

Appendix C - Co-operative Neighbourhoods – A Guide for Councillors

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“Many different people and many varied services contribute to the welfare of local communities. But councillors are uniquely placed to develop strategies, shape thinking and take an active lead locally because they alone have been democratically elected to represent the interests of the people and the council”. (Local Government Association - A councillor’s workbook on community leadership; Oct 2017)¹

The community leadership role played by Ward Councillors will be central to the success of Co-operative Neighbourhoods. Ward Councillors are both part of the Council and also deeply connected with and part of the community. The LGA’s workbook on Community Leadership sets out three reasons why this aspect of a Councillor’s role is now more important than ever:

- There is a primary responsibility to consult and involve all the stakeholders in their community – localism and devolution is about giving more say and power to local communities.
- Good leadership can help to improve the reputation of councillors and build trust among residents – in an era of tight fiscal constraint and public service reform, councils, and those elected to serve them need to do all they can to demonstrate that they are delivering value for money by keeping their residents well informed.
- To enable capacity building so that communities are empowered to solve their own problems without the need for costly statutory sector provision or intervention. This is not just about the need to save money – although that is undoubtedly a driving force – but is about the need to recognise that society is changing with a more connected population demanding greater participation in shaping the lives of their own communities.

What is ‘Co-operative Neighbourhoods’?

Co-operative Neighbourhoods is a partnership between council staff, Ward Councillors and the community. Its objectives 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, which will bring

¹ *Councillor workbook: community leadership*. Local Government Association, October 2017. Available at <https://www.local.gov.uk/councillor-workbook-community-leadership>

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staff together from different parts of the Council to work as one team, focussed on that locality.

Co-operative Neighbourhoods is a way of working. It will provide a framework to support Councillors in maximising the effectiveness of their community leadership role.

As things progress, we want to add more people to the partnership – including other public sector staff such as those from the Police, County Council and Health.

What will 'Co-operative Neighbourhoods' do?

Officers and Ward Councillors will work together, with other community stakeholders, to develop a Cooperative Neighbourhoods culture through 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"

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What are the six Neighbourhoods?

Each 'neighbourhood' is a combination of two or three Borough Council wards. The six neighbourhoods are:

- Bedwell & Pin Green
- Chells & Manor
- Longmeadow & Roebuck
- Old Town, Symonds Green & Woodfield
- Shephall & Bandle Hill
- St Nicholas & Martins Wood

These neighbourhoods provide simple and manageable geographic and administrative boundaries, but it should be recognised that they do not necessarily accord with the way residents think of their community. Residents' definitions are more likely to be individually conceived, flexible and multi-faceted, reflecting the many different aspects of people's lives. This needs to be a key consideration in the way that the Council responds to what matters to residents rather than relying on fixed notions of what make a community.

How will 'Co-operative Neighbourhoods' be managed?

Co-operative Neighbourhoods will not replace the existing management and service structures. It will though, add value by providing a framework to support greater collaboration between services. The Council wants to enable its staff to use their strengths, knowledge, and experience to make a difference to communities - by making informed decisions, resolving issues more quickly and helping to bring about sustainable improvements.

The emphasis will be on collaboration, not only across teams, but also between different levels of the organisation. Whilst there will be no formal management arrangements in the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Teams, each one will be supported by a 'Strategic Lead' and an 'Operational Lead'. These roles will be filled by existing managers. They will be key points of contact for Ward Councillors in support of their community leadership role and ensure that 'Co-operative Neighbourhoods' responds to the needs of the local community.

How will I know who is in my Co-operative Neighbourhoods Team?

Information on each Co-operative Neighbourhoods Team will be available electronically. In addition to information about the neighbourhood and Ward Councillors, it will list the Strategic and Operational Lead as well as details of all the staff that make up the team.

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How will Co-operative Neighbourhoods work in practice?

There will be no 'one size fits all' approach to Co-operative Neighbourhoods. It will be up to the teams themselves, working with Ward Councillors and the local community, to find ways of working which meet the purpose of Co-operative Neighbourhoods set out above, whilst responding to the particular strengths and needs of each neighbourhood. There will, however, be certain things that will be common to each team.

- The **structure** of Strategic Lead, Operational Lead and team members drawn from across the Council
- **The use of data** from different sources to ensure a greater understanding of the specifics of each neighbourhood. This will include demographic, service performance, health, employment, crime and anti-social behaviour and environmental data
- A focus on understanding the **everyday experiences** of residents in the neighbourhood, what matters to them, their aspirations, and concerns
- The gathering together of information about **investment and projects specific to each neighbourhood**, so that all involved can have knowledge about, support and add value to each other's work.
- **Communicating** on a regular basis – with each other, as a team, with Ward Councillors and with community groups
- Setting out what will be happening in the neighbourhood in a **Community Plan**. The 'first stage' of these Plans, to be put together by the end of September 2020, will be largely made up of what is already known about council activity and plans in the neighbourhood. However, as Co-operative Neighbourhoods progresses, it is important that the Plans reflect the aspirations and actions of Ward Councillors and communities, so everyone has ownership over them.

How will Community Plans develop after the 'first stage'?

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 long-term aspirations for the area. Although they will begin as summaries of the priorities, projects and investments of the Council, in future they will include the plans of other public sector bodies. Crucially, they will reflect the way in which communities themselves are supported to work together on what matters most to them.

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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. 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.

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.

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.

Community Plans, on the other hand, 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.

How will I report issues and raise concerns on behalf of residents under the Co-operative Neighbourhoods way of working?

Co-operative Neighbourhoods is built on the principles of staff being more embedded in communities, accountability and building relationships with residents. The Strategic and Operational Leads, supported by members of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Team, will decide with Ward Councillors how they will work together to make progress on developing their Community Plan. Getting to know individual members of the team will be important in creating a culture in which staff, Ward Councillors and the community are equal partners.

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The Council though is also implementing strategies to encourage electronic communication and 'self-serve' as the most efficient way of managing transactions. Both approaches are important and can support each other and will be developed collaboratively. A balance between the two will need to be struck as both strategies are rolled out.

In recognition of this, and particularly while staff are learning and developing new ways of working, every effort should be made to ensure day to day service requests and complaints are channelled through the existing mechanisms, i.e. online, the Customer Service Centre and through Yoursay. Work will naturally be generated by staff being closer to communities and picking up on issues. However, routing service requests, enquiries and complaints through existing mechanisms will help service managers to maintain some control over the flow of work that goes to frontline staff in neighbourhood teams and ensure that they are manageable. The teams need to be given time and space to experiment, learn from what they are doing and develop more responsive, collaborative, efficient and effective ways of working.

It is important to note that Strategic and Operational Leads will not be responsible for resolving day to day service delivery issues within the neighbourhood. Where the issue cannot be resolved by the staff in the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Team responsible for that particular service, issues should be escalated to their line manager, rather than the Strategic or Operational Lead.

Community Plans will contain far more than repairs, maintenance and plans for physical improvements in the area. However, these will undoubtedly form an important element and getting this right will help to build the confidence and trust of the community. Further guidance will be provided which sets out the way in which both day to day issues and planned improvements will be dealt with, as well as how programmes agreed as part of the Council's budget and capital programme will be managed locally.

As Co-operative Neighbourhoods develops and closer working relationships are built between officers, Ward Councillors and the community, these processes will no doubt change. The important thing is that all those involved, including Ward Councillors, have a chance to learn from their experiences and influence how things develop in the future.

How can my Community Leadership role help Co-operative Neighbourhoods to be a success?

“Community leadership is about councils, both councillors and officers, enabling local communities to determine their own future. It is not traditional, top-down leadership,

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but involves councillors and officers using all the tools at their disposal to engage communities in making their own difference. It promotes a partnership of shared commitment to promote a shared vision for the locality". (Local Government Association - A councillor's workbook on community leadership)

The LGA's workbook on Community Leadership sets out very clearly the vital role that Councillor's will bring to the Co-operative Neighbourhoods Team.

"The central concern for councils and councillors remains to promote the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of their areas, achieving sustainable communities. The key role is to:

- provide for local communities – articulation of aspirations, needs and priorities
- co-ordinate the actions of public, private, voluntary and community organisations
- shape and focus existing and future activities of these organisations to meet community needs."

It was noted earlier that there would be no prescribed way in which Co-operative Neighbourhoods would operate, beyond some common expectations set out above. Officers, Ward Councillors and the community will find their own way of having discussions, finding out what is going on and agreeing plans for the future. However, the LGA's booklet provides some extremely useful pointers that are very compatible with the ethos of Co-operative Neighbourhoods.

"Whether you are working at the ward or whole council level, to produce a community strategy there must be a process of community planning. Key stakeholders must be involved in this process. These could be large groups like the police, health authorities and schools, or smaller ones, such as voluntary groups, local businesses, and community groups. Partnerships of all kinds are at the heart of community planning and neighbourhood renewal agendas. While, multi-agency in their composition, their purpose is to bring together statutory, non-statutory, private, voluntary and community organisations for the purpose of promoting and improving residents' quality of life. Having an agreed strategy can provide a framework for different organisational processes and mobilising a wide range of agencies, organisations and community interests. Partnerships should:

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- build consensus around an agreed vision for the future
- see their own interests in the context of a bigger picture
- encourage the development of sustainable communities
- identify conflicting objectives and needs
- build trust and closer working relationships, where appropriate
- develop a clear understanding of each partner's roles and responsibilities
- review existing partnership and consultation arrangements
- share data and analysis
- share resources and provide a coordinated response to community priorities
- shape and focus existing and future activities of agencies
- produce a community strategy”

As a Co-operative Council, “we support councillors to know their community and lead their community”

Co-operative Neighbourhoods is a new venture for all of us but it builds on the traditions and values of Stevenage and the Borough Council. The key to its success will be how we all work, learn, plan, make a difference and celebrate together!