

SUMMARY MINUTES of the VALUATION TRIBUNAL SERVICE BOARD

129th Meeting, held on 31 March 2021 at 10:30 am via MS Teams

Present: Robin Evans (Chair); Gary Garland (VTE President, ex-officio member); Suzanne McCarthy (Deputy Chair), Neil Buckley (Member); Paul Cammidge (Member); Stephen Chappell (Member), Kevin Everett (Member), Alison Griffiths (Member) and Lola Moses (Member).

In attendance: Tony Masella (Chief Executive & Chief Operating Officer), Lee Anderson (Director of Operations & Development), Keung Wong (Finance Director) and Nicola Hunt (Board Secretary).

Welcome, Apologies, Declarations of Interest, Confirmation of Minutes

There were no apologies for absence or declarations of interest. Minutes of the meeting held on 27 January 2021 were confirmed as accurate. Actions had been completed as required.

Chief Executive's Report

Tony Masella highlighted the salient points of his report. An interim report had been published in respect of the Business Rates Review. The full report was expected in Autumn 2021. He reported that secondary legislation had been laid to bring in measures that where coronavirus affects the occupation of property it will not be considered as a Material Change of Circumstances (MCC) for the purposes of business rates valuations. Primary legislation is to be introduced to apply the same rules to COVID-related MCCs received since the start of the pandemic. In the circumstances, the VOA had advised they will be taking no further action on the current 50k MCC COVID challenges.

VTE recruitment is progressing well and should be completed by December 2021; it will hopefully result in 30 new Chairs being appointed.

Concern was expressed that managing appeal fees is becoming extremely resource intensive, even at the current low volumes. Two thirds of fees are refunded and each refund incurs a transaction fee which raises the question whether the objective of appeal fees was being met and if this represented value for money from a public purse perspective.

EDI Survey Analysis

A staff EDI survey was carried out in December to which 74% of the workforce responded. The results identified some areas of further work and external expertise was being sourced to provide training. An in-house working group had been set up, led by HR, to explore what can be achieved to promote EDI within the organisation.

Members' Survey Analysis

An anonymous survey of VTE Members had been conducted to gauge views on remote hearings, training, electronic communication and post-COVID working. The majority of members confirmed online hearings were a positive experience despite frustrations surrounding the format of evidence bundles. Although evidence bundles are outside of VT control a project has been set up to investigate what improvements can be made within the scope of the regulations.

Finance

Management Accounts to 28 February 2021. The position at 28 February 2021 was a total resource funding forecast of £6.1m against the original budget of £7.5m, resulting in savings of just under £1.4m, of which £925k had been surrendered in the summer supplementary return. Significant savings were caused by the impact of COVID-19 and the implementation of online hearings. The Chair confirmed the Finance Committee reviewed the management accounts in detail during the meeting on 19 March.

Strategy

HR. The HR Strategy had been circulated prior to the meeting; Tony Masella thanked Lola Moses and Stephen Chappell for their assistance. He highlighted the key issues and advised the paper set out the aims in terms of the direction in which the organisation will move during the next few years and built on the requirements of the Framework Document (December 2018). In 2020 there were 61 members of staff in post, with a plan to move towards a maximum of 66 over the next three years.

The Board approved the strategy.

Staff Training & Development. This strategy built on the HR strategy and set out the direction of travel regarding training and development during the period 2021 to 2024. Tony Masella again passed on his thanks to Lola Moses and Stephen Chappell for their input. He added that the organisation remained focussed on enhancing and developing the skills of the workforce.

The Board approved the strategy.

VTE Member Training & Development. The strategy had been put together in consultation with the VTE President and outlined the objectives that will be implemented in 2021 to 2024 to enhance the existing member skills and development programme. The President advised he was currently working with the Vice Presidents to review and implement a new appraisal process.

Budget 2021-22

The draft budget of £6.9m was submitted for Board approval. It is less than the 2020-21 budget of £7.5m, but the Director of Finance was confident it would be sufficient. It was noted the position will be monitored and any savings incurred can be surrendered each quarter. The capital requirement of £285k had been identified, made up of four IT projects. The Chair stated that the Finance Committee had reviewed the draft budget during the meeting on 19 March.

The Board approved the draft budget 2021-22.

Business Plan for 2021-22

The Business Plan was circulated. The Chair explained the most important part of the plan was the section on delivering priorities and he felt this encapsulated everything the organisation was trying to achieve.

The Board approved the Plan.

Operations & Programme Update

Remote hearings. The Director of Operations & Development reiterated earlier discussions about how successful remote hearings continued to be. He circulated a report showing appeal type and clearance rates which reflected the COVID situation where all cases notified from 1 April 2020 were postponed; he added these cases are now being re-listed.

KPIs. The KPI targets were set pre-COVID and where they were not met narrative was provided to explain the reasons why. For the first half of the year it was not possible to progress cases and it had been challenging to try and clear the backlog. It was noted that targets in respect of decisions issued within one month, complaints resolved at stage one, notices issued electronically and appeals lodged online were all met.

Chair's Report

The Chair had nothing further to report.

VTE President's Report

The President reported that remote hearings continued to work well. A small number of applications had been made for face-to-face hearings, but due to the COVID environment this was still not possible. However, the majority of parties preferred remote hearings.

Risk Management

Strategic Risk Register. There are currently six risks on the Strategic Risk Register, categorised as follows: one amber, three green and two red.

Committee Updates

Finance Committee draft minutes. The Chair circulated the draft minutes from the Finance Committee meeting held on 19 March 2021. The Board had no further comments to make.

Finance Committee Assurance Report. The Board reviewed the Finance Committee Assurance Report and had no further comments to make.

ARAC draft minutes. The Chair of ARAC circulated the draft minutes from the ARAC meeting held on 25 March 2021. She asked the Board to note that the external audit had made it clear the Annual Report & Accounts 2020-21 would not be laid before the summer Parliamentary recess. She advised two internal audits had been carried out, Core Financial System which had been given substantial assurance and Financial Loss Allowance (FLA) Claims which was given adequate assurance. The Board had no further comments to make.

ARAC Assurance Report. The Board reviewed the ARAC Assurance Report and had no further comments to make.

Any Other Business

On behalf of the Board, Suzanne McCarthy thanked the Chair for his service on the Board since November 2014, and as Chair since 1 April 2018. She thanked him for his leadership and wished him a happy retirement. Robin Evans thanked the Board and the Executive for their support and professionalism.

Date of next meeting: Wednesday 26 May 2021 at 10:30 am.