



Report of: Executive Member for Finance and Performance

Meeting of	Date	Ward(s)
Executive	2 September 2021	All
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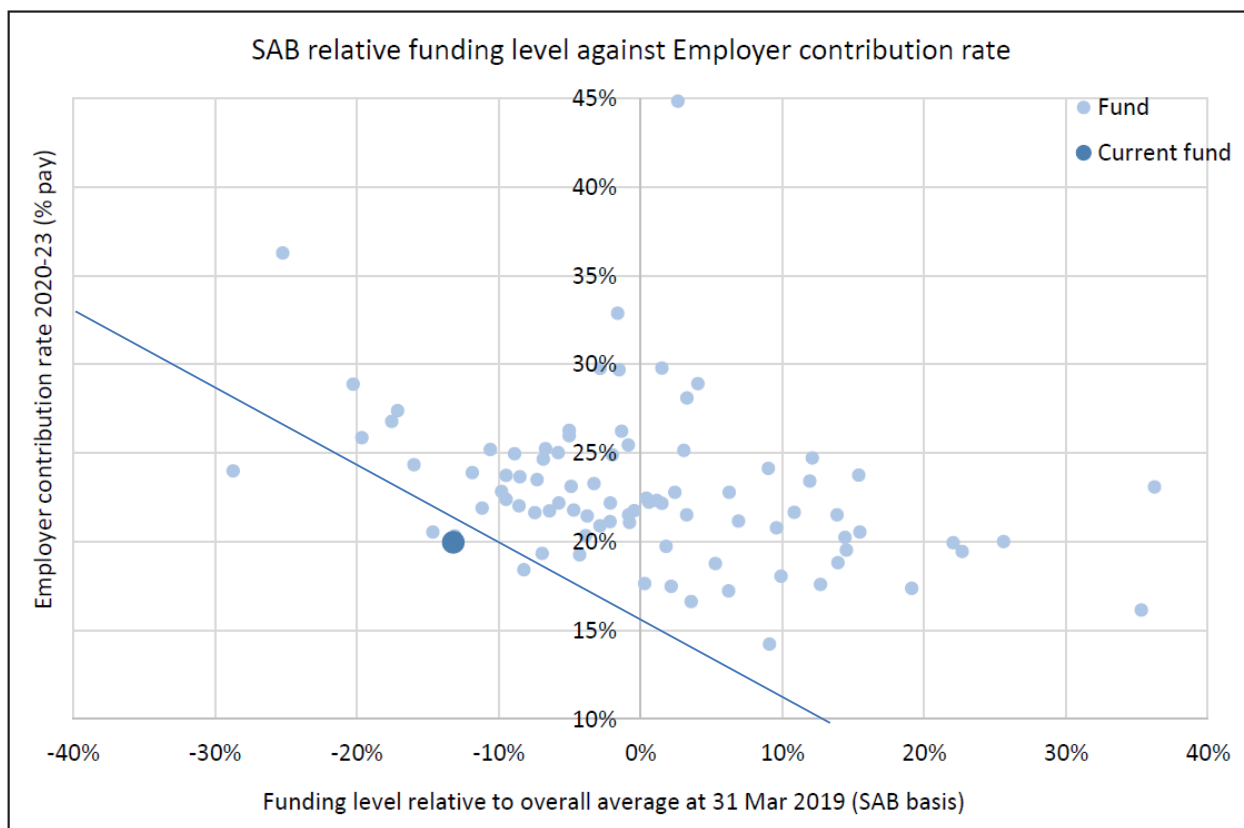
SUBJECT: London Borough of Islington Pension Fund Deficit

1. Synopsis

- 1.1 This report presents the latest valuation of the Council's Pension Fund deficit and options available to the Council to reduce this deficit. Eradicating the deficit would achieve reduced costs to the Council as an employer in the longer term.
- 1.2 At the last actuarial valuation (31 March 2019) Islington's pension liabilities were 85% funded within the Fund, resulting in a funding deficit of £249m. As a result of holding the deficit the Council incurs interest at an estimated rate of 4.2% per annum. The cash amount of payments required to pay off the deficit over the recovery plan period is estimated at around £360m. The recommended options would reduce revenue costs by just less than £14m over a 19 year period.
- 1.3 The actuarial valuation is the critical point at which contributions for the following 3 year period are set, taking account of the prevailing deficit level. As a result of market movements, this deficit will fluctuate between valuations however contributions will not change until the next valuation. Following improved market performance, lower than expected pension increases and a prepayment of contributions it is estimated the deficit is presently £67m. Should this value remain significantly lower than the £249m it would be good news however it should be noted that markets can go down as well as up and that it should not be assumed that the pension fund will end the valuation period at this improved funding level.
- 1.4 Because £249m is the agreed deficit at the valuation point and the £67m is an estimate based on fluctuating markets, the remainder of the paper will discuss the deficit based on £249m. The benefits quoted are not impacted by deficit numbers varying unless it is below the proposed payment level. Should the deficit value reduce

below the proposed payments, the payments will be reduced accordingly. Overall a benefit will exist and the scale of which will be reduced in proportion to the reduction in payment level.

- 1.5 The recommendations within this paper stand should the fund be in deficit. In the optimistic case that pension fund assets continue their performance levels and the deficit is eradicated then no additional payments to the Fund will be made.
- 1.6 Should the fund subsequently move in to surplus following additional payments being made, the actuary could agree a funding strategy whereby the excess assets reduce the Council's ongoing contribution. Alternatively, the Council could take the opportunity afforded to reduce the level of risk in its investment strategy – ie move funding allocations to safer, but lower yield assets. This would not reduce the ongoing contribution but would head off a risk of investments going down. Either of these outcomes would be positive for the Council and the increased borrowing resulting from the recommended decisions would be supported by a reduction in deficit recovery payments.
- 1.7 Each year the Government Actuary Department (GAD) produces a report on Local Government Pension Schemes. Islington is one of only four Funds in the country to be engaged by GAD as a result of flagging as amber.
- 1.8 The GAD use a method of review which looks at the relative funding level of a pension fund against the amount of contributions being made to pay off the deficit. This is a simplistic way of analysing and looks at the Fund's relative position against other funds rather than our own trajectory. Our deficit is reducing, but not as fast as other funds.
- 1.9 Based on the methodology used, the LBI Fund was the fourth lowest out of 87 funds in terms of a comparison with time taken to recover the deficit versus the anticipated deficit payments through to 2023. It is therefore important that the organisation takes steps to ensure its plans for deficit recovery are robust.
- 1.10 The graphic below was prepared by the GAD and it shows the distribution of the 87 pension funds in their analysis. The four below the line are those flagged as amber and engaged by the GAD to discuss our plans.



1.11 The Council has a number of potential options available to it in order to reduce the pension fund deficit and the key ones considered within this report are:

- 1) Repay the deficit as per the current deficit reduction plan
- 2) Full repayment via internal resources (reserves)
- 3) Full repayment via borrowing
- 4) Part repayment via flexible use of capital receipts
- 5) Part repayment through the HRA

1.12 Options 4 and 5 are the recommended options. Option 4 would generate an anticipated General Fund revenue saving of up to £7m spread across the remaining 19 years of the deficit recovery plan. Option 5 would immediately reduce the HRA balances by c£20m but allow a reduction in interest costs estimated at a further £6.9m over the recovery period. The use of the HRA balances therefore has no detrimental impact on services to residents or the housebuilding programme. Taken together the recommendations will reduce revenue costs by just less than £14m over a 19 year period.

1.13 Whilst previous performance is not an indicator of future performance, it is demonstrable that over the long term, the Pension Fund assets perform well. The Council must meet the interest costs of holding a deficit in the Pension Fund whereas if the assets were held in the Fund itself, they would historically have achieved significant additional returns.

- 1.14 Eradicating the Pension Fund Deficit is in the long term interests of the Council and its residents. Financially, the interest saved on the deficit can be recycled to invest in services. Within the HRA, paying off the deficit early means that funding can be freed up for long term house building projects. Additionally through the Fund's decarbonisation agenda, the additional assets which will sit within the fund will be invested in low carbon investments and therefore indirectly support the Council's net zero carbon agenda.
- 1.15 All Local Government Pension Funds are revalued once every three years. In between the valuations the Council can and will undertake periodic 'desktop' revaluations to understand how its assets and liabilities are moving. Where these reviews identify options available to the Council to minimise the deficit, these will be recommended as appropriate.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. To note that despite the deficit reducing, the London Borough of Islington Pension Fund was identified by the Government Actuaries Department as the fourth lowest fund out of 87 in terms of a comparison with time taken to recover the deficit versus the anticipated deficit payments through to 2023.
- 2.2. To note the options in relation to the reduction of the Fund deficit and the consequences of each option.
- 2.3. To approve deficit reduction options 4 and 5 to be taken forward for implementation, and recommend that the Section 151 officer in consultation with the Executive Member for Finance and Performance receive the appropriate delegation to approve the payments and budget adjustments in order to achieve successful implementation.
- 2.4. To approve the recommendation to Full Council on the 23rd September 2021 the adoption of a Flexible Use of Capital Receipts policy in order to achieve an ongoing revenue saving in relation to reduced costs of the Pension Deficit.
- 2.5. To note that further Executive approval may be sought to make subsequent payments from fortuitous underspends and flexible use of capital receipts where there is a clear rationale for this in the long term interests of residents.

3. Islington Pension Fund: Deficit Repayment Options

Option 1: Repay the deficit as per the current Funding Strategy Statement conditions

- 3.1. Under the LGPS regulations the Council must maintain and publish a Funding Strategy Statement (FSS). The funding objective is to achieve and maintain a solvency funding level of 100% of liabilities. Where a shortfall exists at the effective date of the valuation a deficit recovery plan will be put in place which requires additional contributions to correct the shortfall.
- 3.2. The deficit recovery plan assumes this deficit will be paid off in 19 years with effect from 1 April 2020 (expected to be 16 years from 1 April 2023).
- 3.3. This approach to deficit recovery is standard across the LGPS and there are no legal or accounting issues. By spreading the deficit recovery over 19 years the Council is able to manage this within annual revenue budgets.
- 3.4. However, for every year that Islington has a deficit on the Pension Fund it potentially loses returns that would be made were this income invested as part of the Pension Fund in the long term. In other words, the total contributions paid by the Council over the recovery period will exceed £249m due to compounding of interest on the initial deficit amount. Whilst the exact amount is dependent on market conditions and fund performance over time, based on the current deficit payment schedule at the 2019 valuation total contributions are expected to be £360m. (I.e. to bridge the deficit of £249m over 19 years the Council will actually have to make cash payments to the pension fund of £360m).

Option 2: Full repayment of Pension Fund deficit – via internal resources (reserves)

- 3.5. If the Council were to repay the deficit in full the Pension Fund it would generate returns on this amount from the outset and avoid the additional contributions associated with repayment over a longer time period (i.e. would need to make cash payments £249m to clear the deficit rather than £360m).
- 3.6. In order to ensure financial prudence, and ensure compliance with Treasury Management policies, the Council must have cash balances greater than the deficit payment that it wishes to make.
- 3.7. At the point of setting the 2021/22 budget, total revenue reserve balances were expected to be £255m at year end 2020/21, and £234m in March 2022. This would be right at the limit of the deficit recovery payment, were it to be made in full (~£249m). Additionally, approximately 60% of this balance is held within the HRA, but its share of the deficit is less than 20%. Of the remaining reserves, the Collection Fund deficit timing difference means that the total level of reserves is temporarily and artificially inflated.
- 3.8. In other words, if the Council were to repay the pension deficit in full it would leave itself with no reserves. This would clearly be hugely financially irresponsible as well as contravene Sections 32 and 43 of the Local Government Finance Act 1992 which

require local authorities to consider the level of reserves as part of their budget requirement. Even at the estimated reduced deficit level, using a significant proportion of reserves would leave them at an unsustainably low level.

- 3.9. For this reason, a full repayment of the deficit from reserves is not currently a feasible option for the Council as a whole. It is possible for the HRA to repay its element of the deficit in full and this option is included as option 5.

Option 3: Full repayment of Pension Fund deficit – via borrowing

- 3.10. Given present economic circumstances the cost of borrowing from the PWLB is historically low, (~1.5% p.a. over a 15-20 year term). This compares favourably to the cost of holding a deficit on the pension fund, with the fund roughly accruing an annual expected cost of around 4.2%, if the actuarial projections are borne out in practice in the long term. This is not a guaranteed amount and varies due to the nature of the assets held in the pension fund but does provide a useful comparison versus the borrowing cost.
- 3.11. The table below represents the potential order of magnitude of this saving in the early years of the recovery plan if the Council were in a position to repay this deficit in full (i.e. pay off £249m in one lump sum). Over time this saving will reduce as the recovery deficit reduces (i.e. in the early stages of the recovery period the ratio of interest:principal payments is higher than at the later stages in a similar way to a typical mortgage arrangement).
- 3.12. For this reason, as well as the fact the actual performance of the fund will vary, the figures below should be viewed as illustrative only. Nonetheless, it indicates that there could be substantial revenue savings associated with this approach.

Pension Fund Deficit	£249m
Cost Accrued – Pension Fund (discount rate)	4.2%
Annual Revenue Cost	£10.4m
PWLB Certainty Rate – 19 year annuity (25/3/21)	1.56%
Annual Revenue Cost (assuming borrowing of £249m)	£3.9m
Allowance for Repayment (Spread over 50 years max)	£4.95m
Annual saving	£1.52m

- 3.13. However, borrowing solely for revenue benefits without the creation of a corresponding (non-current) asset is not permissible. In other words, the Council could not borrow solely with the intention of passporting money into the Pension Fund.
- 3.14. The Council is aware of another authority who has acquired shares in an investment company, allowing the authority through the investment company to purchase assets worth £72 million in the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS) to reduce the Council's pension fund deficit by a similar amount. The legal and accounting position on this arrangement is presently unclear.

3.15. Islington have engaged directly with the authority on this issue and will continue to monitor the situation to understand whether a similar approach may be feasible. As such this option is not presently recommended.

Option 4: Part repayment of deficit – flexible use of capital receipts (General Fund)

3.16. Rather than paying the deficit in full, the Council could make additional one-off payments, over and above the annual deficit repayment lump sums already budgeted for.

3.17. Under guidance issued by the Secretary of State in 2016, the Council has the ability for the ‘flexible use of capital receipts’. This means capital receipts can be used to fund any project that is designed to generate ongoing revenue savings in the delivery of public services. It is the Council’s view that the Pension Fund deficit payment would fall under this qualifying criteria and could be applied for this purpose directly.

3.18. Before the Council can flexibly use capital receipts it must prepare, publish and maintain a flexible use of capital receipts strategy. This must consider the impact of this flexibility on the affordability of borrowing by including updated prudential indicators. Full Council must approve this strategy before any qualifying expenditure is incurred.

3.19. The Council (General Fund) is expecting £30m of capital receipts in 2021/22, which could be used to make a one-off contribution towards the balance of the Pension Fund deficit. A further £24m of capital receipts is expected by 2023/24, which could be applied for the same purpose.

3.20. Using these capital receipts to reduce the Pension Fund deficit would reduce the total contribution that the Council would need to make to the Pension Fund, and the number of years over which the Council made these payments. This is illustrated in the table below, but it must be noted these are high-level estimates and the actual performance of the fund will vary so the figures below should be viewed as illustrative only.

	Capital receipt: £30m	Capital receipt: £54m
Total contribution to repay deficit	318	283
Saving against current deficit payment schedule at 2019 valuation (estimated £360m)	(42)	(77)
Initial capital receipt contribution	30	54
Borrowing cost (19 years - interest @at 1.56%)	9	16
Net saving after cost of borrowing and repayment (£m)	3	7

3.21. Capital receipts generated are currently used to support the funding of the Council's capital programme. Using the capital receipts for pension fund deficit payments would therefore have a corresponding impact on the amount the Council would need to borrow to fund its planned capital programme. The impact of this is also illustrated in the table above – even with the Council incurring these additional borrowing costs there is still a net benefit from early repayment contributions.

Option 5 - Repayment of deficit - HRA

3.22. This proposal does not impact on services to residents or the housebuilding programme. It proposes a more efficient use of cash reserves and does not represent a reduction in the funds available for investment over the 30 year business plan.

3.23. An element of the Council's pension deficit relates to the HRA and the HRA Business Plan currently assumes an annual £1.6m deficit contribution to the Pension Fund.

3.24. As outlined in option 2, a significant portion of the Council's reserve balances are currently held by the HRA. This includes £108m in Earmarked HRA Reserves and the HRA Balance (as at 31 March 2020).

3.25. Given the level of HRA balances currently held, the element of the deficit relating to the HRA (estimated at c.£20m) could be paid off in full. However, given the pension deficit is currently held corporately (i.e. Council-wide), further work is required by the actuary to value the portion of deficit exactly.

3.26. Whilst subject to final confirmation from the actuaries in terms of value, and accounting experts in terms of our treatment, it is recommended that, should those checks not identify any impediment, the HRA deficit is paid in full by the HRA and the associated forward looking business plan ceases to contribute a deficit recovery payment.

3.27. Based on an assumed £20m one off payment, a decision to pay off the deficit would release savings within the 30 year HRA Business Plan to reinvest in building new homes, investing in our stock and supporting our residents.

4. Alternative Options Considered

4.1. If the Council were able to treat the deficit recovery payment as an investment this would also be recorded on the Council's balance sheet rather than as a one-off expense in the Council's income and expenditure account. However, legal advice is that this payment would not meet the definition of an investment and this option has therefore presently been discounted. (This advice is consistent with that received by other authorities). This would also preclude the expenditure being treated as capital expenditure.

4.2. As with any investment held, returns from the Pension Fund are variable. Whilst in the long term the risk of negative growth is low, in some scenarios returns may be negative over a period of time. In this situation, early repayment of the deficit would result in a cost to the Council. Equally, the return could be much more beneficial if returns are higher than currently assumed.

4.3. Presently the rate certificate and agreed contributions are lower than theoretically required to reduce the deficit. There is a significant jump in contributions (c£6m) in

2026/27 planned. An additional option would be to create a smooth 'glide path' approach to that increase which contributes additional money to the deficit recovery plan in earlier years and gives a less stark increase in later years. This would see, for example, a £1m per year increase in contributions for 6 years. Clearly this would need to be considered in the context of the Council's wider financial position however the additional payments would generate longer term reductions in cost given the compounding of interest on the deficit. This option will be considered as part of the budget setting process and discussed with the actuary during the rate setting period.

5. Powers allowing the Council to make these payments

- 5.1. Local authority pension funds operate under the provisions of the Public Service Pensions Act 2013 and the Local Government Superannuation Act 1972. The Council is the "administering authority" of the Islington Pension Fund (the Fund) under the Local Government Pension Scheme (LGPS). The Council is also one of the "scheme employers" in the Fund.
- 5.2. The LGPS is :- (1) A defined benefit scheme; and (2) A funded scheme, and the Council has duties to:
 - 5.2.1. Make minimum deficit recovery contributions, based on triennial actuarial valuations, under Regulation 62 of the LGPS Regulations and an actuarially prepared 3 years Rates and Adjustments Certificate (the Certificate), in order to secure the solvency of the Fund and its long term cost efficiency; and
 - 5.2.2. Make contributions to the Fund each year under Regulations 16 and 67-71 inclusive.
- 5.3. The wording and interpretation of the Regulations do not appear to prevent an authority making a prepayment of contributions, and the current Rates and Adjustments certificate allows for contribution over payments to be made. In practice where a prepayment extends beyond the period of the prevailing Rates and Adjustment Certificate (i.e. 31 March 2023 here), the deficit would be re-set at the next valuation to take into account the updated funding strategy and experience over the inter-valuation period (i.e. over 2019 – 2022). The impact of the prepayment would then be taken into account in future contribution outcomes arising from that valuation.
- 5.4. The Council has also sought legal advice from James Goudie QC who has advised that the Council has the legal power to make a beneficial prepayment in respect of its overall deficit (under the General Power of Competence in section 1 of the Localism Act 2011).
- 5.5. Section 151 of the Local Government Act 1972 states that: "without prejudice to section 111, every local authority shall make arrangements for the proper administration of their financial affairs and shall secure that one of their officers has responsibility for the administration of those affairs". Section 111 of the Local Government Act 1972 relates to the subsidiary powers of local authorities.

- 5.6. The Local Government Act 2003 (“the Act”), section 15(1) requires a local authority “... to have regard (a) to such guidance as the Secretary of State may issue, and (b) to such other guidance as the Secretary of State may by regulations specify ...”.
- 5.7. The Statutory Guidance “Statutory Guidance on the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts (updated)” is issued under section 15(1) of the Act and authorities are therefore required to have regard to it.
- 5.8. The Statutory Guidance defines qualifying expenditure as ‘Qualifying expenditure is expenditure on any project that is designed to generate ongoing revenue savings in the delivery of public services and/or transform service delivery to reduce costs and/or transform service delivery in a way that reduces costs or demand for services in future years for any of the public-sector delivery partners. Within this definition, it is for individual local authorities to decide whether or not a project qualifies for the flexibility’ and goes on to give examples of qualifying expenditure including: ‘Funding the cost of service reconfiguration, restructuring or rationalisation (staff or non-staff), where this leads to ongoing efficiency savings or service transformation’.
- 5.9. It is the Section 151 Officer’s opinion that the approach described within this paper for the Flexible Use of Capital Receipts meets the definition required within the Statutory Guidance.
- 5.10. As detailed in paragraph 3.18 Full Council approval is required for the use of the capital receipt as referred to in the report.

6. Risk Assessment

- 6.1. The key risks relating to options 4 & 5 are as follows:

Risk	Implication	Mitigating actions
That markets underperform or investments reduce as a result of prevailing market conditions.	Investments can go down as well as up. The Council could put in additional money into the Fund only to see it reduce below the original value invested.	Having more assets in the Fund means that the difference between total value and the required value will be smaller than had no decision been made. Investments into the Pension Fund are long term and overall will operate in cycles. A short term dip in assets will average out over time when this long term view is applied. A cyclical reduction in Fund value would not directly require additional investment from the Council.
The auditors don't agree with the Council's treatment	If the external auditors do not agree with the Council's accounting treatment of deficit recovery payments then they may issue an adverse	The Council has taken professional accounting advice and Counsel's advice on the legal and accounting implications. Officers will continue to liaise with the auditors prior to making the payments to the Fund.

Risk	Implication	Mitigating actions
	opinion on the Council's accounts.	
Capital receipts don't materialise	If capital receipts are not received then no payment can be made to the Fund.	A regular tracker will be maintained ensuring accurate forecasts of future receipts. No payments will be made until appropriate receipts are received.
Interest rates increase	If interest rates increase then the cost of substituting borrowing for capital receipts will increase meaning that it would cost more to go ahead with the capital receipts recommendation.	The prevailing interest rates will be compared to the effective interest rate incurred by the deficit and should the benchmark be exceeded then no payments of capital receipts will be made to the Fund.
No further fortuitous underspends occur	If no further one off funds are available to contribute to the Pension Fund deficit then the deficit recovery will take longer.	The Council will continue to manage its finances in a prudent, robust and forward looking way. This will ensure that opportunities for reducing the future costs of the deficit liability are taken wherever appropriate.
The Council needs to access its capital receipts after payment to the Fund	If the Council pays its capital receipts into the Pension Fund then it is no longer legally able to transfer them back for usage.	Robust financial planning of the Councils revenue and capital position will mean that this does not become the case.
Further 'current service' deficits occur	If the Council's current staffing structure costs more through an actuarial valuation than it is contributing for current (as opposed to historical) service then a new deficit will occur, increasing the overall deficit for the Fund.	<p>This would not be a risk associated with making the payments – more of a risk mitigated by making additional payments.</p> <p>Regular actuarial reviews of the Councils current service obligations are calculated and appropriate budgets set aside as part of the budget setting process.</p>
The next triennial valuation increases the Fund deficit	If the next triennial valuation increases the deficit then the Council must consider the impact on its deficit recovery plan.	<p>This would not be a risk associated with making the payments – more of a risk mitigated by making the payments.</p> <p>The recommended additional payments would help to mitigate any increase in the deficit by increasing Fund assets.</p>

Risk	Implication	Mitigating actions
		Valuations fluctuate as market conditions, assumed pay levels and life expectancy of membership assumptions change.
The next triennial valuation decreases the Fund deficit to zero or else a surplus	If the next triennial valuation reduces the Fund deficit to either fully or over funded then the Council will have foregone the benefit of the amounts transferred to the Fund unnecessarily.	Should the fund assets overperform and exceed a 100% funded position then the actuary could agree a funding strategy where the excess assets reduce the Council's ongoing contribution. Alternatively, the Council could take the opportunity afforded to reduce the level of risk in its investment strategy – ie move funding allocations to safer, but lower yield assets. This would not reduce the ongoing contribution but would head off a risk of investments going down.

7. Implications

Financial Implications

- 7.1 The amount chargeable to the General Fund of a local authority for pension contributions is a statutorily defined annual amount, the annual amount being that set out in the actuary's Rates and Adjustments certificate.
- 7.2 Given that the contributions are a statutorily defined annual charge, the accounting therefore follows the timing of the cash flows in relation to the charge due, which is an annual charge. In the normal course of events this means that a local authority would pay the contributions due annually in line with the rates and adjustments certificate. In other words if the rates and adjustments certificate specifies that the Council is to pay contributions of £10m in 2021/22 and £10m in 2022/23, then the Council is obliged to do so in the specified years.
- 7.3 The actuary's certificate covers a 3 year period and as such it is reasonably common for local authority prepayments to be made on a triennial basis. As such, the legal and accounting position for these prepayments are well established, unlike deficit recovery payments covering a longer time period.
- 7.4 Utilising borrowing instead of capital receipts will increase the Council's borrowing requirement. This is affordable and will remain within prudential indicators. Amendments to the capital financing of items within the capital programme will be required to accommodate the change.
- 7.5 Should the HRA extinguish its deficit using some of its balances, the £1.6m annual charge will be removed and will be available for reinvestment within the HRA Business Plan.

7.6 If the Council makes any form of additional payment to partially extinguish the deficit, the actuary will not review its rate certificate until the next valuation, meaning the Council must continue to pay against its expected contributions until they are revised. The following table sets out the presently agreed contributions together with the actuaries view of what contributions are theoretically required. The Council's deficit recovery plan currently assumes a significant step up in revenue cost in 2026/27. The lower payments in prior years is supplemented by a required additional performance on the pension fund's assets in order to make up the shortfall.

Year	Deficit Lump Sum Agreed £m	Full Theoretical Deficit Lump Sum £m
2020/21	8.2	13.39
2021/22	8.52	13.91
2022/23	8.85	14.45
2023/24	9.2	15.01
2024/25	9.56	15.60
2025/26	9.93	16.21
2026/27	16.84	16.84
Total	71.1	105.41

Legal Implications

7.7 The legal implications of the recommendations are included within section 5 within this report.

Environmental Implications

7.8 This report does not have any direct environmental implications.

Resident Impact Assessment

7.9 The Council must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation, and to advance equality of opportunity, and foster good relations, between those who share a relevant protected characteristic and those who do not share it (section 149 Equality Act 2010). The Council has a duty to have due regard to the need to remove or minimise disadvantages, take steps to meet needs, in particular steps to take account of disabled persons' disabilities, and encourage people to participate in public life. The Council must have due regard to the need to tackle prejudice and promote understanding.

7.10 This report considers options for financial investment and does not have direct policy implications, so a separate RIA is not required for this report.

Conclusion and reasons for recommendations

7.11 The Council is incurring additional costs in relation to holding a pension deficit. The recommendations support the reduction of this deficit in a financially advantageous way to both the General Fund and the Pension Fund. Should the recommendations not be adopted then the Council will continue to stand higher interest costs that it could avoid.

Appendices: None

Background papers: None

Signed by:

Sabina Curran

20 August 2021

Executive Member for Finance and Performance

Date

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Legal Implications Author: Peter Fehler, Director of Law and Governance