

Staff and Pensions Committee

Monday 7 March 2022

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Andy Jenns (Chair)
Councillor Bill Gifford (Vice-Chair)
Councillor Christopher Kettle
Councillor Jill Simpson-Vince

Officers

Barnaby Briggs, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Neil Buxton, Technical Specialist - Pension Fund Policy and Governance
John Cole, Democratic Services Officer
Andy Dunn, Lead Commissioner, Attraction, Retention and Development
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director, Governance and Policy
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director – Finance
Liz Firmstone, Service Manager, Finance Transformation
Marina Fraser-Ryan, Delivery Lead – People Relations
Kate Sullivan, Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance
Rich Thomas, Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD
Alistair Wickens, Pensions Team Leader, Employer Relations

1. General

The Chair noted that this would be the final meeting of the Committee to be attended by Neil Buxton (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) prior to retirement. On behalf of the Committee, he thanked Neil Buxton for his dedication and hard work over many years.

(1) Apologies

Apologies were received from Councillor John Horner and Councillor Sarah Millar.

(2) Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

There were none.

(3) Minutes of the Previous Meeting

Resolved:

That the minutes of the meeting held on 13 December 2021 be confirmed as an accurate record and signed by the Chair.

There were no matters arising

2. Annual Review of Our People Strategy and Year 2 (2022/23) Delivery Plan

The report was introduced by Rich Thomas (Strategy and Commissioning Manager, HROD) and Kate Sullivan (Lead Commissioner – Culture, Leadership and Performance). Rich Thomas advised that the Our People Strategy had been refreshed in December 2020 and endorsed by the Staff and Pensions Committee following input from the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The Strategy supported the vision of making Warwickshire County Council a great place to work where diverse and talented people are enabled to be at their best. He advised that a Delivery Plan for year two of the Strategy had been produced. It would enable the organisation to attract, recruit, motivate and develop the diversity of talent required to deliver the objectives of the Council Plan.

The Chair praised the quality of the Our People Strategy Annual Review 2021/2022 and Year 2 Delivery Plan, stating that it was readable and well presented.

In response to Councillor Gifford, Rich Thomas advised that consideration had been given to approaches to pay within the Strategy and Delivery Plan. He stated that the pay deal for the period ending in April 2021 had only recently been concluded. The Council was part the national negotiating framework on pay; discussions would soon take place relating to next year's proposal for pay, including consultation with employers nationally. He advised that an increased allowance had been made available within the most recent Medium Term Financial Strategy (MTFS) in anticipation of potential changes to pay in 2022/23.

Andrew Felton (Assistant Director, Finance) advised that due to national pay bargaining arrangements, the Council was restricted by the collective position taken by employers. Whilst the Council had allowed scope within the MTFS for future pay awards, it was unlikely that this provision had been made by all local authorities.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Rich Thomas advised that the Strategy outlined proposals for agile working. He stated that the Council had embarked on the transition to agile working prior to the outbreak of COVID-19. The experience of the Pandemic had shown the advantages of working in an agile way. He stated that a hybrid approach was now favoured to maximise organisational assets whilst enabling people to perform at their best. Survey responses from staff showed a strong appetite for agile working; provision would be made for colleagues to collaborate in person when required.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Rich Thomas advised that there was no evidence to suggest that agile working had a detrimental effect on productivity; survey data suggested that, predominantly, staff felt that they were more productive when working in an agile way.

In response to the Chair, Kate Sullivan stated that, although some roles were more readily suited to agile working than others, the Council was a complex organisation and there was scope for individual teams to examine processes to explore the options available to work in a more agile way. She advised that, at the beginning of the Pandemic, there was a widespread requirement to work from home; however, there was now scope to look more widely at approaches to agile working across the organisation.

In response to Councillor Simpson-Vince, Rich Thomas advised that the initiative to hold a volunteering and wellbeing day was intended to enable staff to sample activities that could lead to improved personal wellbeing and benefit the wider community. The pilot initiative had been well received; consideration would be given to making it an annual event.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the work in the review of the Our People Strategy and authorises the Chief Executive to finalise the 2022/23 Delivery Plan having regard to the views expressed by the Staff and Pensions Committee and the Resources and Fire & Rescue Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

3. Apprentices' Pay Report

Andy Dunn (Lead Commissioner, Attraction, Retention and Development) introduced this report, stating that an increase in the rate of pay for entry level apprenticeship roles was expected to help to attract suitable and capable applicants, and contribute towards the success of the Council's apprenticeship programme.

In response to Councillor Gifford, Andy Dunn agreed to provide details of the number of care-experienced young people who had joined the apprenticeship programme. Details would be made available following the meeting.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee approves the proposal to increase the rate of pay for entry level apprenticeship roles from 1 April 2022 to be aligned to the National Minimum Wage rate for 18–20-year-olds (£6.83 per hour/£13,140 per annum).

4. Local Government Pension Scheme Employer Pensions Discretions Policy

Marina Fraser-Ryan (Delivery Lead – People Relations) introduced the report. She advised that the Council acted as both a scheme employer, and the administering authority of the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). She advised that regulations required the scheme employer to formulate, publish, and keep under review a statement of policy relating to all mandatory discretions which it has power to exercise in relation to members of the Scheme. The same action was recommended be taken in respect of non-mandatory discretions. The Committee's approval was sought for the LGPS Employer's Pensions Discretions Policy.

In response to Councillor Kettle, Marina Fraser-Ryan offered to provide details of the likely cost implications of discretions. She stated that discretions applied to a relatively small number of applications from individuals; the cost was not anticipated to escalate.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee approves the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) Employer's Pensions Discretion Policy attached in Appendix 2 of the report.

5. Review of Pension Fund Discretions for Warwickshire Pension Fund

Liz Firmstone (Service Manager, Finance Transformation) introduced the report which complemented the preceding item. She stated that scheme administrators participating in the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) must formulate, publish, and keep under review a statement of policy on all mandatory discretions which they have the power to exercise in relation to members of the career average revalued earnings (CARE) scheme and earlier schemes. The same action was recommended be taken in respect of non-mandatory discretions. She advised that the purpose of these discretions was to ensure that employers and members are treated fairly and consistently. Consideration had been given to enacting workable, affordable, and reasonable policies.

Councillor Gifford highlighted that attention had been given to the provision of affordable policies. He commented that the measures outlined would expedite a solution in the event of exceptional circumstances.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Approves the recommended updates to the Warwickshire Pension Fund discretions policy;
2. Notes the changes to practice implemented within existing discretions, following legal developments and recommendations from the Local Government Association.

6. Draft Fraud Strategy for the Warwickshire Pension Fund

Neil Buxton (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) introduced the report, stating that it sought to enhance governance of the Pension Fund. He stated that the Committee's input would be welcomed. Following the meeting, the report would be presented to the Local Pension Board prior to final ratification of the Fraud Strategy by the Staff and Pensions Committee in June or September 2022. He advised that the report had been produced following a review undertaken by Internal Audit which did not identify any areas of particular concern, other than to recommend that a policy strategy statement be instated. He provided an overview of policy objectives and highlighted the measures in place to detect and prevent fraud. He advised that training sessions would be held to ensure that staff are fully engaged and able to assist in the detection of potential fraud.

Consideration was given to measures in place to enable the Pension Fund to be notified of the death of a pensioner, including returned payslips and BACs payments.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the Draft Fraud and Corruption Policy for the Warwickshire Pension Fund appended to the report.

7. Draft Business Continuity Plan for the Warwickshire Pension Fund

Neil Buxton (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) introduced the report, stating that it followed a review of cyber security. The report set out Warwickshire Pension Fund's plans to deal with a critical event that could affect business as usual activities and drew on the experience of responding to COVID-19. He emphasised that the Business Continuity Plan supplied alongside the report was an initial draft. Members' suggestions were welcomed and could be incorporated into the Plan.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the report and the attached draft Business Continuity Plan.

8. Pensions Administration Activity and Performance Update

Liz Firmstone (Service Manager, Finance Transformation) introduced the report which provided an update on the work of the Pensions Administration Service. She advised that Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) were continually monitored, this enabled resources to be diverted to areas where additional support was required. The report showed an increased number of requests for transfers into and out of the Pension Scheme. This was attributable to a broader trend of individuals changing jobs more frequently. She advised that implementation of the Member Self Service (MSS) system was likely to mitigate pressure resulting from queries relating to pension benefits. She provided a summary of the main points of the report.

In response to Councillor Simpson-Vince, Neil Buxton (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) advised that the Guaranteed Minimum Pension (GMP) reconciliation exercise related to the process to rectify overpayments and underpayments resulting from administrative changes. It was a substantial exercise affecting pension funds nationally across public and private sectors.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the report.

9. Governance Review

Neil Buxton (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) introduced this report which provided details of the ongoing Governance Review of the Local Government Pension Scheme being undertaken by the Scheme Advisory Board (SAB). He advised that, to provide assurance to members, the appendix to the report provided a schedule of high-profile points emerging from the Review and actions taken by the Pension Fund. Four areas had been identified for future action once statutory guidance or new legislation was introduced.

In response to Councillor Gifford, officers advised that participating employers had not raised any concerns relating to arrangements in place for representation in the management of the Fund.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the report.

Councillor Kettle left the meeting at 15:07.

10. Regulatory and Policy update

Neil Buxton (Technical Specialist – Pension Fund Policy and Governance) introduced the report which provided a summary of regulatory developments within the pensions arena alongside details of policies reviewed either as part of an annual review or where there had been a requirement for minor amendments.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes the report.

11. Warwickshire Pension Fund New Employers and Employers Leaving the Fund

In response to the Chair, members of the Committee agreed to approve the delegation of authority to the Strategic Director for Resources as set out within the report.

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:

New Academies

- Camp Hill Primary School (Part of Futures Trust Multi Academy Trust) 01/03/2022

New Employers

- Risual Limited 01/12/2021
- Radway Parish Council 01/11/2021

12. Review of the Minutes of the Warwickshire Fire Local Pension Board meeting of 14 September 2021

The minutes of the Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Local Pension Board Meeting of 14 September 2021 were noted.

13. 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 paragraphs 2 and 4 of Part 1 of Schedule 12A of the Local Government Act 1972.

14. Firefighter Pension Schemes McCloud Remedy - Immediate Detriment Cases

The Committee received a confidential briefing.

15. Next Meeting

Members noted the date of the next meeting, due to be held on Monday 13 June 2022.

The meeting rose at 15:20.

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Chair