

# The Warwickshire Pension Fund Stewardship & Voting Policy

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## ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This document is an executive summary of Warwickshire Pension Fund's approach to investor stewardship and in particular its policies on key governance and corporate sustainability issues. These issues include: capital and board structure; board evaluation and diversity; director remuneration, audit and accountability, and narrative reporting matters.

The Fund's voting guidelines are consistent with the underlying principles adopted by its pooling manager, Border to Coast Pensions Partnership (BCPP). Assets the Fund has invested via BCPP are therefore subject to similar corporate governance and voting guidelines and can be found at:

<https://www.bordertocoast.org.uk/sustainability/>

Although we recognise that local market standards may vary, our objective is to hold management accountable to the highest possible standards on a consistent basis. The only exception will be where local laws contradict. Smaller companies should seek to emulate best practice.

## 2 SHAREHOLDER RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES

### 2.1 One Share- One Vote

The Fund fully supports the concept of "One share- One Vote" and is not supportive of the creation of share capital with differential voting rights. Companies should therefore disclose the share structure, voting rights and any other rights or limitations attached to each class of shares.

### 2.2 Shareholder Engagement & Wider Stewardship Activities

The Fund is a signatory to the 2012 Stewardship Code and is also a member of the Local Authority Pension Fund Forum (LAPFF).

While our fund managers undertake voting on behalf of our pooled fund holding, we expect them to include stewardship considerations as part of their investment strategy.

As a Code signatory we believe that proper disclosure of our voting records helps companies and other stakeholders including Fund members understand our approach. The records from when the Fund held segregated mandates and decided on its voting arrangements were updated on a quarterly basis and can be found at <https://www.warwickshirepensionfund.org.uk/>. Since the Fund no longer holds segregated mandates, the Fund reviews the voting records of its pooled fund managers quarterly.

Companies should engage with their shareholders on a regular basis throughout the year, not just in the period leading up to the AGM. The results of any shareholder meeting should be promptly disclosed and should include a statement detailing how the Company intends to engage with shareholders in order to understand the reasons for dissent. The steps taken to resolve any concerns should be detailed in the following year's annual report.

## 3 THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS

### 3.1 Board Composition, Diversity & Succession

When assessing the quality of investee company boards, WPF takes a balanced approach to understanding board composition which takes account of overall board size; directors' skills, background and experience.

Diversity brings substantial benefits to companies in terms of skills and competencies. The Corporate Governance Report should include details of the Company's diversity policies, including professional, international and gender diversity, as well as measurable objectives set for policy implementation and the progress against such objectives.

Diversity is more than simply gender; while not supporting specific gender quotas, we encourage boards to voluntarily achieve a target of at least 1/3rd women on the board and in senior positions and to provide clear explanations of how they are achieving diversity goals.

All companies should have a succession plan. Explanations for the re-election of long serving non-executive directors should be made in the context of the succession plan and particular attention should be paid to the Chair and CEO.

Insufficient detail in disclosure or lack of improvement in practice may result in a vote against the Chairman or the Chairman of the nomination committee.

### 3.2 Director Independence & Commitment

Director independence is generally assessed against the standards set by the UK Corporate Governance Code ('the Code'), however there are times when a case-by-case approach is required.

Independence on its own is not a sufficient characteristic for a successful appointee, directors should be able to devote the necessary time to the company's affairs. We therefore expect to see full disclosure of directors' other outside appointments together with a record of attendance together with explanations of non-attendance, which will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

Length of tenure will be considered on a case-by-case basis taking into account the Board's succession plans, the length of service of other Board members, evidence of the director's independent conduct and whether the director has served for more than nine years concurrently with an executive director.

The boards of large companies (excluding the chair) should consist of a majority of non-executive directors.

### 3.3 Board Evaluation

Boards should undertake a formal evaluation of its members performance annually with an external evaluation at least every three years under the guidance of an external, independent facilitator. The annual evaluation should consider the composition and the effectiveness of board members working together.

### 3.4 Chair/CEO

We support the separation of the roles of Chairman and Chief Executive.

Except in rare circumstances, former Chief Executives should not be appointed to the position of Chair. We would expect to see a clear explanation of the reasons and what time horizon the company is looking to for a replacement. The position may be temporary, due to unexpected circumstances such as illness, for example. Where possible, evidence that external search consultants have been engaged should be provided.

We support the principle that the chair should be independent on appointment.

### 3.5 Lead Independent Director

A Lead Independent Director should be identified, especially where the Chairman of the Company is not independent.

The Lead Independent Director should be a key contact for shareholders where the normal communication avenues through the Chairman or CEO have failed or are inappropriate.

### 3.6 Director Re-election

Directors are expected to submit themselves for re-election on a regular basis and boards should not insulate individual candidates. We are supportive of annual re-elections.

### 3.7 Directors' Service Contracts

Companies should fully disclose directors' service contracts or terms of appointment; all contracts should include a notice period of no longer than one year and any exit payments should be clearly disclosed. In particular:

- Severance payments relating to poor corporate performance should not extend beyond basic salary. There should be no entitlement to discretionary payments in these circumstances.
- Contracts should not provide for pensionable performance related pay
- The duty to mitigate should be made a specific contract provision and remuneration committees should consider phased payments in order to fulfil compensation commitments on early termination.

## 4 SHAREHOLDERS' CAPITAL

Pre-emption rights are a basic shareholder right which can be easily eroded without careful monitoring. We support the principles of the UK's Pre-Emption Group guidelines on dilution which permit up to 10% of share capital to be offered for cash rather than on a rights basis (5% additional authority to be used only in connection with an acquisition or specified capital investment). Existing shareholders should be offered the right of first refusal when a company issues shares exceeding 5% of the existing shares in issue or exceeding a 7.5% threshold in any three-year rolling period (excluding issues in connection with a specific acquisition or capital investment), as set out in the Pre-Emption Group's document "Disapplying Pre-Emption Rights: A Statement of Principles", issued in 2015.

Companies should provide explicit assurance that share buybacks will only be exercised in the best interests of all shareholders. This is particularly important where incentive pay may be linked to Earnings Per Share performance – a statement that EPS will be normalised would be welcome

A clear dividend policy should be disclosed and separate approval from shareholders should be sought for the payment of the final dividend. Where a scrip dividend or equivalent is offered, there should always be a cash alternative in place.

## 5 AUDIT & ACCOUNTABILITY

### 5.1 Audit & Accountability

Sound audit and reporting standards are an essential investor protection. Clear presentation of material risks to the business and how they are mitigated is a core requirement. Explanations in relation to changes to accounting practices, restatements or matters of emphasis must be prominent and transparent.

### 5.2 Audit Committee

Boards should ensure that the relationship with the auditor is appropriately focussed on the protection of the company and not of management. The audit committee, which should be composed of suitably qualified individuals, with a least one having a relevant audit or financial background, is responsible for ensuring that the auditors offer independent and effective services. The committee should be comprised of entirely independent directors.

### 5.3 Non-audit Services

Non-audit related work should be minimised to avoid unnecessary conflicts of interest but any conflict should be disclosed in any event. The reappointment of auditors will not usually be supported where non-audit work fees are considerably in excess of audit fees in the year under review, and on an aggregate three-year basis, unless a sufficient and acceptable explanation is given.

### 5.4 Internal Controls

Oversight and management of risk can be enhanced by the use of an internal audit function. Financial institutions should operate a separate risk committee.

### 5.5 Risk Management

Reporting of risk should be dynamic and subject to continual refinement and refreshment. Companies should communicate how risks are managed and details of the changes that have occurred in relation to risks identified during the year. The Company should also report on its response to actualised risks.

### 5.6 Audit Partner, Audit Firm Rotation

FTSE350 companies should tender for audit every 10 years. Reappointment of the audit partner at the same firm will not be considered as sufficient.

Retendering alone is unlikely to safeguard auditor independence. We do not support “Big 4 only” restrictions in tenders or any such requirements by lenders.

## 6 DIRECTOR REMUNERATION

### 6.1 Remuneration Committee

The UK Corporate Governance Code provisions on the role and composition of remuneration committees, serves as a benchmark for our approach to committee composition for our UK and global holdings. Remuneration committees should have access to their own independent advice which is not connected with any other services provided to management e.g. audit, HR, board evaluation etc. Non-executive fees and any associated policies, including share ownership policies should also be disclosed.

In their reporting to shareholders, committees are encouraged to explain their approach to the discretionary powers they exercise over the various components of executive pay. Blanket discretion is not supported.

### 6.2 Remuneration Policy & Disclosure

Remuneration policies should be clear and straightforward so as to facilitate understanding of how management is incentivised to achieve long term shareholder value and support the success of the company. Remuneration policies must be put to the vote on a triennial basis.

- **Remuneration Packages**

The size of the overall remuneration package should be considered in relation to average employee remuneration as well as the performance and growth of the Company. Pay increases should not be in excess of inflation or those awarded to the rest of the workforce without sufficient explanation.

- **Pay for Performance**

We expect to see a significant proportion of executive pay linked to corporate performance which is clearly and meaningfully aligned with strategy and positive shareholder value. Financial metrics and ratios such as Earnings per Share (EPS) or Total Shareholder Return (TSR) on their own are unlikely to be sufficient measures of strategy.

- **Variable or Performance-Related Pay**

Companies should clearly disclose the performance targets used in any variable pay plans (Annual Bonus, Short-Term Incentives or Long-term Incentives). Where commercial sensitivity prevents forward disclosures, we expect to see retrospective disclosure. Bonuses should be set at an appropriate level of base pay and should be capped. There should also be provision to forfeit any bonus where the company has experienced a significant negative event. The technical analysis of variable pay schemes should take account of global and market best practices.

- **Share Ownership Policy**

Executives should make a material long-term investment in shares. Companies should consider requiring executives to continue to hold such material holdings post-retirement or resignation. Non Executive Directors should not be granted performance-related pay and only in exceptional circumstances should they be allowed to join any long-term incentive plan and then any award should be minimal.

- **Recruitment Payments**

We recognise that companies may need flexibility in order to be able to recruit new directors. We expect to see clear disclosure relating to the maximum variable pay which can be paid to incoming directors. Such payments should exclude compensation for variable pay forgone at the previous employer. Transaction-related payments should be subject to demanding performance conditions.

- **Change of Control**

There should be no automatic waiving of performance conditions for either change of control or capital reorganisations. Any consequential early vesting should be time pro-rated.

- **Dilution**

Share-based remuneration plans have the potential to dilute shareholders. For this reason share plans should not exceed 10% of the ordinary issued share capital in any rolling 10 year period.

- **Clawbacks and Malus**

Clawback and malus provisions should be in place for all incentive plans and should be described clearly within the remuneration policy. The remuneration committee should have sufficient flexibility to operate the policy rather than simply tying clawback to specific events such as financial restatements, for example.

## 7 SUSTAINABILITY REPORTING

### 7.1 Responsibility & Disclosure

There is strong evidence that demonstrates that companies with a long-term sustainable approach to their management outperform their peers. We therefore encourage companies to describe their approach to sustainability in the widest possible sense and explain how their policies align with long-term corporate strategy. The board of directors should be directly responsible for sustainability considerations.

### 7.2 Sustainability Risk Reporting

We strongly support transparent and understandable sustainability risk reporting in the context of how relevant and material risks impact their business strategy.

### 7.3 Employment, Health and Safety

Poor employment practices present significant operational and investment risks for companies. We expect management to develop good employment practices across their organisation.

### 7.4 Political Donations

Companies should disclose all political donations and demonstrate where they intend to spend the money and that this is in the interests of the company and shareholders. Political donations will be opposed where these conditions are not met.



## 8 INVESTMENT TRUSTS

We apply to investment trusts the same expectations around board composition, audit, and director independence as to other companies. We believe there should be independence between the board of an investment trust and its investment managers.

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