

<p>ASSESSMENT OF THE EFFECTIVENESS OF NORTHUMBERLAND COUNTY COUNCIL PENSION FUND PANEL 2019/20</p>

Overall assessment

The Pension Fund Panel (“**the Panel**”) has considered the due diligence undertaken to assess the pros, cons and risks of merger of Northumberland County Council Pension Fund (“**NCCPF**”) with Tyne and Wear Pension Fund (“**TWPF**”) and formally confirmed, in June 2019, that it is minded to pursue merger of NCCPF with TWPF, effective from 1 April 2020. Then NCC, as the LGPS administering authority, took the decision to progress with merger at its meeting of Council in January 2020. It is anticipated that merger will lead to efficiency savings of around 13% of the cost of running two separate funds, most of which will be realised by the NCCPF employers.

After taking actuarial advice, the Panel has taken the opportunity afforded by NCCPF’s improved funding level to increase the prudence within the 31 March 2019 valuation, with the aim of benefiting the long-term cost efficiency of NCCPF.

The Panel would particularly draw attention to the following achievements in the year:

- gaining the unanimous support of full Council in pursuit of merger, effective from 1 April 2020, of NCCPF with Tyne and Wear Pension Fund;
- overseeing the due diligence work for implementation of merger;
- overseeing NCCPF’s 31 March 2019 actuarial valuation process, and taking the opportunity to increase the prudence built into the valuation assumptions;
- undertaking the first stage strategy review of NCCPF’s asset allocation and manager structure, and changing the geographical allocations of NCCPF’s quoted equities;
- reviewing NCCPF’s allocation to index-linked gilts;
- developing its collaborative working practices with NCC’s LGPS Local Pension Board, for the benefit of NCCPF and the LGPS members;
- reviewing the Pension Fund accounts and external audit planning and results;
- considering and approving NCCPF’s revised
 - Investment Strategy Statement, and
 - Funding Strategy Statement;
- participating in the development of BCPP Ltd;
- monitoring the effectiveness of the shared pensions administration service with South Tyneside Council; and
- reviewing fund manager performance and the impact of currency hedging quarterly.

Governance arrangements in 2019/20

Administrative arrangements

The Panel met five times in the 2019/20 Council year, both formally and informally (for training purposes):

- three meetings for the normal quarterly business including the review of investments and monitoring the appointed fund managers;
- one further ad-hoc meeting to deal with NCCPF's strategy review; and
- one further training meeting to review NCCPF's prospects ahead of the 31 March 2019 triennial actuarial valuation.

The number of meetings held has been appropriate to allow sufficient time to consider all agenda items and ensure sufficient training and experience have been gained by the members before making the decisions required.

The length of the meetings (i.e. usually a half day) has been appropriate to enable members to consider complex subject matter, and time has been allowed in the meetings for effective challenge of the external fund managers and other advisers.

The Panel has allocated sufficient time at each meeting to consider each decision fully and to understand the inherent risks involved in pension fund investment and the Local Government Pension Scheme.

The Panel has organised additional meetings where necessary to further consider an issue when focus on a single issue is required, for example, pooling or merger. The Chair has had briefings before each Panel meeting and at appropriate intervals between meetings.

The Panel has delegated authority to the Service Director - Finance, in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair, where necessary, to ensure that matters could be progressed on a timely basis without the need to revert to the committee.

The minutes of meetings and reports presented to the Panel were of adequate detail for members to ensure that officers had acted on and implemented the decisions taken.

The papers for the meetings were circulated well in advance to allow adequate time for Panel members to read and consider the issues. The papers were prepared to an adequate standard and included a short summary of each agenda item to aid the reader in understanding the key points. Urgent items, to be tabled at meetings, have been kept to a minimum although at certain times this has been unavoidable due to changing circumstances.

The papers have been presented at the meetings by officers and advisers with sufficient technical knowledge, experience and skill to assist members in understanding the key areas.

The meetings have been conducted in a format which has allowed for decisions to be reached promptly but after appropriate consideration. Suitably qualified officers and advisers have been in attendance at all meetings and have been allowed the opportunity to provide advice during meetings to ensure that decisions made comply with the regulations and best practice.

Panel members have ensured that the views of the observer status participants have been fully considered.

The Chair has conducted the meetings to ensure that all members have been encouraged to express their views. All Panel members have contributed to effective and efficient meetings. NCC's LGPS Local Pension Board members have been invited to attend all formal meetings of the Panel, as well as all training meetings of the Panel to observe the decision making process.

The programme of future meetings takes a risk based approach to allocating time for the Panel to question the advisers and managers, and allows for flexibility so advisers and managers can be requested to attend more frequently should the Panel deem it appropriate. The programme of meetings allows sufficient time for the Panel to understand the fund managers' philosophy and processes and time for effective challenge. The Chair of the Panel has been pro-active in determining the frequency of the fund managers' attendances at the meetings.

The Panel monitors the cost of transitions of assets from one fund manager to another.

Meetings have been conducted following the protocols as set out in the Northumberland County Council Constitution.

Access to advice

The Panel recognises the importance of understanding its responsibilities to the employers participating in NCCPF and, in particular, the need to understand and manage investment (asset allocation) risk. The Panel has had access to appropriate advice and has obtained advice in the year from suitably qualified specialists including:

- investment advice from Mercer;
- actuarial advice from Aon;
- market commentary from Portfolio Evaluation and CEM; and
- legal advice on matters relating to pooling from Burness Paull as well as the LGPS legal specialists at South Tyneside Council.

The Panel has taken advice from Mercer on all investment decisions made and obtained Mercer's research information and ratings each quarter for all of NCCPF's external investment managers.

Senior officers of the Council, such as the Interim Executive Director of Finance, and the Head of Pensions at South Tyneside Council have attended Panel meetings when necessary.

The Panel has an assessment process to formally measure the performance of the investment adviser on an annual basis.

Audit

The Panel has the opportunity to question and engage with the external auditor to discuss the accounting and administration arrangements for the Pension Fund and the Scheme. NCC's internal audit programme covers Pension Fund accounting functions. Internal and external audit provide independent checks on the work of the officers and the shared service pensions administration function.

Performance measurement adviser

The Panel has the opportunity to question and engage with the independent performance measurement adviser, Portfolio Evaluation, to discuss the performance of the external investment managers. This provides an independent check on the investment managers, the information provided in the Panel papers, and, to some extent, the advice provided by the investment adviser (Mercer).

Continuity

Pension Fund investment is long term in nature and expertise takes time to build up. Continuity is vitally important for effective decision making, with some decisions, such as the decisions about asset allocation, being made over the course of several meetings. During 2019/20, the Panel has had continuity in the three most important areas for its effectiveness as a decision-making body, namely:

- its own membership including observers (with two members from pre-2013, including the former Chairman, returning to the Panel as members following the May 2017 elections) ;
- its investment adviser; and
- the officers who support the work of the Panel.

Training

The Panel recognises that pension fund investment and administration is a technical area and the importance of spending time on training. The Panel has received adequate training for the decisions taken in the year, for example, the decision to change the geographical allocations of NCCPF's quoted equities which was discussed at the first stage strategy review and, where the Panel was supported by Mercer's advice and research information throughout the process. Panel members have devoted time to attend relevant and tailored training events, and completed an annual formal Training Needs Analysis.