

# Co-operation at the Grassroots



# Table of Contents

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Executive Summary	2
Co-operation at the Grassroots	3
Types of Co-operation	4
CCIN Values and Principles	5
Case Studies:	
Burntwood Town Council	10
North Herts District Council	11
Stevenage Borough Council	12
Sunderland City Council	13
Enabling Factors for Successful Co-operation at the Grassroots	14
Conclusion	15

# Executive Summary

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The partner councils: Burntwood Town Council, North Herts District Council, Stevenage Borough Council and Sunderland City Council, have been working together throughout the policy lab to demonstrate; how co-operative councils can embed neighbourhood working to deliver better outcomes and better value for money, through a co-operative model of organisation and delivery at a local level. All four councils differ in their size, scope and resources and have been using the term of the policy lab to design and develop better ways of working co-operatively within their communities.

Burntwood Town Council is the smallest of the partners with a population of 26,000. Being a town council they have more limited capacity for direct delivery work. This has built a focus on supporting the development of innovative community groups and organisations to provide services to the people of Burntwood. Through this co-operative model, the council has ensured that community groups and services are maintained and that its limited resources are used effectively across the Town.

North Herts District Council covers a large area of Hertfordshire including rural and urban areas with an overall population of 134,000. Throughout the Covid pandemic, North Herts was able to work with its community partners specialising in Food Support, to design and develop a food network able to provide support and coverage across the district. This in turn meant that North Herts was able to ensure equity of access to support organisations for all of its communities.

Stevenage Borough Council caters to a population of roughly 87,000. The Co-operative Neighbourhood Programme adopted by SBC has divided the town into six Co-operative Neighbourhood areas, with dedicated ward councillors and officers forming a working group that consults, engages and delivers within the locality. This model has benefited the respective communities through enabling involvement, ownership and direction from residents and community stakeholders.

Sunderland City Council covers a large area with a population of 277,000. The development of “let’s talk” community events and engagement, highlighted the need for action within the Elemore area of Sunderland. This centred on the re-development of an abandoned golf course that, through re-wilding, is now an important environmental asset within the area. Local concerns over the use of the area for anti-social behaviour, had led to innovative ideas around turning it into a community park with opportunity to develop community wealth building programmes.

This report provides a summary of the co-operative models used by the partners as contained within the Policy Lab learning video.

# Co-operation at the Grassroots

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“Co-operation at the Grassroots” is the terminology we have used to describe the processes and frameworks put into place by the partners to better support their communities. Across the four council’s methods of consultation, engagement and commitment have been developed to ensure the participation of all community members who want a higher level of involvement with local decision making and democratic engagement.

Over the past few years communities across the country have worked with their local authorities on a variety of projects that have helped to develop stable and informative relationships, allowing for an increased level of communication and understanding between all parties.

Action driven approaches such as; locality focussed engagement and development, resident meetings, consultation with key stakeholders and formalising community partnerships into stronger networks have been crucial in building these initiatives. Alongside this, increased reach as well as greater councillor involvement and participation, has led to the development of a series of exciting and innovative ventures that will strengthen the relationship between councils and their communities.

The methods demonstrated by the councils within this process have shown the benefits of Grassroots co-operation through the success of their projects. Although the impact of the Covid Pandemic was detrimental in some ways to the face to face delivery of these projects and caused some of the work streams to be delayed, it also enabled the authorities to trial and develop new ways of working that they had not had the opportunity to explore before.



# Types of Co-operation

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The variety of methods used throughout the policy lab highlight the many ways in which co-operation is essential to establishing, strong, vibrant communities. For co-operation to fully work there needs to be variety in the methods of engagement and communication to ensure that wider sections of the community are reached.

The approach used in Sunderland, was to focus on locality based consultation. Holding a series of “let’s talk” events within the Elemore area, enabled officers and councillors to fully involve the community. Through the inclusion of local businesses and by using existing links with established community groups, officers were able to reach out to residents they may have previously struggled to engage with.

Similarly the Co-operative Neighbourhoods approach in Stevenage is also a locality based approach, working closely with ward councillors and dedicated teams of officers to support their individual neighbourhood areas. These teams regularly meet with residents and community stakeholders to ensure that the needs of the area are being reflected in developments and project delivery.

As a district council North Herts covers a large geographical catchment consisting of both rural and urban areas. Their approach, to work with, co-ordinate and help to formalise, a series of food support groups into a network that can cover more of the area without duplication, ensures that all communities within the district have access to the support they may need. It also establishes a co-operative and open dialogue between the council, community and voluntary groups.

This approach was also beneficial to Burntwood Council officers, who through necessity due to restricted capacity; rely heavily on the established community groups within the town for the provision of many services, assisting these groups with formalising into the “Burntwood Be a Friend” organisation has enabled them to focus this support for their communities.

# CCIN Values and Principles

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## Social Partnership

In Sunderland the “let’s talk Elemore project” carried out a series of consultations with the Elemore community as to their requirements around the redevelopment of the abandoned Elemore golf course site. The meeting involved local people, local community and environmental groups, representatives from Sunderland City Council as well as from established support organisations such as Bishopwearmouth Co-operative who have established sites in Sunderland providing the community garden centre and café facilities highlighted by the residents. Also in attendance were Sunderland Business Innovation Centre who specialise in supporting CIC and co-operatives. This all-encompassing engagement has produced a design that has support and commitment from the whole Elemore community.



## Democratic Engagement

The Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme in Stevenage demonstrates the benefits of locality based planning along with directly engaging residents in planning and decision making. Through regular and established consultations within the 6 neighbourhood areas, by Community Development Officers responsible for each area along with local ward councillors. The views of residents, community groups, local businesses and services are fed into the co-operative neighbourhood teams, who then use this feedback to co-produce projects, events and developments within each area. This process of consultation into delivery allows for the residents and community members to directly see the impact of their views, opinions and ideas as well as providing, through co-production the opportunity for residents to be directly involved. The recent refurbishment of the Hyde Neighbourhood Centre flower beds was requested by local business owners. This was supported by local councillor budgets and facilitated by community officers and volunteers. This has now led to a licence to occupy which has been issued to a local special educational school for their children and staff to maintain and develop as a long term project.



## Co-production

Burntwood Council relies almost entirely on the partnerships between its community groups. The efforts made by the Council to engage with, support and develop its local groups have led to the formation of Burntwood Be a Friend. This community partnership was instrumental in the Covid response and has since developed into an organisation supporting the entire community through; children's services, community shops, and wellbeing and health sessions. It is the linchpin between the council and community in determining public services and the use of public funds. The Burntwood Be a Friend Community Shop uses links to local businesses to provide a low cost resource for community members through the redistribution of short shelf life or overstocked food. It also serves as a community hub, where residents can access additional information and support.



## Enterprise and social economy

The request by local residents to re-develop the abandoned Elemore Golf Course in Sunderland led the City Council to approach the Sunderland Business Innovation Centre for support.

Their role in developing and supporting small businesses, Community Interest Companies and Co-operatives within the Sunderland area made them an ideal partner for the re-development into a community facility that could be used by all for recreation as well as a resource to help boost the local economy.

Sunderland Business Innovation Centre introduced Bishopwearmouth Co-operative, a community organisation specialising in developing and providing training and employment opportunities for Adults with learning difficulties across Sunderland. Having successfully established a community garden centre and café facility in Sunderland, they are the perfect partner to provide the facilities at the re-developed site, offering training and employment opportunities locally and bring in visitors from all over to shop at the garden centre and eat/drink at the café. This provides an injection of capital into the local community.



## Maximising social value

North Herts District Council supported and developed the existing food support groups into the North Herts Food Provision Network. Through the provision of support and grants during the Covid pandemic, it was established that there were food provision groups duplicating their offer across North Herts. The framework put together by the community officers at North Herts gave these groups the opportunity to meet virtually and spread/share their resources across the district to ensure equity in coverage, enabling all residents who needed support to access it. Through this framework and the network that grew from it, rural areas that were struggling to reach resources were catered for, including the setup of food hubs in churches in St Ippolitts and other isolated communities. Following the pandemic, the network has continued, ensuring equal distribution of collection slots from supermarkets, sharing of resources across partners, opening at different times & days to enable accessibility and avoid duplication, better supporting local economic outcomes.



## Community leadership and a new role for councillors

The Co-operative Neighbourhoods programme in Stevenage develops and enhances the relationship between councillors, council officers and communities. Within the framework, the town is split into 6 neighbourhood areas comprising of 2 electoral wards in each area. Each area has dedicated officers who sit alongside ward councillors to make certain that community needs are listened to and met. There are regular meetings between officers and councillors to feed engagement and consultation information to each other ensuring community voices are being listened to. Councillors and officers also conduct regular community walkabouts to assess any projects or works that are taking place and ensure that areas of development within the community are being noted and addressed. Through this approach the role of the councillor as a community connector is developed. Local ward councillors in the Pin Green & Martin's Wood area had noticed that a previously vibrant community garden at The Oval shops was falling into disrepair. After talking to local residents and businesses it was established that the previous occupiers no longer had the capacity to maintain it. Councillors formed the Friends of Oval Community Garden group and took on a licence to occupy. The garden was refurbished and is now open to public use as well as used by local toddler groups and nurseries for wildlife and gardening sessions.





### New models of meeting priority needs

Burntwood Council was approached by a group of parents and residents who, following the closure of the children's centre in Burntwood, were struggling to access the closest children's services, based in an adjoining town. The council supported the parents to set up a Community Interest Company called Sparks to provide a children's centre and children's services within Burntwood. This is the founding model for Burntwood Be a Friend. Through helping to establish funding, address legal obligations and other necessities for incorporation, Burntwood Council has established a model to better cater for the needs of its community. The initial investment of officer time to support this has led to the establishment of thriving community support organisations across the town. Working in partnership ensures provision reaches those who need it most with volunteers and staff based in key community hubs across the town including the town library and places of worship.



### Innovation

Following the development of The Food Provision Network in North Herts, food provision groups alongside North Herts District Council were able to establish a gap in provision in the Letchworth Garden City area. This led to the development of the Letchworth Best Before Café and formation of a CIC to support it. This organisation provides a town centre venue for food rescue provision, helping both manage food waste and subsequent environmental impact. It provides residents with low cost fresh food. The café is based in the heart of the town centre and is accessible to all. It also provides employment and volunteer opportunities for local people. At the end of each session, unclaimed food is passed on to other food provision groups and volunteers across Letchworth in more outlying areas enabling those unable to make it to a central location to access provisions closer to home.



## Learning

Some of the key learning areas for each council are;

- Ensure all the departments within the council are aware of the project; individual departments may have volunteers, resources and advice that can help the project that you would be otherwise unaware of.
- Listen, if you listen to what the community wants and needs you save time and saving time means you save money.
- Don't be afraid to hand ownership over to the community. They are the ones who are best placed to know what they need.
- Build models and frameworks that can be applied to other areas. The increase in online meetings over Covid provided the perfect opportunity for conversations and partnerships between organisations that may have previously never met.



## Walking the talk

Throughout the process, the members worked co-operatively with mutually beneficial relationships built between authorities differing in size, location and make up. Through this process, officers and councillors alike have been able to develop their own understanding and practice, sharing experiences, learning, successes and failures. This development opportunity has enabled the authorities to better support the communities which they serve. Equally, the values and principles of the CCIN have enabled the authorities taking part in the policy lab to better focus their delivery of services through coproduction, engagement, consultation and sharing of knowledge.

All four councils have stated that they found the policy lab process to be immensely beneficial and were very pleased to have been a part of it.

# Case Studies

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**Burntwood Town Council:** Case study comprises of a brief overview alongside a film documenting the project that can be accessed via the link below.

<https://www.councils.coop/case-study/cooperation-at-grassroots-burntwood>



## Burntwood Town Council Co-operation at the Grassroots: Burntwood be a Friend

Since 2019, councils in Burntwood, North Hertfordshire, Stevenage & Sunderland have been working together on a policy lab to explore ways in which co-operation can be facilitated by councils in their interactions with residents and communities at a very localised level. The policy lab has identified the value this brings, not just to more effective delivery of services, but also to wider social and economic benefits for places.

In response to the Covid pandemic in 2020, Burntwood Be a Friend was established through cooperation from existing community groups within Burntwood, along with Burntwood Town Council the organisation administered support to residents, providing food parcels and signposting in what was an unprecedented time of need. Following the easing of the pandemic and restrictions, Burntwood Be a Friend continued to harness the outpouring of support from the community to provide further services and volunteer opportunities across the town, the flagship being the Burntwood Be a Friend Community Store.

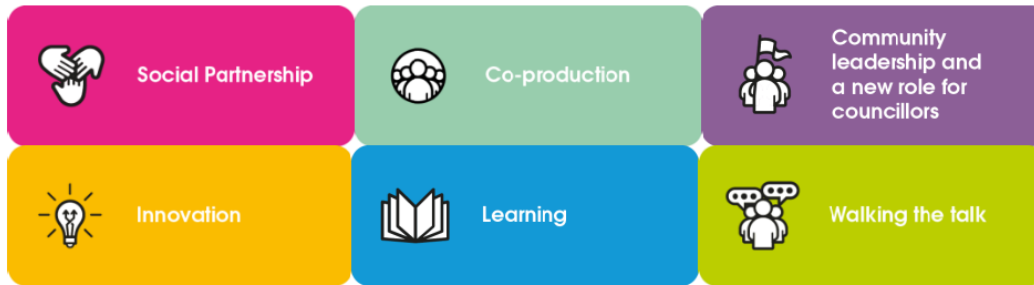
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**North Herts Council:** Case study comprises of a brief overview alongside a film documenting the project that can be accessed via the link below.

<https://www.councils.coop/case-study/cooperation-at-grassroots-north-herts>



## North Hertfordshire District Council

### Co-operation at the Grassroots: North Herts Food Provision Network

Since 2019, councils in Burntwood, North Hertfordshire, Stevenage & Sunderland have been working together on a policy lab to explore ways in which co-operation can be facilitated by councils in their interactions with residents and communities at a very localised level. The policy lab has identified the value this brings, not just to more effective delivery of services, but also to wider social and economic benefits for places.

Geographically North Herts District Council covers a large area including several large towns as well as many rural and village locations. At the start of the Covid Pandemic in 2020, North Herts District Council had been working with community partner's on establishing a local food provision network, the additional complication of the pandemic further highlighted the need for a co-operative approach across the district and through collaboration existing community food provision groups liaised with each other and NHDC to form the North Herts Food Provision Network. A group of community organisations, CIC's and charities focussed on ensuring food is available at a reasonable price to the whole community as well as the prevention of food waste. The network was able to thrive due to the introduction of video conferencing tools and is now an established group serving the needs of the many diverse communities of North Herts.

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**For further information contact:**

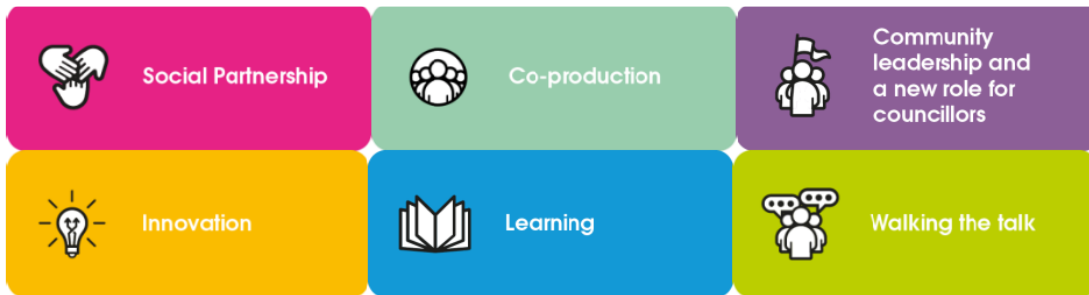
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**Stevenage Borough Council:** Case study comprises of a brief overview alongside a film documenting the project that can be accessed via the link below.

<https://www.councils.coop/case-study/cooperation-at-grassroots-stevenage>



## Stevenage Borough Council Co-operation at the Grassroots in Stevenage: Co-operative Neighbourhoods

Since 2019, councils in Burntwood, North Hertfordshire, Stevenage & Sunderland have been working together on a policy lab to explore ways in which co-operation can be facilitated by councils in their interactions with residents and communities at a very localised level. The policy lab has identified the value this brings, not just to more effective delivery of services, but also to wider social and economic benefits for places.

Through the formation of the Co-operative Neighbourhoods programme, Stevenage Borough Council has formed partnerships between elected members, council officers, stakeholders and community groups to focus on the needs of the community. The six co-operative neighbourhood areas each have a dedicated team that concentrates specifically on the development and improvement of their area through community engagement and direct delivery. These teams work together on the co-production of a variety of projects, initiatives and developments across the town. Focusing on community collaboration and engagement, community wealth building and supporting local community groups and organisations, the Co-operative Neighbourhoods programme ensures healthy community relationships across the town. The Policy Lab case study looks at three projects throughout the town and how the Co-operative Neighbourhoods approach that the council has adopted has helped to better facilitate the delivery of projects responding to resident priorities.

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**Sunderland City Council:** Case study comprises of a brief overview alongside a film documenting the project that can be accessed via the link below.

<https://www.councils.coop/case-study/cooperation-at-grassroots-sunderland>



## Sunderland City Council

# Co-operation at the Grassroots in Sunderland: Let's Talk Elemore

Since 2019, councils in Burntwood, North Hertfordshire, Stevenage & Sunderland have been working together on a policy lab to explore ways in which co-operation can be facilitated by councils in their interactions with residents and communities at a very localised level. The policy lab has identified the value this brings, not just to more effective delivery of services, but also to wider social and economic benefits for places.

Through extensive consultation within the Hetton area of Sunderland, Sunderland City Council and community organisations worked together to identify areas which were considered a priority for local residents. At the forefront of this was the recently closed Elemore Golf Club, a large facility consisting of a building and golf course that had, since its closure been left to go back to nature. The partnership of both council and community was able to secure funding and permission to turn the site into a community park, garden centre and café, run by a local CIC that has experience as well as the local community, the Elemore site will provide a focal point for the local community bringing both wellbeing and employment opportunities to the area.

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# Enabling Factors for Successful Co-operation at the Grassroots

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Three main areas of focus for successful co-operation at the Grassroots have been highlighted through the work carried out by the partners during this policy lab;

## Recognising Your Local Area's Assets

A key element throughout this process for each council has been ensuring the participation and support of existing community groups and community stakeholders. Without this many of the projects would not have been able to proceed as the contacts, backing and resources brought in by these groups have been essential to successful delivery as well as the establishment of reliable communication.

## Taking a risk

All partners involved highlighted the importance of trusting their communities with their best interests. The true benefits of co-operation are underlined through local authorities taking a risk and handing control over to their communities for developments and plans that directly affect them. This approach has proven to be successful in the delivery of community focussed projects throughout this policy lab that not only meet the direct needs of the community but also encourage community members to take ownership and be more involved locally.

## Learning From Your Experience and Improving Practice

Not all engagements are positive and not all projects are successful. The focus for partners has been to ensure that whether feedback is positive or negative it is valued, listened to and acted upon. Regular reflection on delivery of projects, successes, failures and obstacles has enabled the partners to adapt and improve.

# Conclusion

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Grassroots co-operation, whilst relatively new as a concept, has shown benefits to its adoption through the wide and varied applications within the highlighted projects. The areas in which the policy lab partners focussed, enabled them to gain insight into the best ways to work with communities whilst ensuring those communities felt listened to and valued. Throughout the process, areas of learning for the partners developed, allowing them to adapt and change. As well as the areas of learning addressed in the accompanying film, each council highlighted the following advice for other councils.

- Sunderland: “Promote your projects and developments throughout your organisation. Get as many departments to buy into it as possible as their contacts and ideas will be invaluable.”
- Stevenage: “Don’t be afraid to hand over control of community projects to the community. Their experience and insight will only improve the delivery.”
- North Herts: “Look at how you can apply your learning to other areas, frameworks and models you have used for one area of development may be transferable to others.”
- Burntwood: “Trust your community to know what is best from them; they should be the ones to lead, with you in a guiding and advisory role.”

The knowledge and understanding gained by the councils throughout this process has been invaluable, with all partners considering how they will develop such co-operative models to respond to future opportunities and challenges in local areas.