

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 15 July 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Jim Brown (Chair), Stephen Booth, Robert Boyle, Leanne Brady, Kamal Choudhury, Peter Clark, Alistair Gordon and Lynda Guy

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.00pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr McGuinness, Cllr Barr, Cllr Bibby, Cllr Elekolusi, Cllr Humberstone and Cllr Plater.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Part I Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 15 June 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following amendments:

- Item 5, paragraph 4. Add “by 15 July 2025”.
- Item 5, resolution amended to “The Committee noted the draft Work Programme and requested further discussion at the 15 July 2025 meeting.”

**3 PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - OUTTURN Q4 MONITORING REPORT
FOR GENERAL FUND, HRA AND CAPITAL**

The Committee heard that Cabinet had received a comprehensive update on the Council’s financial position, as detailed in the consolidated report summarising key resource matters.

The Strategic Director (CF) informed Members that an overall underspend of £573,000 was reported for the General Fund against a budget of approximately £67 million. While this figure appeared significant in isolation, it represented a modest variance in context. Notably, fluctuations in business rate income (NNDR) were highlighted — with a current-year gain of £145,000 offset by a projected reduction of £183,000 in 2026/27.

The Committee were informed that the report included known impacts on the 2025/26 budget, indicating a projected increase in costs of £320,000, primarily due to carry-forward budget requests from 2024/25.

Regarding the HRA, a £340,000 2024/25 underspend was recorded, however, this included increased repair costs, which remained a significant pressure despite previous budget uplifts offset by reduced financing expenses. A more detailed update was anticipated through the Quarter 1 monitoring report in September and the HRA Business Plan in November.

The Committee heard that 2024/25 actual capital expenditure totalled £44 million, with some schemes reprofiled into future years.

The Strategic Director (CF) provided an update on council-owned subsidiaries. Queensway LLP continued to face challenges; an action plan was in place, and a fuller report on all companies would be presented in September. It was noted with satisfaction that the new Yali restaurant had now opened.

Cabinet had approved all recommendations contained in the report.

A member commented on the cleaning machine being purchased for the town centre and asked whether it would be also used to clean the flooring at the Bus Interchange. Officers confirmed that cleaning at the interchange was constrained to early Sunday mornings due to operational hours and public safety. Midweek cleaning options were being explored, dependent on access restrictions. Photographic evidence was cited showing significant improvement following Sunday cleaning.

A Member raised a question regarding the purchase of a high-cost thermal imaging camera. The Strategic Director (CF) advised that a follow-up response would be provided by the relevant department.

4 PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - HOUSING HEALTH AND SAFETY REGULATORY REQUIREMENTS

The Committee heard that the Cabinet had received a report outlining upcoming legal and regulatory changes relating to housing health and safety, commonly referred to as Awaab's Law, which would come into effect from October 2025 through a phased approach.

The Assistant Director (Building Safety and Housing Property Services) advised that initially, the focus would be on damp and mould and all types of emergency housing hazards, with subsequent phases extending to other hazards.

The Assistant Director (Building Safety and Housing Property Services) confirmed that a range of preparatory measures had already been undertaken, with further actions planned to ensure full compliance. This included reviewing internal policies and procedures to meet the new requirements.

The Committee were advised that new electrical safety requirements for the social housing sector were expected from November. These aligned with the Council's current practice of five-yearly safety checks, and therefore no additional work was required.

As part of compliance preparations, the Assistant Director (Building Safety and Housing Property Services) informed the Committee that the Repairs and Maintenance Policy had been amended. The proposed changes were summarised in the report and highlighted in Appendix 1.

Cabinet had approved all recommendations contained in the report.

Members welcomed the progress made, particularly in light of previous scrutiny work on damp and mould.

5 PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - Q4 CORPORATE PERFORMANCE 2024/25 AND ANNUAL REPORT 2024/25 AND CORPORATE PERFORMANCE SUITE 2025/26

The Committee heard that the Cabinet had received a report and presentation on the Council's end-of-year corporate performance for 2024/25 and the proposed direction for the forthcoming year.

The Strategic Director (RP) advised Members that the report provided a comprehensive overview of key performance data and reflections on the Council's current position. It also outlined forward-looking priorities, shaped through member engagement and aligned with the "Making Stevenage Even Better" corporate plan.

The Committee were advised that the corporate performance suite had been reviewed to ensure alignment with statutory reporting requirements and locally relevant performance indicators

The Strategic Director (RP) advised that the revised suite now included approximately 100 milestone actions linked to core programmes and projects across the Council's five strategic priorities.

A red-rated performance indicator was noted concerning the garage void rate, which remained slightly above the desired threshold. Members heard that causes included increased terminations due to the cost-of-living crisis and that proposed mitigation measures included proactive marketing and engagement with local housing associations to improve uptake.

The Chief Executive had highlighted achievements under key corporate programmes, including:

- Town centre regeneration
- Delivery of social and affordable housing

- Community outreach through the new leisure contract with Everyone Active

The Committee heard that the Annual Report was praised by Cabinet for effectively showcasing the Council's delivery and including strong visual content.

The Strategic Director (RP) advised members of the following feedback from Cabinet:

Cabinet urged continued efforts to identify windfall housing sites to address the need for affordable and social rented homes.

The importance of promoting the Climate Change Community Fund (CCCF) was raised by Cabinet, although comments were made about its perceived complexity, which may act as a barrier to uptake.

Cabinet suggested that partnership activities (e.g. with the Equalities Commission and Stevenage Against Domestic Abuse) and community events be more prominently acknowledged in future reports to reflect the full breadth of Council activity.

Cabinet had approved all recommendations contained in the report.

The Chair reflected on:

- The need to maintain useful equalities indicators, drawing on historical examples such as BV174 and BV175 (related to discrimination complaints and resolutions).
- The difference in perspective between Cabinet and scrutiny forums.
- The importance of retaining access to "crunchy" data when needed for effective scrutiny.
- The need to better capture less-visible yet impactful work, such as youth engagement in schools and interfaith events, which may be overlooked in high-level reporting.

The Strategic Director (RP) acknowledged the feedback and confirmed:

- A review of the CCCF's complexity would be considered in conjunction with the new Portfolio Holder
- While the performance suite included around 50 KPIs, numerous operational indicators were also monitored internally to ensure effective service delivery.
- The Government was consulting on a new Local Government Outcomes Framework, which could see the reintroduction of standardised performance measures across eight thematic areas. A Council response would be submitted by the end of August 2025.

PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - FLAT BLOCK RECYCLING IMPROVEMENTS

The Assistant Director (SDS) advised that a report had been presented to Cabinet outlining proposals for the utilisation of a portion of the Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding totalling £1.078 million. The funding was allocated across three key workstreams:

Capital improvements at 74 flat blocks, including signage and infrastructure upgrades.

Contingency provision for any funding shortfall in the rollout of mandatory food waste collections from April 2026.

Project management support to ensure successful delivery of these initiatives.

Cabinet welcomed the focus on improving recycling provision at flat blocks, which were acknowledged as challenging areas. Cabinet had approved all recommendations contained in the report.

Members expressed particular interest in the trial of a new three-wheeled bin designed to improve access at blocks with limited mobility infrastructure. These bins were intended to assist waste crews and could reduce the need for structural changes such as ramps.

Responding to a Member question, the Assistant Director (SDS) confirmed that 74 flat blocks (59 council-owned and 15 private) were subject to a comprehensive audit. The audit assessed the presence and adequacy of current recycling facilities. Private blocks, from which the Council also collected waste, would benefit from improved signage and community engagement to encourage recycling.

A Member asked a question regarding anticipated increases in recycling post works. The Assistant Director (SDS) advised that data from a previous pilot indicated a sustained increase in recycling rates post-intervention. Extrapolating from this, officers estimated a potential 2–4% increase in borough-wide recycling rates from the flat block improvements. A further 5% increase was anticipated following the introduction of separate food waste collections, potentially lifting overall rates from 39% to between 44–47%.

A Member asked a question regarding the location of bins. It was clarified that all bins would be external to buildings in line with fire safety regulations. The three-wheeled bins were to be used by crews on collection days and do not imply indoor storage or individual floor-level facilities.

The Assistant Director (SDS) confirmed they were liaising with planning colleagues to ensure future developments accommodated appropriate waste and recycling infrastructure. The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) added that harmonisation of requirements through the local planning system remained an ongoing priority.

The Chair commented on the potential safety issues that may arise regarding ramp gradients in adverse weather. The Assistant Director (SDS) assured members that ramps would be site-specific, compliant with building regulations, and installed in consultation with engineering colleagues.

Responded to a Member comment regarding overall reduction of waste, the importance of prioritising waste reduction over recycling was reiterated. The Assistant Director (SDS) advised that the EPR scheme's polluter-pays principle was designed to discourage excessive packaging by producers, with taxation acting as a deterrent.

It was acknowledged that the EPR income was an ongoing allocation, however future sums were not expected to be at the same level as the year one allocation. The Assistant Director (SDS) confirmed that transparency and strategic allocation of these funds would be ensured through Cabinet oversight and financial governance.

7 PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - HERTFORDSHIRE LOCAL RETROFIT STRATEGY

The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) briefed the Committee on the report recently submitted to Cabinet, which sought approval to endorse the Hertfordshire Local Retrofit Strategy. The strategy was led by the Hertfordshire Climate Change and Sustainability Partnership, of which the Council was a member.

The Committee heard that the strategic direction and aims were detailed between paragraphs 3.8 and 3.18, with the full strategy included as an appendix.

The Assistant Director (Planning and Regulation) advised Members that endorsement of the strategy provided the Council with a formal mandate to participate in current and future phases of retrofit activity across the partnership.

The Committee were informed that the accompanying action plan would be refined in collaboration with multiple agencies to ensure it was realistic, robust, and deliverable.

Cabinet had approved all recommendations contained in the report. Scrutiny Members noted and welcomed the strategy.

8 SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME ITEMS

The Chair advised Members that a list of previously discussed topics was included in the agenda, and Members were invited to raise any additional suggestions.

The Chair emphasised that the committee was not seeking to take on the work of the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) but recognised value in exploring workforce-related topics within the committee's remit, such as workforce survey and profile.

Other potential scrutiny topics proposed included:

- Social value in procurement contracts
- Contract compliance and financial risk, especially regarding investment decisions by local authorities
- Council communications, including strategy and responsiveness to public concerns

A member query submitted by Cllr Phil Bibby was referenced regarding the proposed new swimming pool and leisure centre. The Chair commented on the timeliness of scrutinising this matter, given ongoing public consultation. The Strategic Director (CF) clarified that a Cabinet report on the facility was scheduled for October, with subsequent scrutiny at Overview and Scrutiny Committee post-Cabinet decision.

The Scrutiny Officer reflected on the previous year's approach, where three items were added to the regular meeting agenda. This balance between standing items and scrutiny topics was considered effective. They proposed reviewing the current topic list to:

- Assess feasibility and scheduling
- Identify topics suitable for committee presentations and recommendations
- Determine which could be addressed via briefing notes or where scrutiny is already planned

The Committee supported this approach. The Chair proposed consolidating topics under broader headings, noting:

- Workforce (covering workforce survey and profile)
- Communications (as a distinct topic)
- Social Value and Ethical Investments (as a subset of financial oversight)

The committee agreed that ongoing financial monitoring remained a standing responsibility and that was also within the scope of the Audit Committee.

A Member strongly supported scrutiny of communications, citing the need for a strategic and unified approach to responding to public discourse, particularly online, to ensure consistency and clarity in messaging.

The Scrutiny Officer agreed to review and prioritise the suggested topics with topics to be consolidated and categorised for practical implementation.

9 OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY ACTION TRACKER

The Scrutiny Officer introduced the item, explaining that each Scrutiny Committee received an Action Tracker, which monitored progress on previously scrutinised topics. Members had received the tracker in advance of the meeting, and while it could not be displayed live, the report included hyperlinks to relevant committee reports and decisions, offering easy reference for follow-up.

The Chair and Committee were reminded of topics previously scrutinised during the past municipal year, which included:

- Customer Service Centre Relocation
- Website Usability and User Experience
- ICT Update and Cybersecurity

The Scrutiny Officer noted that, in previous conversation, the Chair had expressed interest in revisiting cybersecurity, given the increased risk to local authorities and the importance of maintaining vigilance in this area.

Members were invited to comment on whether they wished to receive regular updates via the Action Tracker throughout the year and to indicate which items they may want to revisit or scrutinise further.

The Chair acknowledged the usefulness of the tracker and highlighted the Customer Service Centre front entrance as a live example where Members could observe operations first-hand and form any relevant feedback. They noted that the topics were straightforward but welcomed further input from Members.

10 URGENT PART I DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

There were no Urgent Part I Decisions authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

11 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

12 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That under Section 100A of the Local Government Act 1972, the press and public be excluded from the meeting for the following items of business on the grounds that they involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in Paragraphs 1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006.

2. That the reasons for the following reports being in Part II were accepted, and that the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

13 **PART II MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING**

The Part II Minutes of the meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee held on 15 June 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to some minor amendments.

14 **PART II DECISION OF THE CABINET - WRITE OFFS OVER £10K**

The Strategic Director informed the Committee that the Cabinet had considered writing off Council Tax debt deemed irrecoverable which was properly due to the Council and was more than £10,000.

Members asked a number of questions that were responded to by Officers.

15 **URGENT PART II DECISIONS AUTHORISED BY THE CHAIR OF THE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE**

There were no Urgent Part II Decisions authorised by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

16 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR