

Staff and Pensions Committee

Monday 4 March 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Yousef Dahmash (Chair)
Councillor Brian Hammersley
Councillor Christopher Kettle
Councillor Sarah Millar
Councillor Mandy Tromans

Officers

John Cole, Senior Democratic Services Officer
Jan Cumming, Senior Solicitor and Team Leader, Commercial and Contracts
Lisa Eglesfield, Pensions Administration Service Manager
Julie Elliston, Assistant Civic Services Officer
Liz Firmstone, Head of Finance Transformation and Transactions
Martin Griffiths, Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance
Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services
Paul Morley, Area Manager – Response, Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service
Kate Sullivan, Strategy and Commissioning Lead for Organisational Development

Others

Councillor George Jabbour (North Yorkshire Council), Vice Chair of the Border to Coast Pensions Partnership Joint Committee

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Bill Gifford.

(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 11 December 2023 be approved as an accurate

record and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising.

2. Our People Strategy Annual Review 2023/24 and Year 4 Plan 2024/25

Kate Sullivan (Strategy and Commissioning Lead for Organisational Development) introduced the report, stating that the Our People Strategy was reviewed each year and presented to the Committee. The Annual Review examined achievements over the past year as well as performance metrics and priority actions for the year ahead. She advised that five key areas had been prioritised, these were: Strategic Workforce Planning; Reward and Recognition; Recruitment and Retention; Leadership; and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and Wellbeing. The Committee was asked to note the activity summarised within the 2023/24 Annual Review and endorse the Our People Strategy Delivery Plan for 2024/25.

Councillor Millar praised the quality of the report and its findings. She highlighted that it was proposed to work more closely with staff network groups in 2024/25. She asked if the involvement of trade unions would also be sought, stating that trade union representatives were often experienced, well-informed of EDI-related matters, and able to contribute positively.

Kate Sullivan advised that the Joint Consultative Committee (JCC) met on a quarterly basis, providing a means to liaise with trade unions. At present, trade unions did not participate in staff network groups but there was nothing to prevent their involvement. She would highlight this option to trade unions and staff network groups.

In response to Councillor Millar, Kate Sullivan advised that there had been an increase in the number of staff absences due to sickness, including stress and mental health-related absences. In response, an action plan had been devised. Attention had been given to causes of absences including workloads and the effect of long NHS waiting lists. This work was ongoing. She advised that stress and mental health support was provided. The increased number of mental health-related absences was consistent with trends nationally. It was a priority area and continued support would be offered to staff.

Kate Sullivan advised that the wellbeing offer to staff would be augmented by partnership work with Occupational Health and Employee Assistance Programme providers with specific focus on stress and mental health. The Council would also strive to achieve Silver Thrive at Work Accreditation in the year ahead. This included a strong emphasis on stress and mental health support.

In response to the Chair, Kate Sullivan advised that new starters to Warwickshire County Council were asked a series of questions to inform an understanding of social mobility. These questions had recently been refreshed and work would be undertaken to compare the Council's workforce with others both locally and nationally. A 'grow your own' approach was promoted, providing improved opportunities to recruit, retain and develop talented individuals. Social mobility objectives were also supported by visits to schools to promote what the Council had to offer as an employer and provide insight into the range of different careers that were available.

In response to the Chair, Kate Sullivan advised that the Council performed well against EDI criteria. Pay gaps within the organisation compared well against the national average. It would be

important to maintain this good progress and enable staff to feel safe and included. This objective was supported by working closely with staff network groups to listen to feedback and develop effective policies to further promote EDI.

Bal Jacob (Director of Workforce and Local Services) advised that meetings had been held with staff network groups to develop an understanding of how they could be most effectively supported and resourced. This encompassed a focus on communication and approaches to engagement with the workforce. The Council also had an opportunity to engage with local services to promote levelling up and social mobility objectives. This encompassed collaborative working to engage with communities (with a particular focus on areas of social deprivation) to promote career opportunities within the Council. Apprenticeship programmes provided an effective means to bring talented individuals into the organisation and invest in their development.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Kate Sullivan advised that a significant amount of internal communication took place over digital platforms including emails and the Council's intranet. It was acknowledged that this was not always the most effective way to engage with community teams. This had been the focus of a project to give detailed attention to the needs of community workers. It had been found that, whilst community workers may be less likely to respond to a staff survey, the level of engagement within individual teams was very good. As a result, renewed attention would be given to approaches to engage with community teams. She advised that the staff survey response rate was highest within the Resources Directorate. This was anticipated as many of those within the Resources Directorate were desk-based. Within the Communities and People Directorates, there was a higher proportion of staff who had different working patterns which accounted for slightly lower response rates within specific teams. However, the overall response rate had increased from 43% to 56% which was very encouraging.

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

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the activity as set out in the 2023/24 Annual Review of Our People Strategy and endorses the 2024/25 Our People Strategy Delivery Plan.

3. Pension Fund Regulatory and Policy Update Report

The Chair highlighted that Martin Griffiths (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) would leave the Council before the date of the next meeting. On behalf of the Committee, he thanked Martin for his dedication and hard work and gave his best wishes.

Martin Griffiths introduced the report which provided an update on the findings of the Annual Review of Pension Fund Policies as well as details of regulatory developments in the pensions arena.

Councillor Millar stated that it was positive that a Business Continuity Plan was in place to ensure smooth running of the Fund following the recent departures of experienced officers. It was also promising that cyber security was being treated as a priority.

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

Resolved:

That the Committee notes the updates contained within the report.

4. Pension Fund Business Plan 2024/25

Martin Griffiths (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) introduced this report which sought the Committee’s approval of the Pension Fund Business Plan for 2024/25. He advised that it was best practice for pension funds to have a formal documented Business Plan in place. This was not only for the benefit of the Fund to demonstrate compliance with the relevant codes, but also for stakeholders to provide an indication of the Fund’s aims and objectives for the year ahead. He advised that the Business Plan complemented the other key documents which governed the strategy and operation of the Fund, including the Investment Strategy and Funding Strategy. He highlighted the governance elements of the Business Plan which formed the main areas of focus for the year ahead. This would enable implementation of the requirements of the Scheme Advisory Board Good Governance Review and the Pensions Regulators General Code of Practice. Preparation for the introduction of the Pensions Dashboard and implementation of the McCloud remedy were also key areas of focus.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Martin Griffiths advised that there were no issues of the magnitude of the McCloud Judgement on the horizon. There were some national pensions administration issues which would require attention; however, these affected a much smaller number of members.

Liz Firmstone (Head of Finance Transformation and Transactions) advised that preparation for the introduction of the Pensions Dashboard was the next large-scale project for the Pensions Administration Team. A Business Plan was being prepared to determine how to manage the anticipated workload. This would include consideration of whether additional resources would be needed to support delivery of the project.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Martin Griffiths advised that the Triennial Valuation had been successfully completed to ensure that sufficient income could be generated to cover any shortfall between contributions, benefits, and expenses. Work was underway with employers to implement any required changes to contribution rates.

Councillor Millar stated that it was promising that the Business Plan included climate change commitments. She emphasised that the Fund was a long-term investment vehicle. There was a need to ensure that the Fund could fulfil its fiduciary duties which encompassed making investment choices which contributed to mitigating climate change. She praised the inclusion of further development of ESG monitoring for climate change actions within the Business Plan. This was an area of growing importance following recommendations by the Transition Plan Taskforce and International Sustainability Standards Board (ISSB) which would strengthen expectations for reporting by companies on carbon impacts.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pension Committee approves the Business Plan as set out in Appendix 1 of the report.

5. Pensions Delegation Update

Jan Cumming (Senior Solicitor and Team Leader, Commercial and Contracts) introduced the report, stating that Warwickshire County Council's status as a Fire and Rescue Authority meant that it was the Scheme Manager of the Firefighter's Pension Fund. In 2015, it had been decided to delegate the role of Scheme Manager of the Fire Pension Fund to the Chief Fire Officer. However, in practical terms the oversight of administration of the Fire Pension Fund was managed by the Finance Team. Day-to-day activities were largely outsourced to the West Yorkshire Pension Fund under a contract managed by the Finance Team. Having discussed this matter, the Chief Fire Officer and the Executive Director for Resources had concluded that it would be preferable for these finance-based functions to have the oversight of the Council's Chief Finance Officer and thus be delegated to the Executive Director for Resources.

Jan Cumming advised that, at the meeting of the Staff and Pensions Committee in December 2023, updates were proposed to the Fund's Conflict of Interest Policy. The report included clarification that the Executive Director for Resources held the role of s151 for the Council and therefore for the Council in its capacity as Administering Authority for the Pension Fund. To avoid the perception of any conflict, day-to-day functions required in respect of the Pension Fund were delegated to the Director of Finance. These functions were delegated to the post, rather than an individual, and were currently exercised by the Interim Director of Finance pending a permanent appointment to the role. The Committee's approval was sought for the recommendations of the report.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Approves the delegation of the role of Scheme Manager of the Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Firefighter's Pension Fund to the Executive Director of Resources as set out in paragraph 1 of the report.
2. Approves the amendments to the Conflict of Interest Policy for the Warwickshire Pension Fund set out in Appendix 1 of the report.

6. Pensions Administration Activity and Performance Update

Lisa Eglesfield (Pensions Administration Service Manager) introduced the report which outlined key developments affecting pensions administration and the performance of the Pensions Administration Service (PAS). She provided details of take up of the Member Self Service (MSS)

initiative, performance against KPIs, workloads across the PAS, breaches, implementation of measures to administer the McCloud remedy, and progress of the Pensions Dashboard project.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Lisa Eglesfield advised that it was anticipated that the Fund would meet the staging date of 1 October 2025 for the Pensions Dashboard without any significant difficulties. An integrated service provider for the project had not yet been sourced. This would be accomplished once a procurement framework was in place.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Lisa Eglesfield advised that a robust process had been followed to notify members of the Fund of the legislative changes brought about by the McCloud remedy. Details had been sent to all members within scope.

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

Resolved:

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

7. Review of the Minutes of the Warwickshire Local Fire Pension Board of 6 November 2023

Lisa Eglesfield (Pensions Administration Service Manager) provided a summary of the topics covered at the meeting of the Local Fire Pension Board, including details of the Second Modified Retained Exercise, preparations for the Pensions Dashboard, and the McCloud age discrimination remedy.

In response to Councillor Millar, Lisa Eglesfield advised that approximately 120 people had been identified as being in scope for the Second Modified Retained Exercise.

In response to Councillor Hammersley, Lisa Eglesfield advised that guidance had been sought from the Local Government Association (LGA) about accessing funding from the Fire Pensions Top-Up Grant including measures to ensure that the right amounts would be applied for at the right intervals.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the minutes of the meeting of the Warwickshire Fire Local Pension Board on 6 November 2023.

8. Employers Joining and Leaving the Warwickshire Pension Fund

Lisa Eglesfield (Pensions Administration Service Manager) introduced this report which provided details of academies and contractors that had applied to join the Pension Fund over the past three months, as well as any employers leaving the Fund.

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

Resolved:

That the Committee delegates authority to the Executive Director for Resources to:

1. Approve applications to the Pension Fund from the employers listed in Appendix 1 of the report, subject to the applications meeting the criteria set out in the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013; and
2. Facilitate those employers listed in Appendix 1 of the report to exit the Pension Fund.

9. Future Meeting Dates

The Committee noted the dates of future meetings.

The meeting rose at 10:41.

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Chair