

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

NOTES OF INFORMAL OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE MINUTES – CORPORATE COMMUNICATIONS

Date: Wednesday, 26 November 2025

Time: 4.00pm

Place: Kadoma Room

Present: Councillors: Jim Brown (Chair), Phil Bibby, Peter Clark, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy.

Officers: Interim Strategic Director; Kathryn Carr, Head of Communications and Marketing; Sandy Eaton, Scrutiny Officer; Stephen Weaver, Democratic Services Officer; Gemma O'Donnell.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 4.00pm
End Time: 5.45pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Leanne Brady, Sandra Barr, Stephen Booth, Kamal Choudhury, Andy McGuinness (Vice-Chair), Ellie Plater and Ceara Roopchand.

2 COMMUNICATIONS AND MARKETING 2025 – 2026.

In preparation for the meeting Overview and Scrutiny Members had provided officers with responses to questions about the service that the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny had set in advance of the meeting.

The interim Strategic Director, Kathryn Carr, provided Scrutiny Members with an overview of the Corporate Communications and Marketing Team, including staffing levels. The current national economic and political climate has a local impact that has generated more social media traffic and other online activity. This has also included local public demonstrations. This requires continuous monitoring such that managing all Stevenage related media is becoming more challenging. Members were advised that senior officers and HR are exploring cost effective options to resource the seven-day role that is increasingly required to cover this work.

The Head of Communications and Marketing, Sandy Eaton, provided Members with a PowerPoint presentation which covered the following items:

Team Structure

Members were introduced to the Council's Communications and Marketing Team:

- Sandy Eaton – Head of Communications and Marketing.

- The team included 3.7 FTE Comms & Marketing Officers and 1 FTE Graphic Designer.
- An additional team member would be recruited in the New Year.

A question was raised regarding the breakdown of other Hertfordshire Council's Communications and Marketing Teams. Officers outlined the team structures for Watford and Hertsmere and confirmed they would seek to provide the Committee with further examples of resources at comparable Councils.

The Head of Communications and Marketing welcomed how Members could support their work more effectively.

It was noted that the Website and Digital Team were separate, which created its own challenges. Members noted the strong need for closer working and possible reintegration.

Discussions included:

- Event pages and links would sometimes produce error codes (404 issue).
- 48% of residents used the website as their primary source of Council information.
- Digital Strategy (including online reporting systems) was due to go to Cabinet and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
- Google search results could be misleading due to paid placements, which can affect event visibility.
- The same SBC supported event circulated for different days at the same time.

Functions of the Team

Sandy presented the Remit of the Team:

- Press office management.
 - Responding to media enquiries, statements, and press releases.
- Social media management
 - 11,000 followers on Facebook, which was the main site for resident conversation.
 - 8,000 followers on X.
 - 5,000 followers on Instagram
- YouTube channel and digital boards management.
 - Livestreaming and recording of Council, Cabinet, and Planning meetings.
 - Promotion of these meetings via social media.
- Crisis management
 - Supporting reputation management during incidents.
- Promotion of Council services and events
- Production and delivery of the Chronicle residents' magazine
 - 36,000 copies printed and 400-500 downloaded online.
 - SBC produce three copies a year, which is the highest in Hertfordshire. Other councils have moved to digital or only one yearly edition.
 - Localised digital newsletters were raised as an alternative to printed publications of the Chronicle.
- Public affairs support

- Video / visuals / photography of Council services
- Staff intranet

Updating Councillors

Weekly events and activity summaries are sent to Members.

It was noted that Group Leaders received press releases at the same time. Members requested to have specific briefings on controversial matters.

Members commented that it would be helpful for information to be circulated to them prior to being published on social media, so they would be aware of upcoming events/communications.

Controversial events/ issues in the community

Issues raised:

Fireworks Night Display

- Delay in releasing information due to unresolved parking details. Members noted the need for clearer, earlier information to avoid confusion.

Indoor Market Opening

- Contractor delays moved the opening from the 22 November to the 6 December.
- Caused reputational issues and the Head of Communications and Marketing noted that communication could have been smoother.
- Awaiting decisions for compensation for traders.

Christmas Light Switch On

- Widespread media coverage – Local and National - Apologies issued and gifts arranged.
- Issues with inappropriate comments directed at the Mayor who was not responsible for the event.
- Crisis management ongoing, including safeguarding of the children involved and an ongoing investigation by the Council into the event arrangements.

Main Campaign Themes

- Pioneering Stevenage Skills – Mission 44 Charity with Sir Lewis Hamilton.
- Transforming Our Town – Underpass works and Town Centre Regeneration.
- Green Stevenage – Green Space Volunteers and Parks.
- Spotlight on Housing – Projects delivered and future works.
- Pride in Stevenage Campaign – Promoting kindness, community and civic pride, with the aim to highlight positive resident led stories.

Making the Council more visible

- Showcasing staff and apprenticeships.
- Statistics post from Beryl was well received and Members asked for more infographics to include information such as fly-tipping costs.

- Youth Engagement – The Youth Mayor and Deputy Youth Mayor engage with the younger population at events.

Feedback

Members questioned the language used in information sent to residents, where some had misunderstood these communications. It was noted that better coordination was needed between teams to understand the guidance for communications to residents.

Members queried whether it remained appropriate to use X as a communications platform. Officers advised that the Council had around 8,000 followers on X and was used to provide updates on activities, including directing residents to Council meetings on Youtube. It was therefore considered a useful and appropriate platform to continue using.

Discussions took place on why the Website Team and Communications Team were now separate, when they were previously together. Members suggested it may be useful to look at how links between the teams could be strengthened, including considering reintegration, subject to understanding the original rationale. Officers confirmed they would circulate the LGA report on the separation of the services, with the advice included.

The council will continue to produce three print issues a year of the Chronicle to keep residents informed of the council's corporate plan, its progress and its initiatives to make Stevenage Even Better, a place for everyone.

A further question was raised regarding the current circulation of paper copies of the Comet newspaper, and it was noted that over 88,000 copies were printed and there were over 2.3 million page views online. It was noted that these figures were provided by the Comet.

Similar to many other issues, the impact of Local Government Reorganisation is currently unknown with regards to future iterations of publications like the Chronicle etc.

Members thanked the Communications and Marketing Team for all their work, especially when under challenging conditions.

Informal Recommendations:

Based on the discussion, the following possible recommendations were suggested:

- Officers confirmed they would seek to provide the Committee with further examples of resources at comparable Councils.
- Members requested to have specific briefings on controversial matters.
- Members noted the strong need for closer working and possible reintegration of the Communication and Website team.
- Members commented that it would be helpful for information to be circulated to them prior to being published on social media, so they would be aware of upcoming events/ communications.
- Better coordination was needed between teams to understand the guidance for communications to residents.