

Cabinet Member Response to Review of Equalities, Diversity & Inclusion

Date Recommendations agreed by Community Select Committee:

The draft report and recommendations were considered at Community Select Committee, Tuesday 11 November 2025, where the Committee made amendments to the recommendations (circulated Friday 19 December 2025, following agreement by the Committee on Monday 15 December 2025, with no further changes made by the Committee)

Date responses should be made by:

Executive responses on behalf of the Cabinet Portfolio Holders for:
Equalities & Young People the Lead Portfolio and for Resources, should be received by Friday 13 February 2026

Recommendations:

Executive Response:

RECOMMENDATION 1 - Working with the local community to encourage a more diverse range of people involved in leadership roles:

That the Cabinet Portfolio holder for Equalities and Officers be recommended to (i) 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,

Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas.

Gemma Marat to comment re Stevenage Equalities Commission & Operation Black Vote Civic Leadership Programme:

1. Citizenship Programme – Partnership with Operation Black Vote

magistrates, and other public offices, working with initiatives like the citizenship programme with Operation Black Votes and (ii) Members and officers look at ways to provide support for the Equalities Commission Legacy Group to succession plan and help identify the next generation of community leaders to support this voluntary role

Action: Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods

A Service Level Agreement has now been agreed between Stevenage Equalities Commission (SEC) and Operation Black Vote (OBV) for the delivery of a targeted Citizenship and Civic Engagement Programme over a 4–6 week period.

The programme has been designed to respond directly to the democratic deficit identified through the Commission’s work, particularly in relation to underrepresentation of Black and Brown residents in civic and public life.

Delivery will include:

- A diagnostic phase reviewing equality, education and community health data to better understand barriers to civic participation in Stevenage.
- Structured engagement with local residents and community partners, with a focus on lived experience and practical routes into leadership roles.
- A feedback and recommendations session to shape a locally grounded civic leadership pathway.
- The programme will specifically explore routes into roles such as school governorships, magistracy, local boards, and other public appointments. It is intended to build awareness, confidence, and practical understanding of how to step forward into these positions.
- Interim check-ins will take place at the end of each phase, with a final report setting out findings and recommended next steps to sustain impact.

2. Community Engagement and Leadership Pipeline

The approach recognises that increasing diversity in leadership requires more than awareness-raising. It requires:

- Clear information about opportunities and application processes.

- Visible role models from underrepresented communities.
- Ongoing mentoring and peer support.
- Practical help navigating systems that can feel inaccessible.
- Through workshops and dialogue sessions, the programme will test what support mechanisms are most needed locally. This will inform whether a structured leadership pathway, mentoring network, or annual civic development offer should follow.

3. Support for the Equalities Commission Legacy Group

Alongside the OBV programme, officers and Members are asked to consider practical support for the Equalities Commission Legacy Group to strengthen succession planning.

This may include:

- Identifying emerging community leaders through the Citizenship Programme and connecting them to the Legacy Group.
- Providing light-touch officer support for coordination and continuity.
- Establishing clearer role descriptions and pathways for involvement to make participation more accessible.
- Exploring small-scale development or mentoring opportunities for new volunteers.
- The intention is to ensure that the voluntary leadership within the Legacy Group remains sustainable and representative over time, and that new voices are supported to step into civic roles.

4. Next Steps:

- Programme commencement date to be confirmed.
- Community workshops scheduled in partnership with local organisations.
- Interim progress update to be provided to the Portfolio Holder at the midpoint of delivery.
- Final report and recommendations to inform longer-term civic

	<p>leadership development planning.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This work marks a practical step towards embedding more inclusive leadership across Stevenage’s public life and creating clearer pathways for residents who have historically been underrepresented in decision-making spaces.
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 2 - Increased collaboration between Members and the Equalities Commission Legacy Group:</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Action: Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas.</i></p> <p><i>Gemma Marat to comment re Stevenage Equalities Commission:</i></p> <p>Work undertaken through the Citizenship and Civic Engagement Programme with Operation Black Vote is supporting delivery of Recommendation 2 by creating structured opportunities for engagement between Members, the Equalities Commission Legacy Group and the wider community.</p> <p>The programme includes facilitated workshops with local residents and community partners, alongside a formal feedback session setting out findings and recommendations on civic participation and leadership. These sessions provide a direct forum for Members to engage with lived experience, hear evidence emerging from the community, and contribute to discussions about strengthening representation in public life.</p> <p>This approach strengthens collaboration by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating focused spaces where Members and the Legacy Group engage together with residents. • Grounding discussion in local data and community insight. • Identifying practical barriers to civic participation that Members can help address. <p>The feedback session offers a structured opportunity for Members and the Legacy Group to reflect jointly on the findings and consider how to sustain</p>

	<p>and strengthen the Commission’s initiatives.</p> <p>There is also clear potential for this model of engagement to move into a more formalised annual or bi-annual structured session, bringing together Members, the SEC Legacy Group and the wider community. Using the evidence and themes emerging from the Citizenship Programme, these sessions could provide a regular platform to review progress, highlight leadership opportunities and maintain momentum around civic participation and equalities work.</p> <p>In addition, the programme is helping to identify emerging community leaders who may engage further with the SEC Legacy Group, strengthening continuity and reinforcing the connection between community voices and elected representatives.</p> <p>Overall, the Citizenship Programme is reinforcing collaborative working between Members and the Equalities Commission Legacy Group by providing shared evidence, shared dialogue, and a clearer link between community engagement and civic leadership development, with scope to embed this engagement in a structured and ongoing way.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 3 - The voices and lived experience of the trans community are heard in discussions and at events to help combat misconceptions and hatred:</u></p> <p>That officers and Members ensure that the voices of the trans community are invited into discussions and events, hearing people’s lived experience to help address misconceptions and combat hatred.</p> <p>Action: Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas.</i></p> <p>Events team (Alex Marsh and Ryan Ansell) to comment on how the Pride area is included in Stevenage Day and how they look to increase security to avoid incidents like last year etc.</p> <p>Following an incident at Stevenage Day 2025, we have engaged with the Stevenage Police Hate Crime Team and members of the LGBTQ+ community to review arrangements for the Pride area at the event. It was agreed that we would work closely with both the Police and our onsite security team in advance of this year’s event and ensure that clear</p>

	<p>operational details are included within all event documentation. Security staff will receive a briefing from the Stevenage Police Hate Crime Team ahead of the event opening to ensure they are aware of the context, potential risks, and appropriate responses. We will strengthen security provision within this area and establish a clear reporting procedure to enable attending organisations to report any incidents promptly, ensuring they are appropriately escalated and addressed. This escalation process will enable issues to be addressed in real time and will help ensure that the event remains inclusive and safe for all those attending.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 4 – carry out an audit of the provision of benches and seating in the town centre:</u></p> <p>That the Assistant Director Planning and Regulation carry out an audit of the provision of benches and seating in the town centre and at the neighbourhood shopping areas to ensure there is enough seating for older people and those with mobility issues.</p> <p>Action: Assistant Director Planning and Regulation</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Planning & Regulation and the Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas.</i></p> <p>Gemma Marat to comment re benches across the town:</p> <p>The use of UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) funding to install and enhance bench provision across parks and neighbourhood shopping areas is currently taking place and has been driven by member requests.</p> <p>An audit of existing seating provision could be developed as part of this wider programme to ensure that future investment is evidence-led and aligned to need. This audit would be best placed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map the current number and location of benches in the town. • Assess condition, accessibility and spacing between seating points. • Identify gaps along key pedestrian routes, near bus stops, health facilities, retail areas and open spaces. <p>In addition, it should be noted that the needs of older residents and people with mobility issues have already been a consideration within the Council's Age Friendly Stevenage programme. When installing benches in recent years, attention has been given to appropriate seat height, the inclusion of</p>

	<p>armrests and back support, and thoughtful positioning along pedestrian routes and in accessible locations. The proposed audit could build on this existing approach, ensuring consistency across all areas and identifying where further improvements may be required.</p> <p>It is important to note that this would need to be a cross-business unit initiative. Seating provision and public realm management sit across multiple service areas and, in some locations, land or highways fall under Hertfordshire County Council control. As such, this cannot be treated solely as a community development function. Coordination would be required between Planning and Regulation, Housing and Neighbourhoods, Parks and Environmental Services, and relevant partners at county level to ensure a comprehensive and accurate assessment.</p> <p>Linking the audit to UKSPF-funded works has helped ensure that findings translate into practical improvements. However, as UKSPF funding is approaching completion and all capitol funds provided for this are now spent, any further phases of seating improvements identified through the audit would require alternative funding sources or future capital allocation.</p> <p>Developing the audit alongside current and planned installations would provide a structured way to understand existing provision, highlight shortfalls, and support a coordinated, accessible approach to seating across the town centre and neighbourhood shopping areas.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 5 - Address concerns around digital exclusion for older people be addressed:</u></p> <p>That the Director Business Change be invited to acknowledge the concerns raised by input from Age Concern regarding the digital exclusion of some of the local community's older people and describe ways the Council has put mitigations in place Action: Director Business Change & Digital</p>	<p>The Director for Business Change and Digital and the Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas & Resources, Cllr Jeannette Thomas, acknowledge the concerns raised by Age Concern around the digital exclusion faced by some of the communities' older people.</p> <p>The concern was raised with particular reference to the Winter Fuel payment, which caused significant worry amongst older residents as</p>

some were not able to access online services, leading them to seek in person support from Age Concern.

Access to the UK government's Winter Fuel Payment services is indeed primarily digital, through central government's gov.uk website which provides information on eligibility and the claiming process.

In 2025 the government launched the UK Digital Inclusion Action Plan (2025), the first national strategy in over a decade to address the digital divide. It focuses on supporting local efforts, improving skills, reducing device/data poverty and enhancing service accessibility.

For the services that it provides, the Council is committed to digital inclusion, as outlined in its Digital Strategy 2025-28.

[Stevenage Borough Council Digital Strategy 2025-2028](#)

To combat digital exclusion, the Council recognises that face-to-face and telephone services remain essential for reasons such as access, personal choice, and the complexity of individual needs, and is committed to maintaining these options to ensure continued accessibility for all.

The Council's Customer Service Centre handles around 90,000 calls per year, offers 2,400 bookable appointments per year and offer 40 hours per week for people in need. There is clear, consistent messaging around how to access services, ensuring that residents can easily engage with the Council.

The Council recognises that there will always be people whose needs

	<p>cannot be fully met through digital channels, and by digitising services for the majority, the Council can free up capacity to support those who most need it.</p> <p>To support residents who would like to be more digitally engaged, the following measures are being put in place:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive design for individuals with disabilities or limited digital literacy • Service design based on customer feedback, and a deeper understanding of service use and customer needs • Attracting grant funding to support with skills training and confidence building projects with community partners. • Engaging with the LGA Digital Inclusion Network to share best practice, develop plans and coordinate to better tackle digital exclusion
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 6 – Address concerns raised by Age Concern around the lack of provision of mobility scooter hire service from the bus interchange:</u></p> <p>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 should take forward Age Concern’s offer to investigate what would be required to create a mobility buggy storage and hire options from the bus interchange.</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas & Jeannette Thomas, Resources</i></p> <p><i>Estates/Facilities (Mel Chiknagi & Gary Cupid) to comment:</i></p> <p>Herts Mobility are currently located within the new Stevenage Indoor Market at Park Place. Estates will be meeting with them to explore whether there is an opportunity to support a mobility scooter hire or loan service that could benefit users of the Stevenage Bus Interchange.</p> <p>As part of these discussions, Estates will consider what would be</p>

<p>Action: Assistant Director Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods & Head of Estates</p>	<p>required to support such a service in practice. This includes suitable storage arrangements, safety considerations such as charging and fire risk, day to day management, insurance, maintenance and the hire costs associated with operating the service. These factors will help determine whether a mobility buggy storage and hire offer could realistically be supported at the Interchange or through a nearby managed location.</p> <p>Mobility equipment hire is also available locally through providers such as Walkwel in the Westgate Shopping Centre, who offer short term hire of mobility scooters, wheelchairs and other mobility aids. Estates will consider how existing services such as this could complement any future offer linked to the Interchange.</p> <p>Following these discussions, Estates will review what may be feasible and provide a further update. Any future provision would need to be considered alongside operational requirements, safety considerations, funding availability and partnership arrangements.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 7 - Address the needs of young people by supporting extracurricular activities in schools and in the community via sports, interests and social clubs:</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Action: Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas.</i></p> <p>Leisure team (Geoff Caine & Ryan Ansell) to comment on what options are in place for young people re sports etc.</p> <p>Our leisure provider, Everyone Active delivers a comprehensive Active Communities programme for young people, offering sessions in a variety of sports including basketball, golf, badminton, netball, and other multi-sport activities. They have additionally supported initiatives such as This Girl Can, which aims to increase participation in sport among women and girls. Alongside this, the Stevenage FC Foundation continues to deliver the Premier League Kicks</p>

	<p>programme, as well as soccer camps and multi-sport sessions for young people. We also work in partnership with the Stevenage Sporting Futures Team to provide programmes within schools that focus on mental health, healthy eating, and physical activity. All partner organisations have previously accessed, and continue to utilise, Local Community Budget funding to support the delivery of these activities for young people.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 8 - To address support for neurodiversity, encourage better collaboration between the Council and external mental health experts:</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Action: Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas.</i></p> <p>Mind in Mid Herts are part of the Social Inclusion Partnership (Stevenage CAN). SBC Health and Wellbeing colleagues interact with them regularly. Mind in Mid Herts have also been a key consultee in the emerging Healthy Stevenage Strategy with a prominent focus in the strategy on mental health.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 9 - Address the needs of the sight loss community:</u></p> <p>Members recommend (i) supporting the sight loss community with high-visibility markings on bollards to enhance safety for 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 and (ii) officers investigate a project to enhance the screens adjusting their height and screen resolution to make them accessible to the visually</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Equalities & Young People, Cllr Colleen De Freitas & Jeannette Thomas, Resources.</i></p> <p>Since the attendance of the Stevenage Sightlife and Herts Vision Loss Groups at the Community Select Committee meeting in January 2025, the Council has liaised directly with these groups and Cllr Colleen De Freitas attended a Stevenage Sightlife Group meeting in September 2025 to hear their concerns directly. Contact has also been made through the Council's</p>

impaired and possible audio bus announcement system at the bus interchange and identify sources of funding to support such enhancements.

Action: Assistant Director Housing & Neighbourhoods & Head of Estates

Community Partnership Officer for involvement within the charity and volunteer partner network.

In terms of the specific issues raised under this recommendation,

The Head of Planning and Enforcement outlined that for (ii) the Council is aware of issues with the screens at the Bus Interchange and are looking to into whether there are any remaining S.106 funds available to resolve this in a timely manner. Further, from October 2026 it will become mandatory for every local bus to provide audible announcements and visual displays identifying the route and direction, each upcoming stop, and the beginning of any diversions. Thus, since this announcement, buses have been retrofit to comply with the new legislation.