IAS 19 *Employee Benefits* (November 2013)

Actuarial assumptions: discount rate

The Interpretations Committee discussed a request for guidance on the determination of the rate used to discount post-employment benefit obligations. The submitter stated that:

a. according to paragraph 83 of IAS 19 *Employee Benefits* (2011) the discount rate should be determined by reference to market yields at the end of the reporting period on "high quality corporate bonds" (HQCB);
b. IAS 19 does not specify which corporate bonds qualify to be HQCB;
c. according to prevailing past practice, listed corporate bonds have usually been considered to be HQCB if they receive one of the two highest ratings given by a recognised rating agency (eg 'AAA' and 'AA'); and
d. because of the financial crisis, the number of corporate bonds rated 'AAA' or 'AA' has decreased in proportions that the submitter considers significant. In the light of the points above, the submitter asked the Interpretations Committee whether corporate bonds with a rating lower than 'AA' can be considered to be HQCB.

The Interpretations Committee observed that IAS 19 does not specify how to determine the market yields on HQCB, and in particular what grade of bonds should be designated as high quality. The Interpretations Committee considers that an entity should take into account the guidance in paragraphs 84 and 85 of IAS 19 (2011) in determining what corporate bonds can be considered to be HQCB. Paragraphs 84 and 85 of IAS 19 (2011) state that the discount rate:

a. reflects the time value of money but not the actuarial or investment risk;
b. does not reflect the entity-specific credit risk;
c. does not reflect the risk that future experience may differ from actuarial assumptions; and
d. reflects the currency and the estimated timing of benefit payments.

The Interpretations Committee further noted that 'high quality' as used in paragraph 83 of IAS 19 reflects an absolute concept of credit quality and not a concept of credit quality that is relative to a given population of corporate bonds, which would be the case, for example, if the paragraph used the term 'the highest quality'. Consequently, the Interpretations Committee observed that the concept of high quality should not change over time. Accordingly, a reduction in the number of HQCB should not result in a change to the concept of high quality. The Interpretations Committee does not expect that an entity's methods and techniques used for determining the discount rate so as to reflect the yields on HQCB will change significantly from period to period. Paragraphs 83 and 86 of IAS 19, respectively, contain requirements if the market in HQCB is no longer deep or if the market remains deep overall, but there is an insufficient number of HQCB beyond a certain maturity.

The Interpretations Committee also noted that:
a. paragraphs 144 and 145 of IAS 19 (2011) require an entity to disclose the significant actuarial assumptions used to determine the present value of the defined benefit obligation and a sensitivity analysis for each significant actuarial assumption;
b. the discount rate is typically a significant actuarial assumption; and
c. an entity shall disclose the judgements that management has made in the process of applying the entity's accounting policies and that have the most significant effect on the amounts recognised in the financial statements in accordance with paragraph 122 of IAS 1 *Presentation of Financial Statements*; typically the identification of the HQCB population used as a basis to determine the discount rate requires the use of judgement, which may often have a significant effect on the entity's financial statements.

The Interpretations Committee discussed this issue in several meetings and noted that issuing additional guidance on, or changing the requirements for, the determination of the discount rate would be too broad for it to address in an efficient manner. The Interpretations Committee therefore recommends that this issue should be addressed in the IASB's research project on discount rates. Consequently, the Interpretations Committee decided not to add this issue to its agenda.