

GN28: Retirement Benefit Schemes - Adequacy of Benefits for Contracting-out on or after 6 April 1997

Classification

Practice Standard

Application

An actuary responsible for determining whether the benefits of an occupational pension scheme, or an appropriate sub-section of such a scheme, satisfy the statutory standard required for salary-related contracted-out schemes and sections of Contracted-out Mixed Benefit Schemes (COMBSs) which are contracted-out on a salary-related basis in respect of service on or after 6 April 1997.

Legislation or Authority

Pension Schemes Act (1993, c.48). Sections 12A and 12B [as inserted by section 136(5) of the Pensions Act 1995].

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Contracting-out) Regulations 1996. SI 1996/1172.

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Mixed Benefit Contracted-out Schemes) Regulations 1996. SI 1996/1977.

Northern Ireland has its own body of law relating to pensions and, in relation to Northern Ireland, references to the Great Britain legislation contained in this Guidance Note should be read as including references to the corresponding Northern Ireland legislation. Appendix shows Northern Ireland legislation equivalent to the Great Britain legislation mentioned in this Guidance Note.

This Guidance Note has been approved by the Secretary of State and the Department of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland in accordance with Regulations.

Author

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Status

Approved under Due Process (Technical Amendment).

<i>Version</i>	<i>Effective from</i>
1.0	01.01.97
1.1	17.03.97

1 Introduction

1.1 Section 12A and the Regulations made thereunder indicate that an employer will only be able to apply successfully for a salary-

related contracting-out certificate in respect of a scheme providing benefits which are 'broadly equivalent to or better than' the benefits provided by a 'reference scheme', details of which are set out in section 12B. This equivalence can only be certified by the 'scheme actuary' appointed under section 47 of the Pensions Act 1995 unless no such appointment is required under that section (see regulation 24). All future references in this Guidance Note to 'certificate' refer to the reference scheme test certificate. In their application to COMBs further references to a 'scheme', 'members' and 'membership' should be read also in the context of the salary-related part of a COMB.

- 1.2 The purpose of this Guidance Note is to advise actuaries of the considerations which they need to take into account in assessing this equivalence, and in providing a certificate. A scheme must also satisfy other requirements if it is to be a salary-related contracted-out scheme; those requirements are not covered by this Guidance Note.

2 Frequency of Provision of Certificates

- 2.1 A certificate, in the form specified by the Contributions Agency, must be provided as one of the conditions to be met by a scheme seeking to contract-out under the 'reference scheme' test.
- 2.2 For a scheme that is an existing salary-related contracted-out scheme before 6 April 1997, the first such certificate will be based on an effective date of 6 April 1997. This certificate should be provided with the re-election package which is to be submitted to the Contributions Agency by 31 January 1998.
- 2.3 For a scheme contracting-out for the first time with an effective date on or after 6 April 1997, a certificate must be provided on or before the effective date (see also paragraph 4.7).
- 2.4 The actuary must provide a renewal certificate at regular intervals as required by the Secretary of State. The Contributions Agency will specify when such certificates need to be provided. It is intended that this will normally be every three years.
- 2.5 The actuary must reconsider the scheme's ability to meet the statutory standard whenever informed, in accordance with GN29 or Regulations made under section 47(9) of the Pensions Act 1995 or section 37 of the Pension Schemes Act 1993, of a change which might affect the scheme's ability to satisfy the test

and, in carrying out such reconsideration, must comply with part 5 of this Guidance Note.

3 Instructions

- 3.1 The actuary will receive instructions from the employer to determine whether the scheme satisfies the 'reference scheme' test. Since the actuary is already acting for the trustees or manager(s) of the scheme, the trustees or manager(s) should be told that these instructions have been accepted from the employer (unless the actuary has already informed the trustees or manager(s) of an ongoing appointment to provide the employer with such advice as may be required from time to time). The actuary shall provide the signed certificate to the employer.

4 Methodology

- 4.1 If a scheme has a benefit structure which provides pensions equal to or better than the reference scheme in every respect, including the earnings definition and widows' or widowers' pensions, the actuary can provide a certificate without further investigation.
- 4.2 A scheme does not have to match the structure of the reference scheme to be contracted-out provided that the actuary is able to certify that the benefits are broadly equivalent to or better than the pensions under the reference scheme, tested separately for members' own benefits and pensions for their widows or widowers.
- 4.3 The tests of equivalence must be satisfied on an overall basis for the membership collectively. This means that the average amount, or value, of benefit to be provided by the scheme must not be less than the average amount, or value as appropriate, of the benefits under the reference scheme for the relevant group of employees. Provided that the overall tests are satisfied, the actuary should also be satisfied that not more than 10% of the individual members or their widows or widowers would fail the tests of equivalence. The actuary need not automatically look at the benefits for each individual member in order to be satisfied that each of these tests of equivalence is satisfied; it is a matter of professional judgement for each actuary as to the amount of investigation which is necessary.

- 4.4 The tests of equivalence are to be based on the active membership of the scheme as at the effective date of the certificate. Members of the scheme who are not contracted-out under the salary-related test must be disregarded.
- 4.5 The tests of equivalence shall also be based on the latest available remuneration data.
 - 4.5.1 If the latest available remuneration data relates to a period ending before the effective date, the actuary should consider obtaining confirmation from the employer that no significant changes in remuneration patterns had occurred before the effective date.
 - 4.5.2 The chosen period for which the latest available remuneration data is obtained will normally be one year. Where the actuary has reason to believe that remuneration patterns for that period are significantly abnormal and the employer has confirmed in writing that this is the case, then the actuary can test whether the scheme satisfies the broadly equivalent requirement based on remuneration data over the three years ending on the effective date and provide a certificate on that basis.
 - 4.5.3 As the sole area of uncertainty will in many cases be differences between earnings definitions as required by the scheme and as required by the reference scheme, the actuary may be able to draft a statement on this issue for the employer to sign which will permit the actuary to carry out the certification without individual analysis.
- 4.6 Normally in an actuarial investigation the actuary would comment briefly on the quality of the data which had been provided, along with any reservations regarding the data. In view of the nature of the certification which has to be provided under section 12A, the actuary should be satisfied that the quality of the data is sufficient before completing the certification.
- 4.7 If a certificate is to be provided in respect of a scheme which is being established, the scheme should be tested on the basis of its anticipated membership. Only if the actuary is informed that the initial membership differs significantly from the anticipated membership need the scheme be retested on the basis of the actual membership. The actuary should require the employer to provide appropriate information concerning the initial membership and should follow the procedures set out in paragraph 5.1.

- 4.8 In order to certify broad equivalence it will be necessary to compare the scheme benefits with those under the reference scheme. In certain circumstances it will be necessary to make a comparison between the values of the respective benefits.
- 4.9 The benefits to be compared will (with the exception of those under paragraph 4.11.3) be those that are expected to accrue to the membership of the scheme in the three years following the effective date of certification.
- 4.10 The members' benefits should be those to which the members would be entitled in relation to that period if they were to leave service at the end of that period or on earlier attainment of normal pension age. The scheme's normal pension age is defined as the earliest age at which an unreduced pension would be payable as of right.
- 4.11 The pensions for widows or widowers should be compared with those payable from the reference scheme separately in respect of death in service during the three year period, subsequent death in deferment and death in retirement and the tests should be passed in respect of each contingency.
- 4.11.1 For the purpose of the comparison of widows' or widowers' pensions, some reduction in respect of a large age difference between husband and wife may be ignored, provided that such reduction does not exceed 2.5% for each complete year of age difference in excess of ten.
- 4.11.2 For widows' or widowers' pensions on death in deferment and death in retirement, the comparison with the reference scheme should be made on the same basis as described in paragraphs 4.9 and 4.10 above.
- 4.11.3 For widows' or widowers' pensions on death in service, the comparison with the reference scheme should be made on the basis described in paragraph 4.9 above, except that investigations will be required where the widows' or widowers' pensions are:
- (a) non-service-related (eg a fixed percentage of pay of less than 25% of the appropriate earnings as defined under the reference scheme) or
 - (b) a prospective service benefit where the accrual rate is lower than 1/160ths of appropriate earnings as defined under the reference scheme.

In such cases, the widow's or widower's pension payable from the scheme if the member were to die on the third anniversary of the effective date of the certificate, or on the day before normal pension age if earlier, should be compared with the accrued widow's or widower's pension under the reference scheme based on the member's pensionable service to that date excluding any pensionable service before the scheme first contracted-out in relation to the State Earnings Related Pension Scheme, or 6 April 1988 if later in the case of female members.

- 4.12 For the purpose of comparing the scheme benefits with those under the reference scheme, the following points should be noted:
 - 4.12.1 Where a member is not accruing benefits over part or all of the three year period because the member's length of service is such that the member has accrued the maximum pension under the provisions of the scheme then, provided that the member satisfies the relevant conditions laid down in Regulation 28, the member shall be included in the tests of equivalence on the basis that the maximum scheme pension accrues uniformly over the member's potential pensionable service in the scheme, subject to a maximum of 40 years.
 - 4.12.2 If the benefit structure of the scheme is such that an explicit lump sum benefit at retirement is provided (other than by commutation of pension), then the value of this lump sum benefit can be taken into consideration as a member's benefit in determining whether the equivalence test is satisfied.
 - 4.12.3 No account may be taken of death benefits payable in lump sum form.
 - 4.12.4 No account may be taken of any discretionary benefits.
 - 4.12.5 No account may be taken of any benefits which are money purchase benefits.
- 4.13 If it is necessary for the actuary to compare the values of the scheme's benefit and those under the reference scheme, the long-term assumptions set out in the Appendix to GN27 (Minimum Funding Requirement) must be employed, together with such further assumptions from that Appendix as are necessary to enable the comparison to be made. If, for a particular matter, no assumption is set out in the Appendix, the actuary is free to make any suitable assumption, provided that, overall, the assumptions are reasonable and consistent.

- 4.13.1 For the purpose of assessing the value of the member's benefits from the scheme, the benefit should be assumed payable from the scheme's normal pension age, as defined in paragraph 4.10.
- 4.13.2 For the purpose of valuing widows' or widowers' death in service pensions, the benefits to be valued are those under paragraphs 4.9 or 4.11.3 assuming that the member died on the third anniversary of the effective date or the day before normal pension age if earlier.
- 4.13.3 For the purpose of valuing widows' or widowers' death in deferment pensions, the benefits to be valued are those which would be payable if the member had died after he was assumed to leave service under paragraph 4.10.
- 4.13.4 For the purpose of valuing widows' or widowers' death in retirement pensions, the benefits to be valued are those which would be payable if the member had died on the day after the scheme normal pension age having left service in accordance with the assumptions made under paragraph 4.10. Where the scheme's normal pension age is earlier than age 65, this will mean a comparison between the value of a scheme widow's or widower's death in retirement pension and the value of a reference scheme widow's or widower's death in deferment (or death in service) pension. Where the scheme provides that the widow's or widower's pension on death in retirement is reduced if the member elects to commute part of his or her pension for a lump sum at retirement, then an appropriate reduction in the scheme widow's or widower's pension should be made, broadly consistent with the average experience for the scheme.
- 4.14 If the scheme has more than one benefit scale available to members, whether these scales are available on an open choice to members or whether they are defined for certain categories of employment, then the equivalence tests must be carried out separately for each scale. Only if a particular scale satisfies the equivalence tests in its own right can those members to whom it applies be in contracted-out employment. This is to avoid a certificate being issued where all the members in a particular scale get less than the reference benefits, but these members happen to make up less than 10% of the overall membership of the scheme. In this context, 'benefit scale' encompasses both the accrual rate and the definition of pensionable pay.
- 4.15 Where there is more than one employer linked to a scheme, each or any of them may wish to have their own individual contracting-out certificate covering their own employees. The

'broadly equivalent' tests described in paragraph 4.3 must then be carried out separately in respect of the employees covered by each separate contracting-out certificate. Where a holding company contracting-out certificate is to be used, separate tests will not be required for the different employers covered by it, unless paragraph 4.14 applies.

- 4.16 Where an employer has two schemes, neither of which can be treated as contracted-out in its own right because, for example, one provides death-in-service benefits and the other provides pension benefits the actuary should consider the aggregate of the benefits when providing the certificate.

5 Ongoing Supervision

- 5.1 Whenever the actuary is informed of any significant changes to the membership, including remuneration patterns, or to the terms of the scheme, consideration should be given as to whether such changes would adversely affect the ability of the scheme to pass the tests of equivalence. In such circumstances the actuary should be satisfied that it would have been possible to certify that the scheme satisfied the tests of equivalence immediately following the relevant change and, if not the Contributions Agency, the employer and the trustees should be notified, unless the situation has been rectified before notification takes place.
- 5.2 Before a proposed change in the rules of the scheme can be made, Regulation 42 requires the actuary to notify the trustees in writing that the scheme will continue to satisfy the statutory standard after the alteration is made.

Appendix: Northern Ireland Legislation

GB Provision

Sections 12A and 12B of the Pension Schemes Act 1993

Section 37 of the Pension Schemes Act 1993

Section 47 of the Pensions Act 1995

Section 136(5) of the Pensions Act 1995

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Contracting-out) Regulations 1996

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Mixed Benefit Contracted-out Schemes) Regulations 1996

NI Provision

Sections 8A and 8B of the Pension Schemes (Northern Ireland) Act 1993

Section 33 of the Pension Schemes (Northern Ireland) Act 1993

Article 47 of the Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

Article 133(5) of the Pensions (Northern Ireland) Order 1995

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Contracting-out) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1996

The Occupational Pension Schemes (Mixed Benefit Contracted-out Schemes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997