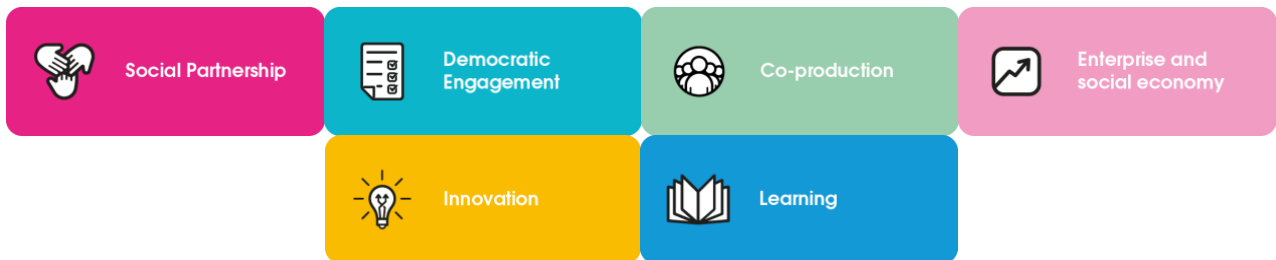




COOPERATIVE PLACE MAKING



Stevenage Borough Council

Shaping the Future of the Social Inclusion Partnership

Background

The Social Inclusion Partnership (SIP) has been established for over 30 years and was one of the first inter-agency groups in Stevenage. It brings together organisations from across the voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise sector, alongside the local authority, to address social exclusion and support residents facing economic inequality.

The partnership has always emphasised practical collaboration, information sharing, needs identification, awareness-raising, and the development of joint responses to local issues. This includes joint projects, shared research, and providing a space for partners to coordinate activities and learn from one another. SIP meets monthly and agrees its priority areas each year through consultation with members, ensuring its work remains relevant and locally driven.

Why Formalisation is Being Explored

Prior to Covid, there were early discussions about formalising SIP's structure. The intention was to strengthen partnership working, improve access to funding and create a more sustainable model for collaboration.

Following Covid, this became a clearer priority. With support from Stevenage Borough Council, an officer was assigned to work with SIP and explore different incorporation options.

This work included:

- consulting members on their views and ambitions

- researching different models, including CICs, social enterprises and co-operatives
- sharing findings and gathering feedback through the partnership.

Through this process, there was a clear preference for a multi-stakeholder co-operative model, particularly as it would:

- support shared responsibility and accountability
- allow organisations to remain independent and continue their own fundraising
- strengthen access to funding and collective support.

At the same time, members recognised potential challenges such as the level of commitment needed, legal considerations, and the role of organisations linked to national governance structures.

A Phased Approach

Rather than moving directly to full incorporation, SIP has agreed to take a staged approach.

- The initial phase is to formalise the partnership through a federation-style model supported by a constitution. This is a structured way of working in which organisations collaborate more closely, share priorities, and coordinate activities, while remaining fully independent and without forming a single legal entity.
- This provides an opportunity to test how partners work together in practice, understand strengths and challenges, and build confidence.
- Over a period of 18–24 months, the intention is to transition towards a Community Consortium Co-operative. This would be a more formal model, with shared governance, joint decision-making and collective responsibility, enabling partners to work together more strategically while still delivering their own services.

This approach allows the partnership to develop in a practical and manageable way.

Using the Mondragon Model as an Influence

As part of this development, SIP has used the Mondragon Co-operative as an ideal reference point. Mondragon is a large network of co-operatives in Spain where independent organisations operate under shared governance, values and support structures, while remaining locally run. This model is relevant to SIP as it demonstrates how organisations can collaborate in a structured way without losing their independence. It provides a useful example of how shared governance and collective working can strengthen the wider system.

What This Looks Like in Practice

SIP is beginning to apply these principles through its current way of working.

- Partners are organised into themed focus groups aligned to the agreed annual priorities, such as cost of living support, older people and young people.
- These groups focus on strategic coordination and support, including mapping provision, identifying gaps and improving collaboration between organisations.
- The SIP Steering Group is leading on formalisation, providing oversight of governance, structure and future development.

This ensures that delivery remains with individual organisations, while the partnership focuses on coordination, alignment and shared planning.

Support Through the Policy Lab Approach

This ongoing work is now supported by a broader policy lab project focused on Sustaining Local Leadership and Place-Based Innovation.

- The programme supports SIP to strengthen leadership and succession planning across community organisations.
- It will provide workshops on cooperative governance, community resilience and place-based service design, directly supporting the move towards a co-operative model.
- A mentorship framework and community of practice will enable shared learning and peer support across partners.
- Toolkits and practical resources will help partners test and embed new ways of working before formal incorporation.

This support allows SIP to take a structured but flexible approach, building confidence and capability alongside delivery.

Why This Approach Works for SIP

This approach builds on SIP's existing strengths as a partnership while introducing more structure over time.

- It allows organisations to remain independent while strengthening collaboration.
- It supports the development of shared systems and ways of working before formal incorporation.
- It creates a clear pathway from an informal partnership to a Community Consortium Co-operative.

Using the Mondragon model as an influence, alongside the support of the policy lab approach, provides both a clear direction and the practical support needed to make this transition work.

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