



TYNE AND WEAR FIRE AND RESCUE AUTHORITY HUMAN RESOURCES COMMITTEE

**Minutes of the Meeting held Remotely on Monday 1 February 2021 at 10.30am
via Microsoft Teams**

Present:

Councillor Haley in the Chair.

Councillors Dodds, Flynn, Pickard, Taylor and Woodwark.

Part I

Apologies for Absence

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Butler and Stephenson.

Declarations of Interest

Councillor Dodds declared an interest in item 6 'Pension Scheme Membership Update' as he was in receipt of a pension under the 1992 Firefighters Scheme. Councillor Woodwark declared an interest in the same item as a member of the LGPS.

Minutes

44. RESOLVED that the minutes of the Human Resources Committee held on 5 October 2020 Part I, be confirmed as a correct record.

The Chair referred to the Annual Equality Data and Gender Pay Gap report and whether a comparison between Tyne and Wear and other metropolitan authorities was available. The Human Resources Director stated that he had that information and would forward it after the meeting.

Firefighter Recruitment

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority), the Finance Director and the Personnel Adviser to the Authority submitted a joint report providing an update on progress and future plans relating to Firefighter recruitment initiatives.

Firefighter recruitment was essential to ensure the effective management of operational deployment, in line with budget and risk critical activities. After a long period without recruiting new firefighters, in 2018 a campaign was launched in collaboration with County Durham and Darlington and Northumberland Fire and Rescue Services which resulted in the appointment of 24 trainee firefighters. 23 individuals successfully passed the course and were employed by TWFRS.

A further cohort began training in September 2019 with 14 individuals becoming operational and a further 23 firefighters became operational in August 2020 after undertaking Covid-secure training from April 2020. There had been a second Covid secure training cohort and this had led to a further 18 operational firefighters in the service in December 2020.

In response to a question from Councillor Woodward, the Human Resources Director clarified that 20 candidates had started the course in September 2019 and 24 in April 2020. It was highlighted that 24 was the maximum number of individuals who could be trained at one time under the current Covid restrictions. The Committee were advised that the reasons for trainees not completing the course was a mixture of health and fitness issues or not attaining the necessary standards at intermediate assessments.

A new recruitment campaign had begun in October 2020 and had attracted 1,612 applicants. All processes and assessments were reviewed to make sure that they were Covid secure; an additional assessment was added to test candidate fitness. It had been decided to carry out virtual interviews prior to role related tests due to the increase in cases of the more transmittable variant of Covid and as of the end of the previous week, 108 candidates had been interviewed. The situation remained fluid and a pragmatic process was being adopted.

Inter service transfers had also resulted in an additional 34 Firefighters and Crew Managers joining the service and a diversification working group had been launched in October 2020 to initiate and debate improvements to current selection testing processes which would increase applications from under-represented groups. This would directly support the Inclusion pillar of the TWFRS 2025 Vision.

Recruitment costs were met from relevant budgets but it was noted that the PPE required to make recruitment and training activities Covid-secure was met from a Covid specific budget.

Councillor Woodward queried if any issues had been raised during the selection process by candidates and the Human Resources Director explained that one of the reasons for introducing the an additional fitness test was to identify if that would reduce the numbers of candidates who dropped out of the process for fitness reasons.

ACO McVay advised that selection tests were established nationally and the Service was involved in a piece of work to review and update these. It had been suggested that successful applicants should have a day's trial for the course to ascertain if it was for them.

Councillor Pickard commented that it showed the flexibility of the service that training could be carried out during the pandemic; he asked if 'in person' interviews had been offered to applicants and the Human Resources Director stated that it had been considered and candidates could come to the service headquarters for the interview but this would still take place remotely.

Councillor Dodds referred to inter service transfers and if Tyne and Wear had an idea of the individual's length of service and potential financial implications when they expressed an interest. Councillor Taylor asked about training for outside organisations and whether that helped to offset the service's costs.

The Human Resources Director said that there was a formula for full cost recovery when selling training and this helped to defray the training centre costs.

The Chair commented that there had been small numbers of individuals joining the service with each recruitment process but in the context of the total workforce it appeared as if one in ten firefighters were recruited recently. He asked what the plans were for future recruitment and the Human Resources Director advised that the service needed to continue recruiting as rapidly as it could and there was some work taking place to look at increasing capacity and the throughput of trainees.

Councillor Taylor asked about whether there were any issues with overtime and the Finance Director explained that overtime was budgeted for, especially when there were new recruits, and where vacancies existed then savings would be made from the vacant positions.

Having considered the report, it was: -

45. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) the contents of the report be noted; and
- (ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Investors in People (IiP) Re-Accreditation

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority), the Finance Director and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report updating Members on the outcome of the recent Investors in People (IiP) reaccreditation.

In April/May 2019, the Authority had been reassessed against the IiP framework and had successfully achieved the Gold Standard Award. The Executive Leadership Team had reviewed external assessments in December 2019 and had decided to

continue with liP and review this before the next three year accreditation period expired. A cross section of employees had been invited to take part remotely in an liP assessment during December 2020 and initial feedback had been that the Gold Standard criteria had been met and that the Authority was continuing to progress well against 'big ticket' items which had previously been identified. The final report had not yet been received but the first draft had been very positive.

The Human Resources Director reported that South Wales Fire and Rescue Service had recently been in touch to ask for some assistance and insight and Tyne and Wear were informally helping them with that process.

Councillor Taylor asked if there was a possibility of including Fire Authority Members in a future liP working group, noting that this might sit well with HMICFRS and the Chair agreed that it would be good to be involved. The Human Resources Director stated that there was potential for this to be useful evidence or a case study.

Councillor Woodward highlighted that there had been some questioning of what the Authority got out of the process, was it just a badge for instance, and asked whether this had been progressed. The Human Resources Director advised that as part of the discussions in December 2019, the value of external assessments had been considered and it was concluded that there were benefits for the service for a relatively low cost. It was noted that other fire and rescue services were looking at their involvement and participation in liP did wax and wane over periods of time.

The Chair commented that sector led improvement was one thing but bringing in liP provided an outside sector perspective; good practice from other areas of the country could be brought in and it did provide value for money. Councillor Dodds agreed and noted that it was easy to cut things out during the current time but he felt these programmes were good for the service and for its reputation.

Accordingly the Committee: -

46. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) the contents of the report be endorsed;
- (ii) the Service be supported in continuing its liP accreditation; and
- (iii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Pension Scheme Membership Update

The Chief Fire Officer/Chief Executive (Clerk to the Authority), the Finance Director and the Personnel Advisor submitted a joint report providing an update on current and recent trends in pension scheme membership in the Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service workforce.

All employees of Tyne and Wear Fire and Rescue Service were contractually and statutorily entitled to be members of either a Firefighters Pension Scheme (Fire

Pension) or Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) depending on whether they had operational competence or not. Both types of schemes had grown in complexity over time resulting from successive Government changes and all schemes required contributions which varied over time.

Since the late 1980s, employees have had the right to opt out of the occupational pension scheme and to make their own arrangements, however automatic enrolment had been gradually introduced between October 2012 and February 2018. New employees joining the Service who were eligible were entered into the scheme when they started as part of the contract of employment.

The report set out the number of employees who had opted out of the pension scheme and the rate was 7.37% for the Fire Pension and 8.86% for the LGPS. The opt out rate was higher among female employees, however the percentage of opt outs had decreased over time.

The most recent auto enrolment exercise carried out by the Service was in July 2019 with 63 employees being auto-enrolled and 17 remaining in a scheme, a retention rate of 27%. As 46 employees had opted back out of the scheme, having previously opted out more than 12 months prior, this information had been used to influence the understanding of how to budget for pension contributions in the salary budgets.

The Human Resources Director advised that the trade unions had been asked for informal feedback on the report and the view of the FBU had been that pension opt outs usually coincided with changes in the national scheme and also could be related to personal financial difficulties. All unions were concerned about the impact of further changes to the Pension Schemes.

Councillor Flynn commented that pensions were complex and felt that efforts should be made to demystify both the Fire Scheme and the LGPS and that once you spoke about the benefits of pensions schemes, people generally opted in.

The Chair asked if there were opt outs of the scheme after an employee reached the maximum amount of pensionable benefits. The Human Resources Director stated that if a firefighter had achieved their maximum term, they needed to remain in the scheme and take a payment break, these employees would not be included in the numbers of opt outs.

Councillor Dodds asked if payment holidays were a new option and ACO McVay stated that these had been introduced in the last five years. The Human Resources Director added that taking a contribution holiday may affect the final salary element of the scheme. Further information would be provided to Councillor Dodds on this matter.

47. RESOLVED that: -

- (i) the contents of the report be noted; and
- (ii) further reports be received as appropriate.

Annual Report of the Local Pensions Board

The Finance Director submitted a report proving the Committee with the Annual Report from the Local Pension Board (LPB).

The Terms of Reference for the LPB provide for the LPB to produce an annual report highlighting areas of concern and identifying good practice. The Board was made up of six members, three acting as Employer Representatives and three acting as Employee Representatives. Councillor Flynn acted as an observer for the Authority.

The LPB had met twice during the year as its activity had been limited by the pandemic, however the following policies had been agreed in January 2020: -

- Review of Terms of Reference
- Review of Conflicts of Interest Policy
- Review of Training Policy
- Review of Reporting Breaches Policy

The Board had agreed to add reports from the pensions administrator and LGA bulletins as standing items on the agenda and had received reports on the response to Home Office consultation on Public Sector pensions and finalised a training plan for board members. It was planned to review the Risk Register at the LPB meeting in January 2021.

Within the coming year it was expected that the focus of the Pension Board would be on the remedy of public sector pension reforms and the impacts it would have on the Service scheme members. Details of the consultation on this were awaited and from a finance point of view, it needed to be identified who was going to pay the costs but it seemed inevitable that there would be higher employer and employee contributions.

The Chair noted that the report revealed the complex matters which were going on in relation to pensions. He noted that the Pension Administrator had to self-report a delay and the Finance Director explained that the Annual Benefits statement had not been issued on time in the previous year but all requirements had been complied with for this year.

The Chair commented with respect to the remedy of pensions, it was surprising that discrimination had happened when the scheme was designed and had it been done properly, it would have been in the terms and conditions from day one. His view was that it should be a funded remedy but it was a case of waiting to see what came out of the consultation.

48. RESOLVED that the contents of the report be noted.

Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation Order) 2006

49. RESOLVED that in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 2006 the public be excluded during consideration of the remaining business as it was considered to involve a likely disclosure of information relating to consultations/negotiations in connection with any labour matter arising between the Authority and employees of the Authority (including the Authority holding that information). (Local Government Act 1972, Schedule 12A, Part I, Paragraph 4).

(Signed) G HALEY
Chair

