



Valuation Tribunal Service

Corporate Plan 2022-25 incorporating the 2022-23 Business Plan

A Post Pandemic Way of Working

Chair's Introduction

When I was appointed Chair of the Valuation Tribunal Service in May 2021, I found an organisation with a clear focus on its purpose, well run, well governed and with a highly committed team serving dedicated Valuation Tribunal Members and parties to appeals.

But the VTS is not complacent. The organisation adapted quickly and effectively to new ways of working stimulated by the pandemic. Valuation Tribunal hearings moved online through necessity, but our research shows that the overwhelming majority of parties to appeals much prefer this way of working. We wholeheartedly support the VTE President's commitment to continuing online hearings in all, but exceptional cases and we will continue to focus on improving the online experience for everyone involved in hearings.

We recognise and appreciate the dedication of tribunal members who are volunteers, giving their expertise and time freely to ensure fair appeals. Because we know that new ways of working suit some members better than others, we commissioned research to understand their views and needs. We will work with the Tribunal President and our policy colleagues at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities to respond to the research data and support current and future tribunal members as well as we can.

The scope of our work is prescribed by statute and policy, but during the year we will think creatively and deeply about the opportunities and challenges of the next five or so years and refresh our strategy accordingly.

The VTS benefits from the wisdom, commitment and hard work of its executive leadership, staff team, non-executive directors and our colleagues at the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. I am grateful to them all and look forward to working with them and our stakeholders as we deliver and develop in the coming year.

Harry Rich

Chair

Over the past year, and since first migrating our operation to homeworking in March 2020, we have continued to face the challenges presented by Covid-19 in our work and lives. This pandemic has demonstrated the importance and value of finding new ways to deliver our services. This, for us, has meant implementing a new operating model to facilitate working remotely and introducing virtual hearing platforms.

We have made solid progress towards the aims we set ourselves. We have redesigned our working practices, our technology, our procedures, all to enable us to deliver our statutory services in such challenging times.

We sought not only to maintain the critical service required for appellants seeking resolution to their business rate and/or council tax dispute during a period of great financial uncertainty for them, but also to improve technological accessibility of our services.

As with many organisations, the enforced move to homeworking has caused a fundamental shift in how we interact with colleagues and VTE Members. Many activities successfully moved online, including significant training and development needed to support the delivery of our services. During the year, we have focussed on opportunities of bringing colleagues and VTE Members together by hosting virtual events.

We have provided a comprehensive programme of support for colleagues' mental and physical well-being as the wider impact of the pandemic continued to be felt. Where mutually beneficial, we have offered staff the opportunity to become permanent homeworkers as we have developed in to a more flexible and digitally enabled organisation. 60% of our staff are now permanently home-based.

I am immensely proud of our committed, diverse and talented team of staff and VTE Members in how they have adapted to the new

operating environment and rising to the challenges of working remotely.

The focus for the coming year will be embedding these changes, recognising the consequential increased reliance such necessary changes now place on digital engagement, technology, staff and VTE Members in providing our statutory functions. Taking a step back now to pre-Covid working is not an option and, like many other organisations, finding what for us is the new normal is the aim.

Our aims for 2022-23 are set out in this Business Plan.

Tony Masella

Chief Executive & Chief Operating Officer

Our service

The Valuation Tribunal Service (VTS) is a statutory, independent organisation sponsored by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). The VTS delivers a range of services to the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE), who make the final decisions on disputes that have arisen between those who pay

council tax or non-domestic rates and their local council or the Valuation Office Agency (VOA).

The VTE is headed by a President and is a separate statutory body charged with¹:

- dealing with appeals in ways which are proportionate to the importance of the appeal, complexity of the issues and the anticipated costs and resources of the parties
- avoiding unnecessary formality and seeking flexibility in the proceedings
- ensuring, so far as practicable, that the parties are able to participate fully in the proceedings
- using any special expertise effectively, and
- avoiding delay, so far as compatible with proper consideration of the issues.

Although two separate bodies, the VTS and VTE work together, in partnership, to deliver the end-to-end process from registration of an appeal by the VTS to the issuing of a decision by the VTE.

For tribunal users, this means that even those whose appeals are not successful should feel that they have received a good administrative service leading up to the hearing process and that the law has been correctly applied by the VTE in providing a resolution of the dispute.

Our mission statement

To provide the fairest, most effective service we can to those involved in local taxation appeals.

Delivering financial efficiency

The VTS receives grant in aid funding from the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for its activities. We recognise that these are challenging financial times for the public sector following the health pandemic and that restraint and sensitivity in using public money is a key objective. We aim to implement planned improvements to our services to increase efficiency and customer service. We will work with our sponsoring department to review ways of delivering financial efficiencies whilst we continue to comply with the requirements of our Framework Document and maintaining the statutory service required from us by Parliament.

We are committed to providing excellent value from the public monies entrusted to us. We will continue to identify and drive forward efficient ways of working.

Our values

¹ The Valuation Tribunal for England (Council Tax and Rating Appeals) (Procedure) Regulations 2009, as amended

We are a value driven organisation committed to meeting our strategic priorities.



As a demand led organisation, our strategic objectives define our success.



Our strategic objectives

Total resource funding estimates for 2022-2025

The table below provides our estimates of funding needed over the next three years, reflecting our current thinking regarding staffing, IT development, appeal volumes and VTE requirements.

Naturally, our estimates are subject to consideration and approval from our sponsoring department and subject to wider challenging reviews and decisions on public spending following the COVID pandemic.

£'000	2022- 23	2023- 24	2024- 25
Pay	2,904	2,974	3,046
Non Pay	1,940	1,945	1,947
Pension payments	404	414	536
Depreciation	151	119	136
Total	5,399	5,452	5,553
Capital	283	140	60
Resource AME	1,492	1,523	1,556
Total Resource Funding	7,174	7,115	7,169

The key assumptions in our three-year financial projections are:

- Maintaining total staffing levels at 66 posts - 26 Corporate staff, 30 Tribunal Hearing Clerks and 10 Tribunal Support Officers.
- Employer's pension contribution rate at 16.3% in 2022-23 and estimated increase to 18% from 2023-24 to reflect a triennial valuation review of pensions and the increased net liability of £5m reflected in our 2020-21 annual accounts.

- Reflecting uncertainty around cost of living pay rises (estimated 2.5%) in Pay budget to reflect inflation as may be agreed by the National Joint Council.
- Developing and sustaining our existing IT infrastructure and cloud technology and maintaining the required investment to ensure its continued suitability.
- Managing work volumes and mitigating possible backlogs.
- Preparatory work for the introduction of 2023 revaluation of businesses.

Our capital requirements in 2022-23 reflect the continuing journey to deliver and support hearings on a virtual platform. Our aspirations reflect:

- Completing the work to develop and build digital interfaces to allow the sharing of council tax valuation and non-domestic rating list appeal data with the Valuation Office Agency (VOA)
- Impact on the VTS of the VOA Business System Transformation Programme and the Fundamental Business rates review.
- Refresh of end-of-life laptops in line with our three-year depreciation policy and to reflect greater dependency on IT.

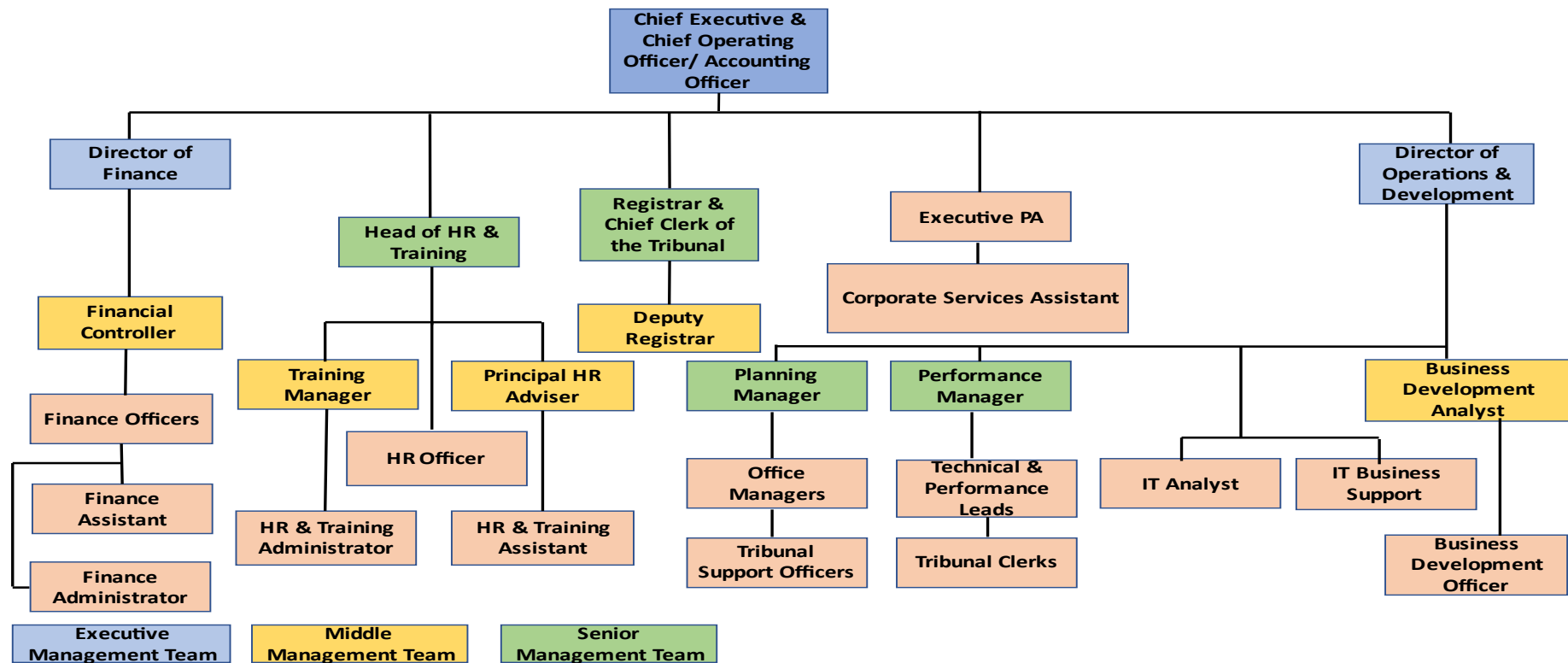
Our estimates of 2023-34 and beyond reflect maintaining the investment in our digital services to ensure we continue to meet business and user requirements.

Staffing

Tribunal Clerks are experts in the field of rating, council tax and tribunal practice and procedure and provide this authority at hearings. They also draft the Tribunal's reasoned decision. Our team of Tribunal Clerks are home-based to reflect their peripatetic role.

Tribunal Support Officers provide the essential planning, facilitation and support to tribunal users and provide the necessary administrative support to Tribunal Clerks.

Our corporate team provide the back-office functions required of a public body and cover areas of IT, Business Development, Project Management, HR, training, finance, health and safety and corporate governance.



Membership of the Valuation Tribunal for England

Our statutory function is to support and provide advice to the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE). We currently support 138 VTE Members. Since 2021 we have seen a 17% reduction in VTE Members, irrespective of successive recruitment exercises since 2018. Whilst the statutory retiring age for VTE Members is 72, we are seeing significant numbers leave to pursue fee-paid appointments within the judiciary.

The VTE is a tribunal sponsored by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Membership appointments are made by the Lord Chancellor and, under the Constitutional Reform Act 2014, recruitment for our non-fee paid appointments is managed and regulated by the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC). We have made changes to the recruitment exercise to reflect that VTE membership is non-paid with no formal requirement to be legally qualified and continue to work with JAC and Ministry of Justice colleagues to find ways of adapting their recruitment framework further. We have started an exercise in this financial year to recruit a further 30 senior members ('chairmen') to maximise our flexibility in managing hearing panels.

The fallout of the health pandemic and adjusting to new ways of working has presented its own challenges for VTE Members in terms of their level of engagement. Migrating from the norm of face-to-face hearings held in buildings to now presiding on virtual hearings convened through the prism of a laptop/computer screen in a home environment is a significant and challenging change.

We recognise that our modus operandi has needed to change in order to respond to the challenges we have faced as a nation. We remain mindful of our statutory responsibility to support the VTE and are focussed on understanding their needs within their new working environment and how we can continue to support VTE Members to allow them to hear and determine appeals.

As a first step, we have recently concluded the field work on Member research to better understand their motivation for engagement. Of the 138 members, around 60% have been engaging on remote hearings. The Table below shows the number of VTE Members that are engaging on remote hearings per month since April 2021.

The estate

The evolving change in our modus operandi since the first national lockdown resulted in us vacating at lease end (4 June 2021) our colocation with the Department for Work and Pensions in Crossgate House.

The closure of this office resulted in no redundancies and all staff based in Doncaster office moved to home-working contracts.

We now operate from a single office in Leman Street, London.

Since 2020 we have created Covid compliant offices which reduced occupancy to 62%. In 2021 we accelerated home working for all office-based Tribunal Clerks, which fits with the peripatetic nature of our business England wide.

Hearing venues

Before the Covid-19 pandemic the VTS hired a number of external premises (70) throughout England, ranging from council owned to hotel accommodation, for the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE) to convene its hearings. This incurred venue costs as well as travelling costs for staff and VTE Members. Since the migration to remote hearings, the need for hearing venues has significantly reduced, and with that the need for travelling.

Whilst feedback from the Valuation Tribunal's User's Group and our customer survey points to a preference for virtual hearings, it is recognised that there may be instances where online hearings may not be the most effective way to dispense justice for that particular appeal.

Requests for in-person appeals have naturally been limited during the Covid period. However, as government restrictions have lifted we recognise that such requests may increase. Whilst the VTE's preferred default hearing method is remote hearings, we are working with the President of the Valuation Tribunal to incorporate a process within the VTE's Consolidated Practice Statement (CPS) to address how applications for in person hearing requests will be handled.

Business Plan for First year of the Corporate Plan 2022-23 Workload

Our focus has been on reducing the backlog of council tax appeals that arose during lockdown. We start the 2022-23 financial year with the following number of appeals, broken down by each appeal type.

Council Tax Appeals (by type)	
Council Tax Reduction	450
Council Tax Liability	600
Council Tax Valuation	1750
Council Tax Completion	200

Non Domestic Rating	
2010 List Appeals	10000
2017 List Appeals	1100

We started 2021-22 with 32,967 outstanding 2010 List appeals. The vast majority of these related to Automatic Telling Machines (ATMs), which was subject to a Supreme Court judgment.

We have been holding a series of meetings with the parties to focus on the clearance of appeals where this judgment impacts. This has resulted in over 70% of these appeals being cleared without necessitating listings and involving tribunal resource. In consultation with the Valuation Office Agency and the professional bodies, we have now identified a programme of listings for this coming year.

During the 2020-21 financial year we received a total of 1,166 appeals in respect of the 2017 rating list. 406 were cleared during the year. As we approach the end of this 2017 rating list, and the first to introduce Check, Challenge and Appeal (CCA), we are beginning to see an increase in appeal receipts.

Our expectation remains that we will see an increase in 2017 rating list appeals as we approach the end of this rating list and prepare for the introduction of the 2023 rating list. Our recruitment exercise with JAC will stand us in good stead with hearing resources to deal with address this.

The start of a financial year, and the issue of council tax bills, often provides the impetus for council tax payers to query their bills with their local authority. Many will not fall within the legislative requirements for appealing and may lead to challenges in the number of Listing Officer's Decision to treat these as invalid. Our aim will be to list these early given the nature of these appeals.

Delivering our priorities for 2022-23

Strategic objective	Priority	What we will do and why	When we will do it	Current position	Key Indicators of success	Measure of success
Support the VTE by administering a fair, efficient and accessible appeals system	Be an exemplar national tribunal, delivering a local service	Increasing the number of VTE Members engaging in on-line hearings so that a minimum of 12 hearings per annum is carried out by each member.	Quarter 2	On-line hearings have proved successful and our intention is to make these type of hearings the default position.	An increased in number of VTE Members engaging in online hearings	Increase the number of VTE Members sitting on remote hearings by 20%
		Prepare a paper for our sponsoring department on ideas how the VTS and VTE can respond to the changing environment and to consider how the VTE may deliver a good service.	Quarter 1	COVID working has created a new way of working which was not envisaged previously.	Changes in processes	Submission of paper to the sponsoring department setting out potential changes and perceived benefits.
		Research and investigate further ways that the VTS and VTE may better deliver its services to users as effectively as possible	Quarter 3	Changing environment has necessitated us to explore ways of working that may not have previously thought workable.	A vision towards the effective and efficient provision of our statutory duty.	A revised strategy in place to 2027

Enhance the quality and consistency of our service to all stakeholders	Maximise the use of our IT for the benefit of all stakeholders, particularly appellants	Developing format of information to be accepted by the VTE when submitting appeals	Quarter 1	We have developed digital engagement with users to reduce the plethora of paperwork accompanying appeals which makes considering evidence online difficult and confusing.	Changes to the Consolidated Practice Statement in the reform of evidence bundles.	More succinct evidence bundles produced to allow for better decision making
		Research and implementation into software interactive solutions	Quarter 3	Greater reliance on digital engagement opens avenues to further solutions	New digital systems in place that encourages users to make appeals online.	90% of appeals submitted through online registration service
		Review our business processes to fit our new working model	Quarter 2	Covid-19 working has required us to change process to suit circumstances	A project group of staff working with these processes set up to review.	100% of in-house business processes reviewed and revisions in place for staff
		Implementation of 'rules' on submission of evidence bundles	Quarter 2	Plethora of documentation submitted to the Tribunal purporting to be evidence	Agreed approach by the professional bodies	Process embedded in to Consolidated Practice Statement

Build capacity and capability in our staff	Demonstrate willingness and commitment to invest in our staff	Creating a leadership and management learning programme to create a talent pool of leaders for the future.	Quarter 2	As an organisation we recognise the technical abilities of our staff and invest in qualification sponsorship. We want to develop leaders for the future.	Leaders of the future identified and enrolled on an Institute of Leadership & Management approved course	A provider for the Institute of Leadership & Management qualification identified and a course in place, with candidates
		Reviewing our flexible and agile Covid-19 working policies are fit for purpose, reflecting the needs of our business	Quarter 2	Lockdowns have taken people to an enforced home working environment.	We have a clear view of what our flexible and agile working policy is	Updated flexible working Policy to include home-working options.
		Providing opportunities to bring colleagues together in a learning environment	Quarter 2	Home working has created some benefits but in person interaction needs to be maintained. In person courses and seminars have not been held since March 2020	All staff and members given the opportunity of attending external events, with off-site venues identified and confirmed	100% of staff attended approved external in person events. 60% of VTE Members attended approved external events
		Getting employee views of benefits and challenges they see as an employee	Quarter 3	Health pandemic has required changes to be implemented and has involved staff working in different ways	All staff members given the opportunity of participating in a staff survey	Conduct an employee survey with analysis of feedback

Operate with financial and organisational initiative and efficiency	Seek out efficiencies which leads to greater effectiveness	Review current SAP processes and develop and implement better SAP reporting	Quarter 4	As a shared system, the sponsoring department manages development of SAP. This does not always provide a tailored approach	Improved SAP reporting in place with a project team in place to identify changes needed and a project plan for implementation of agreed changes	At least 80% of changes identified have been implemented
		Creating a budget focus team with regular reviews	Quarter 1	Budget managers have been working in isolation regarding budgets within their areas	A wider spread of understanding on budget spend that may impact on areas outside of responsibility	Minimise underspend within 5% of budget resource allocation

Funding Projections for 2022-23

We expect that many of the changes we have introduced as part of Covid-19 working will continue to feature in 2022-23. Remote hearings have worked well and we expect that this will continue as the default hearing method moving forward.

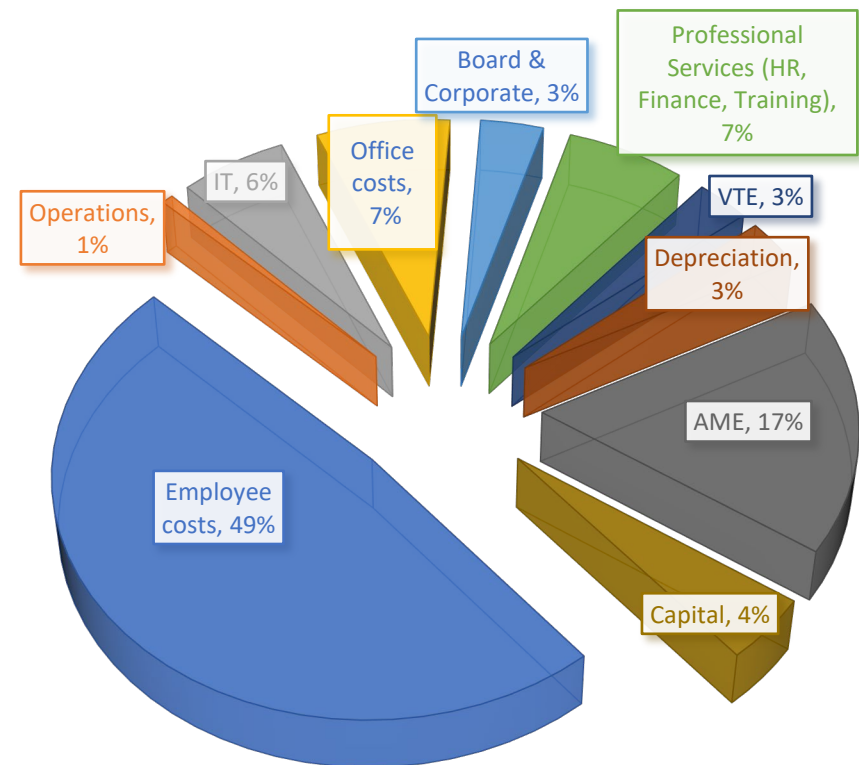
We estimate our funding in 2022-23 to be £7,005k and this reflects our assumption that around 80% of hearings will continue to be held on-line. As a consequence, there are savings associated with not needing to hire as many hearing venues and associated travelling expenses of our staff and VTE Members in getting to them.

We recognise that the ability for users to engage on-line will depend on technology and home broadband connectivity. For appellants where connectivity has been identified as an obstacle, we will offer a physical hearing, subject to government advice in place at the time.

The table below illustrates the breakdown of this indicative funding for 2022-23.

Budget category					£'000
Pay					2,904
Non-Pay					1,940
Pension payment					404
Depreciation					151
Total Admin					5,399
Annually Managed Exp[enditure (AME)					1,492
Capital					283
Total Resource Funding					7,174

The breakdown of our planned areas of spend for 2022-23 are:



Our Key Performance Indicators for 2022-23

Our key performance indicators measure our success against our statutory function and our targets remain reflective of the challenges faced in these areas as a demand led organisation.

Strategic Objectives	Support the VTE by administering a fair, efficient and accessible appeal system	Council Tax Appeal	80% of appeals determined within 6 months of registration 92% of decisions issued within 1 month of the hearing (90% in 2021)
		Non-Domestic Rating Appeals	85% of appeals determined within 6 months of registration 90% of decisions issued within 1 month of the hearing
		All Appeals	82% of appeals resolved at first time of listing
	Enhance quality and consistency of our service to stakeholders	Complaints	80% of complaints resolved at Stage 1 with no further escalation
		Digital Services	90% of NDR appeals lodged using our on-line appeal service 90% of tribunal statutory notices issued electronically (80% in 2021)
		User Survey	65% of users surveyed are satisfied with the administrative service we provide (61% in 2021)
	Operate with financial and operational initiative and efficiency	Finance	90% of undisputed invoices paid within 5 working days of receipt
		Tribunal Hearings	82% of scheduled hearings result in 2 or more appeals being heard on the day
	Build capacity and capability in our staff	Absenteeism	Short term sickness less than 3.6 days per person (Office for National Statistics reported average)
		Training	Training and development days per staff member average 5 days or more per year

Governance arrangements to support the Corporate Plan

All of our activities are underpinned by governance arrangements which support the delivery of our services. These include:

- the statutory framework set out in the Local Government Act 2003;
- Board reviews of performance and achievement against this Business Plan;
- reporting to DLUHC in line with the Framework Document and complying with government policy and sponsoring department rules;
- the Board's Finance and Audit & Risk Assurance Committees, which exercise detailed oversight in their relevant areas;
- Standing Orders, Standing Financial Instructions and Procurement Policy, which are reviewed and updated at least annually;
- our risk management processes which are overseen by both the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee and the Board;
- A business continuity plan which has been formulated with significant staff engagement and which is seen as a living document, regularly reviewed and tested;
- our information governance, through a set of policies that support effective and secure data handling, implemented by staff trained to ensure they handle data, especially personal data, appropriately;
- a Change Approvals Board, responsible for considering and controlling all requests for IT and business process changes.

Delivering and reporting on the Business Plan

The Business Plan is published on our website and on the staff intranet. VTS budget holders bid for budgets for activities designed to deliver the objectives outlined in the Plan and to minimise risks. The objectives set out in the Plan provide the basis for staff personal development objectives. The delivery of this Plan will be monitored quarterly at three levels:

- the delivery of targets and achievements against the Plan will be monitored by the Board, which may amend the Plan to reflect new or revised Ministerial requirements that emerge during the year;
- the Chief Executive and Chief Accounting Officer will monitor the achievements of the Plan with his executive team; and
- we will share our progress and achievements with DLUHC through quarterly Accounting Officer meetings and any other meetings convened.