

Staff and Pensions Committee

Monday 6 March 2023

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Andy Jenns (Chair)
Councillor Bill Gifford (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Brian Hammersley
Councillor Christopher Kettle
Councillor Sarah Millar
Councillor Mandy Tromans

Officers

Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
John Cole, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director, Governance and Policy
Andy Felton, Assistant Director, Finance
Liz Firmstone, Service Manager – Transformation
Bal Jacob, Strategic and Commissioning Manager (HROD)
Vicky Jenks, Pensions Administration Delivery Lead
Victoria Moffett, Lead Commissioner – Pensions and Investment
Chris Norton, Strategy and Commissioning Manager – Treasury, Pension, Audit and Risk
Kate Sullivan, Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance

1. General

On behalf of the Committee, the Chair welcomed Bal Jacob, who had recently joined the organisation as Strategic and Commissioning Manager (HROD).

(1) Apologies

There were no apologies.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There was none.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2022 be approved as a correct record

and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising.

2. Our People Strategy Annual Review

Kate Sullivan (Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance) introduced the report, stating that the refreshed Our People Strategy 2020 – 2025 had been endorsed by the Staff & Pensions Committee and Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee in December 2020. Since then, the Strategy had been presented annually to both committees for review and to seek endorsement for plans for the year ahead. She directed members' attention to the Our People Annual Review for 2022/23 and Year 3 (2023/25) Plan which showcased activities and performance against organisational priorities for 2022/23 and provided an overview of performance data and key priorities for the coming year. She advised that it was proposed to focus on five priority areas in 2023/24: Recruitment and Retention, Pay and Reward, Strategic Workforce Planning, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Employee Engagement.

Councillor Gifford expressed support for the objectives of the Strategy. He noted that 'Safe to be Authentic Self' would be introduced as a measure of success for 2023/24. He queried how this could be tracked by the organisation.

Kate Sullivan advised that it was proposed to monitor 'Safe to be Authentic Self' as a measure of success by means of responses to the Your Say Survey. A baseline of 79% had been calculated by combining relevant responses from the most recent Your Say Survey.

In response to Councillor Millar, Kate Sullivan advised that the Your Say Survey had highlighted concerns relating to rising costs of living. Data from the survey was being analysed to determine an appropriate response.

Sarah Duxbury (Assistant Director, Governance and Policy) highlighted that the Council was bound by the national negotiating framework for pay. However, there were additional ways that the organisation could reward its staff. The benefits of working for Warwickshire County Council were now being more prominently promoted, including within adverts for job vacancies.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Kate Sullivan advised that temporary agency contracts were required for certain key areas of service delivery, such as social work. However, measures were in place to achieve the right balance without relying unnecessarily on agency staff.

In response to Councillor Millar, Kate Sullivan advised that the trial of the Vivup Highfive platform had shown the advantages of enabling peer to peer recognition. However, take up of the offer was not high. Subsequently, it had been resolved to make use of Microsoft applications which provided a similar functionality at no additional cost to the organisation. The STAR Awards continued to provide opportunities to praise colleagues, enabling individuals and teams to be recognised for making an outstanding contribution.

In response to the Chair, Kate Sullivan advised that the Council had been awarded the Silver Thrive at Work accreditation in Summer 2021 for a period of three years. Work was underway to gather evidence to secure accreditation for an additional three years.

Councillor Millar moved that the recommendation be accepted and was seconded by Councillor Kettle. This was supported unanimously by the Committee.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the activity as set out in the 2022/23 Annual Review of Our People Strategy and endorses the 2023/24 Our People Strategy Delivery Plan.

3. Business Plan Report

Chris Norton (Strategy and Commissioning Manager – Treasury, Pension, Audit and Risk) introduced this report which set out Warwickshire Pension Fund’s Business Plan for 2023/24, including details of governance arrangements and actuarial activities. He highlighted the addition of ‘Sustainability’ as a theme of the Action Plan for 2023/24, recognising the focus on climate risk. He advised that the Fund’s membership had continued to increase. This trend was projected to continue. The number of employers had also increased. He highlighted the additional demand that this placed on the Fund.

Chris Norton highlighted coverage in the report of key activities including the Member Self Service (MSS) scheme and Pensions Dashboard initiative. He advised that Workforce Planning continued to occupy an important part of the Business Plan to promote staff retention and maintain resilience. He highlighted the 38 actions listed within Appendix C of the report. A quarterly update of progress against these priorities would be provided to the Local Pension Board during the year ahead.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Chris Norton advised that i-Connect had proved to be an asset for academies joining the Fund, particularly those that did not have a large back-office staff.

In response to the Chair, members agreed to approve the recommendation of the report.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes and approves the Business Plan for 2023/24 as attached at Appendix 1 of the report.

4. Pensions Administration Activity and Performance Update

Vicky Jenks (Pensions Administration Delivery Lead) introduced the report which outlined key developments affecting pensions administration and the performance of the Pensions Administration Service (PAS). She reported that work to promote the Member Self Service (MSS) platform was ongoing. Take up of MSS had increased since the last update to the Committee and efforts were being made to further encourage members of the pension scheme to make use of the system. The report provided a commentary of performance against Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), improvements had been made against KPIs that were below target. She advised that workloads for the PAS had increased. It was proposed to make use of automation for basic tasks which would alleviate pressure on the team.

Vicky Jenks advised that use of the i-Connect system had helped to reduce the number of breaches. Employers had demonstrated a good record of supplying information in a timely way. Where breaches had occurred, it had been possible to resolve issues without difficulty. She

reported that employers had been notified of changes to contribution rates which would come into effect from 1 April 2023. A consultation on the Funding Strategy Statement (FSS) had also been completed. She highlighted commentary in the report relating to engagement with academies to clarify the Fund's expectations in circumstances when academies outsourced contracts. She advised that due to technical considerations, the Department for Work and Pensions had resolved to postpone the deadline for local government pension schemes to connect to the national Pensions Dashboard. This would provide additional time to complete the work that was required.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Vicky Jenks advised that pensioners had been notified that paper payslips would be discontinued on 30 May 2023. After this point, if there was a change to the amount being paid or a change to the tax code, a letter would be sent to notify the individual. It was hoped that more pensioners would choose to opt into the MSS scheme to allow e-payslips to be issued. She highlighted the environmental and cost-saving benefits of MSS. It was acknowledged that some pensioners would not be able to access their payslip electronically. Requests to receive a paper payslip would be assessed on a case-by-case basis.

In response to Councillor Millar, Vicky Jenks advised that work was ongoing to identify the barriers to take up of MSS and ways to increase engagement.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Vicky Jenks advised that the PAS continued to monitor workloads to ensure that it was adequately resourced to respond to increased demand. She advised that most new employers joining the Fund were academies. This was a relatively straightforward process. However, handling arrangements for academy's contractors was more resource intensive.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the content of the report.

5. Regulatory and Policy Update

Vicky Jenks (Pensions Administration Delivery Lead) introduced this report which provided a summary of recently reviewed Pension Fund policies and gave an update on regulatory developments in the pensions arena. She advised that the Fund had reviewed its Bribery and Fraud Policy, it was not considered that any amendments were currently required. The Fund was in the process of reviewing its Internal Dispute Resolution Procedure as part of the planned review cycle. No material changes were anticipated. She advised that it had been resolved to postpone the proposed review of governance processes until after the Scheme Advisory Board (SAB) has released the findings of its Good Governance Review. However, preparatory work had been undertaken.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Vicky Jenks advised that the Bribery and Fraud policy would continue to be monitored.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the updates contained within the Report.

6. Employers Joining and Leaving the Warwickshire Pension Fund

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee delegates authority to the Strategic Director for Resources to approve applications from the listed employers subject to the applications meeting the criteria required for admission:

- Newbold And Treddington CofE Primary School, which entered the Fosse Multi-Academy Trust on 1 November 2022.

7. Review of the Minutes of the Warwickshire Local Fire Pension Board Meeting of 7 November 2022

The minutes of the Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Local Pension Board of the Firefighters' Pension Scheme meeting of 7 November 2022 were noted.

8. Reports Containing Exempt or Confidential Information

Resolved:

That members of the public be excluded from the meeting for the items mentioned below on the grounds that their presence would involve the disclosure of exempt information as defined in paragraph 3 of Schedule 12A of Part 1 of the Local Government Act 1972.

9. Warwickshire Pension Fund Business Continuity Plan

The Committee held a confidential discussion.

10. Exempt Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the exempt minutes of the meeting held on 12 December 2022 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising.

11. Future Meeting Dates

Members noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting rose at 14:48.

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Chair