HIGHLAND NHS BOARD	Assynt House Beechwood Park Inverness IV2 3BW Tel: 01463 717123 Fax: 01463 235189 www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk	NHS Highland na Gàidhealtachd
MINUTE of MEETING of the STAFF GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE	**2nd September 2025 at 10.00 am**	

Present

Elspeth Caithness, Employee Director
Bert Donald, Whistleblowing Champion
Kate Dumigan, Staffside Representative
Dawn MacDonald, Staffside Representative
Philip MacRae, Non-Executive, (Chair)
Joanne McCoy Non-Executive Director
Gerry O'Brien, Board Vice Chair
Janice Preston, Non-Executive Director
Steve Walsh, Non- Executive (Vice Chair)

In Attendance:

Gareth Adkins, Director of People and Culture
Evan Beswick, Chief Officer, Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership
Gaye Boyd, Deputy Director of People
Louise Bussell, Nurse Director
Heledd Cooper, Director of Finance
Jennifer Davies, Director of Public Health
Karen Doonan, Committee Administrator
Phillipa Hurley, Corporate Assistant (observing)
Arlene Johnstone, Interim Chief Officer, Highland Health and Social Care Partnership
David Park, Deputy Chief Executive
Heather Richardson, Head of Operations
Dominic Watson, Head of Corporate Governance
Nathan Ware, Governance and Corporate Records Manager
Michelle Abraham, Organisational Development Manager (Item 4.2)

1 WELCOME AND APOLOGIES

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. Apologies were received from F Davies and K Sutton. It was noted that H Richardson was deputising for K Sutton.

1.2 Declarations of Interest

There were no declarations of interest.

2 ASSURANCE REPORTS & COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATION

2.1 MINUTES OF MEETING HELD ON 1st July 2025

The minutes were **approved** and **agreed** as an accurate record.

2.2 ACTION PLAN

It was noted that all the actions were in progress and there would be an update given at the next meeting.

2.3 COMMITTEE WORKPLAN 2025-2026

Committee Members noted the workplan

3. MATTERS ARISING NOT ON THE AGENDA

None

4. Spotlight Session

4.1 Argyll and Bute HSCP
Evan Beswick, Chief Officer A & B HSCP

The Chief Officer A & B HSCP spoke to the presentation wherein it was highlighted:

- The partnership operated as an integrated Health and Social Care model, differing from North Highland's lead agency approach. Many posts were integrated and could be filled by either employer, supporting a fully joined-up service. Professional roles remained with their traditional home organisations to uphold staff governance and regulatory standards. The area had a highly dispersed population and workforce, with Argyll and Bute noted as having the largest number of inhabited islands in Scotland. Care was delivered as close to home as possible, though geographical challenges impacted service provision.
- A strategic priority within Argyll and Bute had been to build on individuals' assets and promote independence, rather than rely on services that fostered dependency.
- An Integrated Partnership Forum had been established, co-chaired by the Chief Officer and the staff-side lead from the Council, alongside a staff-side lead from the health side. The forum enabled concerns affecting large groups of staff to be raised and discussed.
- There had been recruitment challenges due to the rurality of the area however there had been work completed with the council and social housing providers to enable a link to housing for staff moving into the area and this had been a huge success.
- There was a strong community focus and there was consultation under way around some of the policy changes in respect of social care.
- There was a joint strategic plan that linked to the workforce planning and commissioning strategy, and it was noted that there was a huge workforce that works in the independent sector and was neither employed by health nor the council.
- A learning workshop had been held in August to understand what had been learned over the last year in respect of safe staffing work and the decisions that required to be made to meet obligations under the act.
- There had been challenges recruiting within people services and it was noted that there had been no people partner in place at any of the management team meetings due to this challenge.
- There had been limited success in reducing the use of agency staff with it being noted that the more remote and rural the location the more agency staff were used.
- Staff were able to access Open University Courses which allowed them to remain in the local area whilst they studied and achieved their qualifications.

Committee members queried the funding arrangements for integrated job posts. The Chief Officer for Argyll and Bute HSCP explained that integrated budgets existed within the Health and Social Care Partnership. The Integrated Joint Board received funding from both NHS Highland and the Council and was responsible for planning and delivering integrated services based on these resources. Some of the queries raised by committee members had related to operational matters rather than staff governance, and these would be addressed and discussed within the Joint Partnership Forums (JPFs) going forward. Assurance was given to committee that any discrepancies between job bandings in Argyll and Bute and North Highland would be dealt with through the processes that were in place.

The Whistleblowing Champion queried progress on addressing staff challenges in securing accommodation in remote areas, noting that staff had raised this issue during visits. The Whistleblowing Champion also asked whether these challenges were being resolved through the partnership arrangements that Argyll and Bute had with other agencies. The Chief Officer for Argyll and Bute HSCP explained that Argyll and Bute had been among the first authorities to declare a housing emergency. Whilst there had been some successes, the issue had not been easily resolved. Monthly meetings had taken place with housing providers, and discussions had covered not only staff accommodation but also residential care. The team had explored what could be achieved in partnership with housing providers, including the use of innovative models.

Committee members queried the Open University (OU) Courses with it being noted that whilst nursing courses could be accessed through the OU there was no route for Allied Health Professionals (AHPs) to follow a similar route and queried whether there was anything further that could be done to support the AHPs. The Chief Officer for Argyll and Bute HSCP stated that support was in place for medical professionals. The Rural Fellowship Scheme, jointly funded by NES and health, had enabled GPs who had just completed training to gain their first experience working in a rural setting, and this had proved highly successful.

It was noted that a sickness and absence summit had been planned to explore ways of supporting managers in handling absence sensitively and in a staff-centred manner, ensuring employees were supported in returning to the workplace.

The Director of People and Culture assured the committee that, regarding the job banding query raised by committee members, a working group had been established to explore the issue further. Discussions had also been taking place within the Area Partnership Forum.

4.2 Leadership Development Programme

Michelle Abraham, Organisational Development Manager

The Organisational Development Manager spoke to the presentation wherein it was highlighted:

- The Culture and Leadership Framework was a long-term programme aimed at improving how everyone worked together within the organisation.
- Capability had been built into each level, with a focus on embedding positive values and fostering a values-driven culture across the organisation.
- The Framework had examined the learning systems within the organisation to ensure that staff, leaders, and managers were supported in their development.
- The Leadership and Development Programme had been created to ensure that leaders possessed the appropriate leadership skills alongside technical management capability, enabling them to manage effectively.
- A total of 2,091 staff had completed workshops, with a further 267 staff having completed digital resources.
- The Virtual Leadership Conference, which had taken place in May of this year, had been attended by approximately 430 staff.
- The Leadership Network had grown to include approximately 281 staff.
- A Culture Zone had been developed, along with a course brochure, both of which were now available online for staff to access further information about the training opportunities available to them.
- Approximately 400 evaluation forms had been completed online, with very positive feedback received.
- Over the next two years, the focus would be shifted towards addressing development needs within the organisation. A strategic analysis had already been completed, which

identified the need to raise awareness of health and safety among those in leadership roles, as well as to strengthen support for career progression.

- It had also been identified that alignment with national development initiatives was necessary, and a framework was being piloted by NHS Education for Scotland (NES) based on a Scottish Leadership Success Profile.
- There would be a compulsory programme for new managers to attend to provide them with a stronger foundation from which to begin their leadership.

The Director of People and Culture thanked the Operations Development Manager and her team for the work they had carried out and highlighted that the team had also provided targeted interventions to support teams experiencing challenges in specific areas.

Committee members queried the context of the numbers presented, asking how many staff could have potentially taken part in the training. It was noted that staff side had requested a meeting with the Organisational Development Manager to further discuss some of the queries raised.

Committee members had also noted that leadership and management were distinct areas, and it was important to differentiate between the two when designing training. They had queried whether it was possible to seek examples of good leadership and management not only within NHS Scotland but externally as well.

The Whistleblowing Champion had queried how the outcomes of the work being undertaken were measured to assess the effectiveness for those who had completed the training. In relation to the compulsory training, committee members had asked who had made the decision regarding eligibility, and what emphasis had been placed within the training on supporting managers to hold challenging yet supportive conversations with their staff.

The Chair highlighted the gap between existing managers and those who would go through the compulsory training for new managers and queried if there was any risk involved.

The Director of People and Culture explained that the framework had been based on coaching, mentorship, and action learning sets, and as such, was not directly measurable. However, it had been intended to establish a standard for managers within the organisation, which they would then be able to demonstrate in their roles. Courageous Conversations had been included as a module within the training to support managers in conducting challenging conversations with staff. It had been emphasised that access to training was important for all staff, not just those in management roles, to embed a positive culture throughout the organisation.

Committee members had highlighted the challenges encountered in some early resolution situations, where managers had not responded as expected—often deferring to HR rather than addressing questions directly. Whilst it had been acknowledged that some situations were complex, it was noted that relatively straightforward questions—particularly those relating to existing policies designed to support staff—fell within the remit of managers and should have been addressed accordingly. The Director of People and Culture had explained that HR Advisors were there to provide guidance, and that a balance needed to be struck in more complex scenarios. It had been noted that the management training would help to build managers' confidence in making decisions.

5. <u>Items for Review and Assurance</u>

5.1 People and Culture Portfolio Board Update

Report by Gaye Boyd, Deputy Director of People

The Deputy Director of People and Culture explained that the level of assurance remained at moderate due to the amount of work yet to be completed. Attention was drawn to the appendix which detailed the work that had recently been completed. It was noted that whilst there was good attendance at the working groups, these were not full. The Deputy Director of People stated that the Terms of Reference continued to be reviewed to ensure that the correct people were in the correct groups.

Committee members queried the Wellbeing Roadshows and suggested including smaller venues. It was noted that future planning would consider a wider area. The Director of People and Culture emphasised the need to promote various items to staff and highlighted the importance of flexibility in delivering these across different locations. The Chair asked about the Gaelic-speaking post, specifically its funding duration and hours. The Deputy Director of People confirmed it would be full-time and funded for one year.

The Committee **noted** the report and took **moderate** assurance

5.2 Statutory and Mandatory Training Update
Report by Gareth Adkins, Director or People and Culture

The Director of People and Culture gave an update wherein it was highlighted:

- A Short Life Working Group (SLWG) had been established to identify barriers to statutory and mandatory training. This group completed its work earlier in the year.
- Within the past year improvements have been observed across all areas of the organisation.
- The focus on statutory and mandatory training would continue. It was noted that a new module on violence and aggression had been introduced, which all staff within the organisation were now required to complete.
- From February 2026, the focus on statutory and mandatory training would shift. Nine modules had been selected at a national level, meaning that staff joining the organisation who had already completed the training will not be required to repeat it.

The Chair raised a query regarding statutory training, specifically referencing fire safety training as a legal requirement. It was suggested that emphasising the statutory nature of such training might improve completion rates. The Director of People and Culture clarified that the statutory obligation related to the provision of the training itself. Further, the Health and Safety Committee had discussed local fire evacuation procedures and the management of associated risks, particularly within hospital environments where patients may be immobile. It was noted that consideration should be given to the risks linked to the training being delivered.

Committee members raised concerns regarding the level of access facilities staff had to TURAS, where the fire training was hosted. They questioned how assurance could be provided in the absence of on-site visits by the fire brigade, particularly as staff and buildings change over time. Members also queried how momentum would be maintained to achieve higher year-on-year completion rates for the training.

The Director of People and Culture highlighted Protected Learning Time (PLT) and cited that potentially this could be used in areas where low completion rates of training were found. It was noted that it was down to the leadership within each directorate to ensure that completion rates continued to improve.

Action: The Director of People and Culture to look at the compliance figures for facilities and discuss further with staff side and report back through the Area Partnership Forum.

The Committee **noted** the report and took **moderate** assurance.

5.3 Integrated Performance and Quality Report
Report by Gareth Adkins, Director of People and Culture

The Director of People and Culture spoke to the report wherein it was highlighted:

- Time to fill continued to be below the national average.
- Sickness absence rates had remained around 6%, though they had decreased from a higher level. Work was planned to identify areas with the highest rates to provide targeted support. Long-term absences were linked to more chronic conditions, and further efforts were needed to explore additional support options. The Director of People and Culture had offered to carry out further analysis to determine whether there was any correlation between age and long-term sickness figures.
- It was noted that, regarding the mandatory training figures in the report, bank staff were not permitted to take shifts without completing their training. However, the figures included inactive bank staff, which appeared as non-compliance, even though they were not actively working.

Action: Director of People and Culture to complete further analysis of any correlation between age and long-term sickness figures.

The Chair commended the Director of People and Culture on the work done in relation to reduced Time to Fill, noting that NHS Highland were 16 days below the national average.

Committee members queried when the leadership and management and wellbeing work that was being done would start reflecting in this report which showed that things were stabilising. The Director of People and Culture highlighted the work that had been done in respect of completion of appraisals which had continued to increase. There was a short life working group in place that was looking at this further. He noted that some of the work that may have to be done was the rebranding and relaunching of the importance of appraisals across the organisation.

The Whistleblowing Champion queried whether staff had come forward to request appraisals, or to explain why they had not been appraised. The Director of People and Culture explained that, often, the main challenge in completing appraisals had been finding the necessary time. It was noted that a small number of staff, who had perhaps worked for the organisation for many years, felt that appraisals were not particularly important. Work remained to be done to support managers in encouraging staff to recognise the value of appraisals.

Committee members queried whether agency staff and new staff had received their statutory and mandatory training in the same manner as bank staff. The Director of People and Culture explained that the short-life working group would consider new starts and how the training requirements could be applied to them going forward. It was noted that overseeing bank staff training had been easier, as there were more bank staff available than there were positions to fill, resulting in fewer operational consequences when requiring staff to complete training prior to commencing work.

The Committee **noted** the report and took **moderate** assurance.

5.4 Communications & Engagement 6-monthly Update
Report by Nicki Sturzaker, Head of Communications & Engagement

The Director of People and Culture spoke to the report, highlighting that its focus had been the social media checklist and the associated work undertaken. The checklist had been shared with the HR Sub-Group. It was noted that there had been several issues relating to social media use, and that this checklist provided clarity on several scenarios that could arise in what was considered a challenging area.

Committee members queried whether there had been a policy regarding the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the workplace. It was noted that safeguards from a governance perspective had been explored at a national level. The Deputy Chief Executive explained that Co-Pilot had been used within a controlled environment, and that licences had been obtained following review by the data protection team to ensure the safety of information. It was further noted that some clinical areas had clinicians piloting national programmes involving AI. There was no straightforward answer to the question, but it was felt that, where there was an advantage to the organisation, AI would be used within a controlled environment.

The Committee • **noted** the report and took **moderate** assurance • provided feedback on the draft Social Media Policy and Checklist

5.5 Strategic Risk Review

Report by Gareth Adkins, Director of People and Culture

The Director of People and Culture spoke to the paper, noting that there had been a successful workshop led by the Head of Health and Safety over the summer. It was further noted that a number of actions were ongoing as outlined within the paper.

The Committee took assurance – to give confidence of compliance with legislation, policy and Board objectives and took **moderate** assurance from • the review and refresh of the people and culture strategic risks • ongoing work to finalise level 2 risks

5.6 Whistleblowing Q1 Report

Report by Gareth Adkins, Director of People and Culture

The Director of People and Culture explained that there had been no new cases within the period; however, there had been some closures, and one case had remained open. An action plan would be created based on the cases that had been completed. The Chair queried the length of time the case that had remained open had been ongoing, and the Director of People and Culture clarified that, since the report had been written, that case had now been closed, noting that it had been a complex matter.

The Committee **noted** the report and took **moderate** assurance – to give compliance with legislation, policy and Board objectives noting challenges with timescales due to the complexity of cases and investigations.

6. Items for information and noting

6.1 Area Partnership Forum update of meeting held on 13 June 2025

The Whistleblowing Champion queried Item 7.8, the Whistleblowing Annual Report, within the minutes, and how feedback would be welcomed regarding the visits made by the Whistleblowing Champion to various areas within NHS Highland. It was noted that no feedback had been received since that meeting, and the Whistleblowing Champion reiterated that feedback from these visits was welcomed and that it was necessary to enhance the visits undertaken.

The Committee **noted** the Area Partnership Forum minutes of the 13 June 2025

6.2 Health and Safety Committee Minutes of meeting held on 3 June 2025

The Director of People and Culture highlighted Item 9.2 within the minutes and explained that further work had been undertaken regarding adverse events and how these were categorised. Continued improvement had been observed in the assurance reporting received from local health and safety groups. It was noted that a recent meeting had taken place with staff side representatives to establish an ongoing forum for health and safety, which would initially be dedicated to health and safety advisers working with staff side.

The Committee **noted** the Health and Safety Committee Minutes of meeting held on 3 June 2025.

7. Any other Competent Business

7.1 **Review / summary of meeting for Chair to highlight to Board**.

The Chair would highlight to the board:

- the spotlight session and the work that was going on in Argyll and Bute
- the social media checklist
- key highlights from the IPQR

8. Date & Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting is scheduled for Tuesday 4th November 2025 at 10 am via Microsoft Teams.

9. Future Meeting Schedule

The Committee Noted the remaining meeting schedule for 2025 as follows:

13 January 2026
3 March 2026

Close of Meeting 12.30pm