clearer and more accessible to local voluntary and community groups.

We need to create a significant change in our relationship with the sector, based on clear priorities and outcomes that improve people's lives rather than simply funding organisations and services.

This does not mean that we do not value each and every one of the organisations operating in our community. It means that because we have less money we have to concentrate on the highest priorities. Therefore our emphasis will be on vulnerable residents and the most deprived neighbourhoods. We want to narrow the pockets of inequality which exist across the town, as this will ultimately benefit everyone. We will move towards a stronger, fairer system of commissioning ensuring priority need is met.

⁵ A profile of Stevenage can be found at appendix one

⁶ In-kind support refers to non financial support such as officer time, rent-free arrangements, subsidised fees, free advertising and more. See appendix two for more information.

What is commissioning?

Commissioning is about planning, paying for and monitoring services. Traditional grant funding involved organisations approaching funders to apply for funding to support their existing services or to open new services. Commissioning differs as it is a cycle which begins with funders identifying their local priorities. They may also then assess needs and look at gaps in service delivery. Once priorities are decided upon, a specification is written, defining what outcomes the funder is looking for. Local groups are invited to tender for the contract, service level agreement, or grant to deliver these particular outcomes.

The process is described as a cycle. A contract/grant is awarded to the organisation that can demonstrate how they can deliver these outcomes and offer quality and value for money. The funder then monitors performance and evaluates the impact of the project.

- **The community commissioning cycle**

1 Assess local needs

- Agree the priorities with community partners in Stevenage and establish what gaps there are in services
- Determine what resources (funding) are available
- Decide what outcomes are required to be delivered in partnership
- Decide how these outcomes can be delivered: what type of service is needed?

3 Monitor and evaluate

- Identify opportunities to support the provider in delivering outcomes
- Monitor performance and spend
- Evaluate impact and look again at local priorities.



2 Tender

- Issue a specification
- invite groups to bid/tender, showing how they can deliver these priority outcomes
- Assess applications against agreed criteria
- Agree a contract / service level agreement based on the above.

- **We need to reduce public spending and improve efficiency.**

As a result of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, Stevenage Borough Council anticipated a cut of around 35% in its grant, resulting in the need for £3.5million of savings over the subsequent four years.

In 2011/12 the council's community funding budget was reduced by 15% (£66,692), and further reductions are anticipated in order to reach the overall savings target that the council has set itself. The intention has been to try to reduce the impact on the sector as much as possible through a funding process that focuses on delivering outcomes based on community needs, along with information and advice on how organisations can become more self-sustaining.

As a co-operative council we wish to increase the resilience and viability of the sector and raise its voice and independence. To do so we need to move away from only providing direct assistance as we do not want these strengths to be compromised.

We believe that in the future we should see more partnership working and that groups should be handed the freedom to design and deliver services.

- **We acknowledge the importance of the sector in meeting residents needs**

The role of local authorities has changed. As a co-operative council we acknowledge our influence as a strong community leader, responsible for ensuring stronger communities.

Stevenage Borough Council recognises that it cannot fulfil this role without support from a thriving voluntary and community sector.

Stevenage Borough Council firmly acknowledges the need for a vibrant, diverse and strong voluntary and community sector in order to most effectively meet local needs and improve quality of life for Stevenage residents.

The council has adopted co-operative principals which recognise the importance of working with the community and other agencies to provide quality services that meet the needs of the residents. We recognise that the Stevenage voluntary and community sector is ideally placed to design and deliver these services.

- **The need for new delivery models**

Successive governments as well as the lead national organisations for the voluntary and community sector, have acknowledged the need to modernise, sustain and improve overall provision of infrastructure services. Now it is more important than ever for services to question the likelihood of long-term sustainability if the way they work remains the same.

In Stevenage, consultation with our stakeholders has shown us that our local infrastructure services are highly valued, however the sector is in agreement that services could be more effective and accessible.

There is a need to re-think the way we do business. There is an awareness that services need to be rationalised so that we make the best use of resources, but rather than just cutting back on services or functions, it is important that organisations come together to explore innovative delivery models.

This strategy reinforces the council's commitment to supporting organisations through the process of change and recognises that transformation of local services may be necessary, not just for long-term resilience, but to promote the profile, voice and influence of the sector as a whole.

- **National drivers for change**

The Localism Act⁷ outlines new rights and powers for local communities, including giving people a new way to voice their opinion on local issues and ensuring social enterprises, volunteers and community groups get a chance to change or improve how things are done.⁸

The recent White Paper 'Opening Public Services' outlines the intention to make public services open to a range of providers. Some organisations are preparing their organisation's readiness to respond to the future funding environment and take advantage of opportunities that may arise from the reform of public services.

In Stevenage, and across the UK, voluntary and community sector organisations are beginning to think, not only about how they can become more sustainable, but how they might position themselves for future opportunities.

⁷ A summary of the key points from the Localism Act can be found at appendix three.

⁸ A Plain English Guide to the Localism Act

Priority - Voice and Representation

- **Building on the Compact**

The *Stevenage Compact* is an agreement between Stevenage Borough Council, the voluntary and community sector and other local public bodies to 'improve our relationship for mutual advantage'

Stevenage has a thriving and diverse voluntary and community sector which has developed with the active support of the council and other agencies. The council has historically enjoyed a strong relationship with the sector and is committed to maintaining an open dialogue with community groups.

This strategy outlines a commitment to strengthen and renew the compact in 2012 and beyond.

As a co-operative council we would like to build on the positive dialogue we currently have to enable voluntary, community and faith groups to help shape policy. In January we hosted a summit event for voluntary and community groups in Stevenage.⁹ Emerging from that event is a new network of partners. The Stevenage Community Network will remain completely independent, however we will support its development.

The council is committed to further develop the relationship between the two sectors for the benefit of the community. In light of shifting national policy, funding constraints and the need to work differently we would like to work closely with our community partners to agree a compact that will accurately capture this commitment.

- **Strengthening links and increasing voice**

A key issue highlighted through our dialogue with the sector was the need to improve communication. This is a broad area, but key themes affecting the sector seem apparent. Firstly, people working in the sector have consistently said that they would like to see more inter-agency or partnership work. The barriers to this were not cost or time. Moreover, members felt that they were not connected with each other and did not always know who else was working in the sector and how to access them. In our survey in December 2010 55% of people stated that they *'need help in identifying partners to collaborate with.'* We were also told that *'people need to come together, both in terms of size and thematically similar areas of work.'*¹⁰

Attendees at the summit reported the need for improved sharing of information, perhaps a central hub for communications and marketing, to improve dialogue within the sector and at the same time pooling valuable resources.

The Stevenage Community Network aims to bring together voluntary and community organisations wishing to make a difference to the sector for the benefit of the people of our town. It will act as a forum to exchange ideas and explore innovative ways of working.

⁹ For more information about how we have consulted see appendix five.

¹⁰ Stevenage voluntary and community sector summit January 2011

As a co-operative council we wish to enable the voice of the sector to shape policy and we hope in time that effective networking will bring a shared vision, ensuring the needs of the sector are understood.

There is also the need to raise understanding and awareness of the nature and value of services offered by the sector amongst organisations outside of the sector and to raise its profile through representation.

The voluntary and community sector survey showed us that only a quarter (24%) of respondents have ever been in touch with their voluntary sector representatives on the SoStevenage¹¹ board, despite there being ten representatives from the sector on the board. Furthermore 18% of people interviewed did not know who their local Councillor is.

The council welcomes the formation of the Stevenage Community Network and acknowledges the need to review the current links we have with the sector to ensure that all corners of the sector feel represented.

What do local Councillors Do?

Councils are run by elected councillors who are voted for by local people. Councillors are responsible for making decisions on behalf of the community about local services, agreeing budgets and council tax charges.

Councillors are elected by the local community and are there to represent its views. Each councillor represents an area called a ward, serving for four years.

Councillors are not paid a salary and are not council employees. Councillors provide the policies, and then paid employees (council officers) put them into practice.

In Stevenage there are 39 councillors representing 13 wards. To find out who your local councillor is or how to contact them email:

memberservices@stevenage.gov.uk

¹¹ Stevenage's local partnership works to promote the social and economic well-being of people living, working and visiting the town.

Objectives

- ✓ We will move towards a fairer, more transparent and more accessible approach to commissioning and allocating community funding
- ✓ We will work to promote SoStevenage representatives and local councillors
- ✓ We will support the development of a communications hub and database
- ✓ We will renew the Stevenage Compact, agreeing with partners on how and when this should happen
- ✓ We will develop a work programme for continued consultation with the voluntary and community sector
- ✓ We will support the development of the independent Stevenage Community Network.

Priority - Sustainability

- **Partnerships, collaborations and mergers**

In light of financial constraints and shifting national policy many local authorities are encouraging a review of how their voluntary sector is supported. There is a move to encourage the sector to work more collaboratively and to deliver outcomes more cost effectively. This is also reflected in the response of local voluntary and community sector members to our December 2010 survey.

Encouragingly, when asked about partnership, the highest proportion of respondents stated that they needed help in 'identifying partners to collaborate with' (55%). In terms of planning for the future, almost three fifths (57%) are planning organisational growth and one in ten is planning a merger.¹²

However, while 38% would be willing to pay for face to face advice, few would be willing to pay for undertaking mergers, shared services (6%) or developing partnerships (11%). It might be assumed that many local organisations are not confident about the principals of investing to save and have not started to explore the cost benefits, efficiencies and necessity to share functions in these changing times.

The council strongly recognises partnership work as a vehicle for change and greater financial independence and we will continue to support local voluntary and community organisations to come together to form partnerships and collaborations.

- **Transforming Infrastructure Services**

At the Stevenage Voluntary Sector Summit in January 2011 groups were encouraged to tell us what the strengths are in local organisational support, as well as areas for improvement. Importantly, there was universal support and acknowledgment for the services offered by existing Stevenage infrastructure services, a view Stevenage Borough Council would firmly support.

Nonetheless, there is a need to improve access to effective, joined up support services. This is mirrored nationally and is driving policy change.

In Stevenage, help with finding volunteers was an issue for over half (53%) of respondents while almost half (49%) need help developing volunteers. Information and updates on employment law was considered the most important staffing need. Furthermore almost three fifths (58%) of respondents felt that they needed help with publicising their organisation.

Stevenage Borough Council, with partners, would like to see frontline voluntary and community organisations access a wider range of high quality support including more volunteering brokerage and links to local businesses.

¹² Stevenage voluntary and community sector survey December 2010

We would like to see infrastructure organisations remodelled to become more efficient, ensuring areas are not duplicated or services fragmented and importantly, to become more self-reliant and sustainable.

We are confident that there is agreement with the sector that business models need to change. We have been actively engaging with the sector, inviting proposals and sharing ideas.

This strategy later describes the rise of enterprise and other models of social innovation as means to building greater capacity into the sector as well as of achieving greater sustainability in the long-term.

- **The changing face of public services**

For some years, successive governments have anticipated and looked forward to an increased role for the voluntary and community sector¹³. More recently large cuts to public spending have led to significant changes in the way public services are delivered.

Some organisations are already taking steps to prepare their organisation's readiness to respond to the future funding environment and take advantage of these future opportunities.

In light of constrained public spending the future level of income from Government is uncertain. In the short term funding is likely to fall, but in the longer term contracts for public service delivery may lead to increased funding of the voluntary sector.

The voluntary and community sector has a good reputation for innovation and creative thinking and the opening up of public services may lead to real benefits for groups in Stevenage. Increased competition will also make it more important than ever to demonstrate value for money, effectiveness and to seek out collaborations with local partners.

- **Sustainability through co-operative working and enterprise**

This strategy has already discussed the need to rationalise and transform ways of working and to become more outcome focused. However we appreciate that the sector is diverse and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to future stability.

The public sector has traditionally been the main source of income for the sector but this is a rapidly changing picture.

There is a growing expectation from both within the voluntary and community sector and funders that organisations will engage in some form of income generation in order to become self-sustainable. New models of working are transforming the way some areas of the sector do business. These include mutuals, co-operatives and social enterprises.

¹³ Ref: the future role of the third sector in social and economic regeneration (2007) Treasury /Cabinet Office

Like the wider voluntary and community sector, these are organisations driven by a social imperative and vary from those employing one or two people, to national organisations.

Unlike some voluntary organisations, co-operatives, mutuals and social enterprises are self-sustaining and the rise and success of these organisations during this lengthy period of economic downturn is being described by many in quite revolutionary terms.

As with all businesses, these organisations compete to deliver goods and services but the social aim remains central to activity, and profits or surpluses are reinvested towards achieving that aim.

Social enterprises operate in almost every industry in the UK. Enterprise and trading may include selling products or publications, providing training, renting office space to running a transport or membership scheme.

The government defines social enterprises as businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders and owners.

Hertfordshire Community Meals - case study

Hertfordshire Community Meals is a not-for-profit social enterprise that was established in 2007 to deliver meals on wheels in Hertfordshire.

From small beginnings with two vehicles, seven staff and a team of volunteers, HCM has grown into a thriving, community focused organisations supporting vulnerable and disabled adults throughout Hertfordshire.

The enterprise now employs over 100 staff, is supported by 150 volunteers and runs a fleet of almost 50 vehicles. The enterprise is constantly finding innovative ways to add value to their clients and the community.

- **Towards co-operative working**

Resources are scarce - Stevenage Borough Council needs to invest in a sector which is moving towards sustainability and can deliver defined outcomes. We acknowledge that partners are concerned about risks involved in changing the way they work, but entrepreneurial and innovative services can attract an increase and diversification of funding. Some organisations may need to extend or acquire new skills such as marketing or financial forecasting to survive and avail of opportunities that arise. Some partners believe that there may be a blurring of boundaries between the VCS, public sector and private enterprise.¹⁴

As a co-operative council, Stevenage Borough Council encourages greater independence for organisations who can secure more unrestricted income promoting financial sustainability. The council wishes to help organisations grow as resilient, independent but equal partners. We know that developing a form of income generation will require a significant amount of time and investment, which is why the council is firmly committed to supporting innovative, new models from their conception.¹⁵

In July 2011 the Executive Member for Community, Health and Older People wrote to over 300 organisations in Stevenage to invite ideas and underline our commitment of support to the sector as a whole.

Objectives

- ✓ We will continue to promote local voluntary and community organisations in coming together to form partnerships and collaborations
- ✓ We will encourage voluntary and community organisations to join the Stevenage Community Network
- ✓ We will engage the sector in the development of robust, innovative infrastructure services
- ✓ We will support the sector in becoming 'contract ready' for new opportunities
- ✓ We will encourage the support of innovative models in the sector

¹⁴ Stevenage Voluntary Sector Summit Jan 2011

¹⁵ More information about not-for-profit enterprise and some case studies can be found at appendix five

Priority - Harnessing corporate giving

It's difficult to find out who to talk to [about helping the local community] It's a shame because people like us would be a credit to the county.

We would be able to help but we just don't know how to get into it.....it's an issue of accessibility for businesses like us

Stevenage Managing Director July 2011

An emerging theme from Stevenage Borough Council's consultation with the voluntary and community sector is that of corporate social responsibility or more accurately, corporate giving and the need to explore how the sector can make beneficial links in terms of sponsorship, one-off donations, the provision of volunteers and business support.

The benefits to businesses of corporate social responsibility, whether it is through direct donations, volunteering, free use of facilities and resources, are now widely accepted. The business case for being a responsible business by Cranfield University identified seven key benefits of corporate social responsibility ranging from 'attracting and retaining good quality staff' through to 'direct financial impact.'

However the area provides some challenges, not least the recent downturn affecting many areas of trade, commerce and industry. In addition the benefits referred to above are not applicable to all business types and sizes. Many businesses, as we heard from our business survey, do not know where to access information about the community or indeed, which areas of the community are looking for specific forms of support, for example, help with policy development or the use of volunteers to build a community garden.

In response to our consultation in June 2011 and the need to better understand the potential for more private sector giving, Stevenage Borough Council commissioned a business sector survey investigating voluntary and community sector collaboration. In addition, we then conducted a second interview with the voluntary and community sector to ascertain what sort of help local groups are already receiving.

- **What is the local picture of corporate and community collaboration?**

It is clear that a significant part of the business community in Stevenage do not need to be sold the benefits of supporting the sector. An encouraging 39% of all respondents are already supporting the sector in some way. A total of 394 businesses were surveyed and it highlighted that over 180 different voluntary and community organisations are supported by 147 of the surveyed businesses.

We were interested to know if corporate support was going back into the local community, as opposed to national or international causes. Local voluntary and community organisations are supported the most (73%). In addition, of those local groups receiving funding from the private sector, 93% receive donations from local firms.

Typically, businesses support the sector through direct financial support (73%), in the form of donations and most groups surveyed receive £1000 or less.

Interestingly in-kind support is most often in the form of shared or subsidised use of facilities and the sharing of business skills. Approximately 29% report to release employees to volunteer.

- **How can the business sector be enabled to help?**

The most common theme throughout our survey with business was the reported need for more information about how they could help the community. More specifically, business wanted to know which organisation needed what.

Many business respondents made suggestions about what they would like to see including a link on the council's website, a directory of local groups and a coming together with the sector, such as a conference. The need for more information and a function to bring the two sectors together was echoed by the voluntary and community sector with many respondents suggesting an event and a permanent activity for brokering opportunities.

'Stevenage Council should get out into the market place and raise awareness through some promotional campaign and meeting employers'
Stevenage Director (Business sector)

- **Resourcing business brokerage**

The need for linking businesses with the community is clear but there are resource implications for current support services.

We have heard from the sector that organising volunteers can be hugely time-intensive. Simply signposting Stevenage's business world to a volunteer service or directly to a group will not always result in benefits, particularly if organisations wish to release many volunteers.

Local infrastructure agencies are able to support or refer individuals interested in volunteering but have reported difficulties in, for example, accommodating requests from larger business. Scheduling, CRB¹⁶ checks and related administration take considerable time and local services are not currently resourced to carry out a large volume of requests.

This strategy has already outlined our interest in new models of infrastructure support and we are interested in a model that might deliver a brokerage service which will benefit the sector and reach those businesses who tell us they would like to make a contribution.

In some areas businesses are charged a fee for receiving the services of a volunteering agency. This helps to resource the function of the brokerage and adds value to the relationship.

¹⁶ Criminal Records Bureau Checks for people coming into working contact with young or vulnerable individuals.

Voluntary and community sector brokerages offer more than volunteering exchange. In addition they encourage businesses to offer skills and expertise, donations, gifts and sponsorship. We support the idea of a model which would generate revenue for the brokerage, through levying, for example, a fee for services such as volunteering. In return businesses receive tax relief, networking and local publicity and a range of other benefits for their organisation.

There are clearly missed opportunities in terms of local business wanting to help the sector and businesses wanting to know about how they can make a contribution.

There are already some positive examples of how the private sector is collaborating with the voluntary and community sector but there is no consistent approach across the town. Stevenage Borough Council would like to see an emerging model of infrastructure support able to offer a brokerage service which could harness the potential for giving from the private sector.

'There are businesses that would like to get involved like us but we have to go out and find the information. It would be more useful to have some sort of proactive engagement and them to say these are the projects we have at the moment, is there anyone there who can help.'

Retail Manager Stevenage

Objective

- ✓ We will actively support and encourage business interaction with voluntary and community groups.

Priority - Volunteering

Volunteers don't get paid not because they're worthless, but because they are priceless.
Sherrie Anderson – Volunteering Co-ordinator

The council believes that an active and diverse volunteer base is crucial to the sector and the well-being of the community and it also recognises the challenges involved in sourcing and keeping people with the appropriate skill level.

Throughout our consultation the need for improvements in this area has become clear, both in terms of the number of people coming forward to volunteer as well as an increase in the capacity for support and development provided to individuals.

Nationally the number of people volunteering their time has decreased and is at the lowest it has been for ten years.¹⁷ The picture of volunteering in Stevenage is somewhat different. Support services suggest an increase in people coming forward to volunteer, possibly due to increased redundancies and therefore motivated by personal development as well as personal endeavour.

The rise and fall of volunteering rates are most likely to be caused by several factors. Locally it is important that regardless of the environment, more local people are attracted to volunteering, are well matched, supported and retained.

The council acknowledges that volunteers are not a free resource. Moreover they require initial and on-going investment from the support service placing them as well as the community group who may have to provide, for example, one-to-one support and training.

Consultation with our partners has told us that there are many challenges in attracting and retaining volunteers. People volunteering their personal time are motivated by different aspects of volunteering. Individuals may be retired or not able to work in full-time employment due to health reasons or do not need a salaried position. Some may be motivated by the desire to keep fit and active or to develop skills for the labour market. Varying motivations affect the suitability of a volunteer placement and the organisation's ability to attract and retain people with the appropriate skill set and interest.

The council is committed to supporting the expansion of our volunteering base with its management lying at the centre of an infrastructure hub. We are keen to see a volunteer base better proportioned to the volunteering requirements of the sector and suggest this may be achieved through the establishment of a brokerage service.

Successful volunteering brokerages often levy a fee to private business to organise volunteering opportunities for their staff. Our consultation has shown that we need to take advantage of the corporate sector's desire to contribute to the voluntary and community sector and this may be an opportunity for the Sector. Our corporate survey told us that approximately 29% of the businesses we spoke to release employees to volunteer.

In talking to the sector and local businesses about collaboration, we were keen to further explore the potential for volunteering. When asked about their greatest needs, over half of voluntary and community groups surveyed said that 'help finding volunteers' was a key

¹⁷ National Citizenship Survey – Coalition Govt September 2011

issue. Yet when they were asked what contribution they would most like to see from the business community only 9% suggested volunteering. This may be because pressures around funding take priority or it may reflect the difficulties local groups have experienced in accommodating private sector volunteers.

It is clear that the capacity for volunteering in Stevenage should be expanded and we will work with partners to achieve this.

Objective

- ✓ We will encourage and support the expansion of the volunteer base and volunteering services in Stevenage.

Measuring Performance

The vision and objectives within this strategy will be addressed through the development and implementation of a detailed action plan. This action plan will present a clear work programme for on-going consultation, enablement and support of the voluntary and community sector in Stevenage. The plan will be produced by an action group consisting of council officers and partners from across the voluntary and community sector.

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 SMART¹⁸ targets and milestones which are regularly performance managed.

Our commitment to Equality

An Equality Impact Assessment has been completed. The assessment considered the implications of the strategy on equality groups to ensure this strategy is compliant with the Equality Act 2010. The assessment found that this strategy will help to support a range of equality groups across the town by ensuring a strong, vibrant and resilient voluntary and community sector which delivers services for such groups.

¹⁸ Specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time bound.

Contact details

For more information on this strategy or any other issue relating to the voluntary and community sector in Stevenage please contact

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Appendix one – A profile of Stevenage

The voluntary and community sector in Stevenage has been working to improve the lives of people in the town since it grew as a designated new town in the 1950s, when early arrivals set up the first community associations. The sector has evolved to meet the broad range of needs presented by local people.

Stevenage is a medium-sized town set in the relatively affluent, rural Hertfordshire. However the town presents a very different picture to the county as a whole, experiencing problems often found today in bigger towns or inner-cities.

Whilst Stevenage has a lower proportion of people from an ethnic background than other areas in the East of England and South East. We do have a diverse mix of beliefs and ethnicities across the town with a significant increase in recent years of migrants from Eastern Europe, predominantly Poland. The town accommodates a broad range of religious beliefs and practices including Jewish, Hindu, Muslim and Sikh, with approximately two thirds of the community stating their religion as Christian.

Compared to the county and sometimes the UK as a whole, poor health is a factor affecting a significant section of the community. Several health indicators are improved and improving, but obesity, smoking and binge drinking are too prevalent and comparative life expectancy suggests disadvantage within our community.

Stevenage is quite a young town in terms of having an above average number of youths but also a lower than average number of pensioners. Issues such as teenage pregnancy, lowered educational progress and youth unemployment remain significant across the town. However this does not negate the need to address the issues of a range of vulnerable communities including, older people, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities.

Compared to most local authorities, the borough has a much higher level of people in social housing. The town provides some 40,000 jobs, however many of these jobs are occupied by people commuting into town. Local people are less likely to be employed in managerial positions, compared to the rest of the county. People living in Stevenage generally earn less than in the rest of Hertfordshire.

So Stevenage, our local partnership continues to work to improve the quality of life for our community. The partnership brings together organisations from the public, private and voluntary sectors to focus on the economic, social and environmental well-being of our town. Partnership groups including the Social Inclusion Partnership and the Health and Wellbeing Partnership are actively working to redress some of the social inequalities described above.

Stevenage in 2011

The town's population is approximately 81,000 and likely to increase to 90,000 by 2031.

In the *Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010* Stevenage is ranked 173 out of 354 districts in England (where 1 is most deprived). In Hertfordshire, Stevenage is the most deprived district.

2011 Health Profile tells us:

- Life expectancy is 6.4 years lower for men and 5.4 years lower for women in the most deprived areas than in the least deprived.
- One in five adults binge drink
- One in four adults is obese
- 23.5% of the population smoke.

There are 35,000 homes in Stevenage and 29.6% is social rented housing. The council housing waiting list stands at 6,000

Appendix two - How the council supports the sector.

In August 2011 the council's Stronger Communities Officer spoke to colleagues across the council to identify all contributions made by Stevenage Borough Council to the voluntary and community sector. Our intention was to use this information to guide us in our thinking about how we can support the sector in the future.

The exercise revealed a large breadth of support including the following:

- direct financial support in the form of grants, funding or one-off financial contributions
- in-kind financial support in the form of discretionary rate relief and discounted rates
- in-kind support in the form of rent for council owned or managed properties
- in-kind support in the form of leasehold properties on peppercorn rents
- subsidised or free services such as waste and environmental services
- in-kind support in terms of the costs of officer time given to training, advice and wider support given to the sector
- other in-kind support such as research, the funding of events for the sector and free advertising
- One-to-one training and support in sourcing and applying for external funding
- A broad range of community and neighbourhood development services.

Appendix three – the Localism Act explained

The Localism Act aims to move power from central government back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils. The Act is split across five core themes of community empowerment; decentralisation and strengthening local democracy; reform of the planning system; social housing reform; and London.

Key points of the Localism Act include:

- a new power for local people to approve or veto excessive council tax rises through a local referendum, but with the intention that the majority of local councils will fall below the level set by the secretary of state;
- a right for local councils – as well as voluntary and community groups, social enterprises and local authority employees delivering a service – to challenge a local authority, by expressing an interest in running any service for which they are responsible;
- the chance for communities to develop a bid and raise the capital to buy a local community asset when it comes on the open market;
- measures to give people, councillors and councils the power to instigate a local referendum on any local issue;
- a new general power of competence to provide local authorities – including certain local councils – to enable them to do anything apart from that which is specifically prohibited;
- freeing up councillors to be able to campaign, to express views on issues and to vote on those matters, without fear of being unjustly accused of having a closed mind on a particular issue;
- the abolition of the Standards Board regime and a new duty on local authorities to promote and maintain high standards of conduct, including provision for the adoption of a voluntary code of conduct;
- changes to the Community Infrastructure Levy¹⁹ including provisions requiring some of these funds to be passed to neighbourhoods where the development has taken place;
- a new right for local councils to shape their local areas through neighbourhood plans which will enable communities to permit development – in full or in outline – without the need for planning applications;
- the power for communities to take forward development in their area without the need to apply for planning permission, subject to meeting certain safeguards and securing 50 per cent support of the community through a referendum.

¹⁹ The Community Infrastructure Levy is a levy that local authorities can choose to charge on new developments in their area. The money can be used to support development by funding infrastructure that the council, local community and neighbourhoods want.

Appendix four – How we have consulted

Since December 2010, the council has engaged in a series of consultation exercises to better understand how we can support the sector to secure positive outcomes for Stevenage in challenging times. This engagement has contributed to the main themes of this strategy.

- Voluntary sector questionnaire December 2010

In December 2010, the council commissioned the survey 'Shaping the future of the voluntary sector in Stevenage'. Some key findings are referred to in this strategy.

- Voluntary Sector Summit January 2011

Following the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review in October 2010, the council held an event to inform the voluntary and community sector in the borough of the reduction in the council's budget and to involve them in discussions on ways to sustain their organisations in the challenging economic climate.

- Sharing our vision

Stevenage Borough Council's Stronger Communities Officer has been meeting with groups and associations in the sector. In addition, in July 2011, we contacted over 100 voluntary and community sector partners to share our emerging thoughts on new ways of working.

- Stevenage survey of businesses

A key theme to come out of early consultation was the need to better engage with local businesses. To this end, Stevenage Borough Council commissioned a comprehensive business sector survey with 394 local businesses.

- Voluntary and community sector survey – links to the Business community

In order to compliment the survey undertaken with the business community, we decided to mirror the approach taken above by contacting the sector to create a picture of how they were being supported by local business.

Appendix five - Social enterprise is a growing force in the UK

In recent years, the social enterprise sector has been growing steadily, despite the economic downturn. Different governments have in turn, watched and encouraged the development of this sector, promoting not-for-profit enterprise as a model for public service innovation.

The report 'Fightback Britain' reports on the state of social enterprises in 2011 and provides an encouraging picture of this rapidly developing movement.

There is a belief that concerns for how the voluntary and Community sector can continue to support vulnerable people and communities, while experiencing economic difficulty, have actually brought social enterprise to the fore.

'The UK's economic woes have hot-housed the need for a business model that delivers sustainable economic growth while fostering social change and innovation.'

Fightback Britain' 2011

Social Enterprise – some key facts

Social enterprises are currently being established at *three times* the rate of small private firms (2011).

The social enterprise sector is outstripping small and medium sized enterprises in growth, confidence and innovation.

They are most likely to start up and work in Britain's most deprived communities (20 most deprived communities in the UK are seeing greatest rise of social enterprise).

Social enterprises reinvest in the communities where they are based.

Private businesses wishing to move beyond traditional corporate social responsibility are starting to trade more with social enterprises.

Social enterprises have a high proportion of black and minority ethnic and women directors than traditional small and medium sized enterprises.

'Fightback Britain' – A report on the state of social enterprise survey 2011

Enterprise and innovation in the voluntary and community sector-a case Study

The Bromley by Bow Centre is an exceptional example of what can be achieved through not-for-profit business models.

When Reverend Andrew Mawson OBE arrived at the centre in 1984 he found an elderly congregation of twelve people. He persuaded this dwindling group to open its doors to the wider community in order to save their church.

They found a community 'rich in culture and creativity'. Local artists took up rent-free residence in return for offering workshops. A nursery was set up and as the church became used by different faith groups, the building became a focal point for the entire community, growing and adapting by being responsive to the needs of the community. The church was redesigned, for example the rows of pews were replaced with furniture that could be reconfigured for different uses and the surrounding site was to continue growing over the years, sustaining itself through enterprise and attracting funding through its innovative approach.

'the Bromley by Bow Centre kept innovating and experimenting, challenging conventions and confounding expectations'

The centre which helped to define the term 'social enterprise' before its widespread use went on to provide the first, cutting-edge healthy living centre and pioneered an outreach model that brought local people out of isolation.

Today the Bromley by Bow Centre is an organisation with a turnover in excess of £3 million a year and over 100 staff.

It is the third largest provider of adult education in the borough of Tower Hamlets with numerous spin-off businesses. The centre has a national and international reputation for best practice in social innovation.

For more information see the Bromley by Bow Centre website at: <http://www.bbbsc.org.uk/>