

## Minister reveals pension changes

**C**HANGES to when thousands of businesses must auto-enrol staff into a pension scheme have just been announced by Pensions Minister Steve Webb.

The changes, announced on November 28, mean that businesses with between 50 and 3,000 employees could see their staging date – when they must start auto-enrolling their staff into a pension arrangement – changed slightly along with their contribution increases.

The first small businesses with fewer than 50 staff were due to start enrolling in April 2014, but will now see their staging dates delayed until after the end of this Parliament in May 2015.

An increase in employer pension contributions from one per cent to two per cent is also being delayed by the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) from the current date of October 2016. A new timetable following the changes is to be unveiled next month (January 2012).

The DWP also said a decision was made not to alter the dates for larger employers, because their planning was too advanced.

All this means that the revised auto-enrolment timetable is:

- No small business with fewer than 50 staff will have to start auto-enrolment before May 2015;
- Businesses with between 50 and 2,999 staff in their PAYE scheme will also have their auto-enrolment start-dates changed and announced in due course;
- Businesses with 3,000+ people in their PAYE scheme will have their auto-enrolment start date, which, at the earliest is October 2012, changed;
- The required contribution rate will not be changed until all businesses have started auto-enrolment.

However, this revised timetable also begs the question whether the Government will also put back the date on which the minimum employer contribution rate rises to three per cent beyond October 1, 2017.

Any business requiring help in understanding their auto-enrolment obligations should seek help from an independent financial advisor.

■ Harry O'Connor is a wealth management consultant with Pearson Jones plc, Bank Chambers, 9 Kensington, Cockton Hill Road, Bishop Auckland, County Durham, DL14 6HX Tel: 01388 458 919.



## A career in ruins? Archaeologist turns to law

A FORMER Durham University archaeology student has joined a law firm's team dealing with the charity sector.

Mark Ashton, who later trained in law, has been appointed as a solicitor to Dickinson Dees charities practice.

Mr Ashton has recently qualified into the charities practice, having completed his two-year training contract at Dickinson Dees.

He specialised in charity law for half of his training contract, spending two six-month periods with the charities team.

His work to date has included the registration of new charities, the creation of trading subsidiaries and other funding vehicles and assisting with charity property transactions.

He is also a member of the Charity Law Association.

Ros Harwood, head of the charities and independent schools practice at Dickinson Dees, said: "We are delighted to welcome Mark as a fully-fledged member of our team. His enthusiasm and commitment will be a huge asset to us."

"As a trainee, Mark worked closely with colleagues in the property and the employment departments, so he has also developed a good under-

standing of these areas, which often affect charities that are operating more and more like businesses these days. This experience will be invaluable to us."

The wider charities practice at Dickinson Dees is ranked nationally for the work that it does acting for some of the UK's leading charities, including the British Heart Foundation, Mencap and Scope.



**STEPPING UP:** Alex Shiel, of Ward Hadaway, with ballroom dancers

## Dance copyright strictly enforced

LAWYERS at a North-East firm stepped in to stop the world's oldest dancing script service losing out to an unauthorised online competitor.

Newcastle-based Ward Hadaway was brought in when it emerged a man in New Zealand had been taking the scripts produced by the Brockbank-Lane Sequence Dance Script Service and selling them online to dancers around the world.

For more than 60 years, the service has produced scripts of winning ballroom dances for others to follow.

The scripts are to dancers what sheet music is to musicians and are sent to thousands of Brockbank-Lane Sequence Dance Script Service subscribers all over the world from the company's base in Cumbria.

Alex Shiel, partner and head of intellectual property at Ward Hadaway, took

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up the case and, after initial requests from Ward Hadaway for the man to withdraw his products were turned down, the firm worked with a New Zealand law firm to pursue the claim in the South Pacific country.

This involved putting together a copyright infringement case based on the argument that the scripts were covered by New Zealand copyright protection.

After further attempts to persuade the competitor to accept that he was not entitled to continue with his activities did not succeed, court proceedings were issued in the New Zealand courts and served on the competitor.

This ultimately resulted

in him accepting that he was in the wrong, removing all the scripts from sale and agreeing not to infringe Brockbank Lane's copyright in the future.

Mr Shiel said: "We are delighted to have secured this result for Brockbank-Lane Dance Sequence Script Service."

"By establishing that they owned copyright in the very valuable dance scripts which they create, they will deter other businesses from attempting to take advantage of their hard work."

"While their business is an unusual one, like many companies intellectual property is at the heart of what they do so when that is challenged – as it was in this case – it is important for businesses to stand up for their rights, even if that means taking action against someone on the other side of the world."

"The continuing popular-

ity of shows like Strictly Come Dancing demonstrates that ballroom dancing is an increasingly popular pastime.

"It is also one with international appeal so ensuring that the Brockbank-Lane Script Service retains the rights for the work which they do is crucial for the ongoing success of the business."

Mike Hayton, who runs Brockbank-Lane Script Service, said: "We have subscribers all over the world – in Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Asia, Canada, the US and Europe – and we found that our business, particularly in Asia, was being hit by this guy passing our work off as his own and selling it at cut price."

"It gives us a lot more security for the business going forward knowing that we have established our rights to the work which we produce."

## Income rises for UK's top law firms

FEE income at the UK's top 100 law firms increased by nearly ten per cent in the second quarter of the year.

The latest quarterly legal sector survey from business advisory firm Deloitte, to October 31, showed fee income rose by 9.8 per cent compared with the same period last year.

The increase is more than double that seen in the previous quarter of this year, when it was a four per cent growth.

Higher revenues have been driven by an average increase in fee earner headcount and average fees per fee earner, which rose by 3.9 per cent and 5.7 per cent, respectively.

However, the averages hide a large degree of variability as some firms suffered a decline in revenues, while others saw fee income increase by more than 20 per cent, Deloitte said.

While there has been a recent tendency for firms with larger international presence to achieve a greater degree of success than those focused on the domestic market, in quarter two many of the firms with the strongest performance were mainly UK focused.

Stephen Hall, tax partner at Deloitte in the North-East, said: "It is pleasing to see strong growth returning to the UK legal sector and renewed optimism in the domestic market, after an extended period of challenging conditions."

"However, whilst firms are relatively positive about the next six months continued uncertainty in the markets means a degree of caution is needed."

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## Endeavour advice

A TEES Valley law firm has advised a North Yorkshire investment company working on a number of medical centre developments.

Endeavour Partnership, based at Teesdale Business Park, in Stockton, advised Northallerton firm Leven Investments Limited, on the development of a new medical centre and adjacent pharmacy in Grimsby in Lincolnshire.

The centre, which was built by Admiral Construction on former allotment land acquired from North East Lincolnshire Borough Council, will provide facilities for the local population.

The project is one of a number of primary care developments in which Leven Investments Limited has been involved across the North-East and as far south as Derbyshire.

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