

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 20 January 2026

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber - Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Jim Brown (Chair), Andy McGuinness (Vice-Chair), Robert Boyle, Peter Clark, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy and Ceara Roopchand

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.32pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Sandra Barr, Phil Bibby, Stephen Booth, Leanne Brady, Kamal Choudhury, Akin Elekolusi and Ellie Plater.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Part I Minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee Meeting held on 16 December 2025 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL WORKFORCE PRESENTATION

The Committee received a presentation on the Council's workforce, which provided an overview of current workforce demographics at Stevenage Borough Council, key challenges, and future priorities.

Key information included:

- Local government workforce nationally had reduced by approximately 16% over the past decade.
- Stevenage Borough Council employed 702 staff (663 full time equivalent posts). It was noted that the Council also employed 29 agency staff.
- 51% of staff lived within SG1 or SG2 postcodes. Members noted that two thirds of staff used to live within Stevenage.
- Gender split of the workforce was 53% female and 47% male.
- The gender pay gap had improved to -0.98%.
- The Council confirmed its continued commitment to paying the Living Wage.
- Workforce diversity was increasing, with 18% of Stevenage Borough Council staff identifying as from an ethnic minority background.
- Disability data was reported as below the national average, with actions underway to improve reporting levels.

- Widespread recruitment challenges were noted across the sector.

It was noted that the Council had appointed a Talent Manager to support recruitment and to refresh the employer brand.

The Committee noted that the apprenticeship programme had been successful and supported long term workforce development.

The 2025 staff survey showed high levels of satisfaction, with approximately 80% of respondents indicating an intention to remain with the Council. It was noted that there was a small increase in reported harassment or bullying cases, and Officers advised that this was being addressed through training, awareness, and reporting mechanisms.

The presentation also outlined preparations for Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), noting that workforce planning and staff engagement were key priorities locally and across Hertfordshire. Officers confirmed that work was underway to support staff through this change.

The Chair thanked Officers for their presentation and opened the discussion. Members questioned the Council's ability to attract younger staff in an ageing workforce and the presence of unemployed young adults locally. In response to questions, Officers outlined ongoing work to engage with schools and students through work experience and apprenticeship opportunities, and noted that recruitment competition for specialist roles was primarily from other local authorities rather than the private sector.

Members were advised that graduate and trainee routes were being used to address skills shortages, although retention remained a challenge.

Members sought clarification on workforce data, including the proportion of staff living in SG1 and SG2 at senior levels, disability reporting and sickness absence. Officers confirmed that further information on senior-level residency would be provided, explained that disability was under reported within the system, and that reasonable adjustments were supported through manager engagement and external occupational health advice. It was noted that sickness absence had improved to below target, with long term sickness defined as 21 days or more.

Discussions took place regarding a breakdown of the harassment data and why it did not currently distinguish between incidents involving staff or members of the public on staff.

Members discussed recruitment practices, including anonymised recruitment and potential bias. Officers confirmed that educational institution names were not currently anonymised, noting this could be reviewed.

Members also commented on the 43% staff survey response rate, and Officers explained that steps had been taken to maximise participation, including simplifying the survey and providing in person completion opportunities.

Officers confirmed that school staff were not included in the total figures. In relation to LGR, Members raised questions about staff retention, pay harmonisation and organisational capacity. Officers advised that workforce planning was underway at a Hertfordshire-wide level, and that many staff were expected to transfer under Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) (TUPE) arrangements.

Emergency planning arrangements were also discussed, with Officers confirming that hybrid working had improved resilience and that local staff would be relied upon in the event of a major incident.

4

PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - HOUSING REVENUE ACCOUNT FINAL BUDGET AND RENT SETTING 2026/27

The Director of Finance introduced the 2026/27 Housing Revenue Account (HRA) budget and rent setting report, which confirmed a rent increase of 4.8% from April, in line with the government policy of CPI plus 1%. Service charges would also increase in line with inflation.

The final budget included assumptions for additional compliance and building safety costs, and removed the previously assumed rent convergence increase. This was due to a lack of government confirmation, resulting in a reduction of approximately £209,000 in projected income.

The HRA Business Plan supported a £240 million capital programme over five years and £457 million of investment in new homes over 30 years. Key risks were also identified in the report.

Members were advised that an under-provision of £385,000 for staffing and salary inflation identified when the report was presented to Cabinet had since been incorporated into the final budget submitted to Council.

5

PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - DRAFT GENERAL FUND AND COUNCIL TAX SETTING 2026/27

The Strategic Director and S151 Officer introduced the second of three budget setting reports to the Committee relating to the General Fund.

The report highlighted changes arising from fair funding reforms, which had been beneficial to Stevenage.

It was noted that further detail would be included in the final report in February, including the use of approximately £600,000 of one-off additional growth funding, adjusted to reflect increased costs, and proposals for spending Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding.

The Cabinet also welcomed the additional funding, including support for the 80th anniversary.

In response to questions from the Committee, Officers advised that Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) funding had previously totalled £1.78 million, and that funding of £1.22 million had been received for the 2026/27 financial year. Officers explained that this funding was intended to support flat block recycling and waste freighters.

Officers explained that the settlement had been released and that Stevenage was in a stronger position compared to other authorities. It was noted that the provisional settlement would indicate an increase of 9% for Stevenage, compared to an average increase of approximately 0.6% for other district councils, noting that the figures included council tax increases.

The settlement remained provisional and subject to change following consultation, and the final settlement might only be confirmed close to the report deadline. It was also noted that the settlement covered a three-year period, with the final year aligning with LGR.

6 **PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - DRAFT GENERAL FUND CAPITAL STRATEGY 2025/26 TO 2029/30**

The Director of Finance introduced the report on the draft capital strategy, with the final version due to be considered by Cabinet in February.

The draft strategy set out a £116 million capital programme over five years, including £46.6 million in 2026/27, to support regeneration, housing development, operational assets and climate priorities.

It was noted that, while the improved financial position allowed for increased investment, Officers explained the significant risks which remained. This included potential delays in capital receipts, construction cost volatility and the impact of deferred maintenance.

As part of the budget-setting process, a cross-party Members' consultation had taken place on 6 January, during which 27 capital bids for 2026/27 were presented and considered. All bids received cross-party support, with approval levels ranging from 57% to 100%.

Members also considered nine deferred or unfunded bids listed in Appendix C, which received lower levels of support (between 11% and 28%) and were therefore confirmed as non-priority and deferred.

A question was raised regarding the capital funding, with no budget being allocated for the Fairlands Valley lighting scheme. Officers advised that the scheme was dependent on further surveys, with costs ranging significantly, making it difficult to set a budget at this stage. It was noted that funding could be met from the Deferred Works Reserve and Capital Reserves if required.

PART I DECISION OF THE CABINET - 2025 RESIDENTS SURVEY FINDINGS

The Committee received a report on the Council's Residents' Survey, which was completed in June 2025. The survey consisted of 1,103 interviews and covered topics including residents' satisfaction with Stevenage as a place to live, views on the Council, feelings of safety, value for money and local priorities.

Members noted Cabinet's approval of the survey results being shared with all Members at the next Cooperative Neighbourhoods Strategic Board meeting.

Questions were raised regarding the fourth bullet point in the Notice of Decision from Cabinet on this item. Members highlighted that the report data referred to an age range of 18 – 44, and in response, Officers explained that additional age-related data had been shared with the Portfolio Holder and would be shared with Members.

Officers clarified that this did not indicate the 18 – 24 age group was larger than others reported, but that it was proportionally over-represented compared with the town's demographics.

Officers agreed to review the data and investigate the breakdowns for future reporting.

Discussions took place regarding the representation of ethnic minorities in the survey and the different language used for the categories. Officers confirmed that this consideration would inform future surveys and annual equalities reporting.

Members noted a mistake in the title of the table on page 23 of the report and noted that it should read 'South Ward Cluster Breakdown'. Officers acknowledged this and confirmed this would be updated.

Officers agreed to review the data and investigate the breakdowns for future reporting.

URGENT PART I DECISIONS OF THE CABINET - LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION AND LOCAL ELECTIONS 2026

Members were advised of updates relating to a new leukaemia therapy developed by Autolus, based in Stevenage, and the signing of a development agreement with English Cities Fund for the Stevenage Station Gateway project.

Members were informed that Cabinet had considered correspondence from Government regarding the Council's capacity to deliver elections alongside LGR capacity. Legal advice confirmed that decision-making responsibility rested with Cabinet.

It was reported to the Committee that Cabinet had agreed to request that the May elections to be postponed by one year, and had delegated authority to the Leader to submit a written response to the Minister by 15 January 2026, which had been

completed.

Members were advised that the decision rested with the Secretary of State and that until a determination, the Council continued to plan for elections to proceed in May 2026.

Officers explained that a judicial review was also underway to review the decision.

The Chair reported that given the limited timescales, they had waived the right to call-in the decision on the 2026 Council elections.

The Chair's observation about timing and some lack of clarity in the constitution was noted.

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

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

10 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

11 EXCLUSION OF PRESS AND PUBLIC

It was **RESOLVED**:

1. That, under Section 100(A) 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 involved the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs 1 to 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act, as amended by SI 2006 No. 88.
2. That having considered the reasons for the following item being in Part II, it be determined that maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighed the public interest in disclosure.

12 PART II MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

It was **RESOLVED** that the Part II minutes of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee meeting held on 16 December 2025 be agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

13 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.

14 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR