



# Connecting Communities

**Community Transport Policy Prototype**



**Co-operative Councils**  
Innovation Network

**Stevenage**  
BOROUGH COUNCIL

# Connecting Communities: To pioneer an approach to improve wellbeing, reducing isolation amongst older people utilising the Stevenage Community Transport service.

## Aims of the Policy Prototype

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Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) has run a community transport scheme for over 30 years, focused on providing transport solutions for older people and those with disabilities. The service primarily offers daily trips to social clubs, shopping venues and local attractions. The service charges a nominal fee to users and is further subsidised by the council.

Throughout the service there have been numerous anecdotal examples of older people's wellbeing improving as a consequence of the relationships and connections to services that are made. These have been more challenging to capture, as they are often intangible and longer-term in their nature.

Through a Co-operative Councils Innovation Network (CCIN) Policy Prototype we aimed to formalise this, to train and develop the role of Community Transport Drivers to become Community Connectors. The aims of this being:

- to support older people to increase their social networks,
- to support early intervention of preventative services reducing the need for crisis intervention,
- to encourage statutory services to change their commissioning processes to recognise the role of "relationships" to improve wellbeing for older people.



Driver supporting user onto mini bus

# Background

The Creating a Healthier Future Strategy, (Hertfordshire and West Essex Sustainability and Transformation Partnership) has highlighted the demographic changes from Stevenage with an increasing ageing population. They anticipate a 12% increase in people aged 65 or over by 2025, and 134% increase in people over 85 within the next 10 years, with this there will be a growing increase in the prevalence of cancer and dementia. More pressing will be the issues with social isolation and loneliness.

The Community Transport service is very popular with those who use it (it currently has 329 individual users on the database) and serves an important purpose in giving older and disabled residents the mobility they need to do basic day to day tasks, such as shopping, and also to access day centres and clubs. Community transport has organically grown, from staff using their own vehicles to take residents to clubs, to purchased mini-buses with flexible uses of carrying residents' wheelchairs and various walking aids. The service is not limited to a particular type of person; residents are collected from assisted housing, council schemes, and private homes/flats across the Stevenage area.



Safely accessing transport by the tail lift

## During the previous year:

# 3,647

individual trips were undertaken with resident's whose ages ranged from 60-100 years old, travelling to and from Community Centre Clubs, the Blind Club and the University of the 3rd Age (U3A).

# 893

individual trips were enjoyed to garden centres, (personal gardens/window boxes are often the only way of showing real independence and obtaining plants, fertiliser etc. is physically impossible on public transport), to the seaside and to pubs for lunches

# 134

individual shopping trips took place to shops or a supermarket.

Community transport has only been used to take older people to clubs and trips, the impact of this, although not the prime reason for offering the service, reduces social isolation, alerts to safeguarding issues, ill health, loneliness etc. Currently the service does not have any policies or practices that enable this to happen, it is far more informal.

The current user base traditionally covers mainly "older people", the few exceptions being users with restrictive mobility for example Multiple Sclerosis, although some are physically fit, normal age-related ailments apply to the majority.

## Methodology

The Policy Prototype sought to build a collectively owned understanding of the purpose of the service and how the importance of social inclusion should permeate all areas of the councils work with older people. The prototype did this through:

- The collection of case studies and the feedback from users of the service through a conversation log.
- Team design sessions, bringing drivers into workshop style discussions to reflect on the service and consider how future service provision can be developed and skills enhanced.
- A workshop with other services, including the council's Independent Living Team, Health and Wellbeing Service, Hertfordshire County Council and local VCS organisations through the Healthy Stevenage Partnership.



Driver helping users to safely exit the bus into a club

## Covid-19

The impact of Covid-19 and lockdown measures announced in March 2020 meant that the Community Transport service needed to cease with immediate effect. The timetable for the Policy Prototype therefore needed to be adjusted.

The pandemic also brought with it an opportunity for the team to further explore the importance of relationships and local networks to reduce social isolation. The team were swiftly re-deployed to the council's Stevenage Helps Community Response team and provided immediate support to older and clinically vulnerable people shielding throughout the town. They also maintained weekly telephone chats with existing users, signposting to other forms of support where appropriate.

### **Between April 2020 and January 2021:**

**130** telephone calls were made to users each week.

Calls last between **5-40 mins**.

A total of **4,940** calls since April 2020 have been made so far.

**86** hampers consisting of a puzzle book, Christmas cake and biscuits were delivered just before Christmas

**104** face masks were delivered to users when staff did Covid safe doorstep visits.

# Findings

## “We are not a bus/taxi service”

The service has successfully reduced the reliance on individual car trips, although the majority of users do not have access to a vehicle, often their alternative would be a taxi ride. Through the feedback from users and sessions with the team it was clear that there are various services available locally or transport companies that just take users from A to B, Stevenage Community Transport was different. Drivers/ Escorts are not carers; however it was noted how they consistently always take time to look after the individual’s particular needs and assess their situation daily.

This has been shown during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the service has had to close and staff continued weekly telephone calls to the users.

## Sourcing the Right Support



Users taking part in a craft workshop

## Case studies / Good practice

Staff identified that due to a club closing, a vulnerable user had not been receiving meals on the day she would normally have attended the club. They contacted the family and social care team and this was then arranged. The user had been surviving on biscuits and milk, until her carers arrived the following day.

During phone calls and Covid safe visits at the end of the garden, staff identified a user not coping with their partner's dementia, as the respite they received whilst attending a club for a few hours a week had stopped. A chat and signposting to other services available like a befriending call, had a positive impact on the carer / partner's mental health and well-being.



Users enjoying tea and a chat

Staff reflected that the majority of people using the service are single often widowed with no local family, most originated from London and have been instrumental in the growth or development of Stevenage new town, being offered jobs and accommodation to start a new life in the 50s. Although reasonably self-sufficient, loneliness, physical limitations and confidence are often issues. The service has evolved as a way to overcome these barriers.



Assisting a user to the bus

Users have said: Going on trips/shopping gives them a reason to dress up and put a face on, shopping enables them to feel independent, (children can become overprotective) and going out helps them to feel confident to walk and overcome mobility issues.



Lunch in a restaurant

## “What we do is give them or their next of kin confidence, we earn their trust!”

It is undoubtedly the case that the service enables users to remain physically and mentally active and socially connected, bringing benefits to their all-round health. However, the service is limited in the scope of its purpose, being largely restricted to transporting users from A to B. There are some social activities directly organised but, in general, the service has not developed as part of a wider strategy to promote health and well-being in the community. The service was largely operating separately to other strategic approaches and was not in sight of the county council, responsible for transportation and social care issues.

The current period in which society is re-emerging from the lockdown provides an ideal opportunity to consider the future needs of older people alongside partners, and to collectively build new ways of working which help shape a better future. The information gained through discussion with service users and providers of the clubs will inform Stevenage Borough Councils future ways of working.





Assisting a user into the club.jpg

## Recommendations

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There are three immediately identifiable and current opportunities for integrating the findings from this Policy Lab into a broader strategic approach to working with older people and those in need of care.. The three opportunities are;

**1) Our Covid-19 Recovery Strategy:** including the way in which the county council, borough council and other parts of the emergency response operation, will recommend ways in which the lessons of the response can be carried through to the future. This ought to shape discussions around how to deliver the help and support that the more vulnerable members of the community will need and how partners want to build the system for better health and well-being across Hertfordshire.

**2) The Healthy Stevenage Partnership (HSP):** will drive a key part of recovery in Stevenage and will provide a focus for collaborative working at a local level to respond to specific needs and opportunities. As the strategy and action plan are reviewed and renewed in the light of Covid-19, there is an opportunity to develop further collaborative efforts to expand initiatives that connect older people with key services and with one another. This will require a knowledge of the local health and well-being system and who is delivering what on the ground – for example, how might the Community Transport Service fit with Health ‘Connectors’ or ‘Navigators’ if they exist in Stevenage and a health led strategy for social prescribing. It will be important that the HSP has engagement at the right level with partners in order to effectively influence strategic as well as operational decision making and crucially.

**3) Older People's Housing Strategy (OPHS):** The council's Managing Homes Service has just produced a strategy for Older People's Housing with Adult Social Care. Historically there has been limited engagement with these services. The service has just recruited an Older Person's activity specialist. There is an opportunity therefore to ensure that the OPHS is integrated with a Council-wide approach to the question of services for older people and the vulnerable and, in turn, with partnership work through the HSP to ensure a wider systems approach

**4) Sustainable Travel:** The council is committed to driving forms of sustainable travel. The recognition of health and care needs for older people presents a variety of challenges in transport planning. The council will continue to work with Hertfordshire County Council as the transport planning authority to drive the sustainable towns agenda, but will work with transport providers in the private, public and voluntary to look at a range of accessible solutions to reduce reliance on car travel for short journeys, particularly for older people and those with care and support needs. In driving the above actions the council will create a more strategic platform in which to further develop its co-operative operating model. This should help to shape work with older people as part of the council's wider Co-operative Neighbourhoods agenda.



Getting on the bus for a shopping trip



Catching up with others on the mini bus

## The Future

Although due to the Covid-19 pandemic we have not been able to work with all the partners in the way planned, we have used the opportunity to develop the staff and re – deploy them into different areas of work, whilst still keeping the Community Transport ethos alive and developing a future co-operative working model. Staff have worked closely with other colleagues delivering food parcels to residents in Stevenage, their transferable skills and knowledge of working with Community Transport users have enabled them to identify families in need, support elderly residents with visits and signposting to other services and to encourage them to maintain relationships made during trips and outings. The weekly phone calls have identified safeguarding concerns. Feedback from users shows these are sometimes the only conversation they have had that week.

Moving forward, we will be able to build on this project by exploring how we have responded to the emergency response and how it can guide future strategic and operational direction. The value of relationships has been highlighted and evidenced. A framework for measuring the wellbeing benefits of relationships is being developed as a key success indicator for future performance managed. Secondly, there needs to be clarity about the relationship of this work to that of the Healthy Stevenage Partnership and how it can both support, challenge and respond to the discussion and direction of travel and how existing services, programmes and projects fit in a broader systems approach at a place-level

Thirdly, the importance of empowering and developing the skills of staff has been fundamental to this exercise. The staff team job title was called “Drivers/Escorts”. This was noted as being misleading. Encouraging staff to think beyond these role descriptions has been key. The policy prototype has seen staff developing ideas and proposals on how the service and the offer for older people can further develop. Staff have grown in confidence and developed new skills and knowledge. Drivers have been at the heart of many of the council’s Covid-19 recovery efforts.

# Summary

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The learning from the project shows that the primary purpose of the service to transport users to daycare centres, shops and days out happened, but a greater impact took place, as users became friends and staff developed their role to become people that could be trusted and asked for support. User's independence grew, as they could choose their own shopping and socialise independently of their families, with the service enabling users to remain physically and mentally active and socially connected, bringing benefits to their all-round health. The inability to continue to run the service due to the Covid-19 pandemic did not prevent the drive to support wellbeing for those using the service. This included ongoing telephone support and a published guide on other sustainable transport options for all users of the service. In addition as part of SBC's recovery plan, the wider learning of the Policy Prototype will be used to inform the direction of older people's services and sustainable travel planning for the future.

Connecting Communities Video Diary: <https://player.vimeo.com/video/379983820>

## Making the Co-operative Difference by Embedding the Values and Principles

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The Policy Prototype has enabled a more co-operative approach to designing services for older people and those with support needs. The contact with people, particularly during lockdown, strengthened the **understanding of needs and aspirations** through: weekly telephone contact, identifying care needs, collecting shopping and delivery of food parcels, depending on the conversation with the user. This led to ideas of innovation between staff and those accessing the service, for example through the intergenerational activities that occurred as a consequence. It also sought to **maximise social value** through connecting people to other assets and resources within their communities, without the need for costly service intervention. Future work will explore new ways of meeting the priority needs of our communities, through the councils new co-operative neighbourhood model, which gives **greater influence and voice** to residents and front-line staff, alongside local councillors. This policy prototype has driven this **learning**. This is the **co-operative difference**.

### For further information please contact:

Diane Wenham – Wellbeing Services manager

[Diane.wenham@stevenage.gov.uk](mailto:Diane.wenham@stevenage.gov.uk)