Communities 1st
Strategic Plan
2022-2026

Communities 1st

Working with you to make a bigger difference

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A Word From The Board

We are delighted to present to you Communities 1st's new strategic plan, setting out our priorities and direction for the next four years.

We are pleased with the progress that our charity has made during the scope of the last strategic plan. It was a period of considerable change, particularly in response to the pandemic, and we are pleased to report that our reach increased, we recruited a record number of volunteers and investment was made into IT to support volunteers and staff in service delivery.

Moving forward, the Board of Trustees is confident that the charity is 'on the right track', and we are looking forward to a period of increasing our impact.

This four-year strategic plan is underpinned by a more detailed work plan, which outlines exactly how we intend to work towards the achievement of our strategic goals and objectives. The work plan is renewed on an annual basis in order to take full account of any changes in the environment in which we operate. We are committed to forging meaningful partnerships both locally and where appropriate, regionally and nationally.

Updates to the plan will be available from Communities 1st annually and will be published on our website at www.communities1st.org.uk/annualreport

The Board recognises the dedication of our volunteers and staff. We would like to thank them for their ongoing hard work and we're looking forward to seeing just how much we can achieve over the next four years.

We hope that everyone is ready for the challenge!

Jason John, Chair
On behalf of the Board of Trustees

Sarah Yexley, Vice Chair
On behalf of the Board of Trustees

Some definitions

In the context of this document, the term '**voluntary sector**' encompasses the breadth and diversity of voluntary action and includes: voluntary organisations; community groups; charities; faith groups engaged in voluntary and social action; non-profit initiatives; and social enterprise organisations.

In the context of this document, the term '**volunteering**' we mean any and all of the rich and diverse activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals or groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives. It is a choice freely made and can include formal activity undertaken through public, private and voluntary organisations as well as informal community participation and social action.

Our Vision

*Strong local communities where everyone
has the opportunity to thrive and make a difference*

Our Mission

**To partner with local communities, turning
knowledge and energy into action and progress**

Our Values underpin everything we seek to achieve.
Developed by everyone at Communities 1st, we live our values in our work with
our partners and throughout our charity.

Inclusive	We treat everyone fairly and understanding their diverse needs and strengths, we can serve them better and provide services that positively impact their lives. We actively seek out the voices from potentially excluded and disadvantaged groups.
Collaborative	We inspire a culture of collaborative partnerships with our members and communities, including our statutory partners and funders, to achieve the best outcomes and impact.
Caring	We make a positive difference to people's lives every day. We focus on positive outcomes and apply recognised safeguarding principles to our work.
Creative	We search for solutions and ideas that overcome the challenges faced by our members, users of our services, communities and partners.
Quality	We strive for quality in all that we do recognising that each person's contribution is valuable.
Integrity	We do the right thing. We are an independent, impartial voice and advocate strongly with and on behalf of the voluntary sector and communities. Transparency is embedded in how we work.

Executive Summary

The past three years have seen significant changes within Communities 1st, particularly the last two, as we have responded to the demands of the pandemic. During this period, we have seen substantive changes in volunteer and staff numbers, the range of activities and services provided as well as our geographical reach.

The pandemic has highlighted what we can achieve. It has demonstrated, as evidenced by activities like the recruitment and support of volunteers, that Communities 1st is an organisation that can deliver, and deliver at scale, effectively and rapidly. We are more confident about what we can achieve.

Working in partnership with members will shape how we deliver
Building on the work that has been done over the course of the pandemic and the shift from the rapid crisis-response mode to an approach which requires supporting organisations and communities to respond to the challenges of the post-pandemic world. We continue to see opportunities to deepen and embed the relationships we have with member organisations in ways that not only provide service and support for members, but build collaboration, working towards relationships involving greater opportunity for co-production and co-design. Embedding and deepening these relationships offer opportunities to increase diversity and new creative collaborations that enable shared working with members to build unity and solidarity.

We will widen involvement in volunteering
We want to build on our success of the volunteer program, and our insight knowledge of local communities, and work in collaboration with our members' organisations. That means both retaining some of the volunteers recruited during the pandemic and reaching out to individuals and organisations from diverse and minority communities to make volunteering more attractive and accessible. Opportunities also exist for engaging with other societal groups, particularly young people, with activities such as promoting volunteering. Volunteering from within schools and colleges has been identified as something that could increase the reach and diversity of volunteers.

And work with you to help improve health and wellbeing and reduce inequalities
As we move to a post-pandemic situation new needs and challenges are surfacing, around health, wellbeing, inequalities, rising cost of living, various refugee situations as well as those that have always been there. We see opportunities to build on and develop our work in new ways. We want to work with neighbourhoods, community groups and social networks to be able to identify unmet needs. We want to listen to and respond to users.

Building upon our achievements, including partnership working and placing local communities at the core of our thinking, combined with a healthy and thoughtful approach to innovation and risk, we look to set out the broad vision for our charity, and continue to develop a successful organisation supporting all sections of our community.

Stephen Craker
Chief Executive, Communities 1st

Drawing on our past

An essential part of any strategy is to reflect both back and forward.

Our previous strategic plan outlined a number of key goals and desired outcomes, many of which have been achieved or surpassed. Those that we are yet to achieve (but are still appropriate to our direction of development) have been carried forward to the new plan.

Drawing from our past is a valuable way of understanding what we have become known for. In our case it's:

- Providing valuable advice, training, networking opportunities and information which helps our sector connect, grow and develop
- Advocating for and representing, the sector
- Being a trusted broker in communication and engagement between sectors
- Delivering projects and activities with clear outcomes which support not only the vulnerable in communities but communities in general
- Delivering projects and activities which connect people and places
- Supporting volunteers and volunteering in all its forms, and enabling residents to take an active role in society and into the employment market
- Understanding and disseminating the strategic context in which we work, and in which we have always worked
- Understanding the implications of change and what organisations must do to survive and thrive
- Understanding the community assets at everybody's disposal, be that individuals, groups or partners

We undertook a SWOT, PEST and brief Stakeholder analysis which can be found on pages 12 & 13.

As a charity we have exciting but realistic aspirations and want to develop our core services within a robust strategic planning process whilst remaining mindful of the financial restraints that we are working under.

Our Strategic Goals and Objectives

Goal 1	A more resilient, effective and representative local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector	
Objectives	**1. Create impact and value in the sector**	**2. Strengthen the sector's voice to effect change**
The outcomes we would like to achieve over the next four years are:	a. Local VCFSEs organisations are more effective in meeting the changing needs of beneficiaries b. More VCFSE services are co-designed with beneficiaries c. Local VCFSEs are more sustainable and resilient d. Local business community engages more closely with local communities and our member VCFSE organisations e. Local VCFSEs will have been helped to access grant funding to support their communities through projects around themes of cohesion and integration.	a. Collaboration between VCFSE and Statutory organisations is increased b. The local VCFSE sector is more involved in the design and planning of services c. Statutory organisations change policies and practice to be more representative of local need d. Commissioning is more responsive to the needs of local communities e. The VCFSE becomes an integral part of the integrated care system including the co-design of services

Goal 2	Volunteering is more recognised, visible and valued in the community providing improved community well-being and personal development	
Objectives	**3. Increase the understanding of and recognition for volunteering**	**4. Promote volunteering in order to increase the number and diversity of volunteers**
The outcomes we would like to achieve over the next four years are:	a. Evidence the impact of volunteering on improving lives, including social value models b. Continue improving the image and concept of volunteering to a wider audience c. Clearly articulate the response to crisis versus ongoing volunteering response and opportunities e.g., learning from Covid community responses d. Volunteer involving organisations are aware of good practice in the recruitment and retention of volunteers e. Enable public sector staff to get more involved in volunteering in their communities. f. Private sector is acting on the benefits of working with the voluntary sector.	a. Improved accessible opportunities for underrepresented groups to get involved in a broader range of volunteering opportunities b. New approaches to volunteering to make giving time easier c. Enable self-organised volunteering opportunities within communities d. Create common processes and practices where possible, e.g., so that it is easier for people to sign up to volunteer with different organisations e. Potential volunteers know of the Volunteer Centre and find it easy to gain access to opportunities f. Provide businesses with a platform to show they are supporting and working in partnership with their community

Goal 3	Improved health and wellbeing where individuals facing barriers or experiencing inequalities are supported and resilient	
Objectives	5. **Creating opportunities for resilient communities and supportive environments**	6. **Widen availability of the right training and skills services in right place at the right time**
The outcomes we would like to achieve over the next four years are:	a. More residents access services which benefit their health b. Greater opportunity for peer support and community involvement c. Communities are better connected and supported d. People who report that their wellbeing has improved. e. People are safe and better protected	a. Individuals undertaking activities within the community have been supported to gain the skills, knowledge and ability to enable them to deliver the vision of their organisation/group b. Helping local people to become resilient and empowered, increasing people's sense of control, autonomy and self-efficacy

Goal 4	Being a sustainable, inclusive and responsible organisation driven by our values	
Objectives	7. **Work closely with people to ensure that they can participate and be involved in all aspects of our charity**	8. **Bring measurable benefits to our volunteers and the wider community in an environmentally sustainable way**
The outcomes we would like to achieve over the next four years are:	a. Our volunteers play a more active role in our charity b. We are supporting and developing Communities 1st ambassadors and Community Champions. c. A better understanding of who we need to reach and what is the best way of engaging with them	a. A consistently good approach to volunteer co-ordination is embedded across the charity. b. People mobilise for inclusive and supportive communities c. More effective and efficient coordination of effort that delivers improved impact in an emergency.

Championing Communities

In keeping with **OUR VALUES**	We're striving towards four **STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS**		
Inclusive Collaborative Caring Creative Quality Integrity	A more resilient, effective and representative local voluntary, community, faith and social enterprise (VCFSE) sector Volunteering is more recognised, visible and valued in the community providing improved community well-being and personal development	To support **OUR MISSION** To partner with local communities, turning knowledge and energy into action and progress	
	Improved health and wellbeing for all, where individuals facing barriers or experiencing health inequalities are supported and resilient Being a sustainable, responsible organisation driven by our values	And achieve **OUR VISION** Strong local communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and make a difference	

Looking to the future

Delivery of the Strategy
This strategy provides the overarching way in which we plan to achieve our Vision. It provides the golden thread that brings together our core work and a series of partnerships, projects and agreements that exist across our organisation, which also contribute towards helping to create strong local communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and make a difference.

While acknowledging significant positive progress in the past, we are firmly focused on what still needs to be done in a post-pandemic world; and getting on with it.

Connected communities are resilient communities
Whether it's tackling disasters, addressing health inequalities or supporting people who are marginalised or isolated, we believe that meaningful connections between people, within communities and across agencies are fundamental for everyone. We want to create spaces and connections for their voices to be heard, listened to and valued, and when possible action being taken, so they feel like they belong to their community. That's why strengthening these connections will form the basis of everything we do, working closely with people, communities and different organisations involved to build resilience.

With people at the centre we will:
- Create high quality projects that support local people
- Collaborate with other providers to increase our impact
- Ensure our resource is focussed and targeted at key projects

We will work for change by:

- **Spreading great practice**
  When a practice is shown to be effective, we will work with others to spread it, locally, regionally or nationally as appropriate. We will build networks and coalitions of people and organisations who are passionate about spreading ideas that work. We will look to provide the best possible evidence on what does work and then work together to spread great practice.

- **Involving Partners and Voluntary Sector Organisations**
  A core principle of our work has been, and continues to be, partnerships, whether that is with voluntary sector organisations, volunteers or stakeholders with a similar interest to ours. We want to work with people, organisations and businesses that want to build, inspire and empower our communities and volunteers to make a difference locally. We want to work with all partners in innovative ways which at times, may challenge current methods of working and develop novel solutions to address need.

- **Improving the system**
Sometimes we may need to work with public sector organisations to change the structures, processes or institutional biases that decide how and where resources are directed and how people and communities are supported. Where there's evidence that change is needed, we will work with others to make that happen. Sometimes this will be hard, sometimes it may make us unpopular. We will always seek to put local people and communities first and ask what is needed.

- **Tackling the climate emergency**
The climate emergency is a major risk to society and our health. And while it's not our charitable purpose to tackle the climate emergency, we must play our part in addressing its causes. We are committed to minimising any adverse impact on the environment, and maximising our contribution to fighting climate change. Therefore, we will:
  - Offer recycling facilities in all our buildings
  - Seek to use green energy and find energy-efficient solutions wherever we can
  - Raise awareness amongst member organisations, staff, volunteers, individuals and their community's environmental sustainability.

- **Working towards Equality, Diversity and Inclusion for all**
We believe that everyone deserves the chance to succeed, regardless of their background or identity. We recognise the diversity of the communities we serve and how vital it is to build strong relationships with them and listen to their needs. We understand that this is crucial to reach the people who need us the most and give them the best experience in working with us.

We are committed to building a workforce that is as diverse as the communities and people we serve, where colleagues feel able to bring their whole selves to work to achieve their best.

We pledge to celebrate diversity and inclusion within our work and across the organisation, and we will continuously educate ourselves and strive for equality.

Our work will support our members to do the same.

Making this happen

This strategy includes an action plan which provides further detail about how we aim to deliver against our priorities and the timescales for achieving this over the four-year period. It incorporates the broad array of work that is being planned as well as how we can work together on common goals and activities through partnerships and collaborative working.

What will success look like?

Over the four-year period, we will measure success in a range of ways. We will gather feedback through staff, partners, organisations, groups and individuals to understand if these actions are making a difference.

In addition to the overall success measures listed below, there are also individual measures of success against the actions outlined in the action plans.

To support the sector to evolve and grow; to be effective, ambitious and enterprising, with a particular focus on recovery from Covid-19, including in the area of digital and innovation.

How will we achieve this?

1 We will strive to develop services and resources to improve the support that groups, charities and individuals receive

2 We will give our communities a louder voice – giving opportunities and platforms for their stories to be heard

3 We will facilitate and provide training that will give a better understanding and knowledge on topics ranging from governance and funding advice to confidence building and back to work programmes

4 We will work to the seven principles of the charity governance code and support our member organisations to do so too

5 We will prioritise the use of the funds that we receive to ensure we achieve our mission

6 We will proactively involve members, volunteers and service users in the development of services, information and research and we will endeavour to become a reliable source of information

7 We will develop engaging compelling and targeted communications to enable those in our local communities' better access to our support

8 We will adapt to meet the needs of the communities we support in line with political, economic, social and technical developments

How we will know it's effective

The management team at Communities 1st monitor the performance of our services monthly, reviewing the outputs of the service against set targets. The performance is also monitored by the trustee board at board meetings.

Feedback from people who use our services, as well as those that don't, is important to us and we use this to review our services and make adjustments. We will implement an improvement log for each team where comments, complements and complaints are logged and actioned. We will use this process to support continuous improvement within each service ensuring that it is meeting the needs of our customers.

The goals and priorities set out in our strategic plan are reviewed regularly in order to ensure that we as a charity are achieving our key objectives.

Evidence of need and impact are measured through the recording and analysis of client interaction and feedback, and the use of impact surveys and database reporting; allowing us to measure performance, ensure quality and evaluate the services being delivered.

We continue to develop our reporting mechanisms, enabling us to monitor and evaluate our performance and ensure that we remain accountable and transparent in our delivery.

Where services are commissioned by external partners, performance is evaluated through regular reporting to ensure continued financial support.

We will have in place an established monitoring system and will be using this to track the impact that we have on communities and on the individuals that work or volunteer to make a difference locally.
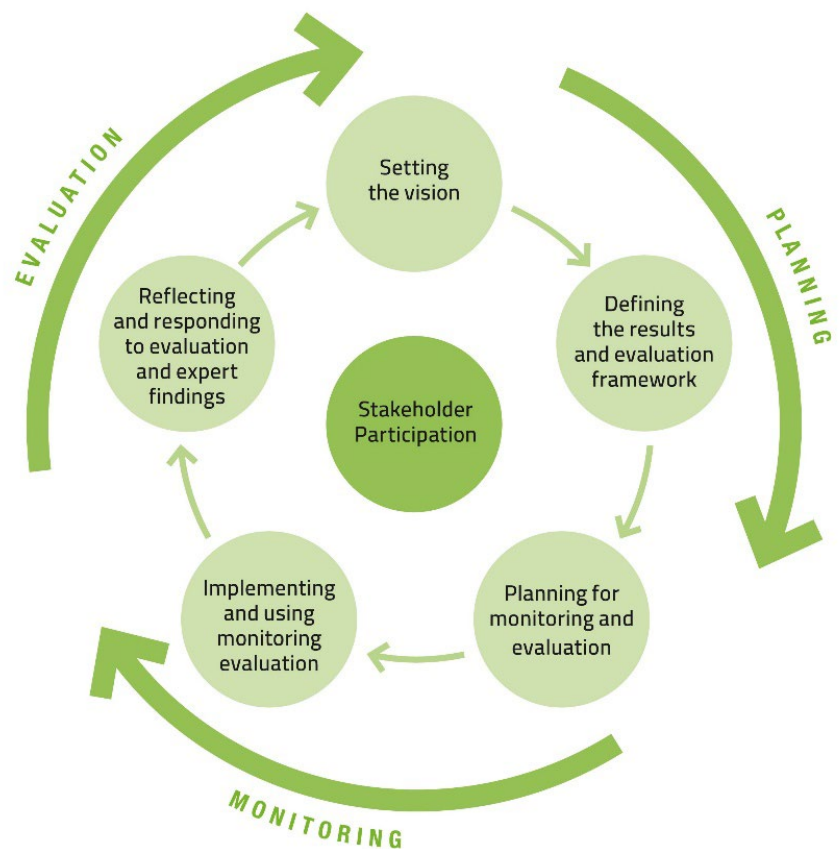
The Evaluation Cycle

How this strategy was developed

This strategy is the result of careful listening and reflection.

Trustees commissioned Nottingham Trent and Sheffield Hallam Universities to undertake an independent evaluation of the impact of our previous work to identify our strengths and areas to improve.   During October 2021 – February 2022, they listened to member organisations, volunteers, sector partners, funders, staff and trustees who have shared their experiences and priorities for Communities 1st's work.

Trustees, together with staff and volunteers have worked together to develop this strategic plan to help deliver solutions to the complex challenges communities face.

Our Thanks

We exist because the voluntary sector exists.

Our purpose is to serve that sector, and the people that it, in turn, seeks to serve. We set forth on the next stage of our efforts with confidence, humility, and a deep sense of gratitude for your continued support and partnership.

We would like to express our appreciation for the valuable contribution to our volunteers and volunteers of our voluntary sector members and partners. We are grateful for the energy, enthusiasm and dedication you bring to your roles as volunteers. You make our mission and that of our member organisations and partners that much smoother.

They say the best present you can give a person is your time.   Thank you!

Your feedback

We welcome feedback on how we can best achieve our aims as set out in our refreshed strategic plan. If you would like to provide us with any feedback on our work, please contact us@communities1st.org.uk

SWOT Analysis

S

Strengths

1. Member organisations are supported
2. Volunteering Management Experience
3. Citizen involvement
4. Creative and Pro-active approach
5. Strong, experienced and committed staff
6. Community designed program of activities
7. Systematisation of working practices
8. Experience and local knowledge of beneficiaries, the local VCFSE sector and the community
9. Reputational standing across the region and with key stakeholders
10. Proven track record and impact in delivering projects
11. Strong value base
12. Resourcefulness, drive and tenacity

W

Weaknesses

1. Communications are too generic and not sufficiently tailored for volunteers
2. Ability to communicate the breadth of work of Communities 1st
3. Publicity and promotion of our charity to beneficiaries
4. Lack of sustainable income to continue delivering services at current levels.
5. Teams/Business Units too insular
6. Volunteers not always engaged enough especially in regard to their strengths
7. Need for a sustainable replacement programme for fixed assets, especially our mini-buses

O

Opportunities

1. Improve networking with organisations which focus on marginalized groups
2. Further develop on our good foundations to enable us to enhance/ better support organisations and volunteer experience.
3. Reducing Inequalities and supporting population health management
4. Increased demand on our services
5. Increased collaboration between partners
6. Develop or offer more services, if appropriate, over a wider geographical area, in partnership with others, or in an advisory role
7. Opportunity to influence commissioners/decision makers
8. To co-develop and produce new innovative ways of working
9. Increased local community engagement
10. CSR with local business
11. To collaborate across a whole range of activities including direct delivery, market development and social impact

T

Threats

1. Political, social and economic changes affecting our sector
2. Lack of suitable and accessible premises for office functions and service delivery.
3. Pressure to show leadership in addressing climate change, equality and inequalities
4. Increased costs of operating
5. Lack of Public Sector Capacity, therefore increased demand on the sector
6. New commercial entrants seeking to offer many of our traditional services providing increased competition
7. External competition and conflict objectives overcomes drive for genuine collaboration work
8. Financial pressures on authorities as austerity 'bites' after COVID-19 pandemic
9. Funding being directed to 'crisis services' and not preventative programmes
10. Increased Competition for funding
11. Short-term funding projects are not always financially sustainable

PEST Analysis

P

Political

1. Unstable political environment
2. Increased focus on the short term
3. Changes in social care policies and funding for the NHS
4. Austerity measures imposed upon local government resulting in reduced funding for communities
5. Rhetoric of citizenship and volunteering
6. Levelling up Agenda

E

Economic

1. Economic uncertainty
2. Increasing pressures on households, deepening inequality within and between communities e.g. fuel poverty
3. Increase in demand for services
4. Continued pressure on public finances
5. Reducing carbon footprint and ensuring our premises are as environmentally friendly, cost effective and energy efficient as possible

S

Social

1. Inequalities, including ageing population, mental health, isolation/loneliness
2. Decline in the working-age population, lack of diversity, more remote working
3. Promoting environmental awareness alongside greener attitudes and behaviour

T

Technical

1. Cyber security & hybrid working environment
2. Volunteer passports and 'remote' volunteering
3. Social media
4. 5G wireless technology expanding access to artificial intelligence

Stakeholder Analysis

Table below identifies our stakeholder groups and how we relate to them.

Private Sector

- Employer Supported Volunteering
- Link VCFSE to private sector
- Utilise business knowledge to support VCFSE
- Pay for membership

VCFSE Organisations

- We deliver a service to them
- Support to promote volunteering and create opportunities
- Be involved in cross-sector working
- Work on joint projects
- Pay for memberships

Statutory Organisations

- Commissioners of VCFSE
- Support to promote volunteering and create opportunities
- Support their links with VCFSE to support achieving their aims
- Customer – managing volunteer programmes

General Public

- They are our and our member's volunteer base – ensure they are aware of the opportunities available
- Make aware of support if they want to undertake community activity

Strong local communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive and make a difference

Clients and Service Users

- Those who use services or those who may use them
- Need for flexible packages of support
- Users can also contribute

Find out more

There are different ways you can either get involved in our work, or find out more about the work we are doing to progress delivery against this plan:

- Visit our website at www.communities1st.org.uk

- Follow us on Twitter @1stCommunities

- Sign up to receive our stakeholder newsletter by entering your details at the bottom of the page of www.communities1st.org.uk/signup

- Attend one of our upcoming events: www.communities1st.org.uk/calendar/month

- Find out more about the resources we provide groups: www.communities1st.org.uk/helpforgroups

Contact Details

Services (Transport, Handyperson, Community Centres): 01727 649980

Wellbeing Services: 01727 649930   help@communities1st.org.uk

Volunteer Centre: 01727 649950   volunteer@communities1st.org.uk

Centre for Voluntary Services (CVS):   01727 649940
                                  memberservices@communities1st.org.uk

Main Contact: 01727 649900   us@communities1st.org.uk

Communities 1st operate out of the following locations:
- Civic Centre, St Peters Street, St Albans, AL1 3JE
- Community Centre, 2 Allum Lane, Elstree, Hertfordshire, WD6 3PJ
- Community Hub, 5 Leeming Road, Borehamwood, WD6 4EB
- The Hub, Manor Court, 275 Holdbrook South, Waltham Cross, EN8 7SL
- Aberford Park Community Centre, Aberford Road, Borehamwood, WD6 1PN
- Farriers Way Community Centre, Farriers Way, Borehamwood, WD6 2TB
- Windsor Hall, Blythe Close, Borehamwood, WD6 4EE
- Organ Hall 37 Bairstow Close, Borehamwood, WD6 4TB
- Phillimore Community Centre, Phillimore Place, Radlett, WD7 8NN
- Radlett Centre, Aldenham Ave, Radlett, WD7 8HL
- Bushey Library, Sparrows Herne, Bushey, WD23 1FA
- Caledon Community Centre, London Colney AL2 1PS
- Wyllyotts Centre, Darkes Lane, Potters Bar EN6 2AA
- Redbourn Village Hall, 63 High St, Redbourn, St Albans AL3 7LW
- Ver House, Park Estate, Frogmore, St. Albans, AL2 2WH