

Staff and Pensions Committee

Monday 9 September 2024

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Yousef Dahmash (Chair)
Councillor Christopher Kettle
Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi
Councillor Andy Jenns

Officers

Lisa Eglesfield, Pensions Administration Service Manager
Chris Norton, Head of Investments, Audit and Risk
Kate Sullivan, Head of Strategic HR
Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services
Sioned Harper, Solicitor - Adults and Education Legal Team
Purnima Kandula, Director of Finance
Gary Summerfield, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Tech Specialist
Delroy Madden, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Team Leader
Alistair Wickens, Technical Specialist Pensions Fund Policy and Governance
Marina Fraser-Ryan, Delivery Lead - People Relations
Helen Barnsley, Senior Democratic Services Officer

1. General

(1) Apologies

Apologies for absence have been received from Councillor Bill Gifford, Councillor Brian Hammersley, Councillor Mandy Tromans and Councillor Sarah Millar.

Councillor Andy Jenns and Councillor Parminder Singh Birdi are present as substitutes.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The minutes of the meetings held on the 10th June 2024 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising.

2. Leading Organisational Wellbeing Annual Review 2023/24

Kate Sullivan, Head of Strategic HR, introduced the report to the committee which outlines the achievements and priorities of the council in relation to organisational wellbeing.

The key headlines were confirmed as follows –

- The absence rate at the council is above target and is continuing to increase. There was some stabilisation in August, but this is reflective of the national picture.
- The Thrive Wellbeing Check from August 2023, saw an increase in the council's wellbeing score from 78% to 82%.
- The Manager's absence dashboards have been launched to Tier3 Managers in May 2024. The dashboard will provide managers with a variety of data to support the with managing attendance.
- Work continues to collect evidence that will allow the council to apply for the Silver Thrive at Work accreditation in autumn 2024
- Priorities for 2024/2025 include:
 - Continue to progress and review the attendance at work action plan to stabilise absence levels
 - Refresh the Attendance at Work policy to better support long term and short-term absence.
 - Achieve Silver Thrive at Work accreditation.

Councillor Birdi thanked Kate and her team for the report adding that it was acknowledged that there would be challenges with attendance after the pandemic, but members were pleased to see all the work underway.

Following a question from Councillor Jenns in relation to the silver thrive at work accreditation, it was confirmed that the current bronze level lasts for three years. The Chair asked for information on the benefit of aiming for the silver level and it was confirmed that it is a way of the council showing a commitment to the wellbeing work undertaken. The sickness figures at the council are increasing and the accreditation would provide a framework that will allow officers to identify areas where more work is needed.

It was confirmed that there is no cost to the council in the Silver Thrive at Work accreditation.

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

Resolved

That the Staff and Pension Committee:

Staff and Pensions Committee

1. Endorses the Leading Organisational and Wellbeing Review 2023/2024 as set out at Appendix 1.
2. Considers the performance information in relation to the management of employee sickness absence during 2023/2024 set out in Section 3 and endorses maintaining an overall target of 8 days per FTE (with a +/- 1 day tolerance) for 2024/25.
3. Considers the work in our approach to leading organisational wellbeing and supports the priority actions for 2024/2025 as set out Section 2.11.
4. Endorses sharing a copy of the annual review with Resources and Fire and Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee

3. Occupational Health and Safety Annual Review 2023/24

Gary Summerfield, Technical Specialist - Workforce Health & Safety presented the report to the committee which provides an overview of the work carried in in relation to the 23/23 priorities. There has been a good response to some challenging changes in coming back to the office post-pandemic. It was noted that work needs to be done in learning to identifying risks rather than in responding to the risks themselves.

The Chair raised concerns that violence and aggressiveness aimed at teachers seems to be an issue and is escalating. It was confirmed that the health and safety team is working with education services on this issue.

Incidents reported every quarter to education services, and it has been noted that there are trends in certain locations. It was agreed that question will be asked of education services as to whether the incidents relate specifically to special education needs.

Councillor Birdi 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:

1. Endorses the Occupational Health and Safety Annual Review 2023/24
2. Supports the Council's proposed Health and Safety key focus areas for 2024/25

4. Annual Review of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Delroy Madden, Team Manager - Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing introduced the report to the committee confirming that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) is everyone's business across the council.

The committee noted that the main priorities for EDI were included in the report and the data included was for the period 2023/2024 up to 31st March 2024).

Members of the committee were asked to note there has been a reduction in the rate of disclosure for some groups while the disability disclosure rate has remained stable and there has been an increase for disclosure rates of sexual orientation.

The priorities for 2024/2025 were confirmed to the committee as follows –

- EDI being everyone's business at the County Council
- Disability inclusion
- Social Mobility
- Employee Networks
- Neurodiversity inclusion

Following a brief discussion in relation to the rates of disclosure, the committee noted that officers need to improve the confidence in staff to be happy to disclose information; there is a lot of apprehension about disclosing personal information. It needs to be clear to everyone what is done with it.

The Chair noted that there were 7% fewer people that understand how diversity data adds value and Delroy Madden responded that this may be down to people's perception of how it is used, and where it goes. It is hard to identify one clear reason – it may be a person's historical experiences. It might be that someone feels that there is little point, as nothing is done

Following a question from Councillor Kettle in relation to if there was any information about the responses from different districts, it was confirmed that the information comes from a national database rather than the council so that information is not available.

Bal Jacob, Director of Workforce and Local Services confirmed that she and Rob Powell, Executive Director for Resources have been meeting with the Chairs from the staff networks, trying to ensure that we can find a way to build confidence within the organisation in relation to disclosure rates. We do have to respect that some people just don't want to disclose anything.

In relation to the information about directorate broadcasts, the Chair asked if it was possible for elected members to attend them. Kate Sullivan Head of Strategic HR confirmed that each Director hosts their own broadcast and often they will invite other officers. It was agreed that Kate would look into the feasibility of elected members attending broadcasts.

Follow up – it has been confirmed that should a member wish to attend to discuss/share information then there may be an option to be invited subject to Executive Directors approval

Following a question from the Chair in relation to representational data and if there was over representation within the council in some areas, it was confirmed that there are always trends and fluctuations across data. Officers work to identify areas where, perhaps, geographically we could improve recruitment.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Notes and comments on the Annual Review of Equality Diversity and Inclusion for 2023/2024 attached at Appendix 1.
2. Approves the publication of the Our Diversity Data and Pay Gaps Report 2023-24, attached at Appendix 2 as required by legislation.
3. Approves the publication of the Council's gender pay gap figures, based on a reporting date of 31 March 2024, the Government's gender pay gap website, as required by legislation

5. Pension Fund Regulatory and Policy Update Report

Alistair Wickens, Technical Specialist Pensions Fund Policy and Governance gave an overview to the committee of the report stating that two of the Fund's Policies have been reviewed this quarter, The Administration Strategy and the Admissions and Termination Policy.

The following regulatory updates were also confirmed to the committee –

- The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has reverted to Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG).
- On 6 July 2024, Jim McMahon MP was appointed Minister of State at MHCLG. The role includes ministerial responsibility for local government, including the Local Government Pension Scheme.
- On 20 July 2024, the Government announced a pensions review. The review will be jointly led by HM Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions. The review has indicated that it will look at how to 'unlock the investment potential of the £360 billion LGPS' and 'tackle the £2 billion that is being spent on fees.
- The annual LGA conference is taking place on 30 and 31 January 2025 at the Highcliff Marriot Hotel in Bournemouth. If you are interested in attending the conference, please contact alistairwickens@warwickshire.gov.uk.
- On 9 July 2024, Emma Reynolds MP was appointed Parliamentary Secretary across both HM Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
- The Scheme Advisory Board Cost Management Process is now complete.

It was confirmed that as a result of the updates mentioned above, there will be a lot of information coming to future meetings.

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

Resolved

That the Committee notes and comments on the updates contained within this Report.

6. Pension Administration Activity and Performance Update

Lisa Eglesfield, Pension Administration Service Manager introduced the report to the committee starting with an update on the self-service portal. Information held in relation to the ages of pension fund members allows officers to target relevant communications.

It was noted that the current Member Self Service (MSS) will be switched off in January 2026. The new system will offer a range of improvements.

Following a review of the Key Performance Indicators (KPI) from April to June 2024, it was confirmed that this work was completed in line with the new guidance and that this new process has been embedded into the council's processes.

Reviewing the team work load and the trends and numbers involved it was confirmed to the committee that from January 2024 to June 2024, 99.6% of all tasks were completed on time

Referring to the McCloud Project, Lisa Eglesfield stated that this is now drawing to a close and all work moving forward will be in line with the new regulations.

It was noted that data outstanding from employers is the main reason for not being able to send out pension statements. Currently 99.9 % of statements have been sent out on time.

Councillor Kettle thanked officers for the report, stating that with high performance as shown in the report, it is hard to be picky. Councillor Kettle questioned if communication to new members of the fund is the area most likely to be dropped during busy periods or periods with fewer staff (such as the summer holiday period). It was confirmed that officers are looking to automate some of the early stages; it could be said to be low value work but still important work. It was also noted that some of the data is new, so there is no comparison data.

Councillor Jenns asked for a point of clarification in relation to complaints, and it was confirmed that no complaints had been received, not that the team hadn't responded to any.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes and comments on the content of the report

7. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority: Fire Pensions Discretion Policy

Marina Fraser-Ryan, Service Manager, Workforce Advisory Services presented the report to the committee confirming that 2022 was the last time the report had been to committee.

The committee was asked to note that as an employer operating the Fire Pension Schemes, the Council is required to maintain a policy outlining how the employer discretions under the various fire pension scheme regulations will be exercised.

It was confirmed that the many discretions can be found in the appendices attached to the main report but that they are barely used by the council and are always done on a case-by-case basis.

Following a question from Councillor Kettle, it was confirmed that the small numbers involved in any discretions dealt with meant that any comparison would be unlikely.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Approves the draft Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Authority Employer Pensions Discretions Policy at Appendix 1; and
2. Authorises each of the Assistant Chief Fire Officers (or their nominees) to exercise discretions and make initial decisions in line with the Policy unless such decisions are already delegated elsewhere

8. Review of the Minutes of the Local Fire Pension Board, 17 June 2024

Lisa Eglesfield, Pension Administration Service Manager introduced the review of the minutes from the Local Fire Pension Board meeting held on the 17th June 2024.

The two main points of the report were highlighted as follows –

1. In relation to the Age Discrimination Remedy (McCloud) it was confirmed that work continues on fire records to implement the changes. Cases are being categorised into Green, Amber and Red cases. Amber and red cases are currently on hold while outstanding tax issues are reviewed by HMRC.
2. In relation to the legal case of Second Modified Retained Exercise (“Matthews”), the team have worked further to identify members that could be in scope for this project. Number of in scope members has increased from 118 to 142. So far 57 members have returned forms

expressing interest in the project. Some issues had been identified relating to tax payments due from members.

Councillor Jenns confirmed to the committee that he had attended the meeting, and the minutes were a true and accurate record.

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

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee receive, consider and comment on the minutes of the meeting of the Warwickshire Fire Local Pension Board on 17 June 2024.

9. Employers Joining and Leaving the Pension Fund

Lisa Eglesfield, Pensions Administration Service Manager presented the report and confirmed that it was the standard report with details of employees joining and leaving the pension fund. This will always be an area of constant change and there are regular meetings with legal colleagues to ensure it is all done correctly.

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

Resolved:

That the Committee delegates authority to the Executive Director for Resources to approve applications to the Pension Fund from the employers listed in Appendix 1, subject to the applications meeting the criteria set out in the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013

10. 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.

Any members of the press or public should be asked to leave the Committee Room at this stage. The webcast will also be halted.

11. Exempt Minutes of the Previous Meeting

The exempt minutes of the meetings held on the 10th June 2024 were approved as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising.

12. Critical Services Plan

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes and comments on the updated Critical Services Plan for the Warwickshire Pension Fund.

13. Any Other Business

None.

14. Future Meeting Dates

The Committee will meet at 2pm on the following dates:

- Monday 9 December 2024
- Monday 10 March 2025

The meeting rose at 14:50

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Chair