SOUTH YORKSHIRE PENSIONS AUTHORITY

Summary of Discussion and Conclusions from the Pensions Admin Focus Groups – July 2023

Three focus group sessions were held on 12th and 13th July to examine three questions aimed at providing assistance in identifying changes to how we organise ourselves which will help address the challenges facing us in the pensions admin area. The three questions were:

- How do we organise our teams and roles and people to best effect for meeting the challenges we face?
- Are there any aspects of our current structure that aren't working well? Why not? – (Even if you're not sure what the alternative is).
- Any other thoughts about how we might improve how we organise the work?

All Service Managers, Team Leaders and Senior Practitioners (or equivalent grades) in Pensions Admin were invited and 25 of the 27 invitees attended, 2 people were on annual leave and could not attend.

In answering the questions, the focus was not on the number of people we have, this is being considered separately in the Capacity Planning work, but on how we organise people however many of them we have.

In considering their answers participants were asked to recognise three constraints

- We can't change to a new pensions admin system (at least in the short – medium term)
- We have to achieve value for money.
- Very limited availability of experienced LGPS people in the external recruitment market

Participants were asked to consider their responses to the questions individually and then in small groups before coming back and sharing thoughts with the whole group. Steph Barker and Simon Tewson provided support to the small groups.

There was a significant degree of consensus in the answers provided to the questions across all three sessions and several positive suggestions and ideas for doing things differently. All of these will be sifted as part of the process of constructing an overall plan of action which will then be discussed further as it moves through the decision-making process.

Taking the questions in turn

How do we organise our teams and roles and people to best effect for meeting the challenges we face?

Are there any aspects of our current structure that aren't working well? Why not? – (Even if you're not sure what the alternative is).

Participants tended to answer the first two questions together so these are dealt with together in the table below – where the suggestions and comments have been grouped along the different themes that came out of the discussions.

Theme	Ideas and Comments
Employers	The consensus view here was that employer functions, and in particular admissions and terminations, were crowding out the key technical support and training work that the Support Team should be focussing on which had a negative impact in terms of our ability to adequately train staff in the Benefits Team. It was felt that the "employer journey" from admission to termination was too disjointed with too many people involved and that this would be better handled in one place. There was a general view that the creation of the MDC Team had been very successful. There remains a need to improve the validations in the system and related to this it was felt a harder line needs to be taken to get employers to submit data right first time.
Training for Benefits Team and Career Grade	Need for a more focussed training and technical support team. For both benefits and customer services teams. In regard to Benefits Team career grade training, it was felt that more classroom based training putting things in context and developing understanding of the calculations involved, rather than solely the processes to follow on UPM. This would help reduce the risks posed by the age profile within the Team which could lead to a loss of knowledge. There was a consensus view that the current career grade is pushing people through too quickly and that is not helpful for individuals. It was noted that there is an inconsistent application of progression criteria and a feeling that progression should be handled within a strengthened technical training arrangement. Alongside this, the need for a more formal approach to assessment for progression. It was accepted that the old exam type arrangement might have been too much, but some form of testing was required. There was an acknowledgement that career grades and linked grades are also used in other teams across the organisation and there is a need for a consistent set of principles to be followed across all teams' career grades, with tailoring of the specific knowledge and skills requirements to each team.
Work Allocations for Benefits Team	There is already a plan in place to change the work tray arrangements in the benefits team and it was highlighted that there is a need for this to be implemented as soon as possible to allow work to be more efficiently managed.

	There was a view from members of the Benefits Team that this change could lead, helpfully, to a situation where work allocation and line management / supervision are disconnected with (for example) the next retirement in the queue going to the next available person capable of dealing with a retirement (i.e. fully getting rid of the letter split). There was a feeling that some of these things would create more consistency in practice across the Benefits Team which was felt to be lacking. There was a view that some flexibility to bring groups together for example to address particular backlogs for fixed periods of time. This was perhaps seen as an alternative to the current Projects Team which was felt to lack a clear enough role and was felt to be the "sweep up team".
Customer Services	Discussions around the continuing churn of staff in this team with people moving across to the benefits team. Some felt that this is due to the ability to progress to a higher grade in benefits compared to customer services. There was a sense that the career grade progression here also needs to be looked at. In addition to this there was a suggestion that Customer Services might take on some "grade B" work on an ongoing basis, although a question was also raised about whether there were capacity issues in Customer Services. There was an idea that scheme member engagement should sit with Customer Services and be separated from Employer Engagement.
Technical Adviser Role	There was a view that the Technical Adviser role needs to be made part of a suitable team and that the role's scope, purpose and authority needs to be more clearly defined.
Complaint Handling	A number of people mentioned the need for complaints to be addressed in one place and there was a specific suggestion as to how this might be achieved which will be looked into. It was felt that this was important to ensure consistency of response and to allow us to learn from and address the root causes of complaints.

Any other thoughts about how we might improve how we organise the work?

There were a number of detailed points which people felt could make life easier. Including

- Get the portal up to date and develop a single knowledge base to replace all the individual notes that people are using which encourage inconsistency.
- Face to face appointments are a drain on resource and are too available. They should be a last resort for people with specific needs.
- Identify what is missing or unclear on the website.

- As part of the training programme there was a suggestion that groups being trained could work on similar cases while physically together, for example 5 Pensions Officers might work together with a Senior Practitioner on a pile of aggregations.
- There was a view (although this was not universal) that staff in Customer Services needed to build up more knowledge before dealing with calls. There was a suggestion that "training placements" in other teams might be beneficial.
- The issue of the time taken in the Benefits Team dealing with "payroll-related work" was a source of some feeling.
- Continuing distrust of UPM giving the right answer was felt to have an impact on times taken and the level of checking required. Examples were given of letters picking up the wrong fields and of things being tested on small samples and then not working when released to a live environment.
- There was a question about the possibility of altering the phone line opening hours.
- The idea of more peer checking was put forward as a way of freeing up time for TL's and SP's to support staff.
- Automating key processes such as joiners and leavers was seen as potentially a significant benefit.
- There were some views on whether the arrangement of the office and hybrid working were helpful e.g. teams not necessarily being together and not seeing others regularly resulting in too much chatter.
- The point was made that monitoring of individual as well as overall performance was needed and needed to be a part of the overall process.

What Comes Next

Thank you to all those who participated in these groups for both your honesty and the thought that was put into answering the questions.

There are a number of different streams of activity highlighted here that we will need to take up, although some of them are already on the list of things to do (such as looking at the career grades) this exercise has highlighted how important they are and also given a bit more shape to what we need to do.

We plan to shape this list of ideas into more concrete form and possibly provide further opportunities for discussion with more people across pensions admin to focus on some of the specific ideas and how they might work in practice.

If possible, we will also allow the new Assistant Director – Pensions to have some input into that process which would have to be before they start as it will be important to deal with any changes to the set-up of the various teams alongside getting agreement to the results of the capacity planning exercise.

We will be looking to produce a single list of actions which will include how we will address the issues raised in these Focus Groups as well as other work that will help us address the challenges faced in Pensions Admin and the capacity planning work. This list will be regularly updated so that everyone can see where progress is being made.

As ever if anyone has any specific suggestions that might help address these challenges, please pass them along either through your line manager or direct to a member of SMT.

George Graham

Director