

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**JOINT EXECUTIVE REVENUES AND BENEFITS SHARED SERVICE COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 7 January 2026

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Shimkent Room - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Jeannette Thomas (Chair), Jackie Hollywell and Nigel Williams, Carl Brittain, and Alex Daar

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 6.40pm

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

Nominations were requested for the appointment of the Chair of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the meeting.

It was proposed and seconded that Councillor Jeannette Thomas be appointed Chair for the meeting.

It was RESOLVED: That Councillor Jeannette Thomas be appointed as Chair of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee for the meeting.

2 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received by Councillor Chris Wilson.

There were no declarations of interest.

3 MINUTES - JOINT REVENUES AND BENEFITS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

It was RESOLVED that the minutes of the Joint Revenues and Benefits Committee held on 09 September 2024 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair

4 SHARED REVENUES AND BENEFITS SERVICE - ANNUAL UPDATE

The Committee received a detailed report on the performance of the Shared Revenue and Benefits Service for 2024/25, together with an update on anticipated challenges in future years.

The Assistant Director advised that both East Hertfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council continued to perform well in relation to Housing Benefit processing times and were operating within the agreed performance targets.

Members were informed that Housing Benefit subsidy levels were marginally lower than in 2023/24, primarily due to the continued migration of working-age claimants to

Universal Credit (UC). This migration had reduced the overall Housing Benefit workload but had also limited the shared service's ability to recover ongoing benefit deductions. As a result of the reduced caseload, the service had been able to reduce the Benefits team by a further two full-time equivalent posts. Remaining claims were largely associated with temporary accommodation and hostel cases.

The Committee noted that Council Tax Support (CTS) caseloads were increasing, largely because UC payments were calculated on monthly earnings, leading to more frequent changes in entitlement. The report highlighted consideration of a move to a banded CTS scheme, which would reduce the number of recalculations required, improve the customer experience and support improved collection rates. Officers explained that there had been an intention to introduce this scheme in 2026/27; however, implementation had taken longer than anticipated and Local Government Reorganisation would now need to be considered.

The Committee discussed Council Tax liability levels, and Members asked about the reasons for non-payment. Officers advised that there were a range of contributing factors and no single reason accounted for most outstanding liability.

Members noted that, for 2024/25, the Council Tax collection rate was 94.5% for Stevenage and 96.7% for East Hertfordshire. Officers advised that Stevenage's performance was lower than that of some comparable authorities, including Luton. The Committee discussed potential ways to improve performance to ensure long-term sustainability. It was noted that Luton was more advanced in its use of digitalisation and recovery processes, and Officers undertook to explore learning from Luton that could be applied locally.

Officers reported that two new enforcement agent companies had been appointed on an initial 12-month trial basis to focus on arrears cases.

The Committee was informed that both Councils operated an Exceptional Hardship Relief scheme, providing discretionary Council Tax relief. Demand for this scheme had increased since the pandemic and continued during the current challenging economic climate. Officers explained that applications were subject to a formal process requiring financial information and supporting evidence, with each case assessed independently in line with the Exceptional Hardship Relief policy.

Members received an update on improvements to automation within online forms and back-office systems aimed at increasing efficiency and reducing processing times. The most significant improvement had been the automation of change-of-address processes, which had substantially reduced backlogs. Further automation was under review and was expected to go live from January 2026.

5 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

CHAIR