Scrutiny Committee

16:30 to 18:50 **Thursday, 18 September 2025**

Present: Councillors Wright (Chair), Galvin (Vice-Chair), Caine (substitute for Champion), Davis, Fulton-McAlister, Knight (substitute for Hoechner), Lawes, Sands (M), Sands (S), Smith and Stutely.

Apologies: Councillors Champion, Hoechner and Kendrick

In attendance: Louise Rawsthorne, Chief Executive

Emily Yule, Executive Director of Resources

17. Declarations of Interest

17.1 Councillor Lawes declared a disclosable pecuniary interest with regards item 14 in the minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2025, which referred to the private rented sector. As this was not an item for debate at the meeting, there was no requirement to recuse himself.

18. Minutes

18.1 **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting held on 17 July 2025 were confirmed and signed as a true record.

19. Update from the Council's Representative on the Norfolk Health Overview Select Committee

19.1 (The Chair agreed to take this item first)

19.2 Councillor Galvin, the Council's representative on the Norfolk Health Overview Select Committee (NHOSC), gave a verbal update on the last two meetings of the Committee.

19.3 She highlighted the main topics at the July 2025 meeting, the first being the Norfolk and Waveney Integrated Care Board (ICB) Transition, which followed

the government's announcement that it would abolish NHS England. The transition would consist of six regional ICBs being consolidated into three and there would be a 50% staff reduction across Norfolk and Suffolk. NHOSC also discussed the abolishment of Healthwatch, which had provided a forum for service users, produced reports and had acted as a critical friend to NHS providers since 2012.

19.4 Councillor Galvin explained that NHOSC had resolved to write to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about the disbandment of the Healthwatch service. A letter had been sent in July 2025, but no response had yet been received.

19.5 Councillor Galvin informed Members of the following appointments that had been confirmed at the July NHOSC meeting. Councillor Galvin had been appointed as the link Member for the Norfolk Community Health and Care NHS Trust (NCH&C) and Councillor Neale from Norfolk County Council was appointed as the link Member for the Norfolk and NHS University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust (NNUH).

19.6 Councillor Galvin highlighted the main topics at the September 2025 meeting. This included an update on the Norfolk and Waveney University Hospital Group. In April 2025, NHS England approved the James Paget University Hospital, the Norfolk and Norwich University Hospital (which included Cromer Hospital and the Jenny Lind Children's Hospital) and the Queen Elizabeth Teaching Hospital King's Lynn, to form together as a new hospital group, known as the Norfolk and Waveney University Hospitals Group. Each Trust remained its own legal entity. NHOSC received a report detailing issues affecting patient care, waiting times and the current financial environment. She noted that all three trusts were in financial recovery programmes and the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn had been ranked last in a league table rating all 134 acute hospital trusts in England by NHS England, which was disappointing.

19.7 The September NHOSC meeting also looked at the Advice and Guidance model. Councillor Galvin informed Members that advice and guidance was a national NHS model that allowed GPs and other primary care professionals to seek specialist advice for patients who had not yet been referred to hospital services and may not require referral. It was a means of providing early advice. Advice and Guidance had not received specific funding until now. NHOSC discussed safeguards in place to ensure that appropriate treatment was not missed and requested a further update on this in six months' time.

19.8 Lastly, it was noted that a report on the Vulnerable Adults Service and Health Inclusion Hub was on the Forward Work Programme of NHOSC, but the ICB was due to relet the contract. Councillor Galvin noted that NHOSC had not had sight of any changes to the specification and that it would possibly be detrimental to the service and to vulnerable people in Norwich. Consequently,

NHOSC asked for a written answer on whether there were any changes to the specification. Councillor Galvin advised Members that a written answer had been provided, however, it was marked as confidential. Councillor Galvin was in discussions with Norfolk County Council's Monitoring Officer about the rationale for the response being confidential.

19.9 Future meetings of NHOSC would look at topics such as digital transformation and hospital transport.

19.10 (Councillor Fulton McAlister joined the meeting)

19.11 Following Councillor Galvin's update, the Committee **RESOLVED** to ask the Norfolk Health Select Overview Committee to scrutinise the ICB specification of the Vulnerable Adults Service openly due to the health impacts changes would have on the City.

20. HR Processes

20.1 The Executive Director of Resources presented the report to the Committee. The report provided an updated review of the Council's HR service, recognising scope for improvement. She informed Members that improvement work was ongoing and set out in an Action Plan. The Executive Director of Resources highlighted improvements in the reduction on spend on agency staff and in response to the DBS Audit, which had been received by the Audit Committee.

20.2 The Chair opened the discussion to questions from Members.

20.3 A Member highlighted paragraph 4.10 in the report and asked whether there was a breakdown of applications at different grades and at what level that tapered off. The Executive Director of Resources explained that it was a complex picture and often depended on the role. She offered to provide a more enhanced data set that could address those points. Members and the Chair agreed that that would be helpful, noting that the public sector found it challenging to compete with the private sector, particularly due to remuneration.

20.4 In response to a Member's question about diversity amongst the Council's workforce, the Executive Director of Resources explained that a separate Equalities Monitoring report went to the Scrutiny Committee on an annual basis and was on the Work Programme for later in the year. The report before the Committee acknowledged that there was a low level of disclosure of protected characteristics at the Council. Officers were trying to understand the causes of the low disclosure.

20.5 Members discussed the exit interviews. Members noted that the completion rate of exit interviews for Q1 was only 26%. A Member asked if statistics would be provided for a longer period. The Executive Director of Resources explained that due to a lack of consistent data gathering over the past few years, it was difficult to compile accurate data for the Committee. She advised Members that officers were working to improve the exit interview take up by offering alternatives such as paper questionnaires, conversations with line managers or someone who was not an employee's direct line manager. She had also engaged with union colleagues ahead of presenting the report to the Committee who advised that employees may hesitate to take part in exit interviews because they did not know how that information would be used. A Member proposed that a mechanism, such as an anonymised form, should be established with the trade unions and reviewed yearly. The Executive Director of Resources said that this approach would be considered, however she was focused on creating an open and safe culture, where people did feel comfortable to give feedback in an interview. She noted that the Council would roll out pulse surveys on a quarterly basis to measure how the organisation feels.

20.6 In response to a question on mental health, the Executive Director of Resources stated the Council was recruiting more mental health first aiders and planning to reconvene the Staff Mental Health Working Group who had not met for some time due to availability issues.

20.7 Discussion ensued on training needs. A Member noted the positive step to empower Line Managers to undertake HR decisions within their department, however, acknowledged that that would be accompanied by a large training need. A Member suggested that training was done through ACAS, a government-endorsed organisation, which officers explained that the HR team had already been utilising and looking at upscaling to Managers.

20.8 In response to a Member's request for more context behind the report, the Executive Director of Resources explained that the HR service had faced challenges, including a lack of modernisation and responding to the changing needs of the workforce. Learning and organisational development had been under resourced and there had been a primary focus on employee relations. A combination of these factors had led to underperformance; however, the Council performed well in compliance and employee disputes, meaning it was not making the Council vulnerable to challenge.

20.9 The Chief Executive added that an action plan was in development and would be shared soon.

20.10 Members discussed the decrease in agency spend as a positive step forward. A Member queried whether the Council was spending a similar amount on agency spend with other Councils of a similar size. The Executive Director of

Resources explained that she did not have benchmarking data on the interim and agency spend across other authorities, but would explore this.

20.11 Members discussed mental health related absences. The report highlighted that absence related to mental health had reduced by 26.4% year-on-year, which a Member noted was a good reduction. The Executive Director of Resources explained that the statistic was based on the two years presented in the report, however, work still needed to be done on understanding the causes behind the reduction.

20.12 A Member commented that it was positive to see that the Council was likely to allocate additional resources to the HR team and proposed that the amount of trade union facility time was also increased on a temporary basis. The Chief Executive explained that she had recently discussed this with union colleagues following a series of all-staff briefings which had discussed local government reorganisation and other matters. The Chief Executive would discuss local government reorganisation, staff support, programme work and a potential increase of facility time at the Joint Consultative and Negotiating Committee the following week with union colleagues.

20.13 A Member requested that managers were given extra training as they had been informed by full-time officials of different unions about issues of trade union representatives undertaking their trade union duties. He and offered to discuss this further outside of the meeting. The Executive Director of Resources assured the Committee that all trade union representatives had a list of agreed, authorised duties, that were agreed with their managers.

20.14 In response to a Member's question, the Executive Director of Resources explained that the Council supported officers to become members of their relevant professional bodies and individual job specifications identified any required memberships. The Council supported this through contributions to membership fees. The Chair noted that many professional bodies were recognised by HMRC as legitimate for collection through payroll, meaning there was a tax saving. He asked whether that was something the Council had looked into and the Executive Director of Resources agreed to find out.

20.15 A Member asked what the Council was doing to recruit and retain suitable applicants. The Executive Director of Resources answered that the Council looked for opportunities to promote staff from within, enabling career progression and development. The Council also utilised secondments to enable staff to explore different areas of work and develop additional skills. In terms of retention, the Executive Director of Resources explained that the Council offered flexible working, holiday, access to employee support programme and employee networks which sought to make the Council an attractive place to work. In response, a Member asked if officers had access to retention rates for staff and the Executive Director of Resources offered to bring further data to the Committee. In response to a question about

inductions, the Executive Director explained that improvements were being made, and employees were reporting a more effective induction process.

20.16 Members discussed the Council's e-learning platform. Different learning modules were available for staff, including menopause awareness, which Members were pleased to see. A Member proposed that support should be available for employees dealing with infertility and/or fertility treatment, which the Executive Director of Resources agreed to explore.

20.17 A Member was concerned about the impact of local government reorganisation on staff wellbeing and asked what support was in place. The Executive Director of Resources told Members that the Council was offering all-staff briefings where local government reorganisation was openly discussed and staff were able to ask questions to senior leadership. Staff were also invited to ask questions outside of the meeting. The Executive Director of Resources stated that there were many opportunities for staff emerging from local government reorganisation. Support for wellbeing, training and development would be available, and a programme was in development.

20.18 A Member felt that Councillors needed to more involved and have sight on Council updates going forward, such as staff briefings or digital updates. The Executive Director of Resources agreed to look for occasions to bring officers and Members together, whilst respecting the boundaries between Member and officer roles.

20.19 In response to a question about support for employees who were ex-forces, the Executive Director of Resources commented that the Council was a member of the Armed Forces Covenant.

20.20 Discussion ensued on recruitment. A Member noted that initial data they had found online suggested that the Council's cost on interim and agency staff was higher than comparable councils. They stated that it would be beneficial to see more data that broke down the levels at which people were appointed in the Council on an interim or agency basis. Secondly, the Member queried whether the Council had a policy for governance of interim appointments to council owned companies and joint ventures. In response, the Executive Director of Resources clarified that the company board would be responsible for their recruitment policies. As a shareholder, the Council would not necessarily have a direct influence over that but would have an assurance role. She explained that there was no Council policy on appointment of interims to Council owned companies.

20.21 A Member proposed several possible recommendations, which the Committee agreed needed further discussion and development in a commission of Scrutiny Committee Members outside of the meeting.

20.22 **RESOLVED** to recommend that:

1. The Council runs an all-staff, mental health survey to better inform the Scrutiny Committee about mental health absences and whether staff feel supported in their roles.

2. The Scrutiny Committee receives the action plan following the HR review as soon as possible to understand progress being made.

3. Officers explore ways for Members to be included in organisational culture change and share the responses of cultural surveys with all Members via an All-Member Briefing.

4. Officers explore opportunities for joint officer and Councillor training and develop a Councillor induction programme that can be offered to all current Members, and any new Members to come.

5. The Equalities Information Report which is scheduled for the December meeting of the Scrutiny Committee, covers steps that the Council are taking to improve diversity within the workforce.

6. The Council offers specific support for staff dealing with infertility or fertility issues.

7. The Council ensures that it has an officer who is an Armed Forces Covenant Liaison and runs a survey of any staff who are current reservists or contemplating joining the reserve forces, to understand whether they feel supported by the Council.

8. The Council explores a temporary increase in facility time for trade union colleagues.

9. A budget breakdown for learning and development, including mental health first aiders, is presented to the Committee at a future meeting.

10. Officers organise a commission of Scrutiny Committee Members to further discuss the possible recommendations below outside of the meeting, before bringing back any finalised versions of the recommendations to be discussed and agreed at a future meeting of the Scrutiny Committee:

    a) Introduce a strengthened policy and monitoring framework to limit the use and duration of interim and agency staff, ensuring transparency and timely transition to permanent appointments.

    b) Set a maximum contract duration for interim/agency appointments (e.g. 6 months)

    c) Extension beyond the initial contract must be signed off, not only by the relevant director and portfolio holder, but also reported to the

shadow portfolio holder (and group spokes/leaders) for information and to invite input, to ensure cross party transparency and accountability.

d) Require all posts covered by interim/agency staff for more than 3 months to be reviewed, and where appropriate, advertised as permanent or fixed term roles within a defined timescale (i.e. 8 weeks)

e) All senior interim recruitment should require a member panel to maintain consistency across the council.

f) Publish quarterly reports to Cabinet & Scrutiny on Interim/agency usage including:

    a. Total spend and headcount

    b. Duration of individual placements

    c. Progress towards permanent recruitment for each role

g) Mandating exiting reviews for all interim appointments to collect knowledge and develop learning opportunities for future recruitment policy.

h) Council owned companies and joint ventures should, where possible, prioritise and appoint permanent council officers or elected members as directors over interim staff.

i) Where there is no suitable permanent officer Cabinet must approve the appointment of the officer as interim director, with a clear rationale and agreed maximum term of appointment.

j) Any directorship held by an interim should automatically trigger a review in advance of their contract ending, with Cabinet considering whether to appoint a replacement before departure.

k) Before appointment of interims as directors, the MO should complete a comprehensive investigation and written risk assessment covering conflicts of interest, continuity arrangements, and succession planning.

CHAIR