

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 8 January 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren (Vice Chair),
Leanne Brady, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy
and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.05pm
Time: End Time: 8.10pm

1 **APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

Apologies for absence were received from Committee Members, Councillors Stephen Booth and Mason Humberstone. Apologies were also received from Councillor Conor McGrath who had been invited to attend the meeting in their capacity as Portfolio Holder for Stronger Communities which included Equalities and Diversity.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES - 28 NOVEMBER 2024**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 28 November 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **EQUALITIES, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION PRESENTATION**

The Committee received a presentation from the Council's Corporate Policy and Research Officer, who provided an overview of the Council's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) activities. They explained that the work was underpinned by the Equality Act, which protected individuals from discrimination and identified nine protected characteristics. The Committee heard that the Council also considered socio-economic status in its EDI work to better understand and serve the local community.

The Corporate Policy and Research Officer highlighted the Council's EDI Action Plan, implemented in 2023 and reviewed annually, which included 18 actions across six key objectives. Quarterly updates and an annual progress report ensured ongoing monitoring and improvement. Key actions included initiatives such as the Healthy Stevenage Partnership, the publication of the Equality and Diversity Annual Report, and the introduction of a Race Equality Bill encompassing ethnicity reporting. Other notable activities included community safety programmes,

partnerships aimed at improving youth opportunities, and internal staff networks.

The Corporate Policy and Research Officer outlined the Council's annual Equality and Diversity Report. Recent data revealed that Stevenage had a population of 90,000, with diverse demographics, including the third-largest LGBTQ population in Hertfordshire, and a higher proportion of residents with disabilities compared to the national average.

The Committee were informed that Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs) were conducted for all new policies and strategies to ensure their impact on protected characteristic groups was considered. Examples included policies related to cemetery accessibility, gender reassignment name changes, and safeguarding strategies. The Corporate Policy and Research Officer confirmed that EQIAs were included with relevant policy documents submitted to Cabinet.

The presentation also covered the Council's two EDI working groups: the Officer Equality Group, which oversaw action plan progress, and the Equality Diversity Governance Group, which included councillors and ensured member awareness of EDI initiatives. Additionally, the Council supported staff networks for LGBTQ and women's groups, with plans to expand to a neurodiversity network.

The Corporate Policy and Research Officer concluded with an update on the EDI Event Calendar, an internal resource for tracking equality-related events, which was being revised for potential external use.

Throughout the presentation, Members asked a number of questions.

Responding to questions regarding the data, Officers explained that the data was predominantly sourced from the census but also included internal data, workforce information, and other published national and local data. They noted that Herts Insight was a key source for additional data. Officers clarified that the data was primarily presented for Stevenage as a whole. However, ward specific queries could be addressed if needed.

Responding to a question related to the accessibility of Equality Impact Assessments (EQIA's), Officers stated that while not all EQIAs were readily available, examples were provided on the Council's website. They also noted that every policy or strategy submitted to Cabinet includes an attached EQIA, making them publicly accessible once published.

In response to questions regarding the Equality and Diversity Governance Group, Officers explained that not all protected characteristic groups were directly represented by individuals on the Equality and Diversity Governance Group (EDGG). However, the Officer Equality Group (OEG) was established to ensure broader representation across these groups, providing a platform for staff to voice their perspectives. Officers advised that membership of the OEG was advertised internally on the Council's intranet, and staff could put themselves forward to join. They highlighted that membership of the group has grown significantly over the past year and that there was no upper limit on participation.

The Committee received a further presentation from the Council's Officer Lead on the Stevenage Equalities Commission, and Errol John, Chair of the Stevenage Equalities Commission.

The Committee heard that the Commission was formed following a Council motion in July 2020 to address race inequality and represent ethnically diverse communities. The Commission was established in Spring 2021, following delays caused by COVID-19. It was led by independent Chair Errol John, who was nominated by community groups and elected members.

Initially supported by Stevenage Borough Council, the Committee heard that the COMMISSION became self-funded from April 2022. It consisted of 20 members: 10 from strategic organisations (e.g., police, education, health, and elected members) and 10 from the community, ensuring equal representation.

The Committee were informed the Commission had held discovery meetings and consultations, exploring lived experiences and issues such as health inequalities, stop and search practices, and educational challenges. Recommendations were developed to inform the Council's Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) strategy and action plan. The Commission transitioned into the Stevenage Equalities Commission Legacy Group to ensure its ongoing impact.

The Committee were informed that the Commission hosted a successful conference in October 2024 during Hate Crime Awareness Week and Black History Month and had secured funding for initiatives such as a civic leadership programme (in collaboration with Operation Black Vote) and a website offering resources for volunteers and community members.

The Committee heard that the Commission had produced materials to promote engagement with ethnically diverse communities and would continue to raise awareness through events and a forthcoming website. Resources from previous events, such as the conference and recommendations, were available and could be shared for further review.

The presentation concluded by informing Members of plans to formalise a multi-stakeholder cooperative by March 2025 to advocate for ethnically diverse communities and ensure sustainability.

The Chair requested more detail on the lived experiences gathered by the Commission. In response, the Chair of the Commission advised Members that lived experiences were gathered through community consultations and contributions from professionals. Examples included a sickle cell anaemia patient's account of health inequality challenges and a magistrate's story of overcoming barriers and inspiring others in the community.

The Committee were informed that, prior to the Commission's formation, insights were collected during the Stevenage Legacy and Resilience Project, attended by 300 people, highlighting issues around health and mental health inequalities during COVID-19.

Responding to a question related to the Commissions work directing policy changes, the Council's Commission Officer Lead advised that, while no direct policy changes were implemented, the Commission's recommendations informed the EDI strategy and an action plan. A notable initiative that arose from the recommendations was the development of a civic responsibility programme in collaboration with Operation Black Vote.

In a response to a question regarding consideration given to children in care, especially from ethnically diverse backgrounds, within the Commissions work, the Committee heard that the Commission explored educational access, exclusions, and the broader challenges faced by economically deprived and vulnerable children. Specific focus was given to black and minority ethnic children in care, with input from Children's Social Care and strategic groups across the county. The Committee were advised that the EDI strategy addressed issues affecting vulnerable children, including those in care, through initiatives such as Mission 44. However, a distinct focus group solely for children in care had not been established.

The Chair invited Kate Belinis, Chair of Stevenage World Forum, to address the Committee.

The Chair of the Forum elaborated on the priorities for the Commission with a key focus on ensuring that the recommendations from the Commission's report on race equality were actively implemented rather than overlooked. The establishment of a legacy group was cited as a crucial step to maintain progress, foster independence from the Council, and sustain momentum.

Addressing the challenges faced by the Commission, the Chair (Stevenage World Forum) highlighted the ongoing economic difficulties, post-COVID recovery, and the associated losses that communities had endured, which complicated the Commission's work. The Committee heard that long-serving members were looking towards succession planning to bring in fresh leadership and ideas.

The Committee were advised that a consistent theme across the Commissions priorities was fostering greater community engagement. The Chair (Stevenage World Forum) emphasised the need to involve a more diverse range of people in leadership roles, such as school governors, magistrates, and other public offices, through initiatives like the citizenship programme with Operation Black Votes. The group had also been working on ways to connect with new residents and encourage broader participation.

Efforts to increase both individual and community capacity were discussed, including:

- Hosting conferences and events that attracted significant participation.
- Creating accessible resources for the community, such as spaces to meet and tools for engagement.
- Reviving initiatives like the "Celebrate" programme, which historically brought people together for community-building activities.

The Committee were informed that the Commission sought to secure funding to

sustain its activities and support the infrastructure of the voluntary and community sector. This included providing small-scale support, such as offering spaces for meetings or access to office resources, and maintaining engagement with partner agencies.

Members emphasised the importance of coaching and confidence-building for individuals, particularly for those engaging in public speaking and leadership roles.

Reflecting on the past, there was discussion about how societal changes had impacted the ease of forming connections. Members expressed a desire to rebuild the kind of networks that were more prevalent in earlier times.

Members advocated for visible recognition of past contributors, like Sherma Batson, to inspire future generations and ensure the legacy of their efforts.

The Chair (Stevenage World Forum) concluded with a call for increased collaboration with councillors and the wider community to strengthen and sustain the Commission's initiatives.

The Chair then asked Cllr Elekolusi, described as a successful community leader, to share his experiences and perspectives on fostering community engagement in Stevenage.

Having lived in Stevenage for 25 years and previously owned a business in the town, Cllr Elekolusi noted his strong connections with community groups. The Committee heard they had consistently worked to encourage greater engagement, emphasising the importance of bridging gaps between the council and diverse communities.

Cllr Elekolusi advised that many residents, particularly from ethnic minority backgrounds, remained unaware of the council's role, its services, or even which councillors represented them. This lack of knowledge led to confusion, as evidenced by the direct calls and queries Cllr Elekolusi received from residents, even from those outside his ward.

Cllr Elekolusi suggested organising seminars, conferences, or similar events to connect with key community groups. These initiatives could help raise awareness about the council's role, build relationships, and foster trust. He highlighted the importance of ongoing efforts to bridge the "institutional ignorance" and "communal ignorance" that hindered effective engagement.

Cllr Elekolusi expressed his willingness to support the council in addressing these challenges. He affirmed that the community was eager to participate and welcomed steps to increase collaboration.

Following Cllr Elekolusi's remarks, the Chair emphasised several practical steps and reflections:

The Chair proposed creating visible touchpoints in public areas, such as the council foyer, featuring recognisable symbols or emblems to help residents identify and

engage with council services.

There was a discussion about addressing barriers to access, such as:

- Introducing priority lanes for individuals with disabilities.
- Ensuring the availability of translated documents for non-English speakers.
- Considering ways to address literacy issues, which, while not a protected characteristic, presented significant barriers to communication and engagement.

The Chair highlighted the critical importance of effective communication. Once residents were informed about services and opportunities, they were more likely to engage.

The Chair then invited John Prebble, Director (Junction 7) and Coco to address the Committee.

The Co-Director (Junction 7) began by showcasing merchandise from Stevenage Pride, including badges, T-shirts, and flags. They commended Coco for championing Stevenage Pride and playing a key role in organising the Pride Area at Stevenage Day. This effort, described as a collaborative and impactful initiative, received widespread appreciation from the LGBTQ+ community and beyond.

Coco expressed gratitude for the overwhelming support shown during Stevenage Day, which affirmed the importance of providing dedicated spaces for the LGBTQ+ community. They emphasised the need to continue and build upon this momentum to ensure that the visibility and inclusivity of such events are sustained.

The speakers highlighted a unique initiative at the Pride Area—a blank canvas inviting attendees to share what they were proud of. A selection of responses was read aloud, showcasing a wide spectrum of personal stories, such as:

- Pride in being one's authentic self.
- Pride in gender transition and self-discovery.
- Celebrating diversity, from being queer to breaking personal barriers.

Those heartfelt messages illustrated the diversity within the LGBTQ+ community and underscored the importance of creating safe, welcoming spaces for self-expression and representation.

Coco shared feedback from various LGBTQ+ groups that had avoided Stevenage Day in the past due to its lack of representation and perceived negative connotations. They felt excluded and unwelcome, with little visibility for their community. However, the Pride Area at Stevenage Day changed this narrative, providing a platform for inclusivity and breaking down long-standing barriers.

Both speakers acknowledged the crucial role of Stevenage Borough Council in supporting the initiative. They emphasised the need to ensure the progress made at Stevenage Day continued, with more representation and visibility for the LGBTQ+ community at future events.

Speakers reflected on the importance of sustaining the "flame" of inclusivity and pride. The Co-Director (Junction 7) reinforced the idea that Stevenage Day's Pride Area was not only a celebration but also a transformative space for the community. The event marked a turning point in fostering acceptance, representation, and unity.

The Committee heard that the Pride Bench project in Shephall was initiated by local trans woman and supported by Ward Councillors. The project involved transforming a standard bench into the Pride Progress flag as a symbol of inclusivity and representation.

The Co-Director (Junction 7) advised Members that the initiative received strong support and encountered no barriers during implementation, reflecting the community's willingness to embrace inclusivity. Despite concerns about potential vandalism or graffiti, the bench had remained intact, receiving positive public engagement, and sparking meaningful conversations. Students and young people had embraced the bench as a safe and celebratory space, further reinforcing its value as a public symbol.

The Committee heard that young trans people in the community faced significant challenges, including societal hostility, misinformation, and lack of legal recognition for non-binary identities. Specific concerns were highlighted regarding barriers to changing legal documents, such as birth certificates, to align with chosen identities. Recent government decisions had resisted simplifying these processes, exacerbating difficulties for trans individuals.

The Co-Director (Junction 7) expressed a sense of societal regression in trans rights compared to broader LGBTQ+ progress, urging increased awareness and proactive measures to address these issues.

Education was identified as a crucial tool for combating ignorance and fostering understanding within the community. Personal reflections from the speakers emphasised how direct engagement with LGBTQ+ initiatives, such as the Pride bench project, helped broaden perspectives and dispel misconceptions. Social media was noted as a source of negativity and hostility, underscoring the importance of local initiatives to counter such influences.

The Committee heard that a recent Equality Impact Assessment addressed the protected characteristic of gender reassignment. Measures included allowing individuals to update pre-purchased grave records to reflect their true identity, demonstrating progress in ensuring inclusivity in council services.

The Chair encouraged Members to replicate the Pride bench initiative in other wards, creating a network of symbolic spaces for visibility and dialogue.

Junction 7's contributions to the community were acknowledged, particularly in providing a safe space for creativity and self-expression. The organisation's role in fostering inclusivity and representation was seen as vital. The broader impact of public art and symbols, such as the Pride bench, in promoting acceptance and dialogue was emphasised. Such initiatives played a key role in normalising

conversations around diversity and reducing ignorance.

The discussion concluded with an emphasis on the need for continued vigilance and proactive measures to address the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, particularly trans individuals.

Participants expressed gratitude for the support and contributions of all involved in promoting inclusivity within the community.

A Member expressed appreciation for Pride events nationwide and highlighted their positive atmosphere. They queried the barriers preventing a full-scale Pride event in Stevenage, comparing it to successful events in other towns and cities. In response, the Committee heard that progress had been made with initiatives such as the Pride area at Stevenage Day, which was a success and well-received by the community. The Committee were informed that the focus was now on building upon those efforts and encouraging broader community and council engagement to expand future Pride celebrations.

Members highlighted the importance of trans representation in discussions and events, emphasising the value of hearing lived experiences to address misconceptions and combat hatred. Social media's dual role as an educational tool and a platform prone to negative discourse was discussed.

The Co-Director (Junction 7) expressed concerns about the sustainability of grassroots initiatives, particularly the reliance on a few dedicated individuals. The importance of ensuring longevity and support for projects like Pride and other community events was emphasised.

The Chair acknowledged the absence of disabled representation and committed to ensuring future discussions included a diverse range of voices.

The item concluded with a reaffirmation of the importance of continued collaboration between the Council, local organisations, and community members. Attendees were thanked for their contributions.

4 **EQUALITIES, DIVERSITY & SOCIAL INCLUSION - SCRUTINY REVIEW SCOPING DOCUMENT**

The Chair opened a discussion regarding the Equality, Diversity & Social Inclusion – Scrutiny Review Scoping Document.

Areas highlighted for further discussion were:

- Community Cohesion and Engagement
- Representation and Inclusivity
- Accessibility & Disability Considerations
- Policy Impact

Discussing a future meeting focussed on addressing community cohesion in Stevenage, and public concerns related to refugees housed in hotels. Councillors discussed the misinformation, perceptions, and tensions within the community, as

well as the Council's responsibility to address these issues constructively while clarifying its role and limitations.

The discussion touched on broader concerns, including public safety, community engagement, and ensuring transparency in addressing sensitive topics.

Members expressed the need to strike a balance between advocating for the community, managing perceptions, and providing accurate information to prevent the escalation of community tensions.

The discussion highlighted challenges in scheduling meetings to address community concerns, especially given the sensitive nature of the topics and the broader scope of the council's ongoing work.

Members commented on the need to consider:

- Misinformation and Community Tensions
- Public Safety and Perception
- The Council's Role and Limitations
- Community Engagement and Advocacy

The Committee held a discussion regarding the best approach to ensure effective scrutiny of a contentious and sensitive topic.

Members expressed the importance of balancing open and transparent engagement with the need to manage sensitive discussions constructively.

Members expressed a range of perspectives regarding the best way forward and it was agreed that the Committee would hold a dedicated meeting to focus on community cohesion with Members bringing structured questions to address public concerns and continue clarification of the Council's role and responsibilities in this matter.

These actions aimed to foster greater understanding, mitigate misinformation, and ensure that all voices were heard in a respectful and productive manner.

5 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

6 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

7 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR