



## COVID-19 Stevenage Borough Council

### Inclusive Economy Charter

As part of recovery efforts, Stevenage Borough Council established a charter for the town to drive pledges from public, private and voluntary sector partners to rebuild the local economy, putting residents and local enterprises at the heart of recovery planning

#### Context

The Council had passed a motion at the end of 2019 to drive forward a programme of community wealth building. The unprecedented impact of Covid-19 on the local economy highlighted the vulnerability of large multinational companies as well as small and medium-sized enterprises. A quarter of the town's working age population were furloughed during the peak of the pandemic, with a significant number losing jobs and income. The Council's community response team "Stevenage Helps" saw an unprecedented rise in hardship cases. The council decided to accelerate its plans around community wealth building to drive recovery.

#### Development

The Council first looked at its own processes and the levers it could use. It continued to promote business support grants and target those small and sole traders who had not come forward for support. It then looked at other tools to unlock economic opportunities for local businesses and has since embarked on a full review of its procurement strategy to consider local supply chains. This would enable the council to build relationships with more local businesses as suppliers. The Council then looked at its work with partners and considered how the town's planned regeneration might harness further opportunities for employment, particularly for young people entering a restricted labour market. £300,000 had recently been secured from the Construction Industry Training Board and a partnership with North Herts College and JobCentre Plus would enable the targeting of these apprenticeships to young people at most risk. The Council then looked for ways to further support the growth of the social enterprise and co-operative economy as part of recovery efforts, in order to build more sustainable economic models with greater social benefit. This led to the implementation of a Creative Meanwhile Use Policy for empty units, formed in dialogue with the Arts and Heritage Forum. A newly formed CIC, Junction 7 Creatives, took over an empty unit to create new town centre animation and creative workspace.

## Implementation

The idea of an Inclusive Economy Charter grew from the council's ambition to build back better. The Charter was drawn from discussions with voluntary sector partners to create something of interest to large businesses and small community organisations alike. Co-production has underpinned this approach. The Council further embedded this work in the town's recovery plan led by the multi-agency Stevenage Together Recovery Taskforce. The taskforce will monitor recovery efforts over the coming 12 months. The initial development of the charter encountered some challenges as many organisations were focused on immediate response and recovery efforts, with staff either redeployed or furloughed. The timing of conversations with partner organisations has therefore been key, with encouragement for organisations to consider small, tangible pledges in the first instance, which can be built over time. In developing this work there has been recognition that there will be no "completion" date for the charter; it will continue to grow and evolve over the coming months. The University of Hertfordshire continues to work with the council to validate this approach as further engagement continues.



## Review

The Council's commitment and the development of the charter was approved by the Council's Executive and four organisations have further signed up to the Charter with a public launch planned for October. The Charter is not just a document but a proposed new way of working to create a more inclusive economy in Stevenage. It draws on co-operative values around innovation, co-production and shared dividends for those involved. It is clear that all stakeholders within the local economy have a part to play. There was some initial hesitation as to whether this work should start while stakeholders were still in response mode to the pandemic. It was decided that, with no swift commitment, the opportunity would be missed to inform recovery efforts and establish a "new normal", which in turn would create greater economic resilience across the town. This has also been an opportunity for the Council to influence work at a county level through the Hertfordshire Growth Board. Community Wealth Building has now been agreed as a priority focus area for the North, East and Central Herts Growth Corridor. The Council has committed to producing its first Community Balance sheet at the end of the financial year, to sit alongside its annual accounts. This will quantify the social value achieved through the Council's activities.

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