

**Item no:**



**Meeting:** COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

**Portfolio Area:** Equalities and Young People

**Date:** 11 NOVEMBER 2025

**INTERIM REPORT AND EMERGING RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY  
REVIEW OF EQUALITIES, DIVERSITY & INCLUSION**

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**1 PURPOSE**

- 1.1 To consider the draft report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee Scrutiny, looking at the Council's Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion offer.

**2 BACKGROUND & SCRUTINY ISSUE IDENTIFIED**

- 2.1 The issue of scrutinising the way the Council supports Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion in Stevenage was agreed by the Select Committee as a scrutiny review item when it met on 29 February 2024, and this choice was confirmed by the Committee when it reconsidered their work programme on 13 June 2024.

**2.2 Scope and Focus of the review**

2.2.1 The scope for the review was agreed when the Committee met on Wednesday 8 January 2024. [Community Select Committee - 8 January 2025 - ED&I Presentation](#) It was agreed that the scope should include a focus on:

- Are the public aware of various cultural events that separate ethnic communities hold? Perhaps a review might encourage various diverse groups to come forward and put on their own cultural events.
- Previously the World Forum had arranged a diversity calendar that was promoted by former Cllr Sherma Batson which had been a good vehicle for breaking down barriers. Could this be looked at with the World Forum or the Equalities Commission Legacy Group?
- How does the Council celebrate and help promote the 9 Characteristic groups of the diversity Act 2010 throughout the year?
- The Council's Strategic Leadership Team be asked to share how planning/regeneration affects people with disabilities as they move about the town. What is movement around the town like for wheelchair users and visually impaired?
- The review should address the cultural diversity with the town's LGBTQ+ community. The Council's role is seen as to support not to lead by arranging events. This year's Stevenage Day had a specific LGBTQ+ Pride focus.
- Is there still inappropriate/derogatory language used towards disabled people or used in a pejorative way to able-bodied people in schools?
- Is there still as problem with deep seated racism and what can be done to counter and challenge this?
- A possible recommendation could be that there is a cultural event celebrating Stevenage diversity.
- Can the information boards around the town centre be used to promote the Council's own events and social inclusion?

## 2.3 Process of the review

2.3.1 The Committee met on 2 occasions and the Chair and Vice-Chair met informally with officers to discuss and undertake the review as follows: On 8 & 29 January 2025. Following the evidence gathering the Committee were invited to consider the interim report and draft recommendations at its meeting on 11 November 2025.

2.3.2 The Committee interviewed the following witnesses:

- Corporate Policy and Research Officer, Charlotte Bott
- Corporate Policy and Performance Manager, Daryl Jedowski
- Council's Officer Lead on the Stevenage Equalities Commission, Gemma Maret
- Community Development Officer, Oonagh Sherlock
- Chair of the Stevenage Equalities Commission, Errol John
- Chair of Stevenage World Forum, Kate Belinis
- Director Junction 7 Creatives, John Prebble, Stevenage Pride Member

- Coco Brinda, Stevenage Pride Member
- Lorna Scardifield, Age Concern
- Stevenage Youth Mayor, Lahaina Sutherland
- Sharn Tomlinson, CEO of Mind in Mid Herts
- Alison MacDougall, and Paula McGuinness volunteers for Hertfordshire Vision Loss

### **3 THE COMMITTEES FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 Conclusions of the Community Select Committee re scrutiny of the Council's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion offer**

- 3.1.1 Following the formal meetings of the Committee 8 and 29 January 2025, where Members received officer presentations on the corporate support for Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion in the town and where the Committee interviewed various representative groups a number of observations were made by Members and are detailed below, which have led to the recommendations in the report at section 4.

#### **3.2 Race and Ethnicity**

- 3.2.1 The Committee spoke to Chair of the Stevenage Equalities Commission, Errol John and the Chair of Stevenage World Forum, Kate Belinis. The Committee were advised that a consistent theme across the Equalities 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.
- 3.2.2 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.
- 3.2.3 Members emphasised the importance of coaching and confidence-building for individuals, particularly for those engaging in public speaking and leadership roles.
- 3.2.4 Members advocated for visible recognition of past contributors, like Sherma Batson, to inspire future generations and ensure the legacy of their efforts.
- 3.2.5 The Chair (Stevenage World Forum) called for increased collaboration with councillors and the wider community to strengthen and sustain the

Commission's initiatives with an annual or bi-annual event with Members and Equalities Commission legacy group 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. The Chair of the Equalities Commission Legacy Group highlighted the importance of ongoing efforts to bridge the "institutional ignorance" and "communal ignorance" that hindered effective engagement.

3.2.6 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.

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

### 3.3 **LGBTQ+**

3.3.1 The Committee spoke to Coco Brinda and John Prindle who shared feedback from various LGBTQ+ groups that had avoided Stevenage Day in the past due to its lack of representation and perceived negative connotations. Previously they had felt excluded and unwelcome, with little visibility for their community. However, the Pride Area at Stevenage Day 2024 changed this narrative, providing a platform for inclusivity and breaking down long-standing barriers.

3.3.2 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

3.3.3 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

3.3.4 Members highlighted the importance of trans representation in discussions and events, emphasising the value of hearing lived experiences to address misconceptions and combat hatred.

3.3.5 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-led events was emphasised.

### 3.4 **Older People**

- 3.4.1 The Committee spoke to Lorna Scardifield, Age Concern. Lorna 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.
- 3.4.2 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.
- 3.4.3 The Chair acknowledged the concerns around digital exclusion and mobility issues. It was suggested that this issue be noted as a recommendation for consideration by the Environment and Economy Select Committee.
- 3.4.4 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.
- 3.4.5 A member of the Committee 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.
- 3.4.6 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.
- 3.4.7 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.

### 3.5 **Young People**

- 3.5.1 The Committee spoke to Lahaina Sutherland, 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.
- 3.5.2 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.
- 3.5.3 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.
- 3.5.4 The Committee 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. The Youth Mayor 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.
- 3.5.5 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.
- 3.5.6 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.
- 3.5.7 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.

- 3.5.8 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.
- 3.5.9 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.

### 3.6 **Age Friendly Communities**

- 3.6.1 The Committee 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).
- 3.6.2 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.
- 3.6.3 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.

### 3.7 **Disability – Mental Health**

- 3.7.1 The Committee spoke to Sharn Tomlinson, CEO of Mind in Mid Herts.
- 3.7.2 The Committee were 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.

- 3.7.3 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.

### 3.8 **Disability - Sight loss**

- 3.8.1 The Committee spoke to Alison MacDougall, a volunteer for Hertfordshire Vision Loss. Alison 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.
- 3.8.2 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.
- 3.8.3 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.
- 3.8.4 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. The Sight-Life group suggested implementing a tannoy system to announce bus arrivals and bay changes. Sight-Life acknowledged the assistance they received from residents during journeys 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.
- 3.8.5 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).



- 3.8.6 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 any walkabout.
- 3.8.7 It was noted 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.

### 3.9 **Next steps**

- 3.9.1 The Committee are asked whether there are any other areas of the 9 protected characteristic groups that requires a detailed focus on before concluding this work programme item?
- 3.9.2 The Committee will receive an update on the Council Cultural Strategy at its next iteration and following this session Members could make recommendations on the strategy with a renewed emphasis on diversity and inclusivity.

## 4 **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 4.1 That the Community Select Committee agrees the conclusions of the report as well as the recommendations below and that these will be presented to the Cabinet Portfolio Holder for Equalities & Diversity and that a response be provided from these and any other named officers and partners within two months of the publishing of this report.
- 4.2 **Recommendation 1- working with the local community to encourage a more diverse range of people involved in leadership roles:**
- 4.2.1 The Cabinet Portfolio holder for Equalities and Officers be recommended to work with community leaders and the diverse local community to ensure a more diverse range of people can be involved in leadership roles, such as school governors, magistrates, and other public offices, working with initiatives like the citizenship programme with Operation Black Votes.
- 4.3 **Recommendation 2 – Increased collaboration between Members and the Equalities Commission Legacy Group:**

- 4.3.1 That the Assistant Director Housing and Neighbourhoods be recommended to work with Members to encourage their involvement in an annual or bi-annual event with the Equalities Commission legacy group and the wider community to strengthen and sustain the Commission's initiatives.

4.4 **Recommendation 3 – The voices and lived experience of the trans community are heard in discussions and at events to help combat misconceptions and hatred:**

- 4.4.1 That officers and Members ensure that the voices of the trans community are heard in discussions and events, hearing people's lived experience to help address misconceptions and combat hatred.

4.5 **Recommendation 4 – carry out an audit of the provision of benches and seating in the town centre:**

- 4.5.1 That the Assistant Director Planning and Regulation carry out an audit of the provision of benches and seating in the town centre to ensure there is enough seating for older people and those with mobility issues.

4.6 **Recommendation 5 – Address concerns around digital exclusion for older people be addressed:**

- 4.6.1 That the Assistant Director Business Change be invited to address the concerns raised by input from Age Concern regarding the digital exclusion of some of the local community's older people.

4.7 **Recommendation 6 – Address concerns raised by Age Concern around the lack of provision of mobility scooter hire service from the bus interchange:**

- 4.7.1 Age Concern reminded Members that there were originally plans to locate a mobility scooter hire service from the bus interchange. This had not been possible. Members requested that subject to funding being available to support such a project, officers to investigate what would be required to create a mobility buggy storage and hire options from the bus interchange.

4.8 **Recommendation 7 – Address the needs of young people by supporting extracurricular activities in schools and in the community via sports, interests and social clubs:**

- 4.8.1 Members recommended that the Council, and specifically Members via their Local Community Budgets, support young people in relation to combating mental health needs with greater access to extracurricular activities, particularly sports clubs, mentoring to encourage social interaction and personal development.

4.9 **Recommendation 8 – To address support for neurodiversity encourage better collaboration between the Council and external mental health experts:**

4.9.1 Members are recommending greater collaboration between the Council and external mental health experts would improve service delivery and noted this as an area for development.

4.10 **Recommendation 9 – Address the needs of the sight loss community:**

4.10.1 Members recommend supporting the sight loss community with high-visibility markings on bollards to enhance safety visually impaired residents. In addition, the accessibility of council leaflets should be addressed with the use high-contrast text and background to help the visually impaired.

**5.1 Legal Implications**

5.1.1 There are no direct legal implications for this report.

**5.2 Equalities Implications**

5.2.1 The review and the report are focused on Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion.

**APPENDICES:**

None

**BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

[CSC - Equalities Diversity & Inclusion Scoping Document](#)

[CSC 8 January 2025 - Officer Presentation](#)

[CSC Meeting 29 January 2025](#)