

Pensions Board

26 January 2021

Report title	Covid-19 Response	
Originating service	Pensions Services	
Accountable employee	Rachel Howe	Head of Governance
	Tel	01902 55 2091
	Email	Rachel.Howe@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report to be/has been considered by	Rachel Brothwood	Director of Pensions
	Tel	01902 55 1715
	Email	Rachel.Brothwood@wolverhampton.gov.uk

Recommendation for noting:

The Pensions Board is asked to note:

1. The steps taken by the Fund in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing assessment of service delivery impact

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 To provide an overview of the Fund's response to the current global pandemic and the steps being taken to mitigate service delivery impact and support employees during the second and now third phase national lockdown.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Further to the update presented at October's Board, and following engagement with City of Wolverhampton Council's HR and the Trade Unions (who attended the office for a site visit to view the arrangements put in place) the Fund transitioned some of its employees back to site on 7 September. Numbers were limited in the first instance (to a maximum of 50% of revised capacity across three floors), with priority given to service areas impacted on service delivery during the first lockdown from March. Desks were allocated in accordance with the business cases for return, with a number of desks being provided as "flex" to enable a rota of officers to attend the office to support well-being, personal development and team relationships.
- 2.2 In addition, the Fund recommenced its recruitment programme at the end of August, with a number of successful appointments. Since September the Fund has appointed 8 new persons, together with commencing 8 Graduate (2 year) and 4 Industrial (1 year) placements across all service areas. Prior to starting with the Fund, all new employees were issued an assurance statement noting the protocols in place, were given sight of an employee training video and had an individual risk assessment completed. Recruitment continued throughout the remainder of the year with active recruitment for a Fund apprentice, together with key service delivery roles in our Operations teams. Interviews conducted through the virtual 'Teams'; platform have proven successful with positive feedback received from candidates.

3.0 Supporting employees and services through further lockdown and tiered restrictions

- 3.1 Following Government's announcement that a second lockdown would come into effect on 5 November, the Fund re-evaluated its business case for maintaining office working in light of the national lockdown, reconfirming its position that the payment of pension benefits remains an essential service.
- 3.2 Adjustments were made to the office arrangements which included updated communications to employees on office protocols and cleaning arrangements, together with a full closure of the office on Wednesdays to enable a break in the rota for attendance to support cleaning protocols and minimise transfer risk. Services most impacted by the working from home arrangements (Operations, Data and Customer Services) maintained a reduced but consistent presence in the office throughout the period of lockdown.
- 3.3 Throughout the period the priority has been on employee wellbeing, reinforced through communication from the Fund's Senior Management on supporting each other, offering

opportunity for social interaction through the Fund's staff forum and team-led events and the availability of additional IT equipment, together with the ability to collect DSE equipment (such as office chairs) being on offer to all. Updated guidance on self-isolation protocols was also issued.

- 3.4 To support this, the Fund introduced a wellbeing assessment for all employees to enable all to request agile working in the office where their wellbeing was being impacted by lockdown, feelings of isolation and unsuitable home working environments. The key focus to identify and provide additional support through the Council's employee wellbeing platform as the preferred option over a return to the office given the lockdown in force. Where working in the office was identified as supporting individual wellbeing, a structured and managed return to office working was enabled together with oversight of office use via a centrally managed booking system.
- 3.5 During December, office arrangements and employee support were maintained, with reduced onsite working. Following the announcement over Christmas that the West Midlands would be moving into Tier 4, Senior Managers met to discuss the revised position and working guidance. Further review was undertaken in response to the national lockdown (move to Tier 5) early January. In view of increasing infection rates and also the need for the Fund to continue to provide essential services to members and employers, the office continues to remain open but-by exception, only to support essential service delivery or, in limited cases, where it supports individual wellbeing because working from home cannot be maintained.
- 3.6 Conscious also of the changing situation with schools and childcare support the Fund, in line with the Council, has maintained its position, that it will support those with childcare needs and be flexible with working arrangements where necessary.
- 3.7 We continue to monitor the guidance and the changing situation and will continue to provide guidance and communications as the situation develops.

4.0 Supporting our Customers

- 4.1 The Fund continues to provide support to members as it enhances its customer engagement and member services offerings. While work volumes continue to be impacted with the working from home arrangements, communication and information developed to support members continues to grow as highlighted in the Customer Engagement Update Report. In addition, key service development delivery has continued to be achieved which further supports members in their planning for retirement. Most notable the delivery of deferred retirement quotes online.
- 4.2 Throughout the Autumn, we saw a reduction in safeguarding and vulnerable persons cases with no such cases being reported as a result of the Covid pandemic during this period.

4.3 Employer Engagement Survey

Further to the survey issued out to employers at the start of lockdown, the Fund reissued its employer survey in November as part of its ongoing review of service delivery to Customers.

The survey highlighted the value placed by employers in the people with whom they engage at the Fund, noting specifically responses to COVID-19 related services and support, high value placed on personalised email/phone support, closely followed by webinars and FAQs. This is reflective of the enhanced engagement delivered by the Fund throughout lockdown through digital means, to ensure employers remain informed and the Fund accessible to those requiring support to achieve their statutory duties as employers.

5.0 Financial implications

5.1 The Fund allocated £25,000 of its service development budget to support the issuance of additional IT equipment to employees working from home and spend remains within this budget to date. Some flexibility was built into the Fund's operational budget for service development and there has been change in format of service delivery, however, these changes have been managed within the Fund's approved budget for the year which continues to be monitored and reported to the Pensions Committee through the quarterly budget review process.

6.0 Legal implications

6.1 The Fund has a duty to pay pension benefits as they fall due, failure to do so may result in challenge from both regulatory and national bodies.

6.2 The Fund has a duty as an employer to protect its employees providing a safe environment for them to work, following health and safety regulations and new guidance, as this emerges. Office-based working and supporting communications have been considered in consultation with employees, the City of Wolverhampton Council and the relevant Trade Unions.

7.0 Equalities implications

7.1 Equality Impact Assessments will be undertaken and reviewed as part of the planned phase return to the office taking into account any individual requirements as identified in individual risk assessments.

8.0 Environmental implications

8.1 There are no direct environmental implications arising from this report.

9.0 Human resources implications

- 9.1 The Fund has a duty to provide a safe environment for all employees and has worked with City of Wolverhampton HR team to assess and determine any steps to return to the office. All proposals have undergone consultation with relevant Trade Unions.

10.0 Corporate landlord implications

- 10.1 There are no direct corporate landlord implications arising from this report.

11.0 Schedule of background papers

- 11.1 Pensions Board – Response to Covid-19 – 20 October 2020
<https://wolverhampton.moderngov.co.uk/documents/s156931/Covid-19%20Response%20Update.pdf>

12.0 Schedule of appendices

- 12.1 None.