

SUMMARY MINUTES of the VALUATION TRIBUNAL SERVICE BOARD

130th Meeting, held on 26 May 2021 at 10:30 am via MS Teams

Present: Harry Rich (Chair); 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); Joanne Kennedy-Reardon (Independent Member of ARAC as an observer) and Nicola Hunt (Board Secretary).

Welcome, Apologies, Declarations of Interest, Confirmation of Minutes

Apologies had been received from Gary Garland (VTE President, ex-officio member). There were no declarations of interest. Minutes of the meeting held on 31 March 2021 were confirmed as accurate. Actions had been completed as required.

Chief Executive's Report

The Board's attention was drawn to a return to the office environment in September. The Working Safely Under COVID-19 Policy is being updated to reflect arrangements post 21 June.

The closure of the Doncaster office is progressing well and the VTS will vacate the premises by 3 June 2021. All staff based there will move to permanent home-working contracts.

The expected regulation defining a hearing to include video and audio is anticipated to come into effect on 9 June, subject to Parliamentary timetable.

MHCLG's Principal Accounting Officer had issued the Chief Executive & Accounting Officer with the Delegation Letter setting out funding for 2021-22, confirming a total budget allocation of £6,962k, broken down into specific areas.

The recruitment exercise for clerks had now closed, interviews and selection is anticipated to take place in early June.

The findings of the triennial review approved by the Cabinet Office in 2015 remain unchanged and the VTS and VTE remain a going concern.

Since 1 April 2018 10 VTE Members had resigned from their VTE Membership in favour of salaried judicial posts. This highlighted a need to maintain an annual recruitment plan of 30 new members. The 2021-22 selection process is due to commence in July and it is anticipated that new members will be appointed in December 2021/January 2022.

Finance

Management Accounts to 30 April 2021. The budget previously approved by the Board and Finance Committee of £6,962k had been confirmed. The April accounts forecast of £6,943k showed a reduction against the budget of £19k overall.

Data Protection & Security Annual Report

Lee Anderson, who took over the role of Data Protection Officer (DPO) in July 2020, provided a summary showing how the Service complied with GDPR including an overview of Freedom of Information (FOI) and Subject Access Requests (SAR). No breaches occurred during the year which required escalation to the Information Commissioner.

The Board noted the report.

Health & Safety Annual Report

No accidents or near misses had taken place during the year in either of the offices or in staff homes. The Policy Statement is an annual document and the changes this year reflected the importance of COVID working.

The Board noted and accepted the report and approved the Policy Statement for 2021-22.

Capital Requirements 2021-22

An overview of the Executive Team's proposed expenditure for capital projects in 2021-22 was provided.

The Board noted and approved the capital expenditure for 2021-22.

VTS Website Refresh Business Case. The Cabinet Office had identified some required improvements to the website. This also provided an opportunity to refresh the current website to make changes which reflect the developments during the pandemic and to make the website more user-friendly.

The Board noted and approved the business case.

G-Cloud 12 Call-off Contract. This framework document highlighted the Crown Commercial Service (CCS) standard terms for the provision of IT application development and support. This contract would allow the engagement and procurement of services from particular suppliers. The contract is for two years with an option to extend it for a further two years.

The Board noted and approved the contract.

User Survey 2020-21 Headlines

The suspension of hearings presented an opportunity to revise the current methodology for the user survey to provide a better way of identifying where any drop in satisfaction levels may occur during the end to end process. Focus was placed on the Theory of Procedural Justice, which infers that users of a service are most likely to show higher levels of satisfaction if four pillars are satisfied (Transparency, Fairness, Impartiality and Voice). The survey had now been structured to focus on the pre-hearing experience measuring 'Transparency' and 'Fairness' and the hearing itself measuring 'Impartiality' and 'Voice'. This had shown that pre-hearing satisfaction levels stood at 70% but then dropped to 43% at the hearing stage. It was recognised that VTE decisions contributed significantly to satisfaction levels and qualitative data will provide a better understanding of why satisfaction levels are not as great in this area.

An action plan was presented, which the Board noted and approved.

Operations & Programme Update

Annual Review of KPIs. The annual review was consistent with the quarterly updates. It provided an overview of performance consisting of three elements: the dashboard of KPI activity, infographics showing trends and an exception report providing narrative as to why some targets were not reached.

While the number of targets not reached was disappointing, the targets were set pre-COVID and it was recognised the pandemic would significantly impact performance. It was previously agreed the targets would not be refreshed but narrative provided to show how performance was affected by COVID. Hearings were cancelled but work was still received which could not be progressed due to the COVID environment. Remote hearings were introduced in September and a gradual improvement in performance against targets had been seen since. Remote hearings worked effectively and reduced the backlog of appeals received as a consequence of COVID.

Chair's Report

This was the Chair's first meeting, he thanked everyone for their assistance in helping him understand the organisation. He added that he is committed to supporting the VTS in its work for the VTE and the shared purpose of providing a fair service.

VTE President's Report

The President circulated his report in advance of the meeting to be reviewed in his absence. The Board had no further comments to make.

Risk Management

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

Committee Updates

Suzanne McCarthy reported that no Committee meetings had taken place since the last Board meeting. The next ARAC meeting will be held on 23 June and Finance Committee on 17 September. She thanked Lola Moses for undertaking the role of Acting Chair of ARAC while she deputised as Board Chair.

Any Other Business

A training programme for Board Members had been finalised, further details will be issued by the VTS Training Manager in the near future.

Date of next meeting: Wednesday 28 July 2021 at 10:30 am.