

SUMMARY MINUTES of the VALUATION TRIBUNAL SERVICE BOARD

131st Meeting, held on 28 July 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) 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 new declarations of interest. Minutes of the meeting held on 26 May 2021 were confirmed as accurate. Actions had been completed as required.

Chief Executive's Report

Tony Masella advised that following the Prime Minister's announcement of the lifting of all COVID restrictions on 19 July he is planning for the 24 office-based staff to return to the Leman Street office week commencing Monday 13 September. This would initially be on a hybrid working arrangement with staff expected to attend the office two to three days per week, which will be increased at a later point. The office remains open throughout August to enable staff to adjust to arrangements. He was arranging a further risk assessment in August and would be retaining the COVID-19 social distancing layout arrangements in the interim to provide greater confidence to staff whilst working in the office.

JAC are currently running a recruitment process with the aim of recruiting 30 new VTE Chairmen. Tony Masella reminded the Board that within the next five years 34 VTE Members will retire on statutory grounds alone, he therefore recommended that an annual VTE recruitment exercise takes place with the aim of recruiting 30 new members each year.

To aid succession planning, focus remained on the recruitment of new clerks. The aim is to retain 30 clerks in post as the optimum number.

Legislation came into force on 9 June 2021 to include online and audio within the definition of hearings. It was expected that a high ratio of hearings would continue to be heard online.

The primary legislation stating that appeals cannot be made on the grounds of material changes of circumstances (MCC) due to COVID is progressing at the Committee stage. There are currently 50k MCC challenges that will soon fall into the timelines requiring a VOA decision, which will then kick into the appeal process.

The Government has launched a consultation seeking views on three yearly revaluations as opposed to the current five yearly.

Finance

Management Accounts to 30 June 2021. The overall budget forecast for June stood at £6.72m against a budget of £6.96m. There is a forecast underspend of £235k, which is 3% of the overall budget.

Implications of Managing Check, Challenge and Appeal Volumes

The implications of managing check, challenge and appeal volumes and how this may impact on the future operational budgets, and what control measures should be in place, was discussed in detail. If volumes increase it was likely additional resources would be required to manage the appeal fee process, but it had not yet been quantified so the costs were not yet known.

Update on Annual Report & Accounts 2020-21

The current draft of the Annual Report & Accounts 2020-21 was circulated which included feedback from ARAC, MHCLG and the auditors. The Board was invited to make comment on the Governance Statement and narrative. The finalisation of the accounts and its laying will depend on when the pension valuation is received.

Review of Remote Hearings

It was reported that remote hearings continued to work well and feedback from users was positive. The aim was for at least 70% of hearings to be held online. The Board supported the increased use of remote hearings and noted this change is happening across the Judiciary as a whole.

Risk Management

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

Incident Response & Business Continuity Planning Review

The business continuity and incident response plan had been updated following the recent closure of the Doncaster office. Due to the office closure an annual test of the plan had not been carried out and the document had been fundamentally reviewed to create a single-step plan. The absence of a second site does not increase the risk because of cloud-based services and staff working remotely. The Board noted and approved the plan.

Review of VTE Members' Allowances

VTE Member allowances are set by the Secretary of State. Tony Masella had approached MHCLG seeking a review of current allowances and to take into account the new way of working. Guidance to assist VTE Members in how to make expense claims, including Financial Loss Allowance, had also been developed. The Board noted and approved this guidance.

Operations and Programme Update

Performance/KPI data. The report was consistent with previous updates. The general position was positive despite some issues resulting from the COVID environment. The actions being taken to improve the position and the reasons why targets were not met were set out in the exception report. The Chair felt it was very impressive that VTS staff have had as much success during the COVID environment as they have. It was not expected that the backlog of appeals would be cleared during this financial year.

Chair's Report

The Chair had completed the process of meeting with all Board Members and the senior leadership team individually which had been a most useful exercise. He had also observed both Council Tax and NDR hearings. He and Tony Masella met recently with the Chair and Chief Executive of the VOA, it was a productive meeting and further meetings will take place going forward.

VTE President's Report

The President circulated his report in advance of the meeting to be reviewed in his absence. The matters contained were discussed and noted, the Board had no further comments to make.

Committee Updates

Suzanne McCarthy referred to the minutes of the ARAC meeting held on 23 June 2021. Many of the items contained in the minutes had already been covered during the meeting, but she invited any questions from the Board. The Board had no further comments to make.

Future Meetings – Location and Structure

The Chair invited the Board to express their opinion on resuming face-to-face meetings and there was a unanimous wish to do so. The situation would be monitored but it was planned that the October meeting would be held at the Leman Street office. Committee Chairs retain responsibility to decide whether to resume face-to-face meetings.

Any Other Business

Kevin Everett advised that his current term of office expires on 31 August 2021.

Date of next meeting: Wednesday 27 October 2021 at 11:00 am.