

**COUNCIL
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 21 January 2026

Time: 7.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Nazmin Chowdhury (Mayor), Lloyd Briscoe, (Deputy Mayor), Myla Arceno, Stephen Booth, Robert Boyle, Leanne Brady, Rob Broom, Jim Brown, Forhad Chowdhury, Peter Clark, Coleen De Freitas, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy, Rob Henry, Mason Humberstone, Lin Martin-Haugh, Andy McGuinness, Sarah Mead, Robin Parker CC, Claire Parris, Tom Plater, Ceara Roopchand, Loraine Rossati, Simon Speller, Jeannette Thomas, Carolina Veres, Peter Wilkins, Jade Woods and Tom Wren

Start / End Start Time: 7.00pm
Time: End Time: 9.50pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for Absence were received from Councillors Julie Ashley-Wren, Sandra Barr, Phil Bibby, Kamal Choudhury, Ellie Plater and Nigel Williams.

Councillors Coleen De Freitas and Claire Parris, declared an interest in Item 12 – HRA Budget and Rent Setting as Council tenants.

2 MINUTES - 17 DECEMBER 2025

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the Council Meeting on 15 October and Special Meeting on 17 November 2025 be approved as correct records and signed by the Mayor.

3 MAYOR'S COMMUNICATIONS

The Mayor reminded Members that in compliance with the Constitution, they should refer to each other by their correct title of 'Councillor' throughout the meeting.

The Mayor then referred to a number of events she had attended since the Council December meeting which included:

- The Christmas Social Evening where £385 was raised in the raffle for the Mayor's Charities and the Charity Quiz night which had raised £867;
- Sabbath evening service and supper during Jewish festival of Chanukah;
- Warriorz Caribbean Christmas Experience;
- Cycling UK Stevenage Christmas Lights Special Cycle Ride; and

- The Mayor of Welwyn's Civic Service.

The Mayor advised that her next fundraising event would be the upcoming Mayor's Charity Ball on the 7th February and she gave special thanks to the Deputy Mayor, Cllr Lloyd Briscoe and Cabinet Members for representing and accompanying her to several events.

4 **COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS**

There were no community presentations.

5 **PETITIONS AND DEPUTATIONS**

There were no petitions or deputations.

6 **QUESTIONS FROM THE YOUTH COUNCIL**

There were no questions from the Youth Council.

7 **QUESTIONS FROM THE PUBLIC**

There were no questions from the public.

8 **LEADER OF THE COUNCIL'S UPDATE**

The Leader of the Opposition, Councillor Andy McGuinness, asked the following question:

Does the Leader of the Council agree that since the introduction of the new shops at the Roaring Meg (9 Yards) retail park, the parking situation has got progressively worse and although not a Council responsibility could the Council play a facilitation role in trying to improve the situation for residents and shoppers?

The Leader of the Council asked the Portfolio Holder for Economy, Enterprise and Transport to respond. The Portfolio Holder advised that although the parking at the Retail Park was privately owned and the responsibility of the owners of the site to manage, she would be happy to work in partnership with the owners and the County Council as this was primarily a highways issue. She suggested that Councillor McGuinness could contact the Lib Dem Highways Portfolio Holder at the County Council to encourage joint working on this issue.

The Council then received updates from the relevant Cabinet Portfolio Holders on the following matters:

- STEM and STEAM Opportunities;
- Stevenage Works Community Chest Fund and the Meet the Builders Event at the Oval;
- New Weekly Food Waste Collection;
- work with Age UK;
- Sustaining Local Leadership and Place-Based Innovation project;

- Project Vigilant and The Orphan Film;
- Young Persons Working Party;
- Stevenage's 80th Anniversary;
- Stevenage Station Gateway.

In response to the updates, Councillor Andy McGuinness asked the Portfolio Holder for Environment if he was aware of the issues that had been reported with the mechanisms on the new food waste caddies. The Portfolio Holder advised that there had been some teething problems which were being addressed. He would be speaking to the Team and would report the concerns back to them but gave assurances that the problems would be addressed before the whole town roll out of the scheme.

9 UPDATE FROM SCRUTINY CHAIRS

Councillor Jim Brown, Chair of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, provided updates for Council from the meetings of the Council which had been held since the Council meeting in December. He advised that the Committee had received a presentation from Officers on the Council Workforce and had raised the following issues:

- Members asked HR officers to look into the percentage of senior staff living in SG1 & SG2 post codes;
- Potential for recruitment biases relating to the academic institutions candidates had attended;
- There needed to be an improvement on the 43% staff survey return rate in future years;
- Workforce disability data was under reported and an improvement on the way the information was collected was requested;
- Did the statistics on observations of harassment and bullying incidents in the workplace relate to staff on staff or incidents perpetrated by the public;
- A number of questions regarding the impact of LGR on staff were raised and it was acknowledged that work was underway to support staff through a time of change.

Members considered the decisions of the Cabinet held on Wednesday 14 January and provided challenge and questioning on a number of reports including:

- (i) Housing Revenue Account Final Budget and Rent Setting 2026/27, (ii) Draft General Fund and Council Tax Setting 2026/27, and (iii) Draft General Fund Capital Strategy 2025/26 To 2029/30
- 2025 Residents Survey Findings
- Response to MHCLG letter re Postponement of Local Elections

Members were particularly interested in making sure that there would be budget available within the general fund and capital reserves for any future lighting scheme in Fairlands Vally Park once the studies had been completed.

Members welcomed the provisional settlement from Government for Stevenage

under the fair funding review. In response to the Residents Survey, a better response from younger respondents was welcomed alongside a request for future surveys to provide a better breakdown of responses from younger respondents, particularly those aged 18 to 25.

In the absence of the Chair of the Community Select Committee Councillor Ellie Plater, Councillor Leanne Brady advised that the Committee had not met since the last Council meeting on 17 December 2025. However, Officers and Members had been preparing for an upcoming meeting on 4 February where the Committee would be talking to the Hertfordshire County Council Director of Public Health about aspects of public health that were of concern to residents, specifically on the detail of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment document. Members would also be receiving an update on the Stevenage Healthy Hub and joint working initiatives with partners and the County Council.

Councillor Leanne Brady, Chair of the Environment & Economy Select Committee then advised that the Committee had not met since the last Council meeting on 17 December 2025. Members and officers had been preparing for the meeting on 28 January on cycling and would consider progress of the 2018 Cycle Strategy and would address two actions from the Action Plan to Create an implementation plan for cycle network improvements and maintenance and also to increase the provision of secure and accessible cycle parking across the town, including e-bike charging points. The Committee would be holding a future meeting on cycling, inviting input from various cycling user groups in the town.

The Committee would also be receiving the final report and recommendations on its review of recycling in flat blocks.

10 NOTICE OF MOTIONS

Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic

Councillor Coleen De Freitas moved the following motion:

‘This Council welcomes the changes already made to Government guidance, in that it removes the local connection requirement for care leavers when applying for and being allocated local social housing. The Council will ensure that guidance and support will be given to care leavers in accordance with its legal and statutory responsibilities.

This Council notes that:

- a) care experienced people face significant barriers that impact on them throughout their lives. Care leavers make up 25% of Britain’s young homeless population, and adults who have spent time in care are far more likely than their peers to die prematurely.
- b) despite the resilience of many care experienced people, society too often does not take their needs into account and care experienced people often face direct and indirect discrimination in many areas of life, including housing,

health, education, relationships, employment and criminal justice.

- c) the Public Sector Equality Duty requires public bodies, such as councils, to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation of people with protected characteristics.
- d) current Care Leaver provision ends at age 25, whereas recognition of care experience as a protected characteristic would mean that care experience would be taken into account for a lifetime – in the same way as the discrimination and hardships resulting from care experience last a lifetime.

This Council therefore resolves that:

1. it recognises that care experienced people are a group who are likely to face discrimination and will treat care experience as if it were a protected characteristic, and expects councillors and Council staff to challenge negative attitudes and prejudices towards care experienced people.
2. Equality Impact Assessments relating to any future decisions, services and policies made and adopted by this Council will now also include impact of changes on people with care experience, alongside those who formally have a protected characteristic.
3. requests that the Chief Executive undertakes an assessment of current policies and service areas provided by Stevenage Borough Council to determine impact, including any financial impact, of this policy change.
4. in its delivery of the Public Sector Equality Duty, this Council will include care experience in the publication and review of Equality Objectives and the annual publication of information relating to people who have a protected characteristic in services and employment.
5. this Council formally calls upon all other bodies, including other local authorities in Hertfordshire, to treat care experience as a protected characteristic until such time as this recognition may be introduced by legislation.
6. this Council will proactively seek and listen to the voices of care experienced people when developing new policies.'

In moving the motion, Councillor De Freitas advised that the motion built upon progress that had already been made and that she welcomed the Government's changes to guidance which removed the local connection requirement for care leavers applying for social housing. She also welcomed the positive steps taken locally including HCC's signing of the care leaver covenant and the introduction of additional support around housing, council tax, employment and training.

Councillor De Freitas advised that the motion recognized a simple truth that care experience continued to shape a person's life long after formal support ended. She advised that the statistics showed at least a third of care leavers experienced

homelessness within two years of leaving care and that 25% of the adult homeless population were care leavers. She advised that too many were living in unsuitable accommodation and that instability had more consequences such as significant barriers in education and employment. Only 14% entered higher education by the age of 19 compared with nearly half of the wider population and would face discrimination across housing, health education, employment and the justice system.

In seconding the Motion, Councillor Alistair Gordon advised that many who had experienced the care system would also experience trauma, instability or disrupted attachment leading to mental health problems, lower educational attainment and social isolation.

Councillor McGuinness, Leader of the Opposition thanked Councillor De Freitas for the motion the subject of which was being supported by Councils across the country and advised that his Group would be supporting the motion.

A number of Members spoke on the motion and made the following comments:

- evidence of deprivation for care experienced people was overwhelming;
- the Council should provide additional consideration, support and protection where possible;
- the definition of a care leaver should be clarified although it was recognised that the impact of being in care did not end at a specific age;
- implementation of the motion was key and it was critical that councillors and officers were committed to the issue;
- Members and Officers would be required to receive training in this area in the light of new responsibilities coming as a result of Local Government Reorganisation;
- Support should only be given around care leaver provision being available up to the age of 25;
- The removal of the local connection requirement for care leavers could impact Stevenage residents in terms of housing allocation creating potential division.

Following further debate, Councillor De Freitas, thanked Members for their contributions.

Upon being put to the vote, the Motion was carried.

May's Local Elections in Stevenage must go ahead

Councillor Andy McGuinness moved the following motion:

‘This Council understands the importance of having a replenished electoral mandate from the people of Stevenage which can only come through the ballot box. This Council also affirms the sanctity of elections which should only be cancelled in the most extreme of circumstances. Therefore, this Council believes that the scheduled local elections for Thursday 7th May 2026 in Stevenage should continue as planned and there is no current compelling reason, linked to local government reorganisation, to cancel them.’

In moving the Motion, Councillor McGuinness advised that it was the duty of the

Council to protect democratic systems and institutions. In his view, cancelling the elections was cowardly, unjustified and a betrayal of local people's democratic rights without cause. Other local authorities in Hertfordshire were running elections. There were no exceptional circumstances this year, additional pressures from Local Government Reorganisation were manageable and the May elections must continue.

He advised that although Cabinet had made a case for the cancellation with reasons they had set out in the letter to the Secretary of State, in his opinion they had not justified the cancellation of the elections.

In seconding the Motion, Councillor Stephen Booth advised that elections were at the core of local democracy and local citizens were entitled to choose their representatives. Although the timing of Local Government Reorganisation was not helpful at this stage in the political cycle, he had faith in the ability of the Senior Officer Team at the Council to manage the Council and the elections.

During further debate, the following points were raised:

- The Government had imposed Local Government Reorganisation on Local Authorities. Early engagement in the process in order to get the best outcome for Stevenage had identified the amount of work required by both members and Officers;
- The Government had requested local authorities to consider if they could better deliver on LGR by requesting a postponement of the May 2026 elections and a decision had been taken by Cabinet to request the postponement;
- The decision would ultimately be taken by the Secretary of State and not the Council although it was reported that a Judicial Review hearing would take place between 19 and 20 February and a final decision would not be reached until after this date;
- There were precedents for a number of different parties cancelling elections throughout the Country where LGR was taking place;
- The threshold for exceptional circumstances had been reached for the reasons that had been set out at the recent Cabinet meeting;
- The elections would be cancelled and not postponed as stated;
- The right to vote was fundamental even if the outcome could be uncomfortable for the Council;
- The prospect of a short term election would not be helpful to those elected or to the people of Stevenage but all those elected across the parties were ultimately there to represent Stevenage residents.

Upon being put to the vote, the Motion was lost.

Motion: Practical Environmentalism – Delivering Cleaner Streets and Better Value for Residents

Councillor Mason Humberstone moved the following motion:

- **This Council notes that:**

- Stevenage Borough Council declared a “Climate Emergency”, committing officer time and financial resources to strategies and targets largely outside the Council’s direct control.
- Residents consistently identify cleaner streets, safer parks, reduced fly-tipping and better maintenance of public spaces as higher priorities than aspirational, costly and unrealistic climate declarations.
- This Council faces ongoing financial pressures, including debt, which require a sharper focus on value for money and frontline delivery.
- **This Council believes that:**
- Environmental policy should focus on practical, visible improvements to the local environment rather than symbolic declarations.
- Council resources should be directed toward outcomes residents can see and feel in their daily lives.
- A cleaner, safer and well-maintained town is the most effective form of local environmentalism.
- **This Council resolves to:**
- Rescind the Council’s Climate Emergency declaration and discontinue non-statutory programmes, strategies and reporting arising from it.
- Redirect all associated funding and officer time toward:
 - Reducing Council debt;
 - Strengthening frontline services;
 - Improving core environmental enforcement and maintenance.
- Adopt a “Practical Environmentalism” approach, prioritising:
 - Stronger enforcement against fly-tipping, including increased use of Fixed Penalty Notices and prosecutions;
 - Enhanced street cleaning, litter removal and waste enforcement;
 - Improved maintenance of parks, play areas and community spaces;
 - Faster response times to environmental complaints.
- Report annually to Full Council on:
 - Environmental enforcement outcomes;
 - Cleanliness and maintenance standards across the town;
 - Savings achieved and how they have been reinvested in frontline services.

In moving the Motion, Councillor Humberstone advised that the Council’s declaration on the climate emergency may have been well-intentioned but had not delivered locally and had used officer time to report on targets that the Council had very little control over while every day environmental issues on the streets of Stevenage had been left wanting. Residents wanted cleaner streets, safer and well maintained parks and green spaces and an improved response to fly tipping.

Councillor Rob Henry seconded the motion. He advised that the vast majority of residents wanted their streets cleaned, grass cut and fly tipping dealt with and a Climate Change Emergency declaration did not need to be in place to address these

issues.

During further debate, the following points were raised:

- The Council's climate programme and practical delivery of outcomes had moved a long way since the declaration;
- Outcomes such as the warm homes grant delivering upgraded housing for 240 Council homes and more to come in the future; free central heating grants and grants for improvements like insulation, double glazing and solar panels;
- In parks, a new skate park and a multi use games area had been installed. Additionally small woods were being planted within the three large parks;
- Many service improvements had been introduced including the roll out of a weekly food waste collection service;
- A number of delivery frameworks were in place to prioritize work and attract external funding which reduced pressure on council finances.

Upon being put to the vote, the Motion was lost.

11 **QUESTIONS FROM MEMBERS TO CHAIRS/PORTFOLIO HOLDERS**

The Council received eight questions from Members to Committee Chairs/Portfolio Holders.

The responses to the eight questions had been published in the supplementary agenda for the meeting.

- (A) Question from Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren re: Fire risks from e-bikes and e-scooters.

Supplementary question from Councillor Tom Wren in Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren's absence – is the provision of e-bike charging considered when looking at new developments in the Town?

The Portfolio Holder advised that he would provide a written response.

- (B) Question from Councillor Robin Parker re: Chronicle Magazine

Supplementary question – could the Council return to using council staff to deliver the Chronicle instead of the contractor currently being employed and not doing a particularly good job.

The Leader of the Council advised that he would provide a written response.

- (C) Question from Councillor Stephen Booth regarding: the new food waste disposal scheme

Supplementary question – Had consideration been given to any alternative schemes?

The Portfolio Holder advised that service improvements would continue including the introduction of food waste recycling and flat block recycling facilities.

(D) Question from Councillor Peter Wilkins regarding: Graffiti removal

Supplementary question – a number of incidents of graffiti around the team still needed to be removed.

The Portfolio Holder for Environment advised Councillor Wilkins to let him know directly of any areas that needed to be looked at and he would pass this on.

(E) Question from Councillor Andy McGuinness regarding: Local Government Reorganisation

Supplementary question – What will scrutiny look like in Stevenage following LGR

The Leader of the Council advised that Herts Leaders were working together on the transition between now and June when the new configuration was known. A number of all Member briefings were being organised and updates to Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee would be arranged to update Members on the transition.

(F) Question from Councillor Tom Wren regarding replacement tree planting

Supplementary question – could we use the 3 for 1 tree replacement requirement for the Council's own developments?

The Portfolio Holder for Environment agreed to take this back to officers for consideration.

(G) Question from Councillor Rob Henry regarding Council elections

Supplementary question – What impact does the Leader of the Council believe the decision to cancel the upcoming elections had on his credibility?

The Leader of the Council advised that this had been the subject of a long debate earlier in the meeting which had covered the issue.

(H) Question from Councillor Mason Humberstone regarding: Local infrastructure and new developments

Supplementary question – will the Leader of the Council agree that there was a lack of communication between the Council and residents on the impact of new developments in the town?

The Leader of the Council advised that a communications summit had been held to look at how to get more information to a wider audience. Short Cabinet briefings had also been launched but improvements to communications were

constantly under review.

12 **HRA BUDGET AND RENT SETTING 2026/27**

The Council considered a report seeking approval to the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Budget and Rent Setting for 2026/27.

In moving the motion, Councillor Jackie Hollywell, Cabinet Member for Housing advised that the Council had taken major strides in strengthening the foundations of the Housing Revenue Account and improving its housing services. Stock-condition surveys had been undertaken covering nearly 97% of homes and non-decency reduced to just 1.5%. The data had shaped a clear investment pathway that would maintain 100% decent homes standard in 2026/27.

The Portfolio Holder informed Council that by the end of this financial year, the Council would have delivered 623 new homes since 2014, with a further 281 homes currently under construction. With substantial grant funding secured of over £40Million including Homes England funding of £38million, the target of delivering 1,000 new homes by 2029/2030 was being worked towards ensuring that more families in Stevenage could have access to safe, secure and affordable homes.

It was noted that the Business Plan committed £138million over the next five years, and £745 million over the next 30 years to maintain and improve homes including major investment in building safety, fire compliance, and energy efficiency, with firm commitments to deliver an energy or EPC-C rating across all council homes by 2030.

In relation to rents for next year, in line with the Government's 10-year rent policy, rents would increase from April by 4.8%, equating to average weekly rises of £5.89 for social rent, £8.85 for affordable rent, and £7.26 for shared ownership. The increases would provide essential income required to maintain homes, support compliance programmes, and invest in measures reducing living costs for tenants.

In relation to service charges, it was noted that only the actual cost of providing services would be recharged. Two-thirds of tenants would pay no service charge at all; and for most who did, the increase would be less than 50p per week.

The Portfolio Holder advised that the 2026/27 HRA Capital Programme proposed £75.6 million of investment, including £35.6 million of borrowing, to support major works, to existing and delivery of new homes. The capital programme also supported progress toward delivering the EPC-C energy rating by 2030, maintaining momentum on the Warm Homes retrofit programme, and continuing new-build delivery.

In respect of revenue, the budget included £700,000 of targeted growth for service improvements and regulatory compliance, alongside £496,000 of identified efficiencies across staffing structures, ICT licensing, cleaning and support costs.

In seconding the motion, Councillor Jeannette Thomas, Portfolio Holder for Resources and Performance and Deputy Leader advised that the budget made five

clear promises:

- Safety - The budget included programmed door, lift inspection and repair, water-system checks; targeted fire remedials; and the operational changes required by Awaab's Law so damp and mould cases were dealt appropriately to support the Council's improvement journey towards securing a C1 grading with the Regulator of Social Housing.
- Warmer homes at lower running costs. The worst-performing stock would be prioritised with accelerated retrofits to help tackle fuel poverty sustainably.
- An improved day-to-day service. The budget backed the booking hub and service redesign which would enable residents to get clearer appointments, fewer repeat visits, and faster communication. Tenant engagement would be strengthened to inform priorities and standards.
- The Council would deliver many more homes.
- Finances - a £10Million minimum level of balance would be retained as risk had not gone away — interest-rates remained relatively higher than in recent years and compliance demands were rising.

The Portfolio Holder advised Council that this was a budget and plan that would keep homes safe and maintain homes while building new ones and would protect the HRA's financial and operational resilience.

Upon the motion being put to the vote, it was **RESOLVED:**

1. That HRA dwelling rents be increased (week commencing 1 April 2026) by 4.8%. This equates to an average increase of £5.89 for social rents, £8.85 for affordable rents and £7.29 for Low Start Shared Ownership homes per week (based on a 52-week year), subject to the Government not publishing rent regulations on rent convergence allowing an additional £1 per week for un-converged homes.
2. That the implementation of rent convergence for 2026/27 rents (as set out in the December Draft Budget report and paragraph 4.1.6 of this report), if regulations are published by the date of the Full Council meeting in January 2026 be approved.
3. That the 2026/27 service charges be approved as set out in paragraph 4.2.
4. That the HRA budget for 2026/27, set out in Appendix A, be approved.
5. The 2026/27 growth options as set out in section 4.4 be approved.
6. That the changes from the draft budget in section 4.6 be approved.
7. That the 2026/27 Fees and Charges as set out in Appendix B be noted.
8. That the revised minimum levels of balances for 2026/27 shown in Appendix C be approved.
9. That the Rent Increase Equalities Impact Assessments (EqIA) appended to this

report in Appendix D be approved.

10. That the Capital Strategy detailed in Appendix E be approved, including total spend for 2026/27 of £75.6Million and borrowing to finance capital schemes of £35.6Million.
11. That an additional £1.5Million budget be added to the 2025/26 capital programme, detailed in section 4.8.3, to enable the purchase of 5 additional homes in the Shephall View scheme, to be funded by a budget virement of £330K from the Oval scheme and the remainder from grant from Homes England.
12. That delegated authority be given to the Strategic Director (RP), following consultation with the Portfolio Holders for Housing and Housing Development and Resources & Performance, to complete final negotiations for the purchase of the additional properties, within the agreed total budget.
13. That the contingency sum of £500K, within which the Cabinet can approve supplementary estimates, be approved for 2026/27.
14. That Members note the comments made by the overview and Scrutiny Committee as part of its work in accordance with the Budget and Policy Framework rules in the Council's Constitution.

CHAIR