STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

ENVIRONMENT & ECONOMY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Tuesday, 6 October 2026
Time: 6.00pm
Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Peter Wilkins (Chair), Dermot Kehoe, Jade Woods, Doug Bainbridge CC, Jan Bainbridge CC, Jaysica Marvell, Graham Spencer and Nigel Williams

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6.00pm
End Time: 7.30pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Leanne Brady, John Blackwood Jim Brown and Claire Parris.

Councillor Dermot Kehoe was in attendance as substitute for Councillor Jim Brown.

Councillor Peter Wilkins chaired the Committee due to Councillor Leanne Brady going on maternity leave, and it was noted that he would be Chair until further notice.

Councillor Coleen De Freitas, The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Skills and Young People, was also in attendance for the meeting.

2 MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING

The Minutes of the meeting held on 14 September 2026 were agreed by the Committee.

3 UPDATE ON STEVENAGE WORKS AND THE SKILLS AGENDA

The Committee received an update on the previous review of Stevenage Works and the Skills Agenda, which had been completed in January 2025. Members were advised that the initiative had continued to develop through partnership working with North Hertfordshire College, local schools, businesses and contractors involved in the regeneration programme.

It was noted that Stevenage Works operated through the Council and formed part of the wider procurement and partnership arrangements, with contractors expected to support local skills and employment opportunities across the town.

Members discussed the work being undertaken to address local skills gaps, including adult skills, apprenticeships and pathways into professional qualifications.

Officers highlighted work with North Hertfordshire College and the University of Hertfordshire, including opportunities in sectors such as childcare and early years.

Members also discussed young people who were not in education, employment or training (NEET), and were advised that work with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) was underway to better understand the cohort, barriers to employment and the potential development of a Youth Hub in the town.

The Portfolio Holder for Economy, Skills and Young People discussed the Council's work experience and apprenticeship opportunities, and discussions took place regarding efforts to reach young people who may lack existing networks or direction.

Members also considered the promotion of positive success stories through the Youth Council and Mission 44, however discussions took place regarding concerns about inappropriate online comments directed towards young people. Officers confirmed that the promotion of positive achievements remained important while recognising the need to protect young people online.

Members discussed careers advice and were advised that existing resources, including the Hertfordshire Futures Opportunity Portal, were being promoted locally. The need for greater access to careers advice for adults considering a career change was also raised, with officers noting that this was being considered through the adult skills work with North Hertfordshire College.

The Committee was advised that the local skills strategy was being aligned with the Hertfordshire Economic Strategy and that partnership working with employers remained a key priority. This included engagement with larger businesses such as Airbus and support for SMEs through WENTA and the Council's business centre.

Members also discussed the economic pressures facing businesses, including rising costs, and were advised that developing local skills and ensuring businesses could access an appropriately skilled workforce formed an important part of supporting Stevenage's wider economy.

In response to a question from the Chair, the Portfolio Holder explained that the Council supported SME's through a range of initiatives, including business advice and guidance on funding and grants for local businesses. The Council was also working to maintain and improve its industrial units to improve energy efficiency and reduce operating costs for businesses. It was also working with local colleges, schools and employers, to develop skills, promote STEM careers and create pathways into employment.

Members welcomed the progress made and commended the work undertaken through Stevenage Works and the Skills Agenda, while highlighting the importance of continuing to monitor the number of young people who were not in education, employment or training.

4 **UPDATE ON COST OF LIVING**

The Committee received an update on the Council's work to support residents with the cost of living, with progress considered against the recommendations from the previous review.

Officers outlined the range of advice and signposting available through Council services, including face to face support, Citizens Advice, welfare and debt advisers, tenancy and housing options teams. The importance of early intervention was emphasised, particularly where residents were experiencing difficulties with rent or other household costs, to prevent issues escalating.

The Committee was advised that the previous Housing Support Fund had been replaced by the Crisis and Resilience Fund, with support administered through Citizens Advice following an affordability assessment. Other financial assistance, including support with rent shortfalls and schemes continued to be promoted to residents.

Members discussed the continuation of Community Cafes and were advised that, although the original funding was no longer available, alternative funding had been secured to support community cafés until July 2027. Officers agreed to provide Members with information on the locations of the Community Cafés so that residents could be appropriately signposted. Officers also clarified that the Court Desk was available to all residents, including those renting privately.

The Committee was advised that frontline staff continued to receive training to help identify and respond to cost of living issues, particularly officers working directly with residents.

Members considered Council Tax and rent arrears, which were monitored and reported through the Council's performance arrangements. Officers advised that work was underway to explore the relationship between arrears and areas of deprivation or lower incomes, with a view to provide targeted support. It was further noted that rent arrears were also benchmarked against other local authorities across Hertfordshire.

The impact of the cost of living on local businesses was also discussed. Officers acknowledged the pressures facing the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, including energy and fuel costs and changing consumer behaviour. Support was being provided through WENTA and the promotion of available grants, while regeneration activity and engagement with businesses and market traders were being used to support the town centre and diversify its offer.

In response to a question on whether the Council was doing all it could to support residents, the Portfolio Holder advised Members that although the Council had limited influence over wider costs such as energy, fuel and food prices, significant work was being undertaken through advice, signposting, tenant engagement and early intervention.

Members also highlighted the Council's work to improve the energy efficiency of its

housing stock, including investment in 237 homes through the Social Housing Decarbonisation Fund, with 66% of Council homes now meeting EPC B or C standards. Further investment was expected to improve a total of 379 Council homes through the programme.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part I Business.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

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 involve the likely disclosure of exempt information as described in paragraphs1 – 7 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Act as amended by Local Government (Access toInformation) (Variation) Order 2006.

2.That Members consider the reasons for the following reports being in Part II and determine whether or not maintaining the exemption from disclosure of the information contained therein outweighs the public interest in disclosure.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR