



## COMMUNITY

### Stevenage Borough Council

## Stevenage Helps – A co-operative response to COVID-19

When, shortly after the lockdown started, a 98-year-old resident contacted Stevenage Borough Council to say that she had been told she did not fit the criteria for help with getting a food delivery, the Communities and Neighbourhoods team knew that something had to be done. Although official help channels had been set up, they were working to the criteria set by health experts about who was most at risk if they caught Covid-19. Elected Members and others across the council realised some residents in need were falling through the net at a time when supermarket shelves were running low of essential supplies. Just two days after the Executive and the Senior Management team decided to set up its own operation to support vulnerable residents, Stevenage Helps was ready to take its first call.

The team had already taken over the nearby Stevenage Arts and Leisure Centre to act as a local hub for delivering food to residents who had received Operation Shield letters from the NHS and were due to self-isolate for 12 weeks. A change of plan meant it was stood down, but the large space provided by the sports hall, refrigeration units and ample parking made it an ideal base for Stevenage Helps. Food and other essential items, bought or donated from various sources, was to be stored, sorted, and made into parcels ready to be delivered to residents in need by the council's own staff working with local volunteers.

Meanwhile, staff working from home became call handlers and case managers, taking both requests for help and offers of assistance. A simple checklist was devised to help ensure all the details were captured about personal circumstances and types of help people needed. The checklist developed over time in response to different information about services and offers of help becoming available - at the time of writing the team have just released version eight! Whilst essential to capture information, the checklist was always secondary to listening carefully to the caller and understanding, from their perspective, how they were coping and what help they thought they needed. Although the team developed some simple criteria for who they would help, they always erred on the side of 'help now - ask questions later'.

From the beginning, Stevenage Helps was not intended to become a permanent source of support, the initial contact and provision would be used to discuss a sustainable solution, be that help to set up on-line deliveries or through the local community and voluntary sector, or in some cases making referrals to the local food banks. One of Stevenage's most important Co-operative Council characteristics is 'having a clear understanding between the council and our communities – this is what we do, this is what we will help you to do'. These principles are as important in a crisis as they are at any other time.

Council staff, from backgrounds such as community development, sport, and leisure, playworkers and neighbourhood wardens, very quickly adapted to their new roles. They managed the relief operation, ensured the availability of essential supplies, organised transport as well as handling the calls. They sorted through the offers of help, matching and deploying the volunteers with requests from residents in need. At the time of writing, Stevenage Helps has dealt with over 500 calls and e-mails, delivered 450 food parcels and over 100 of toiletries and made around 300 referrals to other agencies. They also made over 500 calls to those who had not responded to their 'shield' letters from the NHS and provided help to over 150 of them.

The feedback started to come through immediately. One resident who lived on her own told the team that receiving the letter from the NHS, telling her she needed to self-isolate for 12 weeks, "hit me like a brick and threw me into a panic". She contacted Stevenage Helps who "immediately put my mind at rest" and was provided with a delivery of store cupboard and fresh supplies to tide her over until deliveries from Operation Shield arrived. "I have been overwhelmed by this quick response...it is so kind", she said in her feedback. "Thank you to everyone involved in this scheme".

Meanwhile, one local family let the team know that they had managed to secure a delivery but still wanted to say, "thank you for your kindness and the work you are doing for the community of Stevenage. So great to have people like you in the town for support".

Stevenage Haven, a local homeless hostel, contacted the team to thank them for the "kind donation of bread and croissants...the donations and gifts we receive, particularly in these current circumstances, are put to very good use for our residents, both at the hostel and in our move-on properties, and also where appropriate, to the homeless people who call at our door sometimes who are very obviously in need".

As well as working closely with existing community and voluntary sector organisations, important new relationships were forged or strengthened. Stevenage Football Club delivered a range of services using the different skill sets they had to hand, including sandwich and prescription deliveries and a 'Friendly Chat' service. Meanwhile, the council's leisure provider, Stevenage Leisure Limited, offered: counselling and psychological therapy; resilience and life skills courses; access to specialist support groups; exercise and wellbeing activities; and help to develop social networks through art, music and creative writing. Local charity, Compassionate Neighbours, provided volunteers to help people who could not go out and needed small items of personal shopping done.

The local community also stepped up to help meet the cost of supporting those in need. Individuals, local businesses and their staff were invited to 'fund a food parcel'. Along with

an appeal for donations to provide a wide range of help the council has, at the time of writing, raised around £40k.

As with everything at Stevenage Borough Council, the response was guided by Co-operative Principles. Stevenage Helps was set up and has been so determined and successful because these principles have not been abandoned or compromised. The team understood from their day to day work that the impact of austerity on other services to support the community meant that many local residents risked great hardship as a result of Covid-19, the lockdown and economic pressures that stemmed from businesses halting operation. They understood the support that some people would need in accessing welfare advice and wellbeing services as well as to food, medication and other essential supplies. Other best practice guides focus on how the No More Service continued to support those whose alcohol and substance misuse, offending or complex needs made them especially vulnerable and Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse (SADA) who continued to provide support to their existing and new clients. Both services experienced significant increases in demand and worked very closely with Stevenage Helps to ensure no one went unsupported.

The team also understood that the wealth of valuable assets and strengths that existed in the community, built and invested in over the course of Stevenage's unique history as the country's first New Town. Co-operative principles meant that, rather than focusing on thresholds and data analysis, the service prioritised listening and responding to demand, seeing clients as citizens and contributors to the borough who, at this time, needed some extra help. Of the principles adopted by the borough, of greatest importance at this time have been that the council will:

- Exhibit a clear knowledge of the specific needs of the community
- Provide services that are personalised, and community based
- Embed an open, creative and reflective culture
- Be a fair council that treats people equally and with respect.

But the principles are just words until they are enacted by people, such as those at Stevenage Helps, our partners across all sectors, and the huge number of volunteers who have shown extraordinary levels of dedication, passion, empathy energy and sheer humanity. One resident wanted to let them team know,

**“What you are doing is so important during this time of stress and uncertainty. I hope you know how much you are appreciated”.**

---

**For further information contact:**

Rob Gregory

Assistant Director for Communities & Neighbourhoods – Stevenage Borough Council

[Rob.gregory@stevenage.gov.uk](mailto:Rob.gregory@stevenage.gov.uk) | 01438 242568 | [www.stevenage.gov.uk](http://www.stevenage.gov.uk)