

Ombudsman's Determination

Applicant	Ms E
Scheme	Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges Pension Scheme (the Scheme)
Respondent(s)	Capita ATL Pension Trustees Limited (the Trustees) British Council (BC)

Complaint Summary

Ms E has complained that the Trustees and BC have unjustly stepped back from their historic practice of revaluing deferred benefits by 5% per annum.

Summary of the Ombudsman's Determination and reasons

The complaint should be partly upheld against the Trustees and BC because:

- Although BC had the power to amend the Rules, which they did having taken legal advice on the matter, there was a clear representation in a variety of documents and correspondence issued to Ms E over a number of years that revaluation would be fixed at 5% per annum. Finding out that this representation was incorrect would have caused Ms E a serious level of distress and inconvenience which should be recognised.
- However, there can be no estoppel because there are no direct links between the acts taken by Ms E and the misrepresentation.

Detailed Determination

Material facts

1. The scheme was established by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges (**CBEVE**) in 1972.
2. From at least September 1988, deferred members' benefits were revalued in practice at 5% per annum.
3. Ms E joined the Scheme on 16 January 1989. Documents, including the member booklet, transfer value statements, benefit statements etc. issued to Ms E during her membership of the Scheme referred to a fixed rate revaluation of 5% on deferred pensions. However, the Scheme Rules were silent as to the rate of revaluation of deferred pensions.
4. In 1993/94, CBEVE merged with BC and BC became the Principal Employer of the Scheme. At the time of the merger employees were given the choice of remaining in the Scheme or transferring to the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (**PCSPS**).
5. Before the merger members of the Scheme were provided with a Q&A document which informed their decision whether to remain members of the Scheme or to become a member of the PCSPS. Among other explanations of the differences between the two schemes, this documentation explained the revaluation rules as then understood. It reflected the Trustees' existing practice on revaluation. A number of BC employees chose to remain members of the Scheme. Ms E was one of them.
6. During her membership of the Scheme Ms E was a member nominated trustee for several years and, at the time of the merger, she was chair of the CBEVE trade union branch.
7. Ms E ceased to be a member of the Scheme on 17 October 2003 at which time she received a deferred benefit statement which indicated that she was entitled to an annual retirement pension of £26,060.12 and said:

“Your Pension and Dependant's Retirement Pension shown above include increases of 5% per annum compound for the number of complete years between the Date Pensionable Service Ceased and your Normal Retiring Date in respect of benefits in excess of GMP.”
8. The discrepancy between how deferred pensions were revalued in practice and the provisions of the Scheme Rules came to light in 2011 when BC was asked to approve new consolidated Trust Deed and Rules which provided for revaluation of deferred benefits at a fixed 5% per annum.
9. On 31 January 2013, the Scheme closed to future accrual.

10. BC did not approve the new proposed consolidated Trust Deed and Rules and, in August 2013, the Trustees and BC sought Counsel's opinion on the rate of revaluation of deferred benefits.
11. Counsel's opinion concluded that the available documentation did not support the view that BC had made a valid amendment to the Scheme Rules so as to introduce a fixed 5% revaluation rate. Counsel also considered that there was no conclusive evidence that BC had ever decided to go beyond the statutory minimum level of revaluation.
12. Members were advised of Counsel's Opinion in March 2015 and provided with revised deferred benefit statements. Ms E's statement indicated that she was entitled to an annual retirement pension of £15,053.16 assuming revaluation of pension in excess of GMP at the statutory minimum level of revaluation.
13. Ms E queried the figures shown on the statement and, in July 2015, was provided with an amended statement which stated that her estimated annual pension at Normal Retirement Date amounted to £14,387.64.
14. The Rules of the Scheme were amended by a Deed, dated 7 July 2015, which made the following provisions in relation to deferred benefits:

“...The pension shall then be increased before payment in accordance with the Revaluation laws.”

Summary of Ms E's position

15. Ms E says she relied on the Scheme correspondence showing that her deferred benefits would increase by 5% per annum until normal retirement date in her financial planning.
16. At the time of the merger members were told that the Scheme had more generous benefits than the PCSPS, including fixed rate revaluation.
17. The 5% revaluation formed part of an analysis of pension provision when CBEVE staff joined BC under a TUPE transfer. BC is now failing to honour the agreements made. Trade Union members all decided to stay in the Scheme rather than transfer to the PCSPS as a result of the comparison document produced by BC management.
18. Various historical Trustee reports refer to the rate of 5% per annum increases on benefits in deferment. However, there is no evidence that the Trustees at that time made any attempt to formally introduce the 5% revaluation rate to the Scheme rules as they were obliged to do.
19. BC has been aware of the 5% revaluation issue since the merger and has been aware of the lack of specification in the Scheme Rules since at least 2003, when she was a Scheme trustee.

20. BC has the power to amend the Scheme rules but has chosen not to do so. As a result, the Trustee has applied the minimum revaluation required by law, and this is the cause of the significant reductions in the deferred pensions.
21. The 5% revaluation rate was a rule change that was being applied until 2014 and any rule change should date from the last date on which the previous rule was applied.
22. The PCSPS has provisions for Voluntary Early Retirement (**VER**) unlike the Scheme. In 2009 Scheme members were denied equivalent VER terms on the grounds that they had other compensatory benefits.
23. In 2004 she transferred previous PCSPS service to the Scheme as a result of information provided by BC. The 5% uplift to deferred pensions was the reason she remained within the Scheme.
24. In 2011 she retrained as a social worker, moving from a salary of £45,000 to a training salary of £15,000. She believed she could afford to do this on the basis of the information provided by BC in her Scheme pension benefit statements.

Summary of the Trustees' position

25. Having sought the opinion of Counsel the Trustees accepted that no conclusive evidence has yet been found to demonstrate that a decision was taken to introduce a revaluation rate of 5% per annum fixed. There was no option but to administer the Scheme in accordance with the Rules and provide only statutory increases to deferred pensions.
26. The 7 July 2015 Deed adopts new rules that take effect from that date. Clause 3 of the Operative provisions makes it clear that any benefits payable to or in respect of a member who ceased to be in pensionable service before this date shall be calculated under the previous rules. The 2015 Deed does not change the rate of revaluation that was to be applied for accrual prior to its effective date. As pensionable service ceased to accrue from 1 February 2013 the 2015 Deed is irrelevant for assessing the correct rate of revaluation to apply to deferred pensions.
27. At the relevant time the PCSPS offered a measure of inflation protection that was uncapped. Members on fixed rate increases would therefore gain in times of low inflation but lose when inflation rose above 5%. At the time of the invitation to join the PCSPS in 1993 inflation had dropped to 1.6% and the value of a fixed 5% increase would have been apparent to members.
28. BC offered VER to employees in 2009. Employees who had remained members of the Scheme rather than transfer to PCSPS were not offered the same VER rates. The reason they were given for this was that Scheme members were entitled to more favourable benefits than PCSPS member including 5% fixed rate revaluation.
29. Counsel opinion indicated that members had plausible claims for estoppel. Consideration of an estoppel claim should include the impact of the time over which

the applicant has relied on the established practice of applying 5% per annum increases.

Comments submitted by Mrs Y - a Trustee and long serving CBEVE employee

30. She has been a member-nominated trustee since April 2006.
31. At the time of the merger staff were assured that BC would honour all existing arrangements in respect of terms and conditions including pension arrangements.
32. As a member-nominated Trustee she has been contacted by many staff affected by BC's decision to disregard the merger agreements and undertakings. They feel an understandable sense of injustice as they are obviously aware that all previous pensioners have received the 5% revaluation.

Comments submitted by Mr K - a Trustee and long serving CBEVE employee

33. He has been a trustee of the Scheme since 2004.
34. At the time of the merger BC was anxious to maintain the principle and practice of TUPE in relation to the pensions aspect of the merger.
35. In light of the assurances and solemn undertakings given in open meetings, and in writing, the vast majority of CBEVE members decided to stay with the Scheme. Only one member decided to leave and join the PCSPS.

Summary of BC's position

36. Both BC and Capita sought legal opinion on the issue. Wide ranging documentation including the Member's handbook was reviewed as well as the general administrative practice.
37. The outcome of the Counsel's review of the documents and circumstances of this case was that no legal basis for the application of the fixed 5% per annum rate of revaluation for deferred pensions could be established.
38. It would be difficult in the current climate to justify a decision to apply a fixed level of revaluation which far exceeds the current level of inflation.
39. Deferred pensions under the PCSPS are revalued in line with cost of living increases based on the CPI Index. Any decision to apply fixed 5% increases to deferred pensions for a group of former and current employees would be out of step with other current and former BC staff.
40. If the members had chosen to join the PCSPS their Scheme benefits would have been deferred and revalued until payment so it seems unlikely that the rate of revaluation of deferred pensions was a material factor in the decision to remain in the Scheme.

41. At the time of the merger members were advised that pensions in deferment would be re-valued in line with statutory increases.
42. While sympathising with the members' positions our understanding of the purpose of revaluation is to ensure the value of accrued benefits are not eroded by inflation. That objective is met by the statutory provision now incorporated into the Scheme Rules. Strictly, therefore there has been no loss. It is however possible that in some cases a false expectation of the level of revaluation has been provided.

Conclusions

Revaluation and interpretation of the Rules

43. Ms E's complaint is that the Trustees and BC have unjustly stepped back from the historic practice of revaluing deferred benefits by 5% per annum. It is undisputed that until BC and the Trustees sought Counsel opinion, in August 2013, in relation to the revaluation of deferred pensions, Scheme practice was to increase deferred pensions by 5% per annum. Ms E contends that the 5% revaluation rate was an effective rule change that was being applied until 2014 and so the Rules should formally be amended to reflect that.
44. Before the Deed of Amendment dated 7 July 2015, the Rules that governed the Scheme were silent on the matter of revaluation of deferred benefits in excess of GMP. Counsel opined that BC had never made a valid amendment to the Scheme Rules to introduce a fixed 5% revaluation rate and so the statutory minimum level of revaluation applied throughout the period under dispute.
45. Ms E argues that although BC has the power to amend the Scheme rules it has chosen not to do so. Rule 21 of the Rules states "The Principal Employer may (subject to the terms of the Instrument and subject to the consent of the Occupational Pensions Board where required by the Pensions Act) at any time by resolution amend any of the provisions of the Rules." As Ms E states, Rule 21 clearly provides BC with the power to amend the Rules of the Scheme and this is what it has now done albeit not in the way Ms E would have liked. Rather, BC has clarified that the method of revaluation to be applied to deferred pensions will continue to be the statutory minimum required by the law.
46. Ms E contends that BC has been aware of the 5% revaluation issue since the merger in 1993/94 and has also been aware of the lack of specification in the Scheme Rules since at least 2003, when she was a Scheme trustee. I agree that the issue appears to be very longstanding. The summary of evidence submitted to Counsel shows a live issue dating back to 1988, no evidence of any formal resolution of it and an inconsistent approach to the way that the increase rule was described to members at the time of the 1993 merger of employers. However, I do not see that the outcome was likely to have been any different had BC resolved the issue of interpretation earlier. BC could well have taken the same view in 2003 as they did in 2017.

47. In summary, BC had the power to amend the Rules which they did having taken legal advice on the matter. I do not find their actions incorrect or that this amounts to maladministration.

Estoppel

48. However, there has been clear misrepresentation and there is no dispute that some of the correspondence, announcements and statements issued to members reflected that the revaluation method applicable to deferred members was 5% per annum. Both BC and the Trustees acknowledge the possibility, subject to specific facts in individual cases, that members may have plausible claims for estoppel.

49. To succeed with a defence of estoppel by representation, a person needs to establish an unambiguous representation on which he or she relied in good faith to their detriment.

50. These requirements were elaborated in the case of *Steria v Hutchison* [2006] 64 PBLR. In that case Neuberger LJ said as follows:

“When it comes to estoppel by representation or promissory estoppel, it seems to me very unlikely that a claimant would be able to satisfy the test of unconscionability unless he could also satisfy the three classic requirements. They are (a) a clear representation or promise made by the defendant upon which it is reasonably foreseeable that the claimant will act, (b) an act on the part of the claimant which was reasonably taken in reliance upon the representation or promise, and (c) after the act has been taken, the claimant being able to show that he will suffer detriment if the defendant is not held to the representation or promise. Even this formulation is relatively broad brush, and it should be emphasised that there are many qualifications or refinements which can be made to it.”

51. An estoppel by convention may arise where parties to a transaction act on the basis of a common assumption as to fact or law so that it would be unjust to allow one of the parties to go back on it. In *Commissioner for her Majesty's Revenue and Customs v Bencdollar Limited and Others* the judge summarised the principles applicable to the assertion of an estoppel by convention arising out of non-contractual dealings as follows:

- vi) it is not enough that the common assumption upon which the estoppel is based is merely understood by the parties in the same way. It must be expressly shared between them.
- vii) The expression of the common assumption by the party alleged to be estopped must be such that he may properly be said to have assumed some element of responsibility for it; in the sense of conveying to the other party an understanding that he expected the other party to rely on it.

- viii) The person alleging the estoppel must in fact have relied upon the common assumption, to a sufficient extent, rather than merely upon his independent view of the matter.
- ix) That reliance must have occurred in connection with some subsequent mutual dealing between the parties.
- x) Some detriment must thereby have been suffered by the person alleging the estoppel, or benefit thereby have been conferred upon the person alleged to be estopped, sufficient to make it unjust or unconscionable for the latter to assert the true legal (or factual) position.

Having considered the Handbook content, the consistent practice of using a fixed 5% in actuarial valuations, the email sent by BC's HR manager at the time of the employer merger, the practice of issuing leaver statements, the explanation of that practice contained in BC's 6 February 2007 correspondence, the payment of benefits on that basis up until 2014, and the inclusion of a rule to that effect within the proposed consolidated Rules, I consider that on the balance of probabilities, the Trustee, BC and Ms E had between 1993 and the date of scheme closure in 2013, been acting on a common and expressly shared assumption that 5% was fixed and the amount which was quoted in Ms E's leaver statement was what she would get at retirement and that the understanding was expressly shared between BC and the Trustee and Ms E in such a way that she could be expected to rely on it.

52. I understand BC and the Trustee to accept that these elements of the tests for estoppel are made out. However, it remains for Ms E to demonstrate detrimental reliance. I consider that on the evidence presented Ms E cannot demonstrate such reliance for the following reasons.
53. Ms E says that the 5% revaluation to her deferred benefits was the reason she remained within the Scheme at that time. She also contends that in 2004 she transferred previous PCSPS service to the Scheme as a result of information provided by BC.
54. I accept Ms E's submission that she thought that the administrative practice of the time was based on the 1989 member booklet. This says that 'entitlements relative to service after 1984, will be increased by 5% per annum compound'. That is clear and unambiguous. I acknowledge BC's argument that in 1993 at the time of the merger of employers, the Q&A document referred to 'statutory increases' and 'current' rates. I also note that a BC email to members dated 14 July 1993 summarised the Q&A and drew attention to 'a fixed rate of 5%' compared to PCSPS increases in line with RPI. There is an inconsistency there. I conclude that the 1993 communications were not clear enough to undo Ms E's prior understanding based on the 1989 member booklet. However, I conclude that she cannot demonstrate reliance on the representation made for the reasons below.

55. At the time Ms E made the decision to remain in the Scheme inflation had fallen to 1.6% Given that comparison documents stated that revaluation of deferred benefits in the PCSPS was in line with RPI (on benefits in excess of GMP) if that were the only factor to consider then it would have been a significant one. However, it was not the only factor to consider. There were other differences between the two schemes to which attention was drawn in the comparison document provided in 1993. For example, the accrual rate of pensions, is higher in the Scheme, the amount paid on death in service is more favourable in the Scheme, the ill health provision is more generous. Conversely, the lump sum provision is less generous and the calculation of Final Pensionable Earnings is based on final year rather than best of the last three. I cannot therefore accept that the revaluation of deferred benefits was the only factor driving the decision to remain in the Scheme. It was likely to have been one among many.
56. In order to establish reliance, Ms E has to prove that the revaluation rate was a 'significant' factor in her decision. The burden of proof is on her and I have to make an assessment of what was probable without the benefit of hindsight, i.e. on the facts as they appeared at the time without benefit of knowing whether or when Ms E would become a deferred member. BC argues that if the rate of increases for deferred members was significant, then it should have driven Ms E to leave the Scheme. I do not agree with that argument. There is more than one way to become a deferred member; It can happen at different times for different reasons, (as it later did in Ms E's case). However, I conclude that those elements of the benefit structure which were associated with active service would probably have appeared more important in 1993, than rights in deferral because at the time the value of active service benefits would have appeared more immediate. Given the number of other factors in play and Ms E's active status, I conclude that the difference between fixed or variable rate of increase in deferral was unlikely to have been a significant factor in Ms E's decision whether to leave the Scheme in 1993. I have seen no evidence of any connection between the stated increase rate in deferral and Ms E's decision to transfer benefits in.
57. Although Ms E mentions that, in 2009, Scheme members were denied equivalent VER terms as those provided under the PCSPS on the grounds that they had other compensatory benefits this could not have been detrimental to Ms E given that she ceased to be a member of the Scheme six years earlier in October 2003.
58. Ms E also says that in 2011 she retrained as a social worker, moving from a salary of £45,000 to a training salary of £15,000. She believed she could afford to do this on the basis of the information provided by BC in her Scheme pension benefit statements. Ms E does not go so far as to say she would not have decided to retrain if she had understood the correct basis for revaluation of her deferred pension. I have seen no evidence from which I can conclude that the decision to retrain was an act she took in reliance on the incorrect information.

59. In summary, there are no direct links between the acts taken by Ms E and the misrepresentation and so there can be no estoppel.
60. I have also taken into consideration that the misrepresentation occurred for nearly 20 years which did deprive Ms E of the opportunity to make proper retirement planning decisions and in my view, will have caused a serious level of distress and inconvenience to Ms E. I am satisfied that the Trustees and BC are equally responsible for the misrepresentations and the failure to resolve the issue earlier and I have made an appropriate direction below.

Directions

61. Within 21 days from the date of the determination the Trustees and BC shall each pay Ms E £500 in recognition of the serious level of distress and inconvenience the misrepresentation will have caused her.

Karen Johnston

Deputy Pensions Ombudsman
13 March 2019

Annexe

Relevant Documents

62. **Scheme rules (1986)**

“21. Amendment of the Scheme

The Principal Employer may (subject to the terms of the Instrument and subject to the consent of the Occupational Pensions Board where required by the Pensions Act) at any time by resolution amend any of the provisions of the Rules.”

63. **The 7 July 2015 Deed**

“5. **Benefits for deferred members**

5.2 Preserved Pension at Normal Retirement Date

...The pension shall then be increased before payment in accordance with the Revaluation laws.”

64. **Member’s Handbook**

“Introduction

The Scheme is established under trust and governed by formal rules. If there is any difference of interpretation between this booklet and the formal rules the provisions of the rules will be followed. Copies of the rules are available for inspection by the Members.

After Completion of two years’ qualifying service

(A) (2) ...those proportions of your pension entitlements relative to service after 1984 which are in excess of your Guaranteed Minimum Pension calculated at the date of leaving service, will be increased by 5% per annum compound for the number of complete years between the date of your leaving service and your Normal Retiring Date. “

65. **Scheme Trustees report (undated)**

“Pension Increases (continued)

Members who left service on or after 1st January 1991 with entitlement to deferred benefits have the benefits in excess of the GMP at date of withdrawal increased by 5% pa for the number of complete years from their dates of withdrawal to their normal retirement date.”

66. **Minutes of Trustees meeting of 28 September 2011**

“The issue of 5% revaluation on deferred pensions was discussed. The

current Rules and re-draft do not stipulate the increase rate but Eversheds have, in the latest draft, included reference following confirmation from the Trustees at the 20 June meeting that 5% revaluation is current practice. It was noted that 5% indexation is referred to in the members' booklet and scheme valuations have assumed 5% revaluation of deferred benefits. It was agreed that further investigation is required to provide supporting documentary evidence of this provision."

67. **Document headed- Comparison of the Central Bureau Staff Superannuation Scheme (CBSSS) and the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (PCSPS).**

This was issues in 1992 and showed benefits at Normal Retirement date were based on an accrual rate of n/60ths under the Scheme and n/80ths under the PCSPS. It stated that increases on non GMP pensions in deferment was 5 % under the Scheme and that both GMP and Non GMP elements were subject to increases in line with RPI under the PCSPS.

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