

Northumberland County Council
LGPS
Communication Strategy Statement

Administered by Northumberland County Council
April 2018

This is the Statement of Policy concerning Communication of the Northumberland County Council LGPS Pension Fund ("**the Fund**") and has been developed following consultation with South Tyneside Council (the shared administration service provider), employers in the Fund, Scheme member representatives and other interested stakeholders.

Northumberland County Council ("**NCC**") is the administering authority responsible for the local administration of the Fund, which is part of the Local Government Pension Scheme ("**the LGPS**") and ("**the Scheme**"). The Fund comprises over 40 employers with active members, and around 27,000 Scheme members (including active members, deferred and pensioner members).

South Tyneside Council ("**STC**") provides LGPS administration services for:

- Tyne and Wear Pension Fund; and
- Northumberland County Council Pension Fund.

Most communications with the Fund's members and Scheme employers are provided by STC as part of the shared administration service, but NCC will continue to provide communications that relate to collection of contributions, and actuarial, investment and governance matters.

NCC retains **overall** responsibility for communications issued to members of the Fund and Scheme employers by STC.

The Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013 require all LGPS funds in England and Wales to publish a statement of policy concerning communication with members and Scheme employers. This Statement sets out with whom NCC and STC 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 understand the benefits of the Scheme, and all stakeholders are kept informed of relevant developments within the Fund. NCC also believes that effective communications will help to maintain the efficient running of the Fund.

In communication with stakeholders NCC 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; and
- look for efficiencies in delivering communications.

Regulatory basis

The LGPS is a statutory scheme, established by an Act of Parliament. The LGPS 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 LGPS, NCC 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; and
- Data Protection Act 2003 and the General Data Protection Regulation 2016/679.

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.*
- 61 (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.*
- 61 (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).”*

Delivery of communications

NCC 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 Pension Fund Panel will monitor the implementation of this Strategy on a regular basis as outlined later in this Statement.

Operationally, the delivery of the majority of member communications for the Fund is undertaken by STC as part of the shared administration service. However, NCC undertakes communications with employers that relate to collection of contributions, and actuarial, investment and governance matters.

How NCC communicates

Ensuring that key stakeholders are well informed about the LGPS is of paramount importance, and NCC recognises that communicating in a clear, informative style is vital in achieving this aim so that employers and members can understand the value of the Scheme as part of the employment package.

Who NCC communicates with

NCC 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;
- Fund staff;
- STC staff;
- other interested organisations including Government departments, the LGPS Scheme Advisory Board and advisers to the Fund.

The main means of communication with these key stakeholders are outlined in Annex A.

Diversity of communication

The Fund's information is available in alternative formats, for example, Braille, large print, British Sign Language, on request. NCC and STC aim to use the most appropriate communication medium for the audience receiving that 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. The principles of Plain English have been adopted in all communications.

Online services

STC continues to develop and enhance the secure online web services for **employers** available via the <http://www.twpf.info> (shared administration) website.

STC is currently developing web services for **members** and during 2018 expects to offer:

- membership details and payslips to view;

- delivery of annual benefit statements;
- pension increase updates;
- amendment of personal details; and
- calculation of “what if” scenarios.

Measuring whether the communication objectives are met

NCC monitors success against its communication objectives in the following ways:

Communication objectives	Measurement
Provide user friendly, relevant and informative communications in a clear, concise manner with well-presented information	Satisfaction surveys of employers and a sample of Scheme members achieving 90% of scores in positive responses in these areas Provision of an (at least) annual mailing to all active and pensioner members detailing Scheme changes and other relevant developments Active members having the opportunity to attend a meeting when significant Scheme changes occur
Provide communications that are valued by stakeholders	Satisfaction surveys of employers and a sample of 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 a sample of 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 NCC's and STC's performance against these objectives will be reported within the Fund's Annual Report and Accounts and reported to the Pension Fund Panel and LGPS Local Pension Board.

Where performance is substantially below standard, NCC 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 Principal Accountant (Pensions) and other officers will work with the Pension Fund Panel and LGPS Local Pension Board in monitoring and responding to these and other key risks. Where the risk must be managed by South Tyneside Council, NCC will monitor it through regular shared administration service reports and meetings.

Key risks are:

- lack or reduction of skilled resources due to difficulty retaining and recruiting staff members and/or absence due to sickness;
- significant increase in workloads causing strain on day to day service delivery and therefore less focus on communications;
- issues in production of annual benefit statements, e.g. incorrect addresses held;
- inability to deliver a service to members due to system downtime or failure;
- issuing incorrect or inaccurate communications; and
- lack of clear communication to employers or Scheme members.

Costs

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

Approval, review and consultation

This Communication Strategy Statement was approved under a delegation given by the Pension Fund Panel on 23 February 2018. It is effective from April 2018.

It will be formally reviewed and updated at least every three years, or sooner if the administration management arrangements or other matters included within it merit reconsideration, including any changes to the LGPS or other relevant Regulations or guidance.

In preparing this Strategy, NCC has consulted with STC, the employers in the Fund, the Scheme member and employer representatives on the LGPS Local Pension Board, and other persons considered appropriate.

The Communication Strategy Statement is included within the Fund's Annual Report and Accounts and available on NCC's website at:

<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/About/Staff.aspx#northumberlandcountycouncilocalgovernmentpensionfund>

Communication with all Scheme members, i.e. pensioner members, deferred pensioner members and active members

STC publishes a range of Scheme information for employees eligible to join the Local Government Pension Scheme. All information is available to view and download from www.twpf.info but can also be provided in paper format on request.

STC provides a members' telephone helpline, which is a "one stop shop" for all pension enquiries, and available Monday to Friday (8:30 to 5:00 (4:30 on Friday)) on **0191 424 4141**.

Members are also welcome to visit the team to discuss queries, at STC's office, The Pensions Office, Town Hall and Civic Offices, Westoe Road, South Shields, Tyne and Wear, NE33 2RL.

Presentations can be provided for employers. Presentations and promotional material can be provided for active Scheme members at the request of an employer and can be tailored to a specific request.

Communication with pensioner members

STC sends an annual mailing to pensioner members in April to show, among other things, the pension increase applied in the year. A sample of the annual mailing is also available via www.twpf.info.

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

- a statement summarising the calculation of his/her pension and lump sum;
- a letter explaining the arrangements for paying his/her pension;
- a fact sheet directing to leaflet on line explaining his/her appeal rights; and
- a fact sheet summarising the provisions of the Pension Increase legislation.

A sample of pensioner members is surveyed annually to ask their views on the quality and range of services provided by the STC Pensions Office.

A combined payslip and P60 is issued in April each year to each pensioner member, and a payslip is issued when there is a change in an individual's pension of £10 or more in a month. Regular payslips are provided on request.

Communication with deferred pensioner members

STC sends annual benefit statements to deferred pensioner members, which keeps Scheme members informed of their future pension benefit entitlement. STC surveys members to obtain their views on the service and information provided. These are typically sent with the annual benefit statement.

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

- a statement summarising 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; and
- a fact sheet setting out his/her options with regard to LGPS rights, e.g. explaining how to transfer LGPS rights to a new employer's pension scheme.

Communication with active members

On joining the LGPS, each member is provided with a welcome pack by STC that includes information about Scheme benefits, and a form which enables him/her to request further information regarding the transfer of earlier pension rights into the LGPS, and to make a death benefit nomination. Subsequently, STC provides the Scheme member with a notice confirming his/her admission to the Scheme and detailing his/her rights to count previous service, if appropriate.

STC sends annual benefit statements to active members, and an annual newsletter to update members on any relevant changes. The newsletter is also available via the website. STC surveys members to obtain their views on the service and information provided. These surveys are typically sent with the annual benefit statement.

At an employer's request, STC will provide additional information for active members, to explain Scheme benefits and offer an opportunity to deal with members' questions.

NCC facilitates regular presentations provided by Prudential (the Fund's AVC provider) for active Scheme members to make them aware of their AVC options.

Communication with representatives of members

Two trade union representatives and one employee/pensioner representative have observer status seats on the Pension Fund Panel. 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 (NCC) 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

Prospective members can obtain an information booklet about joining the Scheme from STC. It has been designed to answer the frequently asked questions about joining the Scheme. This is made available to all employers for them to include in their recruitment and appointment packs. The booklet may also be downloaded from the shared administration website at www.twpf.info.

STC has a prospective member area on the shared administration website that can be found at <http://www.twpf.info/article/13021/Joining-the-Scheme> which has further information on how to join the Scheme.

At an employer's request, STC will work with that employer to encourage membership of the Fund and to identify initiatives that could be undertaken to increase active membership for that employer.

Automatic enrolment has and will continue to play a part in promoting the Scheme to prospective members. Most employers who are required to provide access to eligible employees will have met their staging date by now. Providing information to prospective members about the Scheme is part of the employers' statutory obligation in respect of automatic enrolment.

Communication with Scheme employers

Following the amalgamation of the district councils in Northumberland with Northumberland County Council on 1 April 2009, one non-voting seat on the NCC 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.

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 (NCC) 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.

STC holds an annual employers' meeting to assist employers in fulfilling their legal obligations to provide year end information about their membership, and to explain any Scheme changes.

NCC holds an annual employers' meeting at which relevant topics such as the move to the shared administration service, the Fund's investment strategy and the actuarial position are discussed.

STC provides a detailed and prescriptive Scheme Guide with relevant updates, which sets out the responsibilities, processes, procedures, forms for completion and other requirements of the employers. This Guide is available via the secure area of www.twpf.info.

NCC and STC issue employer alerts by bulk email when it is necessary to give details of Scheme changes.

Employers are emailed the Fund's Annual Report and Accounts each year by NCC, which includes key policy statements for the Fund.

Employers were consulted on the initial Investment Strategy Statement (ISS) for the Northumberland County Council Pension Fund, and are consulted on all changes to the ISS.

Employers were consulted on the initial Funding Strategy Statement (FSS) for the Northumberland County Council Pension Fund, and are consulted on all changes to the FSS.

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

Each employer is assigned a client manager at STC who is a first point of contact for any queries on LGPS pensions administration matters that arise.

Participating employers are asked to complete a questionnaire giving their views on the quality and range of services periodically by STC.

The Fund's ISS, the FSS, and the Annual Report and Accounts are all available via www.northumberland.gov.uk/About/Staff.aspx.

How to contact us: for administration

The Pensions Office
Town Hall and Civic Offices
Westoe Road
South Shields, NE33 2RL
Email: pensions@twpf.info
Telephone: 0191 424 4141
Fax: 0191 454 1796
Web: www.twpf.info

How to contact us: for collection of contributions, actuarial, investment and governance matters, and information about anything in or related to this Communication Strategy Statement

Andrew Lister
Principal Accountant (Pensions)
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland, NE61 2EF
Email: andrew.lister@northumberland.gov.uk
Telephone: 01670 620146
Web: www.northumberland.gov.uk/About/Staff.aspx