

Summary Minutes of the Valuation Tribunal Service Board 145th Meeting held on 26 July 2023 at 10:30 am via MS Teams

Present: Harry Rich (Chair); Suzanne McCarthy (Deputy Chair); Neil Buckley (Member); Stephen Chappell (Member); Kevin Everett (Member); Gary Garland (VTE President, *ex-officio* 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 for absence had been received from Peter Bates (ALB Business Partner, DLUHC) as an observer.

Neil Buckley reported that he had been appointed as an executive member of the Personal Finance Society.

Minutes of the meeting held on 23 May 2023 were confirmed as a true record of the meeting. Actions had been completed as required.

Chief Executive's Report

Tony Masella referred to his previously circulated report. The meeting he attended with the President on 9 June with the Ministry of Justice had been positive. It provided the opportunity to share our risks and challenges regarding recruitment and engagement for voluntary roles. It was disappointing that no progress had been made since that meeting as an initial response had been expected before the Parliamentary recess.

Member engagement and recruitment remained the two highest risks to the organisation. Tony Masella referred to a table showing the level of engagement at hearings since April 2023, and the number of hearings cancelled due to non-availability of members. Cancelled hearings were impacting the postponement rate, which had increased to 39.96% for Council Tax and 39.92% for NDR in 2022-23. Current member resources were reducing scheduled hearings to 60 per month against an optimum of 80. A backlog was building as the level of clearances was not keeping pace with appeal receipts.

To try and address the engagement issue, Tony Masella had personally written to VTE Members thanking them for their valuable service but also highlighting the workload challenges, requesting a review of their pattern of sittings where possible.

Tony Masella stressed that the appointment of the VTE Member Engagement Lead will provide a dedicated resource to better understand members issues but was not on its own a solution to the risks. The individual will engage with the membership, gather data and analyse the findings, to try and identify any changes which need to be made. A report will be submitted to the Board in January 2024.

Following a review of the 2023-24 draft budget to find savings of £400k as requested by DLUHC, VTS planned to reduce the recruitment of five clerks to three trainee clerk grades.

Review of Business Plan Achievements on Objectives (to Q1). Tony Masella presented the Q1 achievements. The Chair was encouraged to note decision writing was now categorised as green.

Finance

Management Accounts to 30 June 2023. Keung Wong presented the management accounts to 30 June. This reflected a total resource funding forecast of £6,954k.

The Finance Risk Register contained three live risks, categorised as one yellow, one green and one amber.

VTS Revised Budget 2023-24. In response to DLUHC's request to reduce the 2023-24 budget by £400k, Keung Wong reported that savings of £381k had been identified. This was made up from pay, non-pay, with £100k from capital. The Board noted the revised budget.

Business Plan Key Performance Indicators

Tony Masella referred the Board to DLUHC's communication on proposed KPIs following the Minister's refusal to accept them. He recommended to the Board that both methodologies of recording KPIs should be adopted, the Minister's requested format as an external reporting tool and the revised, more meaningful, method as an internal process to capture performance over quarterly periods. This was agreed.

Tony Masella highlighted that the risk regarding turnaround times was heavily dependent on finding solutions to the submitted proposals regarding member engagement and recruitment, which are outside of the control of the VTS and currently with DLUHC and the Ministry of Justice.

Matters for Approval

Incident Response & Business Continuity Plan. Lee Anderson referred to the revisions made to the plan, such as updating supplier contact details and the revised CGI schedule. No changes had been made to the actual structure of the document. The Board approved the plan.

Risk Management

Strategic Risk Register. Tony Masella presented the Strategic Risk Register and referred the Board to the ten risks, categorised as three green, two amber, two red and three yellow. The Board noted the register; no further risks were identified.

Operations and Programme Update

Workload data. Lee Anderson referred to the analysis of operational workflow for the period 1 April 2022 to 30 June 2023 (Q1). The Board noted the following:

- 1,584 appeals received
- 1,553 appeals cleared
- 4,771 appeals outstanding

Lee Anderson explained that some appeals listed in June had not yet been processed, therefore the clearance/outstanding figures would change. There had been a few spikes in Council Tax appeals received and an increase in complex cases. A steady increase of 2017 List appeals had been received, it was anticipated that this would pick up significantly towards the end of the financial year.

Approximately 60%-70% of NDR appeals listed were settled by agreement before the hearing. Therefore, an exercise was planned to look at the timeline of settlements to see if tribunal resources could be used more effectively. Appeals were scheduled on the assumption they would need to be heard by a tribunal, but it was impossible to predict which cases would be settled beforehand and not require tribunal intervention. Lee Anderson was working closely with the VOA and agents to see if it was possible to identify any trends.

Chair's Report

The Chair had nothing further to add to what had already been discussed. He would be meeting with Nico Heslop on 2 August.

VTE President's Report

The President reported that the recruitment exercise for 30 Senior Members had progressed, and interviews would take place in September. Applications for the Vice-President vacancies had been sifted, with interviews planned for September.

Committee Updates

ARAC draft minutes. The draft minutes from the meeting on 26 June 2023 had not yet been approved by the Committee but were circulated to the Board for information. The Board had no comments to make.

Any Other Business

An online cyber security training session had been arranged for Board Members to follow the meeting.

Date of next meeting: Wednesday 27 September 2023 at 11:00 am.