Scrutiny Committee

16:30 to 18:40 **Thursday, 24 April 2025**

Present:	Councillors Wright (Chair), Carrington, Champion (substitute for Galvin), Fox, Fulton-McAlister, Padda, Sands, Schmierer (substitute for Catt), Smith
Apologies:	Councillors Catt, Davis, and Galvin
In attendance:	Councillor Hampton, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Climate Responsive Norwich Councillor Kendrick, Cabinet Member for Modern and Open Council Councillor Jones, Cabinet Member for Housing Emily Yule, Executive Director of Resources Davina Howes, Executive Director of Communities and Housing Jan Robinson, Head of Legal and Governance (Monitoring Officer) Robert Carmichael, Democratic Services Manager Andrew Summers, Head of Environmental Services Paul Rabbits, Environment Services Manager (Delivery) Julia Medler, Head of Customers, IT and Digital Max Griffiths, Neighbourhood and Community Enabling Manager

1. Declarations of interest.

1.1 There were no declarations of interest.

2. Minutes

2.1 **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 20 March 2025 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

3. A Parks and Green Spaces Strategy for Norwich – Results of Consultation and Final Draft

3.1 Councillor Hampton, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for a Climate Responsive Norwich, introduced the report. The Committee had considered the strategy on 21 March 2024 and made recommendations to Cabinet. The report was returning to the committee, following a period of consultation from

25 November 2024 to 2 January 2025 and the incorporation of the Scrutiny Committee's comments.

3.2 Councillor Hampton highlighted the strong response to the consultation, which was hosted on the Get Talking Norwich website and widely promoted. The consultation received 384 responses, with 48% in favour of the strategy. Following consultation, the strategy had been revised, and an approximate timescale had been added to the action plan. Councillor Hampton explained that the strategy was aspirational, and next steps included resourcing the strategy and attracting external funding. Also, a Green Spaces Strategy Group was to be established.

3.3 Members were pleased to see the report and the inclusion of their recommendations which Councillor Hampton explained were covered throughout the strategy, although some of the wording had been amended. Councillor Hampton explained that there was some overlap of the strategy with the Climate Responsive Norwich Programme 2025-35 and Biodiversity Strategy 2022-32. Some actions, which Members had expected to see covered in this strategy, were addressed there.

3.4 A Member noted that the Norwich Youth Advisory Boards' Right to Play campaign was not mentioned in the strategy and asked whether that came up in the consultation. Councillor Hampton clarified that the launch of the campaign was after the end of the consultation period, however, the broad themes were picked up and a Play Strategy would be developed over the summer period.

3.5 One Member queried when the annual forum would take place as it was listed as a short-term priority and action. The Environmental Services Manager explained that, considering good practice from other authorities, this was achievable within the next 6 months and suggested that the end of the Green Flag Award judging season was an appropriate time to do this.

3.6 Members sought assurance that smaller parks and parks in areas of social deprivation were receiving equal attention. The Environmental Services Manager explained that capturing all of the work that was being undertaken was challenging, however, there were smaller projects such as The Dell which had improved access, awareness and volunteer engagement. The Environmental Services Manager felt that this was something the Council was doing well. The Committee commented that there were other projects doing well across the city, namely the Norwich Fringe Project.

3.7 Discussion ensued on maintenance of parks and green spaces. In response to a question, the Environmental Services Manager explained that standards of maintenance across the city were high, but recognised room for improvement. He stated that enhancing the skills of the current workforce was

a priority and potential actions included bringing in external expertise to help upskill staff.

3.8 In response to a question from the Committee, officers clarified that both physical signage in parks and digital promotion was a priority. The Environmental Services Manager recognised the importance of physical signage, particularly in telling the public who to report issues to, as well as the potential for digital media and the website to increase engagement. The Environmental Services Manager explained that Norwich contains many parks with important heritage and had the potential to be marketed as destination sites.

3.9 One Member asked whether there was a strategy for working with beekeepers, or the potential for a strategy in the future. The Cabinet Member for a Climate Responsive Norwich agreed to look into this suggestion.

3.10 One Member asked officers about the strategies to deal with anti-social behaviour in the city centre. The Environmental Services Manager told Members that they were in discussion with the Safer Norwich Partnership Board regarding strategies to deal with this. This included a stronger Police presence and increased CCTV. He assured Members that this situation was being monitored.

3.11 When discussion ensued on green space within the city centre, the Environmental Services Manager agreed that there was a challenge in creating new spaces but agreed with a Member that the redevelopment of Anglia Square would possibly provide an opportunity to do so.

3.12 In response to a Member's question, Councillor Hampton reiterated that the strategy would span a 10-year period, meaning it had to be resilient and include actions and priorities that would be applicable over the short and long term.

3.13 One Member queried how the growing use of tennis courts was monitored and what evidence the Council had to suggest that more courts were a priority over other types of activity. Councillor Hampton explained that this data had been collected through booking systems and that decisions were taken on an evidence basis. When asked how further development of all-weather courts was compatible with the need to reduce urban overheating and spongy surfaces, Councillor Hampton agreed that that was not the ideal surface but reemphasised their popular usage across the city as a public amenity.

3.14 In response to a Member's question, Councillor Hampton outlined that potential funding sources were listed in the strategy.

3.15 The Chair thanked Members and officers for their input.

4. Good Employment Charter

4.1 The Executive Director of Resources introduced the report. The report set out the key characteristics of the Charter and discussed the implementation options for both the Council and the potential to produce a scheme that could be adopted by employers across the city. The Executive Director of Resources told the Committee that the Council was delivering much of the good practice set out in the report, however, implementation across the City would take more resource.

4.2 Members asked questions around employee engagement. The Executive Director of Resources explained that the Council had begun implementing quarterly briefings for all staff. This was currently quarterly as a trial, and she explained that there would be opportunities to provide ad hoc briefings on particular topics, including local government reorganisation. The sessions were designed to be accessible and were delivered in-person to encourage face to face contact, with different time options available. The Executive Director of Resources explained that staff could also engage with newsletters, emails, the intranet and Viva Engage, which had recently been introduced. Managers and team leaders were also vital in sharing messages across the organisation.

4.3 Discussion ensued on staff training and development opportunities. In response to a Member's question on development, the Executive Director of Resources explained that all staff at the Council were offered a learning and development package that was offered through online and face-to-face sessions. Learning was focused on core skills for working in a local authority environment. The Executive Director of Resources also explained that annual performance reviews were used by managers and staff to identify personal development objectives and potential training opportunities. Staff were able to take part in secondments, job shadowing and networks to gain more experience and there was a cohort of managers on a management development programme which had recently been rolled out. When asked about how the use of interim staff effected staff development, the Executive Director of Resources explained that it was made clear to interims that imparting knowledge and skills on others was a key part of their role. This was intended to upskill those around them.

4.4 The Executive Director of Resources also explained that the Council offered a range of apprenticeship types. These supported people to obtain professional qualifications and progress in their career.

4.5 In response to a question about implementation of the charter, the Executive Director of Resources clarified that the Council was not opposed to starting new projects or initiatives in light of local government reorganisation. However, she told Members that both existing and new activity must be

considered through the lens of local government reorganisation and consider the options for accelerating this work.

4.6 Members noted that the charter did not state anything about engagement with trade unions and felt that this needed to be included. The Executive Director of Resources told Members that the Council was engaged with trade unions, and it was possible to add this to the Council's version, but if the Committee were considering a city-wide approach, that would be impossible to implement.

4.7 One Member asked if it was possible to increase the availability of mental health first aid training for Council staff. The Executive Director of Resources told Members that the Council had a number of trained mental health first aiders, and this was under regular review. The Council also offered a mental health first aid course to all managers. Metrics were monitored, however, this would be promoted more to ensure that staff know it is available.

4.8 When asked to clarify the purpose of the charter for Members, the Executive Director of Resources explained that from a Council perspective, it was a consolidation of best practice which would enable the Council to formalise the steps it was already taking and monitor itself against set criteria. In terms of the wider business community and employees, the charter was an accreditation system that would enable employers to attract more employees based on their positive credentials and support employees to have a better working experience. This would act as an assurance piece, meaning employers across the City acted in a responsible, ethical and compassionate way. The Chair and other Members agreed that this was an opportunity to lead by example.

4.9 In response to a Member's question, the Executive Director of Resources explained that the Council was able to recommend the charter to the council's wholly owned companies such as Norwich City Services Limited (NCSL), but it could not mandate that they adopt it. Consequently, the committee agreed to ask Cabinet to ask the board of NSCL to consider adopting the charter. One Member asked if the Council was able to publicly prioritise business from organisations who were signed up to the charter and officers stated that they would need to look into that.

4.10 Discussion ensued on procurement and whether the council would be able to request that suppliers demonstrated the characteristics of a good employer. The Executive Director of Resources stated that suppliers were asked to demonstrate different accreditations and this would be considered.

4.11 Members queried how the Council would monitor companies that had signed up to the charter to ensure they were still achieving the key characteristics. The Executive Director of Resources stated that there would be a process to

ensure accreditation was maintained. This would be considered in a proposal to Cabinet and resources would be assessed. In response to a Member's question, the Executive Director of Resources recognised that some authorities used 3 tiers, however the report looked at 2 tiers, which was the more basic level. Tiers would be considered as part of a more detailed proposal.

4.12 A Member noted that managing organisational change was not mentioned as a characteristic in the charter, but that this was important in the context of local government reorganisation. The Executive Director of Resources agreed that this was important and reminded the committee of the full review of HR policies that was underway and stated that managing organisational change was a priority policy to be reviewed.

4.13 **RESOLVED,** unanimously, to recommend to Cabinet:

1) To include a commitment to recognise and engage with trade unions.
2) To proceed at pace with the introduction of a Good Employer Charter.
3) To ask the Board of Norwich City Services Limited (NCSL) to consider adopting a Good Employer Charter.
4) Amend the contract standing orders to ask suppliers to demonstrate the characteristics of a Good Employer.

5. Communicating with the Council

5.1 The Executive Director of Communities and Housing introduced the report. The Committee had considered a scoping document about communicating with the Council on 23 January 2025, which referenced a motion to full Council on 14 March 2023 about contacting and communicating with the Council. The report followed the committee's request to see the progress made against the actions within the initial motion to Council.

5.2 Members asked for further information about the Housing Hub, which had recently been launched by the Council as a means for online communication with tenants. Officers confirmed that the Hub was in the early stages and had been promoted in TLC for tenants. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing offered to share a briefing on this in the Councillor E-Bulletin to ensure Members were aware.

5.3 Discussion ensued on handling access issues. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing told Members that officers preferred to take an engagement and encouragement approach when dealing with issues in accessing properties for safety checks, however, there was a legal route to ensure the safety of tenants if necessary. When dealing with complex cases, officers would consult with each other, work on a case-by-case basis and

involve external agencies if appropriate. Cases were kept open to ensure they were monitored until there was resolution. Councillor Jones, Cabinet Member for housing, told Members that the council needed to be more adaptable for those with complex needs and this was an ongoing conversation with tenancy engagement.

5.4 In response to a Member's question about customer forms, the Head of Customers, IT and Digital told the committee that most council forms were completed outside of customer accounts, therefore, they were not able to save progress as they worked through the form. However, officers were looking at simplifying forms within the next year. This would make them more user-friendly and prevent them from timing out.

5.5 Members asked for an update on improving council communications with contractors. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing explained that this was ongoing and Contract Managers in the Property Team had regular contact with contractors. She told Members that tenant engagement would be a key consideration of future contractors. There had been a reduction in the number of complaints received and maintenance figures had improved, however, the Executive Director of Communities and Housing recognised that messaging should be clearer given that the council had many smaller contractors.

5.6 Discussion ensued on assessing the customer journey. The Head of Customers, IT and Digital told the committee that text surveys were done every quarter to monitor customer satisfaction. This enabled customers to tell the council how they felt about the service and texts were a quick way to do this. Customers were asked to give their details so that if negative feedback was given, officers were able to look at the specific case. This was then used to train staff and make improvements to the service. The Head of Customers, IT and Digital also explained that calls were recorded and reviewed, which enabled them to complete a score sheet for the Advisors.

5.7 The Committee asked for more information on the five-year visiting programme. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing explained that anyone in a new tenancy received a visit in the first year to see how things were going. The visiting programme was 5 years due to limited resources, however, if there were concerns about a tenant or tenancy, these would be increased.

5.8 Members sought clarification on whether the tenancy app was just for Council staff. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing explained that it was for staff. This would improve efficiency during property visits and provide staff with up-to-date information on each property. This had replaced a paper-based system. In response to a Member suggestion, the Executive Director of Communities and Housing agreed that Members would be able to see a

demonstration of how the app works and assured Members that it would be rolled out to residents at a later point.

5.9 The Committee asked if the Council had considered a participatory democracy approach instead of consultation. The Neighbourhood and Community Enabling Manager explained that whilst participatory processes yielded good results, they were resource heavy. He told Members that it was important to consider using the right approach at the right time. For example, a co-production approach with people with lived experience of seeking sanctuary was being considered for the Council of Sanctuary Strategy consultation.

5.10 A further question was raised on how residents who were not comfortable with digital services were being supported. The Head of Customers, IT and Digital recognised that not everyone can access online services and reiterated that the strategy aimed to improve online services, not force everyone to use them. Those who did not wish to use online services were still able to phone in or see staff by appointment at City Hall.

5.11 A Member noted that the team had been restructured to prioritise gas and electrical compliance and had a 100% compliance record, which was very positive. Members requested to see the current and previous years' figures of how many properties staff were unable to access. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing agreed to provide this.

5.12 In response to a Member's question, the Executive Director of Communities and Housing explained the rationale for working with Tpas, leading tenant engagement experts. They would provide the council with expertise and best practice to help shape opportunities for tenants who wanted to be more formally involved in scrutinising council services.

5.13 One Member told officers that improvements were needed to enable ad hoc customer contact. The Head of Customers, IT and Digital explained that services were operated by appointment to ensure that customers were matched with staff who had the right skills for their issue. They were not able to guarantee appointments for members of the public who visited City Hall ad hoc.

5.14 Members queried why a single point of contact approach for residents was not a viable option. The Executive Director of Communities and Housing explained that there were some cases where there was a named officer as a contact, however, this was not possible in every case due to resources. Councillor Jones, the Cabinet Member for housing, added that having a single point of contact risked resulting in a single point of failure. This could also slow down response time if a member of staff was away. The Head of

Customers, IT and Digital reminded Members that a reception service was being introduced in the contact area at City Hall.

5.15 The Chair drew the item to a close, noting that Councillor Catt had sent questions to officers ahead of the meeting and these had been responded to by officers via email.

6. Scrutiny Committee Work Programme 2024-2025

6.1 Members noted the Work Programme. Officers told Members that TOPIC forms would be circulated soon, in order to begin setting the work programme for the next municipal year.

6.2 **RESOLVED** to agree the work programme.

(The Chair closed the meeting).

CHAIR