

Summary Minutes of the Valuation Tribunal Service Board 137th Meeting held on 25 May 2022 at 11:00 am in Leman Street

Present: Harry Rich (Chair); Suzanne McCarthy (Deputy Chair); Neil Buckley (Member); Paul Cammidge (Member); Kevin Everett (Member) for items 1-6 only; 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); Steve Watts (Head of HR & Training) and Tracey Banham (Training Manager) for items 10 & 11 only and Nicola Hunt (Board Secretary).

Welcome, Apologies, Declarations of Interest, Confirmation of Minutes

Apologies for absence had been received from Stephen Chappell (Member), Gary Garland (VTE President, *ex-officio* member) and Peter Bates (ALB Business Partner, DLUHC) as an observer.

There were no new declarations of interest.

Minutes of the meeting held on 30 March 2022 were confirmed as accurate. Actions had been completed as required.

Chief Executive's Report

Tony Masella referred to his previously circulated report and drew the Board's attention to the salient points. Letters of appointment from the Judicial Office would now be going to the 40 new senior members (chairmen) following the 2021-22 recruitment exercise.

In recognition that the VTE Member engagement is a very high risk for the VTE and VTS, Tony Masella had commissioned internal research to better understand the reasons for the lack of engagement. The following was noted:

- 40% of members had not engaged in training during 2021-22
- 66% sat less than the minimum requirement of 12 sittings in 2021-22
- 47 had sat less than six times
- 33 did not sit during 2021-22

Tony Masella referred the Board to a copy of a letter from the Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP, to the Secretary of State for DLUHC, regarding a public bodies reform initiative. This required a response by 24 June 2022, he had therefore requested a meeting with the Department in order to better understand the impact and to assist with formulating their response.

The increase to three days office working commenced on 1 May 2022. It was reported that since 1 September 72.5 days were lost to COVID sickness absence, equating to around £25k. Since 1 May 14 days had been lost to COVID sickness absence in respect of office-based staff (approximately £6k). The Board noted this.

Business Plan achievements for 2021-22. The Board reviewed the achievements for 2021-22. In reviewing the two objectives that were not achieved it was noted that while the target of 82% for hearings comprising of two or more cases on a day had been missed, 80% was an improvement from the previous year. The Board noted that this was

outside of the VTS's direct control and had been impacted by late agreements, postponements and the VTE President's requirement to hold a hearing with no fewer than two VTE Members. The Board was of the opinion that this should be shown as 'met in part'.

In respect of the data sharing agreement objective, progress had been impacted by the VOA business transformation programme being re-prioritised.

The Chair congratulated the whole team for the achievements.

It was noted that the current KPIs and targets reflected pre-COVID working and may not take into account the impact of post COVID working. It was suggested the KPIs and associated targets should be reviewed to reflect the new working practices.

Finance

Management Accounts to 30 April 2022. The April management accounts showed a total resource funding forecast of £7,180k against a full year budget of £7,174k, indicating a forecast overspend of £6k due to additional training (this includes face-to-face events where the cost is higher). Keung Wong advised that this was not a concern and would even out in later months.

The Pay budget currently reflects 11 vacancies across the organisation, with some due to retirements. The current headcount is 64, therefore vacancies equal circa 20% of the workforce. Concern was expressed on the impact of the vacancies to the delivery of services. A programme is in place to regularly recruit clerks but there are currently more vacancies than unemployed people. Employees are dictating the terms of employment but the public sector cannot compete with packages offered by non-public sector bodies.

Risk Management

Strategic Risk Register & Assurance Map. There are currently nine risks on the Strategic Risk Register, categorised as follows: three red, four amber and two green. No further risks were identified. The Board noted the risks.

Operations and Programme Update

Performance/KPI data. The position remained consistent during the year, two thirds of targets had been met and five were not. The primary concern relates to the turnaround time for appeals resolved at the first time of listing which was affected by COVID. The appeals postponed because of COVID are now being scheduled to hearings. The percentage of scheduled hearings resulting in two or more appeals being heard on the day was 80% compared to a target of 82%.

Lee Anderson explained that although the clearance figures look low in percentage terms, more appeals are being cleared than received. Progress is slow but an improvement will be seen in the next few months. However, if hearings are cancelled due to member shortages this will impact the figures. A monitor had been added to the website to provide a timeline of when appellants can expect their case to be listed.

A small number of face-to-face hearings have been approved by the President where appellants have proven their access to justice would be affected if the appeals were heard online.

User Survey 2021-22 Presentation

Steve King of Savanta presented the findings of the Customer Satisfaction Survey covering 2021-22. He outlined the background and objectives of the survey and advised the focus centred around the four pillars of procedural justice (Transparency, Fairness, Impartiality and Voice). Transparency and Fairness relate to the service offered prior to the hearing, Impartiality and Voice relate to the actual hearing. This 2021-22 report showed satisfaction for the pre-hearing had reduced slightly and post hearing had increased.

A report and action plan following the 2021-22 Savanta report was presented to the Board. The Board noted both documents.

Matters for Approval

Stakeholder Management Policy Action Plan. The Stakeholder Engagement Strategy was reviewed by the Board in March and had now been developed to include an action plan. Appendix 2 had been added which provided a timetable for the engagement activities to be carried out for each stakeholder throughout the year. The Board approved the document and will review it again in six months.

Data Protection & Security Annual Report. This report would usually be submitted by the Data Protection Officer but because Lee Anderson held this position until 31 March 2022 he submitted it for continuity purposes. The dashboard showed a breakdown of requests received during the year, volumes had remained similar to previous years and there were no concerns around risk breaches. One matter had been referred to the Information Commissioner's Office voluntarily who confirmed it had been handled correctly. Annual training for staff is mandatory and Information Asset Owner's complete additional modules. The Board noted the report.

Health & Safety Annual Report 2021-22. Tony Masella was pleased to report no accidents or near misses had occurred during the year. He chaired quarterly H&S meetings during which the H&S Risk Register is reviewed. The H&S Policy Statement was circulated which will be displayed on the office noticeboard once approved by the Board. The Board approved the statement.

Review of HR Objectives for 2022-23

Steve Watts, Head of HR & Training, joined the meeting to highlight the headline objectives for 2022-23. A new objective had been added relating to the challenges of recruitment in order to fill the current vacancies. Steve Watts confirmed all vacancies are problematic to fill, not only the clerks. Research is taking place to see what can be done to make packages more attractive.

The Board noted the objectives and requested a further update, possibly at the September meeting.

Review of the Training Strategy Action Plan

Tracey Banham, Training Manager, was invited to give an update on actions following the approval of the Staff Training and VTE Training Strategies approved by the Board in March 2021. She was pleased to report that all planned objectives had been achieved but the plan will be developed further.

The Board noted the plan and requested a progress update in six months.

Chair's Report

The Chair informed the board that Nico Heslop had replaced Alex Skinner at DLUHC. There is an AO meeting next week where the response to Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg, MP's letter will be raised.

The Board Strategy Day in April was productive; the notes and key ideas will be shared in due course.

VTE President's Report

The President was unable to attend the meeting and had circulated a report in his absence. Member recruitment and the non-engagement of members were fully discussed earlier in the meeting. The President will now formally write to those members who continue not to engage to find out their intentions.

Committee Updates

Remuneration Committee. The Chair of the Remuneration Committee advised a meeting took place on 18 May, the outcomes of which will be discussed following this meeting with no VTS staff present.

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