

Meeting Executive
Portfolio Area Neighbourhoods & Cooperative Working
Date 12th August 2020



CO-OPERATIVE NEIGHBOURHOODS

KEY DECISION

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1 PURPOSE

- 1.1 This report provides an update on the implementation of Co-operative Neighbourhoods, following approval of the programme by the Executive in December 2019. The objectives of Co-operative Neighbourhoods are to coordinate services at a neighbourhood level, provide clear points of accountability, and support the activities of residents and communities who want to improve their neighbourhoods and create new opportunities. This will involve the creation of six, geographically based, Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams.
- 1.2 The report is primarily concerned with the organisational changes that officers are making to support the community leadership role of Councillors, whose main focus will be on the wards they represent. It also sets out the direction for the Co-operative Neighbourhoods programme, which will evolve

through practice and learning and from the input of Councillors, staff, and residents. Attached to the report is a 'Guide for Councillors', to help describe the approach, and which will be further developed over time, based on learning and feedback from the months ahead. This will use a Cooperative approach, engaging and sharing learning and experience across Members, residents, community groups and Officers and will inform future arrangements.

- 1.3 Details are provided of the recent decision, taken by the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Strategic Board, to resume implementation with a revised strategy. This follows the pause in development caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The revised strategy will see the six Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams set up simultaneously, rather than building a prototype in one area, as previously planned. A 'whole council' approach will be taken from the start, joining up all council functions to ensure holistic neighbourhood focus and delivery. To support the expedited strategy, Strategic and Operational Leads have been appointed for each Co-operative Neighbourhoods Area.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 It is recommended that the Executive:
- I. considers and endorses the revised strategy for resuming the development of Co-operative Neighbourhoods.
 - II. approves the Guide for Councillors (see **appendix C**) which will be sent out to all Borough and County Councillors across Stevenage.
 - III. delegates future decisions on development of the strategy to the Strategic Director (RP), in consultation with the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Strategic Board.

3.0 BACKGROUND

“It contains an essential decency and a sense of community – nothing saccharin or pious, a simple responsibility of one for the other”¹

- 3.1 Co-operative Neighbourhoods has long been an ambition of the Council and is one of the five strategic priorities in the Future Town Future Council Plan. There have been several attempts to implement strategies and programmes that turn ambition into action and outcomes; either through efforts to create the right culture amongst officers, the targeting of investment on priorities arising from community consultation, or through Councillor-led action to develop grass-roots plans which have the ownership of the community. The development of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods operating model recognises and sets out to learn from initiatives such as the Pin Green Community Plan and the Neighbourhood Investment Programme, building on their successes and understanding their challenges and limitations.
- 3.2 In December 2019, the Executive approved an approach which would enable senior managers to support the shift from top down, service-led delivery to an approach of supporting staff to work with each other and with the community. This would see staff not only working alongside existing community leaders and groups but would also recognise the value of everyday conversations with residents. This will help in understanding how well council services are meeting their purpose, at a community level, and how residents can be connected, supporting them to find their own ways of working on things that matter to them.
- 3.3 The outbreak of COVID-19 led to a pause in the programme’s development and a chance for reflection on how best to proceed when circumstances allow. COVID-19, though, is just one of the contexts in which Co-operative Neighbourhoods is being developed. As will be discussed later in this report, Co-operative Neighbourhoods provides a way in which communities can recover, reconnect, and build on their strengths in the next stages of the pandemic. It also provides a way in which the Council can: engage with

¹ *Municipal Dreams* on the nature of Stevenage as the first New Town.
<https://municipaldreams.wordpress.com/2013/11/05/stevenage-new-town-building-for-the-new-way-of-life/>

communities on climate change; respond to recent community concerns about racism and inequality; and ensure that community identity, resilience and representation are primary considerations in any future changes to local government.

- 3.4 The Co-operative Neighbourhoods Strategic Board, chaired by Cllr Rob Broom and made up of key officers from across council departments, met on 2nd July to consider a revised strategy for implementing Co-operative Neighbourhoods. The strategy they endorsed had also been approved by the Future Town Future Council Board, a senior officer group responsible for the strategic management of the council's corporate plan. Co-operative Neighbourhoods will: provide a structure to support recovery from the impact of COVID-19; play a central role in the Council's Transformation Programme; and support the Council, working with residents, to define the 'new normal' - based on building Co-operative Neighbourhoods and a Co-operative Town.
- 3.5 The impact of Covid-19 in Stevenage has demonstrated the value of Co-operative Neighbourhoods, bringing into sharp focus the role of neighbourliness, community, resilience, and the importance of connectivity. It has shown the vital importance of frontline district council services and the responsiveness, flexibility, and problem-solving skills of staff. 'Stevenage Helps' has underlined the importance of the Council's community leadership role – including providing direct support to over 600 vulnerable people - and the importance of co-production, planning, organisation and collaboration at a neighbourhood level.
- 3.6 The response built on the strengths of communities, whilst ensuring that the vulnerable were supported. Co-operative principles meant that, rather than focusing on thresholds and data analysis, the service prioritised listening and responding to demand, seeing callers as citizens and contributors to the Borough who, at this time, needed some extra help. The provision of support was accompanied by the co-production of sustainable, individually tailored, longer term solutions.
- 3.7 The further development of Co-operative Neighbourhoods, which had been about to 'go live' in the prototype area at the beginning of April 2020, was

paused due to COVID-19. However, during the current pandemic, co-operative neighbourhoods have undoubtedly been seen in action, including the example in paragraphs 3.10 and 3.11 below.

- 3.8 Resumption of the programme will begin in the certain knowledge that its three principles - co-ordination of services, establishing clear points of accountability and supporting the activities of residents and communities who want to improve their neighbourhoods and create new opportunities – will increase the resilience of both the community and the Council and their ability to deal with what comes next.
- 3.9 It is clear that the longer term impact of the current crisis will require a response that prioritises social and economic well-being, provides an antidote to the effects of ‘social distancing’ and offers the connectivity that enables people and communities to recover and thrive.
- 3.10 The crisis has also demonstrated that Co-operative Neighbourhoods is not an end in itself. Its real value is as an integral part of a broader, often complex system of people, community activity, services, local and national government, and commerce. An example of how this ‘systems approach’ manifested itself during the pandemic began with the response by the Council’s regeneration partner, Reef.
- 3.11 Reef facilitated connection with Groop, a “socially focused business”, who had developed an App providing a ‘community management platform’. By working with Groop, ‘Stevenage Helps’ was able to develop the App, not only to maintain details and connection with community volunteers, but also to ‘case manage’ calls and process requests for help. The App will prove useful well beyond the pandemic, in helping to connect the Council with the volunteers who will be part of the co-operative model. In the same way, volunteers will also be connected to each other. It demonstrates how community-based work and new technology can be mutually supportive and why Co-operative Neighbourhoods will be a vital part of the Council’s Transformation Programme.

4 REASONS FOR RECOMMENDED COURSE OF ACTION AND OTHER OPTIONS

- 4.1 Developing Co-operative Neighbourhoods requires an understanding of how the Council's services, ambitions and plans as a whole manifest themselves at neighbourhood level. The crisis provides an impetus to reinvigorate a co-operative approach which sees communities as equal players in visioning the future, as well as designing and delivering services. The Council's community leadership role will bring key partners that make up the 'system' to work closer together. This will happen at a strategic level, through 'Stevenage Together' and the 'Recovery Task Force', but also at an operational and neighbourhood level, with partners becoming an integral part of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams.
- 4.2 Much of the impetus for the development of Co-operative Neighbourhoods has been the desire to respond to demand more proactively, in a joined-up way, to solve problems and provide support. Whilst this will remain a key part of its role in the future, the plans for resumption bring an opportunity to give a clearer *purpose* for Cooperative Neighbourhoods. This will also help to define what the council's collaboration with communities and partners, in the long term, is looking to *create*.
- 4.3 The new purpose for Co-operative Neighbourhoods, endorsed by the Board and against which the success of its implementation will be measured, is set out below.
- 4.3.1 The purpose of Cooperative Neighbourhoods is to provide area-based structures that enable Officers and Ward Councillors to work together with community stakeholders.** Co-operative Neighbourhoods provides the means by which:
- I. The Council's staff and elected Members engage with **residents** on what matters to them, visions the future, and plans what needs to be done to get there together
 - II. **Residents** are supported to develop projects and activities that help to build connected, cohesive, and supportive communities

- III. **Councillors and Residents** are invited and encouraged to be involved at all stages of the planning, design and delivery of projects and services which impact on them and their neighbourhood
- IV. **Staff** from across the council come together to deliver services and projects collaboratively, involving and responding to issues raised by residents and finding sustainable, co-produced, solutions to problems
- V. **Staff** gain knowledge of how well services are achieving their purpose by understanding the everyday experiences of residents
- VI. **Staff** and managers use the knowledge gained about services to drive continuous improvement, not only in delivering their purpose and effectiveness, but in their efficiency and economy
- VII. The Council engages its **partners** to support the activities and build on the strengths of residents and communities who want to improve their neighbourhoods and create new opportunities. They will respond to the needs of individuals and communities, and build a shared vision of the future
- VIII. A **co-operative and collective** relationship between the public sector, citizens and elected representatives will be forged, in which all are clear about organisational and individual responsibilities, as well as the “responsibility of one for the other”

4.4 Revised Strategy for resuming the development phase of Cooperative Neighbourhoods

- 4.4.1 The current situation, of adjusting to life with covid-19, presents an opportunity to review what is of greatest importance for the Council over the next period. There is an interconnectedness about the Council’s priorities and activities and building Co-operative Neighbourhoods provides an opportunity to link them together. That way, for example, regeneration, becoming a place of choice, meeting housing need, tackling climate change, and community wealth building are thought of and managed at a neighbourhood level, ensuring that they relate to the everyday experience of residents.
- 4.4.2 In order to expedite the implementation of Co-operative Neighbourhoods so that it contributes fully to recovery and transformation, whilst responding to the new operating environment, the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Strategic

Board has agreed changes to the delivery strategy and project plan as set out below.

4.5 Changes to the Project Plan

- 4.5.1 Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams will be set up and become fully operational simultaneously, across all six areas at once, rather than building a prototype in one area as originally planned.
- 4.5.2 Whilst the advanced preparation undertaken in Housing and Investment, SDS and Communities & Neighbourhoods will mean that those services will still lead the roll-out, Co-operative Neighbourhoods will now be developed as a whole council approach, joining up all functions of the Council: strategic and operational; proactive and responsive; front-line and support; and community based, regulatory and statutory services.
- 4.5.3 Whilst there will continue to be great emphasis placed on putting change and decision making in the hands of frontline staff, there will, in the first instance, be a greater level of strategic and operational leadership required. Strategic and Operational Leads have been appointed for each Co-operative Neighbourhoods Area (See **appendix A**).
- 4.5.4 The role of the two 'Leads' will not be to 'line-manage' staff in the teams, to resolve individual service issues or respond to day to day enquiries. The role will be to encourage a problem-solving approach in the teams, drawing on experience and expertise from a wide variety of services and backgrounds - where necessary they will remove barriers to progress. Crucially, they will help build the confidence of staff, enabling them to make decisions and to take control and responsibility for their own work, as well as being responsible to their colleagues.
- 4.5.5 Between now and the end of September 2020, the focus will be on three key elements of the strategy to develop Co-operative Neighbourhoods.
 - 1. Setting up the Co-operative Neighbourhoods **Structures** in each of the 6 areas.
 - 2. **Analysis** of all existing demand for services and all current and planned activity in the 6 neighbourhoods.

3. The first stage in the development of **Community Plans**. At this stage, the plans will be limited to setting out existing activity and known plans for investment and projects specific to each neighbourhood. This is a preliminary stage in the development of Community Plans to give visibility to existing and planned activity in neighbourhoods. For each neighbourhood they will set out:
- Current plans for investment and improvements
 - Planned community projects and activities
 - The issues that have been prioritised with Ward Councilors and the community, that the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Team will work on together over the next period. In the first instance, these will largely be the work of staff in consultation with Councillors, but future development of the plans will ensure they are more community led.
 - Corporate priorities that will include neighbourhood based work as part of the delivery strategy
 - Priorities identified with the community for possible action in the future. Again, In the first instance, these will largely be the work of staff in consultation with Councillors, but future development of the plans will ensure they are more community led.

4.6 Further development of Community Plans

- 4.6.1 By the end of September, plans will only be at their first, or preliminary stage. Initial discussions will take place with Ward Councillors in early September, but this is only intended as the beginning of a continuous process to establish Community Plans as co-productions of the Council (Councillors and staff) and the community, ensuring that they are jointly owned.
- 4.6.2 The Strategic and Operational Leads will agree, with Ward Councillors, how they will work together to ensure that the Plans reflect the immediate issues raised by residents, as well as longer-term aspirations. Although they will begin as summaries of the priorities, projects and investments of the council, they will, in the future, also include the plans of other public sector bodies.

Crucially, they will reflect the way in which communities themselves are shaping their neighbourhoods and are supported to work together on what matters most to them.

- 4.6.3 The Plans and the process for producing them are not designed to be the work of officers working to standardised mechanisms and timetables for consultation with Councillors and the community. Instead, they are designed to encourage and reflect a more dynamic, co-operative approach in which the Plans are co-produced by all of those with a stake in the area. Whilst they are designed to capture short to medium-term aspirations, they can be built on by Ward Councillors and communities who want to exert greater levels of influence and control – see 4.6.6.
- 4.6.4 Although there will be a standardised way of presenting the Plans, the process for producing and reviewing them will vary from area to area, reflecting local agreement. However, over the course of the first twelve months of Co-operative Neighbourhoods, the Plans will become established and will represent a vision for the area which is clear about everybody's role in making it happen.
- 4.6.5 Community Plans are not the same as Neighbourhood Plans, which were introduced by the 2011 Localism Act. Neighbourhood planning is a statutory right, which communities in England can elect to use, giving them direct power to choose where they want new homes, shops and offices to be built, what those new buildings should look like and what infrastructure should be provided. If adopted, Neighbourhood Plans have the same legal status as a local plan and form part of the statutory development plan.
- 4.6.6 Community Plans have no statutory basis but can provide a less formal way for communities to influence what happens in their area across a range of issues. They can act as a starting point for more detailed, aspirational plans for neighbourhoods or parts of neighbourhoods where there are more focused place-based programmes, such as regeneration schemes, or where there is a local desire from communities for greater levels of control or influence over decision making. They can also open up discussion and

provide a way of enabling and supporting communities that are interested in taking the more formal steps of applying for a Neighbourhood Plan.

4.7 **Appendix B** shows the key project milestones for the development phase of Co-operative Neighbourhoods.

4.8 **The role of Councillors**

4.8.1 The role of Members, as community leaders, advocates for their neighbourhoods and first port of call for many residents, will be vital to the success of Co-operative Neighbourhoods. A guide for Members is set out in **appendix C**.

4.9 **Other options considered**

4.9.1 With regard to other options, consideration was given to continuing the implementation in line with the strategy agreed by the Executive in December 2019. However, resetting the timetable would mean a further six months from recommencement to implementation. Continuation of the original strategy would also have required further reliance on a project management approach.

4.9.2 The revised strategy has the advantage of greater speed, making up for pausing of the programme due to COVID-19. It will ensure that the structure for Co-operative Neighbourhoods is in place to support the community in the aftermath of COVID-19. Increasing the amount of senior management support will give it increased resilience and direction in the early stages of the programme's development and allow it to move more quickly from being a project to being a functioning operating model. It will also enable Co-operative Neighbourhoods to be more closely aligned with the Transformation Programme; developing new ways of working, use of IT and the potential to make savings through more efficient, effective, and economical ways of working. It can galvanise the efforts of the whole Council in aligning strategy and delivery around a primary strategic objective - Building Co-operative Neighbourhoods.

4.9.3 For the reasons set out, both the Future Town Future Council Board and the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Strategic Board supported the change in approach.

4.10 Further Appendices

4.10.1 **Appendix D** shows the Communication Plan for the first year of Co-operative Neighbourhoods.

4.10.2 **Appendix E** shows the draft template for Community Plans.

5 IMPLICATIONS

5.1 Financial Implications

5.1.1 The initial development of Cooperative Neighbourhood teams will be cost neutral, in that it will be delivered by existing budgeted staff and resources.

5.1.2 In the future, once Co-operative Neighbourhoods is established, consideration should be given to the way in which budgets are set, which could move to an area and activity-based method of service delivery and investment. However, careful attention and consideration will also need to be given to any impact that changes have on any specific service charges.

5.1.3 It is expected that Cooperative Neighbourhoods will improve the efficiency and economy of service delivery, with the potential for savings arising from collaboration, driving out waste, reducing failure demand and exploration of alternative delivery options.

5.1.4 There may be a need to consider 'invest to save' initiatives that would support more effective area working, for example, training and development, enhanced IT, or adaptations to enable the use of community buildings as offsite workspaces. Growth requests will be submitted as part of the Financial Security budgeting process.

5.1.5 Should the programme require additional funding, growth bids will be submitted as part of the Financial Security budgeting process.

5.2 Legal Implications

5.2.1 There are no specific legal implications identified at this stage

5.3 Risk Implications

- 5.3.1 A Project Risk Register forms part of the Project Plan and is reviewed with the Project Sponsor and by the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Strategic Board.

5.4 Policy Implications

- 5.4.1 Future development of policies will need to determine how they relate to and impact on the different neighbourhoods of Stevenage

5.5 Environmental Implications

- 5.5.1 Co-operative Neighbourhoods will be one of the means through which the Council will help residents to think about tackling climate change in their local environment. It is anticipated, therefore, that there will be positive environmental implications, in that Cooperative Neighbourhoods will enable greater engagement and opportunities for conversations with residents on environmental issues and support environmental based voluntary work.

5.6 Staffing and Accommodation Implications

- 5.6.1 Staff will begin to relate both to their service structures and professional disciplines, as well as orienting their thinking and activity to the neighbourhood structure. For some staff this will involve increased presence in communities and greater engagement with residents. Much of the preparation for this change was anticipated in the recent Business Unit Reviews.
- 5.6.2 Some managers and staff may take on additional specific leadership responsibilities, such as Strategic Lead, Operational Lead, or leadership of collaborative projects or partnerships.

5.7 Human Resources Implications

- 5.7.1 As above, but it should specifically be noted that the neighbourhood teams will operate without traditional hierarchical management structures. This will provide an opportunity for staff at all levels to develop leadership roles covering specific activities. A comprehensive Organisational Development

strategy needs to accompany the progression of Cooperative Neighbourhoods.

5.8 Equalities and Diversity Implications

- 5.8.1 With the Council having agreed to form an Equalities Commission, Co-operative Neighbourhoods will provide a way in which many of the outcomes can be progressed. Cooperative Neighbourhoods will have positive equality and diversity implications, through a focus on greater engagement of residents and enabling the development of stronger communities. Building capability and extending networks can bring specific benefits for those experiencing disadvantage. It will aim to ensure that residents get the support they need, as well as being helped to help themselves. It will also enable greater focus on prevention and early intervention.
- 5.8.2 It will be essential to ensure that all voices are heard and that those who often find themselves excluded are supported to play a full part in the life and future of the community. An ongoing Equality Impact Assessment will build on the Full Inclusion Report produced following the recent community mapping exercise. This has started to give the Council far greater information about the spatial dimension of the Borough's diversity and the current picture relating to issues of equality.

5.9 Service Delivery Implications

- 5.9.1 These are set out in the report.

5.10 Community Safety Implications

- 5.10.1 It is anticipated that Co-operative Neighbourhoods will have positive implications for community safety, with a focus on community engagement and strengthening, early help, prevention and improved partnership working and case conferencing. Community Safety Officers are assigned to patches which also provides an operational link to the Police.

5.11 Information Technology Implications

- 5.11.1 There will be a need for fast and effective IT support and new hardware/software considerations to assist the model. In the first instance there will be a need for technology that is able to connect teams remotely and to collect neighbourhood information in a way that is visible to all. Moving forward there will be a need to investigate how IT can help teams to have a full picture of what is happening across all services and IT platforms.

5.12 Safeguarding Children Implications

- 5.12.1 See Community Safety implications. In addition, safeguarding considerations will follow the SBC policy with relevant frontline staff and responsible officers identified.

5.13 Other Corporate Implications

- 5.13.1 The development and progression of Co-operative Neighbourhoods needs to be managed in tandem with other parts of the Council's transformation agenda. The nature of Co-operative Neighbourhoods means that change needs to happen from the front end of service delivery and community engagement and will require a scheme of delegated decision making to match. This needs to follow on from the experience of staff attempting to bring about the desired changes to engaging, responding, and planning.
- 5.13.2 There is an opportunity through Co-operative Neighbourhoods to enhance the youth work provision and this will be developed in partnership with the Youth Council.

APPENDICES

- A Strategic and Operational Leads**
- B Updated Timetable for introducing Co-operative Neighbourhoods**
- C Co-operative Neighbourhoods – A Guide for Councillors**
- D Communications Plan**
- E Draft Community Plan Template**