

WH Smith names former Direct Line boss as chair as high street chain turns 230

High street retailer WH Smith has named Annette Court as its new chair.

The former Direct Line boss will replace Henry Staunton when he retires after nine years in the role.

The Swindon-headquartered company said Ms Court, who is currently chair of insurer Admiral Group, would join the board as a non-executive director and chair-designate on September 1 before succeeding Mr Staunton on December 1.

She was chief executive of the Direct Line Group between 2001 and 2006, when she also sat on the executive management committee of its then-owner Royal Bank of Scotland.

Ms Court also previously headed up the Europe general insurance division at Zurich Financial Services for three years. She joins chief executive Carl Cowling at the helm of WH Smith, which has more than 1,100 stores across its UK high street and travel arm.

The travel division includes more than 580 travel stores at airports, hospitals, railway stations and motorway service areas, while there are around 560 sites in the high street business.

Ms Court said she was "very excited" to take up the post of chair of WH Smith in its 230th year.

"I look forward to working with Carl and the management team to grow the business and take advantage of the many exciting opportunities that lie ahead," she said.

Mr Staunton said it had been a “privilege” to serve the retailer. “Henry has played a key role in contributing to the company’s success and I would like to wish him well for the future,” added Mr Cowling.

In April, WH Smith [returned to profit](#) after overcoming the challenges of the Omicron variant of Covid. The retailer said it had its travel shops to thank for the turnaround in its fortunes.

Before tax, profit was £18m in the six months to the end of February, compared with a £38m loss in the same period a year ago. The company [said in November](#) it was well positioned to return to “meaningful profit” in 2022.

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