

# **A procedure for reporting breaches of the law to The Pensions Regulator**



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## Introduction

1. In April 2015 the Pensions Regulator (the Regulator) publishes its Code of Practice no 14 (the Code) Governance and administration of public service pension schemes. This is not a statement of law of itself but nonetheless it carries great weight. In some respects, it is like the Highway Code, in that some of its contents refer to statutory items, whilst others are advisory. The Courts may however also rely on the latter. In the same way, if determining whether any pensions related legal requirements have been met, a court or tribunal must consider the Code.
2. There are many and various laws relating to the Firefighter Pension Schemes, with many and various people having a statutory duty to report material breaches of the law to the Regulator. To assist, the Code states that a procedure should be established to ensure that those with a responsibility to make reports are able to meet their legal obligations.
3. Much of the text herein is drawn from the Code itself. Where it has been, the Regulator's copyright applies.

If you have any questions about this procedure, please contact the Pensions Services Manager.

## Legal Requirements

4. Certain people are required to report breaches of the law to the Regulator where they have reasonable cause to believe that:
  - a legal duty which is relevant to the administration of the scheme has not been, or is not being, complied with.
  - the failure to comply is likely to be of material significance to the Regulator in the exercise of any of its functions.

5. People who are subject to the reporting requirement ('reporters') for public service pension schemes are:
  - scheme managers (meaning, in the case of the Warwickshire Firefighter Pension Schemes, the Staff and Pensions Committee).
  - members of the pension board (meaning, in the case of the WFRS, the Local Pension Board).
  - any person who is otherwise involved in the administration of the Firefighter Pension Schemes.
  - professional advisers including auditors and legal advisers; and any person who is otherwise involved in advising the managers of the scheme in relation to the scheme.

## **Reasonable Cause**

6. Having 'reasonable cause' to believe that a breach has occurred means more than merely having a suspicion that cannot be substantiated.
7. Reporters should ensure that where a breach is suspected, they carry out checks to establish whether a breach has in fact occurred.
8. Where the reporter does not know the facts or events around the suspected breach, it will usually be appropriate to consult the appropriate Pension Services Manager, Finance Manager (Transformation) or Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Treasury, Pension, Audit & Risk), regarding what has happened. It would not be appropriate to check in cases of theft, suspected fraud, or other serious offences where discussions might alert those implicated or impede the actions of the police or a regulatory authority. Under these circumstances the reporter should alert the Regulator without delay.
9. If the reporter is unclear about the relevant legal provision, they should clarify their understanding of the law to the extent necessary to form a view.
10. In establishing whether there is reasonable cause to believe that a breach has occurred, it is not necessary for a reporter to gather all the evidence which the Regulator may require before taking legal action. A delay in reporting may exacerbate or increase the risk of the breach.

## **Material significance**

11. In deciding whether a breach is likely to be of material significance to the Regulator, it would be advisable for the reporter to consider the:
  - cause of the breach.
  - effect of the breach.

- reaction to the breach; and
  - the wider implications of the breach.
12. When deciding whether to report, those responsible should consider these points together. Reporters should consider expert or professional advice, where appropriate, when deciding whether the breach is likely to be of material significance to the Regulator.
13. The breach is likely to be of material significance to the Regulator where it was caused by:
- dishonesty.
  - poor governance or administration.
  - slow or inappropriate decision-making practices.
  - incomplete or inaccurate advice; or
  - acting (or failing to act) in deliberate contravention of the law.
14. When deciding whether a breach is of material significance, those responsible should consider other reported and unreported breaches of which they are aware. However, historical information should be considered with care, particularly if changes have been made to address previously identified problems.
15. A breach will not normally be materially significant if it has arisen from an isolated incident, for example resulting from teething problems with a new system or procedure, or from an unusual or unpredictable combination of circumstances. But in such a situation, it is also important to consider other aspects of the breach such as the effect it has had and to be aware that persistent isolated breaches could be indicative of wider scheme issues.

## Effects of the breach

16. Reporters need to consider the effects of any breach, but with the Regulator's role in relation to public service pension schemes and its statutory objectives in mind, the following matters in particular should be considered likely to be of material significance to the Regulator:
- Local Pension Board members not having the appropriate degree of knowledge and understanding, which may result in the Board not fulfilling its role.
  - Local Pension Board members having a conflict of interest, which may result in them being prejudiced in the way that they carry out their role.
  - adequate internal controls not being established and operated, which may lead to the Scheme not being run in accordance with the Scheme's Regulations and other legal requirements, risks not being properly identified and managed and/or the right money not being paid to or by the Administrator at the right time;

- accurate information about benefits and Scheme administration not being provided to Scheme members and others, which may result in members not being able to effectively plan or make decisions about their retirement.
- appropriate records not being maintained, which may result in member benefits being calculated incorrectly and/or not being paid to the right person at the right time.
- anyone involved with the administration or management of the Scheme misappropriating any of its assets, or being likely to do so, which may result in assets not being safeguarded; and
- any other breach which may result in the Scheme being poorly governed, managed or administered.

17. Reporters need to take care to consider the effects of the breach, including any other breaches occurring because of the initial breach and the effects of those resulting breaches.

## **Reaction to the breach**

18. Where prompt and effective action is taken to investigate and correct the breach and its causes and, where appropriate, notify any affected members, the Regulator will not normally consider this to be materially significant.

19. A breach is likely to be of concern and material significance to the Regulator where a breach has been identified and those involved:

- do not take prompt and effective action to remedy the breach and identify and tackle its cause to minimise risk of recurrence.
- are not pursuing corrective action to a proper conclusion.
- fail to notify affected scheme members where it would have been appropriate to do so.

## **Wider implications of the breach**

20. Reporters should consider the wider implications of a breach when they assess which breaches are likely to be materially significant to the Regulator. For example, a breach is likely to be of material significance where the fact that the breach has occurred makes it appear more likely that other breaches will emerge in the future. This may be due to the scheme manager or pension board members having a lack of appropriate knowledge and understanding to fulfil their responsibilities or where other pension schemes may be affected. For instance, public service pension schemes administered by the same organisation may be detrimentally affected where a system failure has caused the breach to occur.

## What constitutes a breach?

21. Breaches can occur in relation to a wide variety of the tasks normally associated with the administrative function of a Scheme such as keeping records, internal controls, calculating benefits and making investment or investment-related decisions.

### Example 1 - Green Breach

An employer is late in paying over employee and employer contributions. It is contacted by officers from the administering authority, it immediately pays the contributions that are overdue, and it improves its procedures so that in future contributions are paid over on time.

In this instance there has been a breach, but members have not been adversely affected and the employer has changed its processes regarding future payments. The breach is therefore not material to the Regulator and need not be reported.

### Example 2 - Amber Breach

A pension overpayment is discovered, the administering authority has failed to pay the right amount to the right person at the right time. A breach has therefore occurred.

The overpayment is however for a modest amount and the pensioner could not have known that they were being overpaid. The overpayment is therefore waived.

In this case there is no need to report the breach as it is not material.

### Example 3 - Red Breach

An employer is late in submitting its statutory year-end return of pay and contributions in respect of each of its active members and as such it is in breach. Despite repeated reminders it still does not supply its year-end return.

Because the administrator does not have the year-end data it is unable to supply, by 31 August, annual benefit statements to the scheme members.

In this instance there has been a breach which is relevant to the Regulator, in part because of the employer's failures, and because the administrator has not been able to fulfil its statutory duties also.

22. Most common breaches:

Cause of Breach	Deadline	Green breach	Means of reporting
i-Connect submission	19th of month	3 days late	Monthly report from IC
Retirement notifications	Individual retirement date	4 weeks late	Admin team
Annual Returns (until April 2021)	30th April	1 day late	Annual Return checklist sheet (one off)
Administration Breaches	Variable		To be judged by case

## Review process and when a breach needs to be escalated

23. The PAS will provide details of breaches to the Employer Relations team so that they can be recorded, and RAG rated. A monthly review will be held with the Employer Relations Team Leader, Pensions Admin Delivery Lead, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Treasury, Pensions, Audit, Insurance, and Risk) & Finance Manager

(Transformation) to assess amber breaches that may need to be escalated.

24. An example of an amber breach that may need escalating:

*An employer has submitted payment for contributions late each month for 3 months and is not responding to correspondence from the Employer Relations Team Leader.*

- The first email from the Employer Relations Team Leader should inform the employer that they are late submitting information and that this has been recorded as a breach but will not at this point be reported to The Pensions Regulator.
- The employer will be asked to submit the required information by a certain date.
- If no response is received within 2 weeks of to this email the Employer Relations Team Leader, will send a 2<sup>nd</sup> email which will include the following wording:
- ***If there is no response to this email*** Senior management will escalate the issue at Tier 2 level or above within the employing organisation and preferably avoiding escalating to personnel already involved.

## Reporting to Staff & Pensions Committee and Local Pension Board

25. A report will be presented to Staff & Pensions Committee and the Pension Board on a quarterly basis setting out:

- A summary of all breaches, including those reported to The Pensions Regulator and those unreported
- Any actions taken to reduce future breaches.

26. Staff and Pensions Committee and Pension Board are both entitled to have access to detailed information about breaches, should they request it (and will be required to maintain confidentiality of information where necessary).

## Reporting process

Type of Breach	Timescale for reporting	Internal actions	Further actions
<b>Urgent and Material</b>  <b>RED</b>	Employer Relations Team Leader informs Pensions Admin Delivery Lead.  Prior to reporting to tPR the AD Finance and Section 151 Officer are informed.	Employer Relations Team to keep record of breach and investigate options to prevent further occurrence. The Pensions Admin Delivery Lead will also liaise with the Pension Regulator where applicable to come to a satisfactory resolution.	These breaches must also be reported to: Assistant Section 151 Officer, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Treasury, Pensions, Audit, Insurance, and Risk), Finance Service Manager (Transformation), the Chairs of the Staff and



Type of Breach	Timescale for reporting	Internal actions	Further actions
	The breach is reported immediately to the Pensions Regulator.		Pensions Committee and Local Pension Board, with a full report to be submitted at the next available meeting for members.
<b>Non urgent and material</b>  <b>RED</b>	Employer Relations Team Leader informs the Pensions Admin Delivery Lead  Prior to reporting to tPR the AD Finance and Section 151 Officer are informed.  The breach is reported within 30 days to the Pensions Regulator	Employer Relations team to keep record of breach and investigate options to prevent further occurrence	Report non urgent and material breach at next Pension Committee/ Pension Board meeting
<b>Amber</b>		Employer Relations Team to keep record of breach and Employer Relations Team Leader to investigate options to prevent further occurrence  Employers who on more than 3 occasions in a row have amber breaches will be escalated to the Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Treasury, Pensions, Audit, Insurance, and Risk) & Finance Service Manager (Transformation)	Report immaterial breach as part of summary at next Pension Committee/Pension Board meeting.
<b>Green</b>		Employer Relations Team to keep record of breach	Report immaterial breach as part of summary at next Pension Committee /Pension Board meeting.

## Submitting a report to the Regulator

27. Before you submit a report, you should obtain clarification of the law around the suspected breach. If:

- you are a member of the Staff and Pensions Committee, Local Pension Board, or you are an external adviser, please contact the Solicitor to the Scheme.
- you are an actuary, auditor, or other external agent, please contact the Assistant Executive Director - Property, Accountancy and Legal.
- you are an officer of the Scheme and you work in Administration, please contact Head of Corporate Financial Services.

28. The person you contact will consider in the round whether the Regulator would regard the breach as being material. (S)he will also be clarifying any facts, if required. If the case is a difficult one (s)he will seek advice, as required.

29. Some matters could be urgent, if for example a fraud is imminent, whilst others will be less so. Non-urgent but material breaches should be reported to the Regulator within 30 working days of them being confirmed, and in the same time breaches that are not material should be recorded (see later).

30. Some breaches could be so serious that they must always be reported, for example a theft of funds by anyone involved with the administration or management of the Fire Scheme. It is difficult to be definitive about what constitutes a breach that must always be reported, but one test is: might it reasonably lead to a criminal prosecution or a serious loss in public confidence?

31. Any report that is made (which must be in writing and made as soon as reasonably practicable) should be dated and include as a minimum:

- full name of the Scheme.
- description of the breach or breaches.
- any relevant dates.
- name of the employer or scheme manager (where known).
- name, position, and contact details of the reporter; and
- role of the reporter in relation to the Fund.

32. Additional information that would help the Regulator includes:

- the reason the breach is thought to be of material significance to the Regulator.
- the address of the Scheme.
- the pension scheme's registry number (if available); and
- whether the concern has been reported before.

33. Reporters should mark urgent reports as such and draw attention to matters they consider particularly serious. They can precede a written report with a telephone call, if appropriate.

34. Reporters should ensure they receive an acknowledgement for any report they send to the Regulator. Only when they receive an acknowledgement can the reporter be confident that the Regulator has received their report.
35. The Regulator will acknowledge all reports within five working days of receipt, however it will not generally keep a reporter informed of the steps taken in response to a report of a breach as there are restrictions on the information it can disclose.
36. The reporter should provide further information or reports of further breaches if this may help the Regulator to exercise its functions. The Regulator may make contact to request further information.
37. Breaches should be reported as soon as reasonably practicable, which will depend on the circumstances. In particular, the time taken should reflect the seriousness of the suspected breach.
38. In cases of immediate risk to the Scheme, for instance, where there is any indication of dishonesty, the Regulator does not expect reporters to seek an explanation or to assess the effectiveness of proposed remedies. They should only make such immediate checks as are necessary. The more serious the potential breach and its consequences, the more urgently reporters should make these necessary checks. In cases of potential dishonesty, the reporter should avoid, where possible, checks which might alert those implicated. In serious cases, reporters should use the quickest means possible to alert the Regulator to the breach.

## **Recording breaches that have not been reported to the Regulator**

39. Breaches that are found not to be material to the Regulator must still be recorded. This is so that if similar breaches continue, then they become material. Recording all breaches also highlights where improvements are required, to try and prevent similar breaches.
40. Breaches that are not being reported should be recorded here: (being a link to an in-house spreadsheet designed to capture all the relevant data).

## **Whistleblowing protection and confidentiality**

41. The Pensions Act 2004 makes clear that the statutory duty to report overrides any other duties a reporter may have such as confidentiality and that any such duty is not breached by making a report. The Regulator understands the potential impact of a report on relationships, for example, between an employee and their employer.
42. The statutory duty to report does not, however, override 'legal privilege'. This means that oral and written communications between a professional legal adviser and their client, or a person representing that client, while obtaining legal advice, do not have to be disclosed. Where appropriate a legal adviser will be able to provide further information on this.
43. The Regulator will do its best to protect a reporter's identity (if desired) and will not disclose the information except where lawfully required to do so. It will take all

reasonable steps to maintain confidentiality, but it cannot give any categorical assurances as the circumstances may mean that disclosure of the reporter's identity becomes unavoidable in law. This includes circumstances where the regulator is ordered by a court to disclose it.

44. The Employment Rights Act 1996 (ERA) provides protection for employees making a whistleblowing disclosure to the regulator. Consequently, where individuals employed by firms or another organisation having a statutory duty to report disagree with a decision not to report to the regulator, they may have protection under the ERA if they make an individual report in good faith. The Regulator expects such individual reports to be rare and confined to the most serious cases.

### **Warwickshire County Council whistleblowing policy**

45. The Council has its own whistleblowing policy. The person contacted about the potential breach, e.g., the Solicitor to WFRS, will take this into account when assessing the case.