

Staff & Pensions Committee

Monday, 8 June 2020

Minutes

Attendance

Committee Members

Councillor Kam Kaur (Chair)
Councillor Neil Dirveiks
Councillor Bill Gifford
Councillor John Horner
Councillor Bhagwant Singh Pandher
Councillor Bob Stevens

Officers

Sally Brandrick, Corporate Health, Safety and Wellbeing Manager
Ben Brook, Assistant Chief Fire Officer
Neil Buxton, Technical Specialist Pensions Fund Policy and Governance
Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director (Governance & Policy)
Andrew Felton, Assistant Director (Finance)
Liz Firmstone, Service Manager (Transformation)
Victoria Moffett, Lead Commissioner Pensions and Investment
Isabelle Moorhouse, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
Chris Norton Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Treasury, Pension, Audit & Risk)
Neville Robinson, Team Lead - Health, Safety and Wellbeing
Rich Thomas Strategy and Commissioning Manager (HROD)
Nichola Vine, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Legal and Democratic)

1. General

(1) Apologies

None.

(2) Members' Disclosures of Pecuniary and Non-Pecuniary Interests

None.

(3) Minutes of previous meeting

The minutes of the meeting held on 12 March 2020 were considered and agreed as a true and accurate record for signing by the Chair.

2. Covid-19 Administration Impact and Actions

Chris Norton, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (Treasury, Pension, Audit & Risk), presented the report. The Covid-19 pension report provided updates on Covid-19 regarding the running of the pensions fund and included the investment and administration side of the fund. He continued that this report focused on the administration side as the investment side was reviewed in the Pensions Fund Investment Sub-Committee.

The report provided a summary of the risk register for the fund itself which included the volatility of the markets, the impact on investments during the Covid-19 period and risks of employer contributions not being paid. Chris Norton continued that employer contributions are as much administration issue as an investments issue, and this is an where risk is significantly higher.

He concluded that the funds had been able to continue critical operations and physically continue to run. The fund itself had finished its restructure and new officer positions had been filled, including a pension administrator manager.

The Chair commended the fund team's ability to carry on working as usual.

Resolved

That the Staff and Pensions Committee notes and comments on the report.

3. Armed Services Support and Foster Friendly Employer

Rich Thomas, Strategy and Commissioning Manager (HROD), presented the report. These items were initially considered at the December 2019 meeting. Recommendations were approved for employees of Warwickshire County Council who are military reservists resulting in development of a new policy. The final matter that required approval was in relation to contracts of employment for mobilised military reservists being operable throughout a period of mobilisation.

The report presented in December 2019 also provided support to these employees who wished to become foster carers. Approval was now sought to provide foster carers with an additional five days of paid leave in each year for the purposes of undertaking learning, development or preparation for the placement of a child or young person.

Councillor Bob Stevens stated that this report is part of the military services covenant that the council had signed up to. He praised the armed forces for their work during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Resolved

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Approved the Council and will treat the contracts of employment of employees mobilised for Reserve Service as operable throughout the period of mobilisation so that there will be no adverse effect on entitlements calculated in accordance with length of service.
2. Approved the proposal for up to 5 days additional paid leave per annum (pro rata for part time staff) for employees who are approved foster carers in the years following approval as a foster

carer for the purposes of undertaking learning, development or preparation for the placement of a child or young person.

4. WFRS Health, Safety and Wellbeing Annual Report

Ben Brook, Assistant Chief Fire Officer, presented the report. Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service (WFRS) has a statutory duty to meet requirements set out in several pieces of legislation including the Fire & Rescue Services Act 2004, Fire & Rescue National Framework 2018, Health & Safety at Work Act 1974, National Operational Guidance and the Health & Safety framework for operational guidance. Ben Brook commended the team for their hard work and good performance over last 12 months, especially due to the situational circumstances; the Chair and committee reiterated this.

He continued that the report focused on how the hospital to home activities have become embedded as a part of our service provision to the community, that staff are being trained on analytical risk assessment as well as ongoing work looking at post fire contaminants, which is a local and national area of research, and specifically the contamination of PPE (personal protection equipment) clothing.

Ben Brook concluded that WFRS had carried out an action plan following the Grenfell tragedy, including a 32-metre high turn-table ladder, to protect communities. He added that personal and vehicle injuries are slightly up but there had been no increase in violence towards crews or major injuries. 97% of WFRS staff members passed their health assessment criteria and there are now Health and Wellbeing Ambassadors and a regular newsletter.

In response to a question from Councillor Neil Dirveiks, Ben Brook clarified that all aggression towards the WFRS was made by the public when the fire service was on duty.

Following a question from Councillor John Horner, Ben Brook stated that the majority of vehicles incidents were at slow speed during manoeuvring and that poorly parked vehicles in streets is a problem across the country, and this can prevent access to emergency vehicles.

In response to a query from Councillor Stevens, Ben Brook said that the report figures included whole time and on-call fire service staff and concurred that the WFRS are receiving help for PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder).

Resolved

That the Staff and Pensions Committee considered and commented on the report.

5. Annual Health, Safety and Wellbeing Report 2019/2020

Sally Brandrick, Health, Safety and Wellbeing Tech Specialist, presented the report. There have been no Health and Safety Executive interventions in 2019/2020, a 50% reduction in all significant accidents and many employee wellbeing actions have been initiated. Last year, a new health and safety auditing process was implemented which had introduced a new measuring and rating formula, so they were able to carry out a new benchmark in auditing services and have a standard format for all wellbeing services. She continued that design services, waste management, construction and children and families had all been successfully audited with positive feedback.

There had been a focus on work safety and workplace inspections for staff which have been improved by the new auditing system.

Sally Brandrick continued that 107 schools and 280 social care workers in Warwickshire signed up or have access to the Employee Assistance Programme before the Covid-19 lockdown, so teachers from these schools and these workers can access counselling and grief support. She stated that work had been carried out on employee wellbeing, to ensure staff knew where support and help was; for example, with home schooling children. Sally Brandrick concluded that they are looking at reinstating and recovery and they can refer to occupational health for Covid-19 to ensure safety for officers when they are reinstated at work.

The Chair endorsed the work done in the report including the 2000 employees who participated in the staff survey, and the staff who provide the mental health advice and help on the intranet.

Following a question from Councillor Dirveiks, Sally Brandrick stated that there is online training and a video on desk exercises on how to use IT equipment safely. Legally the council must provide this information.

Councillor Direveiks and Sally Brandrick conversed about violence involving pupils and support for staff. Sally Brandrick reiterated that schools try to report all incidents even if it involves just one pupil and it is minor; Councillor Dirveiks expressed his concerns with this and its impact on school staff. It was clarified that the Health and Wellbeing service are involved to make sure the appropriate support is in place. Sally Brandrick informed the committee that schools where incidents are a frequent occurrence receive the appropriate guidance.

In response to Councillor Stevens, Sally Brandrick divulged that only officers who work from home contractually worked that way pre-Covid-19 and the council does not have legal responsibility for an officer's home working environment.

The Chair added that a new homeworking policy was recently implemented. Sarah Duxbury, Assistant Director (Governance & Policy), reiterated that several policies have been reviewed due to the vast majority of officers that are homeworking but this will be based on information already provided and £100 has been provided for any officers who need additional equipment to work from home.

Resolved

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Notes the information contained within this report
2. Endorses and supports a proactive approach to the management of health, safety and wellbeing
3. Endorses and supports the promotion of a positive health, safety and wellbeing culture

6. Administration Activity and Performance Report

Liz Firmstone, Service Manager (Transformation), presented the report. In 2019 a governance review was carried out on the Pension Administration Service (PAS) to improve its management.

54 actions on how to improve the service were produced from this with 36 being completed and four more actions will be finished by early July 2020; some of the outstanding actions are not due yet. Liz Firmstone stated that they are currently finalising the results of the internal audits that were carried out over the last year. She continued that the team have successfully reduced outstanding queries by half despite the current circumstances and that the indexation increases to pensions were all implemented on time. The team are currently obtaining information from the employers for the year end so that annual benefit statements can be issues to the scheme members. Statements have already been issued to deferred members.

Liz Firmstone continued that at the beginning of 2019-2020 there were a lot of vacancies and the PAS went through a service redesign which had increased capacity within the team. The service has reviewed its Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and has proposed a revised set for adoption from 2020/21, consistent with industry standards for approval by the committee.

It was clarified that if a deadline is missed for data being submitted by an employer, then this is classified as a breach. If employers repeatedly miss deadlines these cases are escalated, and employers are contacted to identify issues and offer assistance; PAS is keeping under review the impact Covid-19 is having on employer performance.

Liz Firmstone concluded that the PAS has a new I-Connect project which allows the service to obtain information straight from their employer's payroll into the pension system which is effective at resolving issues and improves data quality. It will be distributed in three to four phases starting in the autumn of 2020.

The Chair endorsed the work of the PAS for reducing their high volume of queries.

Following a query from Councillor Stevens, Liz Firmstone stated that 100% is a statutory target for the KPIs and some of these are unreachable; for example the "Retirements Lump Sums", the service cannot make payments until notified by the employer that the employee has retired but the service is not normally informed until after the employee had left. Liz Firmstone reiterated that 2019/2020 was when the service had many vacancies and the numbers had improved for the 2020/2021 year as posts have been filled. She stated that they could now achieve the local targets set out as shown in Appendix 2.

Andrew Felton, Assistant Director (Finance), added that the trending performance had improved; for example, for one of the KPIs 89% had been achieved in the last four months although the overall annual performance was 69% due to lower performance earlier in the year, and the extra staff capacity will push this higher.

In response to Councillor Horner, Liz Firmstone said that the service should be able to achieve near 100% of the KPI targets by 2021-2022. The PAS have prioritised the areas which impact on payments to members, so they do not lose out financially.

Resolved

That the Staff and Pensions Committee:

1. Notes the report.
2. Approves the adoption of the amended key performance indicators set out at Appendix 2.

7. Admissions and Termination Policy

Neil Buxton, Technical Specialist Pensions Fund Policy and Governance, presented the report. This report was generated due to changes of government policy in March 2020 which allowed the fund discretion when resolving exit credits. When an employer leaves the fund, the fund will apply the updated policy to determine whether there is an amount of money due to the employer that is exiting. Neil Buxton concluded that the report contained improvements for the admissions policy.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee approves the amended Admissions and Termination Policy.

8. Administration Strategy

Neil Buxton presented the report. The committee approved a draft administration strategy for consultation in March's Staff and Pensions meeting, following this the strategy went to employers for comments. He continued that amendments to the KPIs will be fed into the strategy and this will be published online when approved.

Andrew Felton reiterated that the strategy allows the fund to have more power over employers who are late with information; I-connect will aid this too.

Resolved:

That the Staff and Pensions Committee approves the Administration Strategy at Appendix A.

The meeting rose at 15:10

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Chair