

**Northumberland County Council**  
**LGPS**  
**Communication Strategy Statement**

**Administered by Northumberland County Council**  
**1 January 2016**

This is the Statement of Policy concerning Communication of the Northumberland County Council LGPS ("the Fund") and has been developed following consultation with employers in the Fund, scheme member representatives and other interested stakeholders.

Northumberland County Council, ("the Administering Authority"), is responsible for the local administration of the Fund, which is part of the Local Government Pension Scheme ("the LGPS"). The Fund comprises over 40 employers with active members, and around 25,000 scheme members (including active members, deferred and pensioner members).

The Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013 require all Local Government Pension Scheme funds in England and Wales to publish a statement of policy concerning communication with members and scheme employers. This Statement sets out with whom the Administering Authority will communicate, how this will be done and how the effectiveness of that communication will be monitored.

**Purpose and objectives**

The aim of the communication strategy is to ensure that scheme members appreciate the benefits of the scheme and all stakeholders are kept informed of developments within the Fund. The Administering Authority also believes that effective communications will help to maintain the efficient running of the Fund.

The Communications Strategy has a number of specific objectives relating to how the Administering Authority communicates with its stakeholders. The Administering Authority will:

- Provide user friendly, relevant and informative communications in a clear, concise manner with well-presented information
- Provide communications that are valued by stakeholders
- Provide access to the appropriate means of communication for stakeholders with alternative needs
- Look for efficiencies in delivering communications.

## Regulatory basis

The LGPS is a statutory scheme, established by an Act of Parliament. The Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013 provide the conditions and regulatory guidance surrounding the production and implementation of communications strategies.

In carrying out their roles and responsibilities in relation to the communication of the Local Government Pension Scheme the Administering Authority and employers will, as a minimum, comply with overriding legislation, including:

- Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations
- Pensions Acts 2004 and 2011 and associated disclosure legislation
- Public Service Pensions Act 2013 and associated record keeping legislation
- Freedom of Information Act 2000
- Equality Act 2010
- Data Protection Act 2003

Regulation 61 of the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013 sets out the requirements of the communications policy for LGPS Funds as follows:

### Statements of policy concerning communications with members and Scheme employers

61. (1) An administering authority must prepare, maintain and publish a written statement setting out its policy concerning communications with —

- (a) members;
- (b) representatives of members;
- (c) prospective members; and
- (d) Scheme employers.

(2) In particular the statement must set out its policy on —

- (a) the provision of information and publicity about the Scheme to members, representatives of members and Scheme employers;
- (b) the format, frequency and method of distributing such information or publicity; and
- (c) the promotion of the Scheme to prospective members and their employers.

(3) The statement must be revised and published by the administering authority following a material change in their policy on any of the matters referred to in paragraph (2).

This statement has been developed to include the information required by those provisions and to describe the Administering Authority's approach in relation to meeting these requirements in its communications.

### **Delivery of communications**

Northumberland County Council has delegated responsibility for the management of the Pension Fund to the Pension Fund Panel, taking into consideration advice from the LGPS Local Pension Board. The Panel will monitor the implementation of this Strategy on a regular basis as outlined later in this statement.

Operationally, the delivery of communications for the Fund is undertaken 'in-house' within Northumberland County Council, mainly by the Pensions Administration Team. However, the Pensions Administration Team will often make use of externally produced material, for example, material produced by the LGA's pension secretariat team including the national LGPS website. Also, the Pensions Administration Team attends regional group meetings to discuss and share communication material. Such information will, if considered appropriate, be customised to the needs of the Fund's stakeholders.

### **How the Administering Authority communicates**

Ensuring that key stakeholders are well informed about the LGPS is of paramount importance, and the Administering Authority recognises that communicating in a clear informative style is vital in achieving this aim.

### **Who the Administering Authority communicates with**

The Administering Authority recognises that there are several distinct stakeholder groups, such as;

- Scheme Members (active, deferred, pensioner and dependant members) and prospective Scheme Members
- Scheme Employers and prospective Scheme Employers
- Pension Fund Panel and LGPS Local Pension Board members
- Pension Fund staff
- Other interested organisations including Government Departments, Scheme Advisory Board and Advisors to the Pension Fund.

The main means of communication with these key stakeholders are outlined in the Appendix.

### **Diversity of communication**

The Fund's information is available in alternative formats for example, Braille, large print, BSL Video/DVD and audio tape, on request. The Administering Authority always aims to use the most appropriate communication medium for the audience receiving the information. This may involve using more than one method of communication. All of the Fund's generic scheme member communication material is produced in English but may be requested in alternative languages.

## Measuring whether the communication objectives are met

The Administering Authority monitors success against its communication objectives in the following ways:

Provide user friendly, relevant and informative communications in a clear, concise manner with well-presented information	Satisfaction surveys of employers and scheme members achieving 90% of scores in positive responses in these areas  Provide a newsletter to all active and pensioner members at least once a year detailing scheme changes and other developments  Provide all active members with the chance to attend a meeting at least once a year
Provide communications that are valued by stakeholders	Satisfaction surveys of employers and scheme members achieving 90% of scores in positive responses in these areas
Provide access to the appropriate means of communication for stakeholders with alternative needs	Satisfaction surveys of employers and scheme members achieving 90% of scores in positive responses in these areas
Look for efficiencies in delivering communications	Evidence of utilising communications produced nationally or in partnership with other administering authorities

An overview of the Administering Authority's performance against these objectives will be reported within the Fund's annual report and accounts and reported on an ongoing basis to the Pension Fund Panel and LGPS Local Pension Board.

Where performance is substantially below standard the Administering Authority will formulate an improvement plan. This will be reported to the Pension Fund Panel and LGPS Local Pension Board together with an ongoing update on progress against the improvement plan.

### Key risks

The key risks to the delivery of this Strategy are outlined below. The Head of Pensions Administration and other officers will work with the Pension Fund Panel and LGPS Local Pension Board in monitoring these and other key risks and considering how to respond to them.

- Lack or reduction of skilled resources due to difficulty retaining and recruiting staff members and also staff absence due to sickness
- Significant increase in workloads causes strain on day to day delivery and less focus on communications
- Issues in production of annual benefit statements, e.g. wrong address or printing errors due to external supplier
- Inability to deliver a service to pension members due to system unavailability or failure
- Issuing incorrect or inaccurate communications
- Lack of clear communication to employers or Scheme members

## **Costs**

All costs relating to the operation and implementation of this Strategy will be met directly by the Fund.

## **Approval, review and consultation**

This Communication Strategy Statement was approved at the Pension Fund Panel meeting on 26 November 2015. It is effective from 1 January 2016.

It will be formally reviewed and updated at least every three years or sooner if any matters included within it merit reconsideration, including if there are any changes to the LGPS or other relevant Regulations or Guidance which need to be taken into account.

In preparing this Strategy the Administering Authority has consulted with the relevant employing authorities, the scheme member and employer representatives on the LGPS Local Pension Board and other persons considered appropriate.

The Strategy Statement will be included within the Fund's Annual Report and Accounts and available on the Council's website at:

<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=16059>

## **Further information**

If you require further information about anything in or related to this Communication Strategy Statement, please contact:

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## **Appendix**

### **Communication with All Scheme Members, i.e. Pensioner Members, Deferred Pensioner Members and Active Members**

The Administering Authority automatically provides a range of Scheme booklets to employees eligible to join the Local Government Pension Scheme on commencement of employment with the County Council, and provides the booklets to participating employers to give to their new employees.

Booklets are also provided upon request, and distributed at information points within County Hall.

All Scheme booklets are available on the Northumberland County Council website, together with links to other useful websites.

Pension Section staff are available to give and receive advice and information by telephone, letter, email, and in person within County Hall. Appointments are not necessary, but private interview facilities can be made available if required.

Regular roadshows and surgeries are provided for active pension scheme members and employers.

### **Communication with Pensioner Members**

The Administering Authority sends annual newsletters to pensioner members by post. The annual newsletter is also available via the website.

At the time of retirement specific information is made available to each individual pensioner, this includes:

- A statement detailing the calculation of his/her pension and lump sum.
- A letter explaining the arrangements for paying his/her pension.
- A leaflet explaining his/her appeal rights.
- A leaflet explaining the provisions of the Pension Increase legislation.

All retiring members are asked to complete a questionnaire giving their views on the quality and range of services provided by the Pension Section.

Payslips are issued at least once a year and when there is a change in an individual's pension of £5 or more in a pay period. Regular payslips are provided on request. P60s are also issued once a year.

## **Communication with Deferred Pensioner Members**

The Administering Authority sends annual benefit statements by post to deferred pensioner members and through them Scheme members are kept informed of their future pension benefit entitlement.

At the time of leaving employment specific information is made available to each individual deferred beneficiary, this includes:

- A statement detailing the calculation of his/her pension and lump sum entitlement and information regarding when the benefits are due for payment together with any early release provisions.
- A leaflet explaining his/her appeal rights.
- A booklet setting out his/her options with regard to LGPS rights, e.g. effecting transfer to a new employer's pension scheme, etc.

## **Communication with Active Members**

On appointment, an eligible employee is provided with an auto enrolment letter, scheme literature and a form which enables him/her to request further information regarding the transfer of earlier pension rights into the LGPS and/or effecting a death benefit nomination. Subsequently the scheme member will be provided with a notice confirming his/her admission to the Scheme and detailing his/her rights to count previous service if appropriate.

Active members are also provided with information concerning their appeal rights.

The Administering Authority sends annual benefit statements by post to active members, and an (at least) annual newsletter by post updating members on any relevant changes. The newsletters are also available via the website.

The Pension Section of the County Council holds annual meetings (road shows) for the contributors in at least three locations throughout the County, to explain Scheme benefits and offer an opportunity to deal with individuals' questions.

The Administering Authority also facilitates regular presentations provided by Prudential (the Fund's AVC provider) for active scheme members to make them aware of their AVC options.

The Pension Section is located in the Northumberland County Council main office (County Hall) and active members have access to advice and information from staff upon request.

Ad hoc meetings and presentations are organised to discuss specific pension issues with groups of employees e.g. those transferring to a new employer under TUPE transfers.

All new entrants to the Scheme are asked to complete a questionnaire giving their views on the quality and range of services provided by the Pension Section.

## **Communication with Representatives of Members**

Two Trade Union representatives and one employee/pensioner representative have seats on the Pension Fund Panel, in the capacity as observers. The seats on the Panel entitle those representatives to all of the Reports, policy documents, presentations and some of the training made available to the voting members of the Panel.

Two Scheme member representatives also have seats on the LGPS Local Pension Board (one of whom is also an observer on the Pension Fund Panel). The Board's role is to assist the Administering Authority as Scheme Manager to secure compliance with the LGPS Regulations and any other legislation relating to the governance and administration of the Scheme, and requirements imposed in relation to the LGPS by the Pensions Regulator; and to ensure the effective and efficient governance and administration of the LGPS.

## **Communication with Prospective Members**

The Administering Authority automatically provides Scheme booklets to all new employees who are eligible to join the Local Government Pension Scheme at the start of their employment with the County Council, and provides the booklets to participating employers to give to their new employees.

The Pension Section of the County Council holds annual meetings (road shows) in at least three locations throughout the County, which active and prospective members are welcome to attend, to explain Scheme benefits and offer an opportunity to deal with individuals' questions.

## **Communication with Employing Authorities**

Following the amalgamation of the district councils in Northumberland with Northumberland County Council which took place with effect from 1 April 2009, one non-voting seat on the Northumberland County Council Pension Fund Panel was allocated to an employer representative and one to an employee/pensioner representative. The purpose of the employer representative seat is to give representation on the Panel to all of the other employers (i.e. other than Northumberland County Council) participating in the Fund. Prior to 1 April 2009 three out of the six Northumberland district councils had seats on the Panel, with full voting rights.

Two Employer representatives also have seats on the LGPS Local Pension Board (one of whom is also an observer on the Pension Fund Panel). The Board's role is to assist the Administering Authority as Scheme Manager to secure compliance with the LGPS Regulations and any other legislation relating to the governance and administration of the Scheme, and requirements imposed in relation to the LGPS by

the Pensions Regulator; and to ensure the effective and efficient governance and administration of the LGPS.

The Administering Authority holds an annual meeting with the employers in February or March each year, at which aspects of the Fund's investments and actuarial position are discussed, together with any Scheme changes. The results of any actuarial valuation and relevant topics are covered when appropriate.

The Administering Authority provides each participating employer with a detailed and prescriptive Scheme Guide and relevant updates, which sets out the responsibilities and information requirements of the employers. An employer section of the Northumberland County Council website has been established and updates for employers are made available via this site.

The Administering Authority issues employer alerts by bulk e-mail when it is necessary to give details of scheme changes.

Employers are sent a hard copy of the Fund's Annual Report and Accounts each year, which itself reproduces key policy statements for the Fund.

Employers were consulted on the initial Statement of Investment Principles (SIP) for the Northumberland County Council Pension Fund, and are sent an annual updated copy as part of the Annual Report and Accounts, and consulted on changes.

Employers are consulted on other ad hoc policy statements, such as the Fund's Governance Policy, as the need arises.

Employers were consulted on the initial Funding Strategy Statement (FSS) for the Fund and are sent an annual updated copy as part of the Annual Report and Accounts, and consulted on changes.

Training on pension matters is offered to human resources and payroll personnel within the County Council and other scheme employers.

Periodically participating employers are asked to complete a questionnaire giving their views on the quality and range of services provided by the Pension Section.

The SIP, the FSS, and the Report and Accounts are all available via the website.