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Buckinghamshire County Council Pension Fund

Funding Strategy Statement

Introduction

This is the Funding Strategy Statement (FSS) for the Buckinghamshire County Council Pension Fund. It has been prepared in accordance with Regulation 58 of the Local Government Pension Scheme Regulations 2013 (the Regulations) and describes Buckinghamshire County Council's strategy, in its capacity as administering authority, for the funding of the Buckinghamshire County Council Pension Fund (the Fund).

This statement should be read in conjunction with the Fund's Investment Strategy Statement (ISS) and has been prepared with regard to the 2016 guidance issued by CIPFA.

Purpose of the Funding Strategy Statement

The purpose of the FSS is to explain the Fund's approach to meeting employers' pension liabilities and in particular to:

- Establish a clear and transparent fund-specific strategy which will identify how employers' pension liabilities are best met going forward;
- Support the desirability of maintaining as nearly constant a primary contribution rate as possible, as defined in Regulation 62(5) of the Regulations;
- Ensure that the regulatory requirements to set contributions to meet the future liability to provide scheme member benefits in a way that ensures the solvency and long-term cost efficiency of the fund are met; and
- Take a prudent longer-term view of funding those liabilities.

These objectives are desirable individually but may be mutually conflicting. This FSS seeks to set out how the administering authority has balanced the conflicting aims of affordability of contributions, transparency of processes, stability of employers' contributions and prudence in the funding basis.

Aims and purposes of the Fund

The aims of the Fund are to:

- Manage employers' liabilities effectively and ensure that sufficient resources are available to meet all liabilities as they fall due;
- Enable primary contribution rates to be kept as nearly constant as possible and (subject to the administering authority not taking undue risks) at reasonable cost to all relevant parties (such as the taxpayers, scheduled, resolution and admitted bodies), while achieving and maintaining fund solvency and long-term cost efficiency. This should be assessed in light of

the risk profile of the Fund and employers, and the risk appetite of the administering authority and employers alike; and

- Seek returns on investment within reasonable risk parameters.

The purpose of the Fund is to:

- Pay pensions, lump sums and other benefits to scheme members as provided under the Regulations;
- Meet the costs associated in administering the Fund;
- Receive contributions, transfer values and investment income; and
- Accumulate and invest money received, and facilitate the management of this.

Funding objectives

Contributions are paid to the Fund by Scheme members and the employing bodies to provide for the benefits which will become payable to Scheme members when they fall due.

The funding objectives are to:

- Set levels of employer contribution that will build up a fund of assets that will be sufficient to meet all future benefit payments from the Fund.
- Build up the required assets in such a way that employer contribution rates are kept as stable as possible, with consideration of the long-term cost efficiency objective.
- Ensure that pension benefits can be met as and when they fall due over the lifetime of the Fund; and
- Ensure the solvency of the Fund; and
- Ensure effective and efficient management of each employer's liabilities.

Key parties

The key parties involved in the funding process and their responsibilities are as follows:

The administering authority

The administering authority for the Pension Fund is Buckinghamshire County Council. The main responsibilities of the administering authority are to:

- Operate the Fund;
- Collect and account for employee and employer contributions, investment income and other amounts due to the Fund as stipulated in the Regulations;

- Invest the Fund's assets ensuring sufficient cash is available to meet liabilities as and when they become due;
- Pay the benefits due to Scheme members as stipulated in the Regulations;
- Take measures as set out in the Regulations to safeguard the Fund against the consequences of employer default;
- Manage the actuarial valuation process in conjunction with the Fund Actuary;
- Prepare and maintain this FSS and also the ISS after consultation with other interested parties;
- Monitor all aspects of the Fund's performance;
- Prepare the Fund accounts;
- Effectively manage any potential conflict of interest arising from its dual role as both Fund administrator and Scheme Employer; and
- Enable the Local Pension Board to review the valuation process as they see fit.

Individual employers

In addition to the administering authority, a number of other employers, including admission bodies, participate in the Fund.

The responsibilities of each employer that participates in the Fund, including the administering authority, are to:

- Collect employee contributions and pay these together with their own employer contributions as certified by the Fund Actuary to the administering authority within the statutory timescales;
- Notify the administering authority of any new Scheme members and any other membership changes promptly;
- Develop a policy on certain discretions and exercise those discretions as permitted under the Regulations;
- Meet the costs of any augmentations or other additional costs, particularly in respect of early retirement strains, in accordance with agreed policies and procedures; and
- Pay any exit payments due on ceasing participation in the Fund.

Scheme members

Active scheme members are required to make contributions into the Fund as set by the Department of Communities and Local Government.

Fund Actuary

The Fund Actuary for the Fund is Barnett Waddingham LLP. The main responsibilities of the Fund Actuary are to:

- Prepare valuations, including the setting of employers' contribution rates at a level to ensure Fund solvency and long-term cost efficiency, after agreeing assumptions with the administering authority and having regard to the FSS and the Regulations;
- Advise interested parties on funding strategy and completion of actuarial valuations in accordance with the FSS and the Regulations;
- Prepare advice and calculations in connection with bulk transfers and individual benefit-related matters;
- Prepare advice and valuations on the exiting of employers from the Fund;
- Provide advice to the administering authority on bonds or other forms of security against the financial effect on the Fund of employer default;
- Assist the administering authority in assessing whether employer contributions need to be revised between valuations as permitted or required by the Regulations;
- Ensure that the administering authority is aware of any professional guidance or other professional requirements which may be of relevance to his or her role in advising the Fund; and
- Advise on other actuarial matters affecting the financial position of the Fund.

Funding strategy

The factors affecting the Fund's finances are constantly changing, so it is necessary for its financial position and the contributions payable to be reviewed from time to time by means of an actuarial valuation to check that the funding objectives are being met.

The funding strategy seeks to achieve (via employee and employer contributions and investment income) two key objectives:

- A funding level of 100%, as assessed by the Fund's appointed actuary, triennially, in accordance with the Regulations; and
- As stable an employer contribution rate as is practical, with consideration of the long-term cost efficiency objective.

The funding strategy recognises that the funding level will fluctuate with changing levels of employment, retirements and investment income, and the employer contribution has to be adjusted to a level sufficient to maintain the pension scheme's solvency and to achieve a funding level of 100% over the longer term

The actuarial valuation involves a projection of future cashflows to and from the Fund. The main purpose of the valuation is to determine the level of employers' contributions that should be paid to ensure that the existing assets and future contributions will be sufficient to meet all future benefit payments from the Fund.

The most recent actuarial valuation was carried out as at 31 March 2016 with the assets of the Fund found to represent 87% of the accrued liabilities for the Fund, corresponding to a deficit of £335m.

The primary rate required to cover the employer cost of future benefit accrual was 15.1% of payroll p.a.

A summary of the methods and assumptions adopted is set out in the sections below.

Funding method

The key objective in determining employers' contribution rates is to establish a funding target and then set levels of employer contribution to meet that target over an agreed period.

The funding target is to have sufficient assets in the Fund to meet the accrued liabilities for each employer in the Fund. The funding target may, however, depend on certain employer circumstances and in particular, whether an employer is an "open" employer – one which allows new staff access to the Fund, or a "closed" employer which no longer permits new staff access to the Fund. The expected period of participation by an employer in the Fund may also affect the chosen funding target.

For open employers, the actuarial funding method that is adopted is known as the Projected Unit Funding Method which considers separately the benefits in respect of service completed before the valuation date ("past service") and benefits in respect of service assumed to be completed after the valuation date ("future service"). This approach focuses on:

- The past service funding level of the Fund. This is the ratio of accumulated assets to liabilities in respect of past service. It makes allowance for future increases to members' pay and pensions in payment. A funding level in excess of 100% indicates a surplus of assets over liabilities; while a funding level of less than 100% indicates a deficit; and
- The future service funding rate (also referred to as the primary rate as defined in Regulation 62(5) of the Regulations) which is the level of contributions required from the individual employers which, in combination with employee contributions is assumed to support the cost of benefits accruing in future.

The key feature of this method is that, in assessing the future service cost, the primary contribution rate represents the cost of one year's benefit accrual.

For closed employers, the funding method adopted is known as the Attained Age Method. The key difference between this method and the Projected Unit Method is that the Attained Age Method assesses the average cost of the benefits that will accrue over a specific period, such as the length of a contract or the remaining expected working lifetime of active members.

The amounts that the employer then pays are a combination of the future service cost described above and any adjustments for the past service surplus or deficit. If there is a deficit, this adjustment will be specified as an additional contribution expressed as either a percentage of pay or as a cash amount to be paid in future.

Valuation assumptions and funding model

In completing the actuarial valuation it is necessary to formulate assumptions about the factors affecting the Fund's future finances such as inflation, pay increases, investment returns, rates of mortality, early retirement and staff turnover etc.

The assumptions adopted at the valuation can therefore be considered as:

- The statistical assumptions which are essentially estimates of the likelihood of benefits and contributions being paid, and
- The financial assumptions which will determine the estimates of the amount of benefits and contributions payable and their current or present value.

Future price inflation

The base assumption in any valuation is the future level of price inflation over a period commensurate with the duration of the liabilities. This is derived by considering the average difference in yields over the appropriate period from conventional and index linked gilts during the six months straddling the valuation date to provide an estimate of future price inflation as measured by the Retail Price Index (RPI). The RPI assumption adopted as at 31 March 2016 was 3.3% p.a.

Future pension increases

Pension increases are linked to changes in the level of the Consumer Price Index (CPI). Inflation as measured by the CPI has historically been less than RPI due mainly to different calculation methods. A deduction of 0.9% p.a. is therefore made to the RPI assumption to derive the CPI assumption. The CPI assumption adopted as at 31 March 2016 was 2.4% p.a.

Future pay inflation

As some of the benefits are linked to pay levels at retirement, it is necessary to make an assumption as to future levels of pay inflation. Historically, there has been a close link between price and pay inflation with pay increases exceeding price inflation in the longer term. The long-term pay increase assumption adopted as at 31 March 2016 was CPI plus 1.5%, with a short-term assumption in line with CPI for the period to 31 March 2020. An allowance has also been made for promotional increases.

Future investment returns/discount rate

To determine the value of accrued liabilities and derive future contribution requirements it is necessary to discount future payments to and from the Fund to present day values.

The discount rate that is adopted will depend on the funding target adopted for each Scheme employer.

The discount rate that is applied to the projected liabilities reflects a prudent estimate of the rate of investment return that is assumed to be earned from the underlying investment strategy by considering average market yields in the six months straddling the valuation date. The discount rate so determined may be referred to as the "ongoing" discount rate. The discount rate adopted for the 31 March 2016 valuation was 5.4% p.a.

For some employers, an adjustment may be made to the discount rate in relation to the remaining liabilities, once all active members are assumed to have retired if at that time (the projected "termination date"), the employer becomes an exiting employer under Regulation 64.

The Fund Actuary will incorporate such an adjustment after consultation with the administering authority.

The adjustment to the discount rate for employers may be set to a higher funding target at the projected termination date, so that there are sufficient assets to fund the remaining liabilities on a "minimum risk" rather than on an ongoing basis if the Fund do not believe that there is another Scheme employer to take on the responsibility of the liabilities after the employer has exited the Fund. The aim is to minimise the risk of deficits arising after the termination date.

Asset valuation

For the purposes of the valuation, the asset value used is the market value of the accumulated Fund at the valuation date adjusted to reflect average market conditions during the six months straddling the valuation date.

Statistical assumptions

The statistical assumptions incorporated into the valuation, such as future mortality rates, are based on national statistics. These are adjusted as appropriate to reflect the individual circumstances of the Fund and/or individual employers.

Further details of all of the assumptions adopted are included in the latest actuarial valuation report.

Deficit recovery periods

Whilst one of the funding objectives is to build up sufficient assets to meet the cost of benefits as they accrue, it is recognised that at any particular point in time, the value of the accumulated assets will be different to the value of accrued liabilities, depending on how the actual experience of the Fund differs to the actuarial assumptions. Accordingly the Fund will normally either be in surplus or in deficit.

Where the actuarial valuation discloses a significant deficit then the levels of required employers' contributions will include an adjustment to fund the deficit over a period of years.

The deficit recovery period for each employer will depend upon the significance of the deficit relative to that employer's liabilities, the covenant of the individual employer and any limited period of participation in the Fund, and the implications in terms of stability of future levels of employers' contribution.

At the 2016 valuation, a maximum deficit recovery period of 16 years is used for all employers. Shorter recovery periods have been used where affordable. This will provide a buffer for future adverse experience and reduce the interest cost paid by employers. For Transferee Admission Bodies the deficit recovery period is set equal to the remaining contract period if this is known.

Where an employer's contribution has to increase significantly then, if appropriate, the increase may be phased in over a period not exceeding 3 years.

Deficit contributions required from an employer are expressed as a minimum requirement, with employers able to pay regular contributions at a higher rate, or one-off contributions, to reduce their deficit. Employers should discuss with the administering authority before making one-off capital payments.

Pooling of individual employers

The policy of the Fund is that each individual employer should be responsible for the costs of providing pensions for its own employees who participate in the Fund. Accordingly, contribution rates are set for individual employers to reflect their own particular circumstances.

However, certain groups of individual employers are pooled for the purposes of determining contribution rates to recognise common characteristics or where the number of Scheme members is small.

Currently there are the following pools within the Fund:

- Buckinghamshire County Council;
- Milton Keynes Council;
- Bucks Academies;
- Milton Keynes Academies;
- Town and Parish Councils;
- Admission Bodies.

There are also a number of connected employers within the Fund. Connected employers are those where we understand that the organisation controls all of the employers or has responsibility for all the pension obligations. Examples include parent/subsidiaries or former Transferee Admission Bodies who have ceased to participate where the legacy liabilities have been passed back to the Letting Authority. In these instances, the contribution rate has been determined as a pooled rate.

The main purpose of pooling is to produce more stable employer contribution levels in the longer term whilst, recognising that ultimately there will be some level of cross-subsidy of pension cost amongst pooled employers.

Cessation valuations

When an employer leaves the Scheme and becomes an exiting employer, the Fund Actuary will be asked to make a termination assessment. Any deficit in the Fund in respect of the employer will be due to the Fund as an immediate exit payment, unless it is agreed by the administering authority and the other parties involved that the assets and liabilities relating to the employer will transfer within the Fund to another participating employer.

In certain circumstances, if it is not possible for all or part of the exit payment to be obtained from the ceasing employer, it may be possible for the exit payment to be paid over a period which the administering authority considers reasonable.

In assessing the deficit on cessation, the Fund Actuary may adopt a "minimum risk" discount rate based on gilt yields and adopt different assumptions to those used at the previous valuation. For example, this is likely to apply in instances where there is no employer in the Fund taking responsibility for any residual liabilities of the ceasing employer. This is in order to protect the other employers in the Fund from having to fund any future deficits which may arise from the liabilities that will remain in the Fund.

Early retirement costs

The funding basis makes no allowance for premature retirement except on grounds of ill health. Employers are required to pay additional contributions wherever an employee retires before attaining the age at which the valuation assumes that benefits are payable. The calculation of these costs is carried out with reference to a calculation method approved by the Fund Actuary.

Links with the Investment Strategy Statement (ISS)

The main link between the FSS and the ISS relates to the discount rate that underlies the funding strategy as set out in the FSS, and the assumed rate of investment return which is assumed to be achieved by the underlying investment strategy as set out in the ISS.

As explained above, the ongoing discount rate that is adopted in the actuarial valuation is derived by considering the assumed return from the underlying investment strategy. This ensures consistency between the funding strategy and investment strategy.

Risks and counter measures

Whilst the funding strategy attempts to satisfy the funding objectives of ensuring sufficient assets to meet pension liabilities and stable levels of employer contributions, it is recognised that there are risks that may impact on the funding strategy and hence the ability of the strategy to meet the funding objectives.

The major risks to the funding strategy are financial, although there are other external factors including demographic risks, regulatory risks, and employer risks.

Financial risks

The main financial risk is that the actual investment strategy fails to produce the assumed rate of investment return (in real terms) that underlies the funding strategy. This could be due to a number of factors, including market returns being less than assumed and/or the fund managers who are employed to implement the chosen investment strategy failing to achieve their performance targets.

The valuation results are most sensitive to the real discount rate. Broadly speaking an increase/decrease of 0.5% p.a. in the real discount rate will decrease/increase the liabilities by 10%, and decrease/increase the required employer contribution by around 2.5% of payroll.

However, the Pension Fund Committee regularly monitors the investment returns achieved by the fund managers and receives advice from the independent advisers and officers on investment strategy.

The Committee may also seek advice from the Fund Actuary on valuation related matters.

In addition, the Fund Actuary provides funding updates between valuations to check whether the funding strategy continues to meet the funding objectives.

Demographic risks

Allowance is made in the funding strategy via the actuarial assumptions for a continuing improvement in life expectancy. However, the main demographic risk to the funding strategy is that it might underestimate the continuing improvement in longevity. For example, an increase of one year to life expectancy of all members in the Fund will reduce the funding level by approximately 1%.

The actual mortality of pensioners in the Fund is monitored by the Fund Actuary at each actuarial valuation and assumptions are kept under review.

The liabilities of the Fund can also increase by more than has been planned as a result of early retirements.

However, the administering authority monitors the incidence of early retirements; and procedures are in place that require individual employers to pay additional amounts into the Fund to meet any additional costs arising from early retirements.

Regulatory risks

The benefits provided by the Scheme and employee contribution levels are set out in Regulations determined by central Government. The tax status of the invested assets is also determined by the Government.

The funding strategy is therefore exposed to the risks of changes in the Regulations governing the Scheme and changes to the tax regime which may affect the cost to individual employers participating in the Scheme.

However, the administering authority participates in any consultation process of any proposed changes in Regulations and seeks advice from the Fund Actuary on the financial implications of any proposed changes.

Employer risks

Many different employers participate in the Fund. Accordingly, it is recognised that a number of employer-specific events could impact on the funding strategy including:

- Structural changes in an individual employer's membership;
- An individual employer deciding to close the Scheme to new employees;
- An employer ceasing to exist without having fully funded their pension liabilities; and

- New employers being created out of existing employers.

However, the administering authority monitors the position of employers participating in the Fund, particularly those which may be susceptible to the events outlined, and takes advice from the Fund Actuary when required.

In addition, the administering authority keeps in close touch with all individual employers participating in the Fund to ensure that, as administering authority, it has the most up to date information available on individual employer situations. It also keeps individual employers briefed on funding and related issues.

Monitoring and review

This FSS is reviewed formally, in consultation with the key parties, at least every three years to tie in with the triennial actuarial valuation process.

The administering authority also monitors the financial position of the Fund between actuarial valuations and may review the FSS more frequently if necessary.