

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 29 January 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair) (Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren (Vice-Chair) (Vice Chair), Stephen Booth, Leanne Brady, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Mason Humberstone and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.40pm

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

Apologies for absence were received from Committee Members, Councillors Kamal Choudhury and Lynda Guy.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 8 January 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 **CONTINUATION OF THE REVIEW INTO EQUALITIES, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION**

The Committee meeting focused on gathering information from guest contributors regarding the Equality Act (2010) and its protected characteristics of Age and Disability. The main emphasis was on listening to real-life evidence from guests and community members.

The Chair invited Lorna Scardifield, who represented Age Concern, to address the Committee. She provided insights into the support available for older people and discussed the provision of benefit advice and housing options, highlighting the importance of face-to-face interactions. Lorna identified a number of key priorities for older individuals, such as the need for more benches in the town due to the relocation of the bus interchange. Additionally, she mentioned that Age Concern was in the process of moving to a new location, managed by Hertfordshire County Council, and they were awaiting further updates on the transition but would remain open from Wednesday to Saturday.

In response to a question from the Chair, Lorna advised that a current concern related to the impact of the recent cut to the Winter Fuel Payment, which had caused significant worry among older residents. Before Christmas, Age Concern had experienced a surge in residents seeking advice about the changes. A major barrier

was that many older people were unable to access online services, leading them to seek in-person support.

The Chair acknowledged the concerns around digital exclusion and mobility issues. It was suggested that these issues be noted as a recommendation for consideration by the Environment and Economy Select Committee.

Lorna informed the Committee that there had been plans to provide a mobility scooter hire service from the bus station, with a designated storage facility proposed at the side of the station. However, due to changes in Council staff supporting the project, the plans had not moved forward.

A member expressed concern upon discovering these plans had not moved forward and suggested that this should be recorded as a specific recommendation for the review. Subject to funding being available to support such a project, officers would investigate what would be required to create a mobility buggy storage and hire options from the bus interchange.

At this juncture, discussions took place regarding the number of mobility scooters available at Age Concern. It was noted that they previously had nine scooters when based in Swingate but now had five due to a reduction in space. It was also noted the main need was for suitable locations, rather than acquiring additional scooters.

The Committee commended the efforts of the Age Concern team, particularly highlighting the opportunity for people to test different types of scooters and walkers. A question was raised regarding restrictions on selling second-hand mobility scooters. It was clarified that due to the organisation's public liability insurance policy, they were only able to purchase new mobility scooters.

The Chair introduced Lahaina Sutherland, the Stevenage Youth Mayor, who addressed matters concerning young people of Stevenage. She invited open questions from the group, focusing on topics such as education and equality. The Youth Mayor shared her experiences as a young person in Stevenage studying while also working part-time.

The Committee heard that Stevenage offered strong part-time job opportunities for young people, with a well-established network for employment access. However, a key barrier to employment was the lack of preparation for entering the workforce, particularly in interview skills and workplace expectations. The Youth Mayor suggested that schools should allocate more time to developing these skills and recommended that workshops be held to support students in this area.

Regarding mental health support, the Youth Mayor praised the resources available in Stevenage, particularly the Young People's Healthy Hub. She highlighted that mental health coordinators in schools were well-informed about available support programs, making it easier for students to access help when needed.

The Chair questioned the level of engagement that young people had with the Council and the services it provided. It was noted that a perceived gap existed between younger people and the Council, which the Youth Mayor aimed to address

during her term. The Youth Mayor advised that she had already visited primary schools across the town and planned further visits before the next Youth Mayor's inauguration in May 2025. She believed it was important for young people to understand that they could have their voices heard at the Council level and proposed holding assemblies or workshops in schools to raise awareness of Council services and improve accessibility.

In response to a question regarding the most effective way for the Council to engage with young residents, the Youth Mayor highlighted the importance of a strong social media presence, as it was a primary communication platform for young people. However, she also emphasised the value of face-to-face interactions, such as guest speakers at school events, which could offer more meaningful engagements.

When asked about what was most lacking for young people in Stevenage, the Youth Mayor identified the need for greater access to extracurricular activities, particularly sports clubs, to encourage social interaction and personal development. She also emphasised the importance of employment opportunities to help young people gain experience, build confidence, and prepare for future careers.

Responding to a question about cost barriers for young people, the Youth Mayor acknowledged that financial constraints were a significant factor. The importance of supporting economically disadvantaged young people was emphasised to ensure equal opportunities. The Chair also highlighted the role of support within the home in encouraging and championing young people.

A Member asked the Youth Mayor about the biggest change she had experienced growing up in Stevenage and what improvements she would like to see. A discussion followed regarding the rise in antisocial behaviour (ASB), attributed to increased social media use and a lack of community cohesion. It was suggested that greater access to extracurricular activities could help address this issue by providing a sense of inclusion and belonging.

When asked about the biggest pressures on young people, the Youth Mayor identified two key concerns. The first was the impact of social media, particularly regarding body image stigma, which could negatively affect mental health. The second was academic pressure, especially the lack of support for young people not pursuing university education. However, it was noted that exam-related pressures had improved through adjustments to exam conditions for those who needed additional support.

The Committee then received a presentation from the Council's Community Development Officer on Age Friendly Communities in Stevenage. The initiative aimed to streamline services, improve support for older residents and create funding and knowledge sharing opportunities with other Age-Friendly Communities (AFC).

The Committee was informed that achieving Age Friendly Community status involved collaboration with the Centre for Better Aging (CFBA) to understand the criteria and benefits. Stevenage was awarded AFC status in February 2024 and was working with Hertfordshire County Council and Age UK on implementation. An Age Friendly Survey had been conducted, with results expected by the end of March

2025.

The Community Development Officer outlined the Take a Seat campaign, which aimed to increase seating in Stevenage to promote rest and community engagement. The initiative would include making street furniture more accessible, such as benches with backs and arms for support. A task and finish group would also be formed to lead specific age friendly projects, replacing the Older People's Network. Additionally, the work would include collaboration with Dementia-Friendly Stevenage to address age-related issues, including dementia care.

The Chair invited Sharn Tomlinson, CEO of Mind in Mid Herts to address the committee.

The Committee was informed about the connection between mental health, disability, and neurodivergent communities. It was highlighted that individuals on the autistic spectrum were nine times more likely to take their own life. Many people without a formal diagnosis of autism or learning difficulties faced social isolation, which significantly impacted their mental health. In addition to dementia-friendly initiatives, the need for a more inclusive, neurodivergent-friendly community was emphasised.

The Committee acknowledged that greater collaboration between the Council and external mental health experts would improve service delivery and noted this as an area for development.

The Chair invited Alison MacDougall, a volunteer for Hertfordshire Vision Loss, to address the meeting. Alison introduced herself and outlined her role in establishing the Stevenage Sight-Life. She highlighted the challenges faced by individuals with sight loss, particularly regarding transport accessibility. She emphasised the importance of public transport, especially the bus services and station, in maintaining independence.

Paula McGuinness shared her personal experience of living with a sight impairment and the difficulties of navigating public spaces, particularly uneven pavements. Concerns were raised about the safety of electric bikes and scooters on pavements, and members requested that the issue be addressed in collaboration with community policing to improve regulation and enforcement. A request was also made for high-visibility markings on bollards to enhance safety visually impaired residents. The accessibility of council leaflets was also discussed, with a recommendation to use high-contrast text and background. Additionally, poor street lighting was identified as a barrier to mobility.

It was noted that Stevenage Sight-Life had met with a representative from the Thomas Pocklington Trust, which had been conducting accessibility assessments at local train stations, including Stevenage and Luton Parkway. Several accessibility improvements were identified, such as the introduction of an audio descriptive guide and enhanced safety measures, including CCTV monitoring for vulnerable passengers.

Laura, a member of the Stevenage Sight-Life group, raised concerns about the

accessibility and communication challenges faced by sight-impaired passengers at Stevenage Bus Station. She suggested implementing a tannoy system to announce bus arrivals and bay changes. Laura also acknowledged the assistance she had received from residents during her travels on public transport in Stevenage. Additionally, concerns were raised about poor signage between the train and bus stations, making it difficult for visually impaired passengers to read signs and identify buses.

The importance of these discussions was highlighted, with reference for the need for an officer as a point of contact. The Community Development Officer also discussed connecting the group with the Voluntary Community Faith and Social Enterprise (VCFSE).

At this juncture, the Cabinet Member for Equalities and Diversity shared their experience of visiting the town centre with a wheelchair user from Invis-Ability to assess the area's accessibility. A suggestion was made for a walkabout with councillors alongside representatives of the Sight-Life group to help them better understand the challenges faced by people with sight loss. It was acknowledged that such an initiative could be possible but would depend on the specific needs of the participants. It was suggested that sighted guides be present to assist during the walkabout.

The item concluded with the Chair clarifying that while the Council could advocate for improvements and would ask for an update from the Environment and Economy Select Committee on the issues regarding the bus interchange that Hertfordshire Vision Loss had originally raised with the Committee, and would communicate concerns to relevant transport bodies, it did not directly manage or commission bus services, so had limited influence over the bus operators.

The Chair, on behalf of the Committee thanked all attendees for their contributions to the meeting.

4 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

5 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

6 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR