



# Valuation Tribunal Service

## Corporate Plan 2023-26 incorporating the 2023-24 Business Plan



## Chair's Introduction

At the Valuation Tribunal Service we are focussed on providing the fairest and most effective service we can to all those involved in local taxation appeals.

Our mission is straightforward, but we only achieve it through the hard work and dedication of our executive leadership and our staff. I, and my colleague Board colleagues thank each of them for their commitment during constantly changing times.

I am very grateful for the wisdom and experience of Board members and for the guidance and support of our colleagues at the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

Our Tribunal Members are key to what we do and we rely on their dedication in giving their expertise and time freely to hear local taxation disputes

Our people, structure and systems are designed to enable the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE) to deliver its judicial function. The Board, together with our Executive Management Team, have identified key strategic priorities that will help us to achieve this.

Our constant and continuing priorities are:

- caring for and developing our staff;
- caring for and engaging VTE Members;
- technological developments to improve customer service and operations.

We have set ourselves some challenging aims for 2023-24 and during the year we will:

- engage with our staff to respond to the changing patterns of work post pandemic. We will review how we operate so that we can continue to work as smartly as possible in delivering our service to tribunal users. This will also allow us to identify our future office needs.
- In collaboration with the VTE President, consider how best we can rapidly identify those appeals where the legislation provides no prospect of success and to deal with these fairly and speedily to avoid potential frustrations from those appealing such matters.
- Continue to modernise our systems and processes to be exemplary and as effective as possible so that we remain responsive to the challenges of any legislative process changes and deal with appeals more speedily.
- Champion consistency in the format we receive appeals and integrate our digital systems to better exchange appeal information with the Valuation Office Agency and billing authorities to ensure the Valuation Tribunal for England has all the information it requires for effective decision making.

I look forward to working with the Executive Team, staff, VTE Members, Board colleagues, our sponsor team and our users as we deliver and develop in the coming year.

Harry Rich  
Chair

## Foreword

The aim of everyone working for the Valuation Tribunal Service (VTS) is to support and strengthen the work we provide as a service to both our users and the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE). As I write this foreword, I cannot help but reflect on how far we have come since we first navigated the challenges presented by the pandemic and the way we have transformed our work. I have been incredibly proud of how my colleagues and VTE Members have adapted to entirely new ways of working in the face of emerging challenges to ensure our service remained accessible.

The period of initial reaction was soon followed by a year of reflection as we took breath to review the changes initially introduced and whether these changes remained fit for purpose at a time of changed attitudes to (a) doing more things remotely; and (b) to working from home. This period of review helped to expose areas of strength, resilience and further creativity.

A year of consolidation followed, and this allowed us to identify further innovation and to capitalise on what had initially been introduced out of necessity. During this time we consolidated in further developing and fine tuning our processes to those in place today. I am immensely proud that all our work in this area, and in difficult circumstances, has been recognised by the industry and we were delighted to have been the recipients of The Institute of Revenues, Rating & Valuation Excellence Award in Innovation (Service Delivery), in addition to the Institute's Highly Commended Award in Excellence in Rating and Valuation in October 2022.

While the formal restrictions are becoming a distant memory, the impact of the health pandemic is still continuing to be felt. Therefore, having benefited from periods of reflection and consolidation, this year is a period of change. This year we will build on the energy, resilience and the innovation so brilliantly displayed during the preceding years.

We will build on what we have learned throughout this journey to put us on an even more sustainable footing in making the VTS and VTE agile and flexible to meet any future challenges head on.

We will continue to strengthen the VTS and support the work of the VTE by continuing to look at further improvements to aid us in delivering a high quality service that supports our users through their appeal journey, as well as supporting VTE Members in their judicial role in decision-making on local taxation appeals. 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 people and maintaining safe work environment are important to us. We will investigate further ways to recruit, train, develop and retain our people, and are continuing to explore with our sponsoring department regarding the best way to promote the continued efficient recruitment and engagement of Members of the VTE.

Our aim continues to be in providing a working environment that remains flexible whilst meeting our operational needs.

We will look to continue to identify and invest in technological developments, the way we use technology, and further develop the agile approach we employ to ensure changes continue to improve our customer service and operations and meeting the needs of all.

Our success will come from working together as a service to deliver the aims and initiatives set out for 2023-26 in the following pages. I look forward to delivering these in the year ahead.

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), which 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 with<sup>1</sup>:

- 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 their dispute.

## Delivering financial efficiency

The VTS receives grant in aid funding from our sponsoring department (DLUHC) for its activities. We recognise the challenging financial times we all face and that restraint and sensitivity in using public money remains a key objective.

We are committed to providing excellent value from the public monies entrusted to us. All improvements to our services are designed with increase efficiency and customer service in mind.

We will continue to identify and drive forward efficient ways of working and will work with DLUHC to review ways of delivering financial efficiencies, whilst complying with the requirements of our Framework Document and maintaining the statutory service required from us by Parliament.

Our strategic objectives define our success as a demand led organisation. Our key performance indicators are set to gauge our delivery within our jurisdiction and our main priority is delivering these.

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

**What kind of  
organisation we  
want to be**

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## OUR VISION

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

## OUR MISSION

Provide the fairest, most effective service we can to those involved in local taxation appeals

**What we do**

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### **Impartial**

We act with integrity, honesty, and openness in exercising our statutory functions, to maintain confidence in us as a public

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### **Efficient**

We actively embrace change and bring new ideas to deliver excellent value for money services for our users.

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## OUR VALUES



### **People focussed**

We are responsive to the needs of our users in taking care to get things right.

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### **Professional**

We deliver on our commitments by applying high levels of expertise, conduct and personal responsibility and

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## Delivering our priorities for 2023-24

Strategic objective	Priority	What we will do and why	When we will do it and who	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 remote hearings	To work with the VTE President in identifying any changes required to the Consolidated Practice Statements (CPS) to reflect new ways of working and following feedback from user forums.	Quarter 1 (Operations)	The CPS sets out requirements for Valuation Tribunal users to assist in the effective disposal of appeals.	Changed practices that assist users and enables Tribunal Members in the more effective clearance of appeals	Introduction of revised CPS and its publication on the website.
		Evaluate the current recruitment process that will attract the widest range of candidates and remains responsive and proportionate to the needs of a non-fee paid tribunal.	Quarter 4 (Chief Executive)	Vehicle for appointments is the Judicial Appointment Commission, which is more focussed on legal fee-paid positions rather than voluntary position. We are currently engaging with our sponsoring department and the Ministry of Justice to investigate the scope for improving the recruitment process	A recruitment process that is timelier and attracts applicants willing to engage as a volunteer.	A changed recruitment process approved by the Ministers.

		Recognising the key risk regarding VTE Member engagement, in conjunction with the VTE President, we will review approaches that will enable the VTE to handle more speedily and fairly those appeals where legislation provides no prospect of success.	Quarter 1 (Operations)	VTE engagement is currently at 60% of workforce and this is affecting the number of monthly hearings. Requirement is 80 per calendar month pcm) and currently scheduling 60 pcm.	Adopting the strike out procedure regarding council tax invalidity appeals.	Reduction in postponement rates so that more appeals end up cleared, thus reducing backlogs.
		Work with VTE Members to maximise sitting days.	Quarter 3 (Operations)	Engagement of volunteer VTE Members is at 60% and this creates a shortfall in sitting days. We want to increase this.	Recruit a VTE Engagement Lead with a dedicated focus on VTE to focus on engagement	Increase in VTE membership engagement to 65%
		Review and improve the current onboarding programme that will provide for a faster journey through training.	Quarter 2 (HR & Training)	On appointment VTE Members are required to undertake a modular training programme of around three months prior to being certified to preside on hearings.	Implementation of a fully revised onboarding programme that allows VTE Members to sit within two months of appointment.	Reduction in the cancellation of hearings due to newly appointed VTE Members becoming available to sit sooner.



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	Implement a standard policy for clerks on key ingredients of a decision.	Quarter 1 (Chief Executive)	The style of writing a decision is not consistent.	Better reasoned decisions.	A policy in place with appropriate training for clerks
		Continue to research and if appropriate, implement software interactive solutions to assist users (subject to capital spend approval)	Quarter 4 (IT)	The changing environment post pandemic has placed reliance on greater digital engagement and we need to be open to avenues for further solutions.	Solutions in place that will encourage users to make appeals online.	Increase in user satisfaction when interacting on appeals.
		Review and, if appropriate, introduce recording of telephone calls	Quarter 3 (IT)	We have moved to softphone technology, but have no recording facilities which may be helpful in play back situations regarding complaints	Better training on customer service regarding provision of advice to users	Improved advice given by staff.
		Continue to modernise our systems and processes to be exemplary and as effective as possible and remain responsive to challenges of any legislative process changes and deal with appeals more speedily.	Quarter 4 (IT)	New types of appeals being introduced as part of Business Rates Review.	Responsive to legislative changes	Secured capital funding for system enhancements



		Champion consistency in the format we receive appeals, allowing system to system appeal exchange data with Respondents to ensure the VTE has all information it requires to assist effective decision making.	Quarter 3 (IT)	Introduced guidance in 2022-23 on information to be submitted with appeals	Greater exchange of appeal data to maintain a single data set on appeal data.	Successful implementation of VOA system that 'talks' to VTS system on appeal data
Build capacity and capability in our staff	Demonstrate willingness and commitment to invest in our staff	Continue in building a leadership and management learning programme building on experiences of 2022 to build a pool of leaders of the future.	Quarter 2 (HR & Training)	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 Chartered Management Institute approved course	Launch the second programme for the Chartered Management Institute qualification.
		Providing opportunities to bring colleagues together in a learning environment	Quarter 2 (HR & Training)	During 2022 we have attempted to bring staff together as team but this was hampered by rail strikes, leading to only one event held in December. Similarly, face-to-face VTE Member events were impacted by rail disruptions in 2022	All staff and members provided with opportunities to attend external events	Two external face-to-face events held for staff during the year, with 100% attendance.  Hold two face-to-face events for VTE Members attracting 70% attendance.

		Look at ways to assist recruitment and retention of staff.	Quarter 1 (HR & Training)	Staff are our biggest asset. Maintaining key and specialist resources is key to our success.	Consideration of non-financial rewards and other benefits as part of employee package.	Effective recruitment and retention strategy in place and agreed by EMT and VTS Board.
		Getting employee views on their perspective as an employee	Quarter 1 (HR & Training)	The health pandemic has changed attitudes and behaviours towards the workplace.	Review and analysis of feedback from staff survey	Provide feedback from survey to build policies and supporting culture in a post pandemic world.
Operate with financial and organisational initiative and efficiency	Seek out efficiencies which leads to greater effectiveness	Engage with our staff and VTE Members to respond to the changing patterns of work post pandemic and review how we operate so that we can continue to work as smartly as possible in delivering our service.	Quarter 4 (EMT)	Changes in ways of working has been a reaction to the challenges faced as a service delivery organisation. Having trialled these for 12 months now, it is important to review what has worked well and what has not.	Improved processes and staffing structure better responsive to changing needs of the organisation	Review of business processes to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.  Identify our future office needs
		Creating a budget focus team with regular reviews	Quarter 1 (Finance)	Budget managers have been working in isolation regarding budgets within their areas	Improving cash forecasting so that draw down better equals actual spend on a monthly basis	Improve budget management to minimise underspend within 2% of budget resource allocation

		Continue in looking at ways to streamline the finance function	Quarter 3 (Finance)	Finance processes are linked to our sponsor's Financial Shared Service's Department and are not always responsive to our needs and timetable.	Following work carried out last year, to implement changes that would add improvement to the finance reporting function.	Improvement in reporting timescales.
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## Total resource funding estimates for 2023-2026

We are living in very challenging economical times. The table below provides the indicative funding that we are expecting to receive over this year and the following two years, reflecting our thinking regarding staffing, IT development, appeal volumes and VTE requirements.

We recognise the ongoing pressures placed on public funding. Naturally, our estimates are subject to consideration and approval from our sponsoring department and subject to wider challenging reviews and decisions on public spending.

£'000	2023- 24	2024- 25	2025- 26
Pay	3,165	3,200	3,200
Non Pay	1,473	1,320	1,320
Pension payments	404	522	522
Depreciation	125	125	156
IFRS16 Office Lease Depreciation	343	281	200
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,510</b>	<b>5,448</b>	<b>5,367</b>
Capital	160	85	60
Resource AME	1,329	1,377	1,482
<b>Total Resource Funding</b>	<b>6,999</b>	<b>6,910</b>	<b>6,909</b>

The key factors permeating through this year's confirmed budget and our financial projections for 2024-25 and 2025-26 reflect:

- Optimum staffing levels of 64 posts - 22 Corporate staff, 30 Tribunal Hearing Clerks and 12 Tribunal Support Officers.
- Retaining employer's pension contribution rate at 16.3% throughout 2023-26 to mitigate against valuation fluctuations due to economic downturns.
- Estimated 4% cost of living pay rise reflecting current landscape around public sector pay.
- Maintaining our investment on our existing IT infrastructure and cloud technology to ensure its continued suitability and sustainability in providing us with new ways of working.
- Managing appeal volumes on council tax and non-domestic rating, especially following the closure of the 2017 rating list and the start of the 2023 rating list, mitigating backlogs where possible.

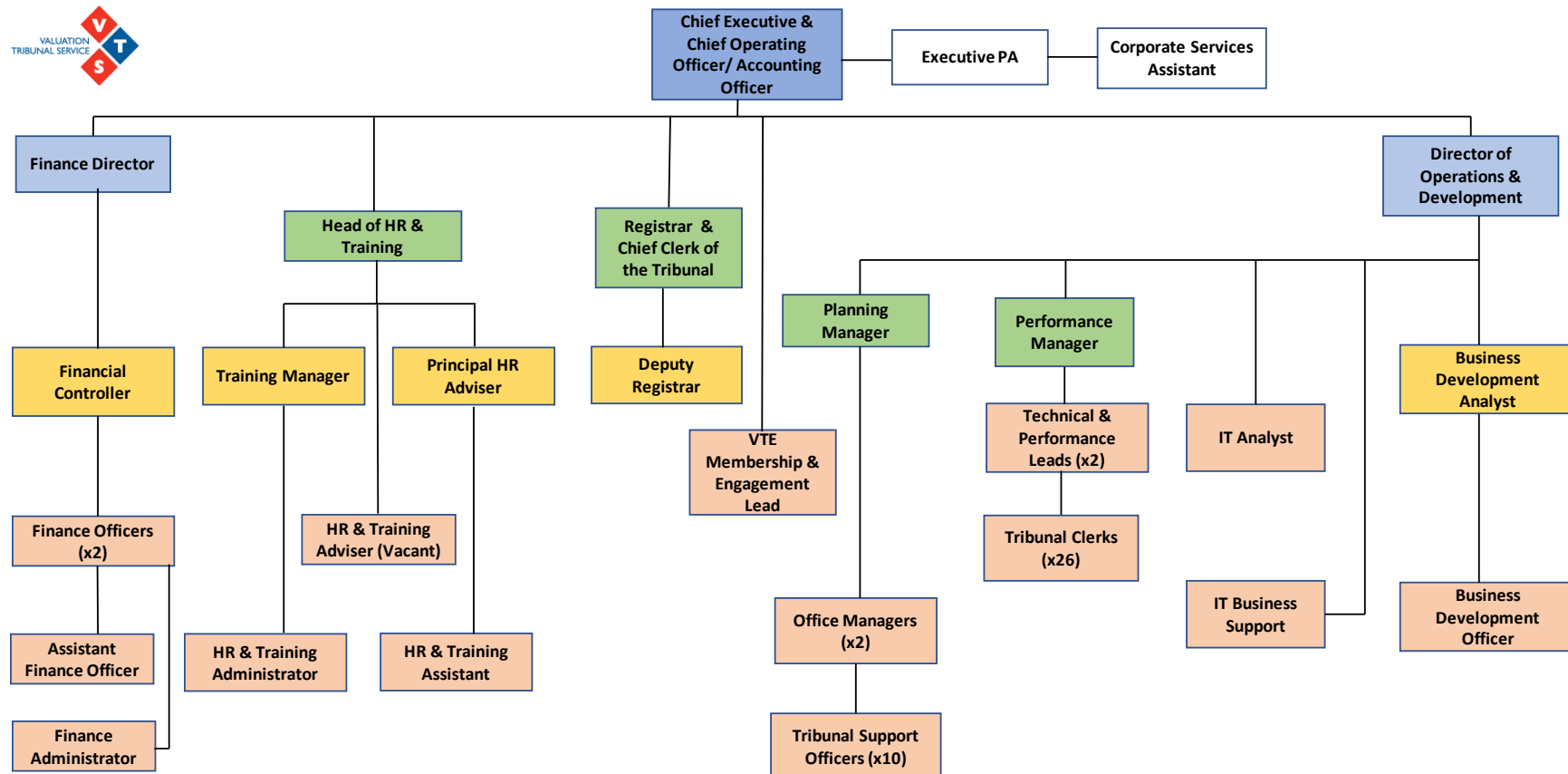
Our capital requirements in 2023-24 are in partnership with our approach in the continuing journey to deliver and support hearings on a virtual platform. Our aspirations reflect:

- 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). This is working in tandem with VOA's Business Transformation Strategy.
- Continuing with the agile approach to our IT investment regarding future development.

Our estimates of 2023-26 and beyond reflect maintaining the investment in our digital services to ensure we continue to meet business and user requirements.

## Staffing

Working arrangements during the health pandemic have demonstrated that we are equally able to operate effectively both at home and in the office. 60% of staff (35) are now engaged on home-based contracts. 19 staff are currently working in a hybrid nature (three days per week in the office and two days from home). Our staffing structure from 1 September is:



## 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 a total of 146 VTE Members. During the year we have seen a reduction in numbers due to the statutory retiring age and resignations to pursue fee-paid appointments within the judiciary. Around 60% of VTE Member remain active and this results in a shortfall of monthly sittings days.

The VTE is a tribunal sponsored by DLUHC. Membership appointments are made by the Lord Chancellor and, under the Constitutional Reform Act 2014, recruitment for these appointments (non-fee paid) 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 we continue to work with JAC and Ministry of Justice colleagues to find ways of adapting the recruitment framework further. We will be engaging in a new recruitment exercise in this financial year to recruit a further 30 senior members ('chairmen') to maximise our flexibility in managing hearing panels.

We will also, in partnership with JAC, be launching a recruitment exercise in May for two further vice-presidents to assist the VTE President in the management of VTE Members and the hearing of specialist cases.

Adjusting to new ways of working post pandemic has presented its own challenges for VTE Members in terms of their level of engagement. We will review the services and facilities we provide, ensuring that they continue to meet the needs of the VTE Membership in the current context, and that we move to a steady

state balance of onsite and remote training events that prioritises learning and training for the VTE Membership equipping them to sit within their jurisdiction.

We will also engage with the VTE Membership to support our work in the administration of a judicial service over the coming year.

## Our Office

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

With 22 staff currently working three days in the office and two days from home, the occupancy rate has reduced by 25%.

Due to the success of remote hearings, our two in-house hearing rooms are no longer as in demand as they were pre-pandemic.

We are evaluating our office needs as our lease comes to an end on 31 October 2025. We will do this in the context of prioritising core service requirements for our users while maintaining some of the benefits of working flexibly for staff, where that is possible.

## External Hearing venues

As part of its Consolidated Practice Statement, the VTE's preferred default hearing method remains remote hearings.

We continue to retain the flexibility to hire external premises in which to hold hearings in stances where applications for in person hearing requests are approved by the VTE President as online hearings may not be the most effective way to dispense justice for that particular appeal.

Feedback from the Valuation Tribunal's User's Group and our customer survey continues to point to a preference for virtual hearings.



## Business Plan for First year of the Corporate Plan 2023-24 Workload

Our focus has been on reducing the backlog of council tax appeals that arose during lockdown. We start the 2023-24 financial year with the following number of appeals, broken down by each appeal type.

Council Tax Appeals (by type)	
Council Tax Reduction	399
Council Tax Liability	582
Council Tax Valuation	1826
Council Tax Completion	91

Non Domestic Rating	
2010 List Appeals	4350
2017 List Appeals	1157

Our focus during the past year has been to resolve the outstanding 2010 List appeals relating to Automatic Telling Machines (ATMs), which was subject to a Supreme Court judgment. We have made great progress in reducing this number from 11,128 to 4,350 and the majority are already listed to future hearing dates.

Our expectation has been that we will see an increase in 2017 rating list appeals at the end of that rating list. There has been an increase in checks and challenges to reflect the closure of the 2017 rating list. We will be maintaining a watching brief with the Valuation Office Agency regarding conversion of challenges into appeals. Due to the regulatory timescales, we do not expect to see the impact of this until December 2023/January 2024.

The start of a financial year, and the issue of council tax bills, often provides the impetus for council taxpayers 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 continues to be to list these early, subject to VTE availability, given the nature of these appeals.

## Funding Projections for 2023-24

Our funding has been confirmed as £6,999k for 2023-24. Our ability to operate within this reduced funding is attributable to our decision to make remote hearings the default hearing method. This method of hearing negates the need to hire external hearing venues and has reduced the cost of travelling by our Valuation Tribunal Members and staff.

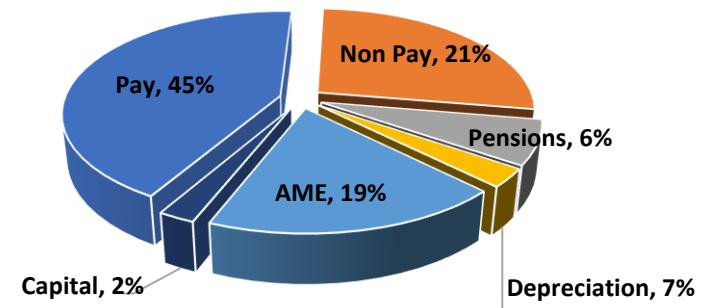
Since implementing this last year, we have provided some physical hearings (22) to those where an online hearing was seen as not being the best way to dispense justice. We will continue to offer physical hearings where, for example, connectivity has been identified as an obstacle.

The table below illustrates our confirmed funding for 2023-24 to deliver our services effectively.

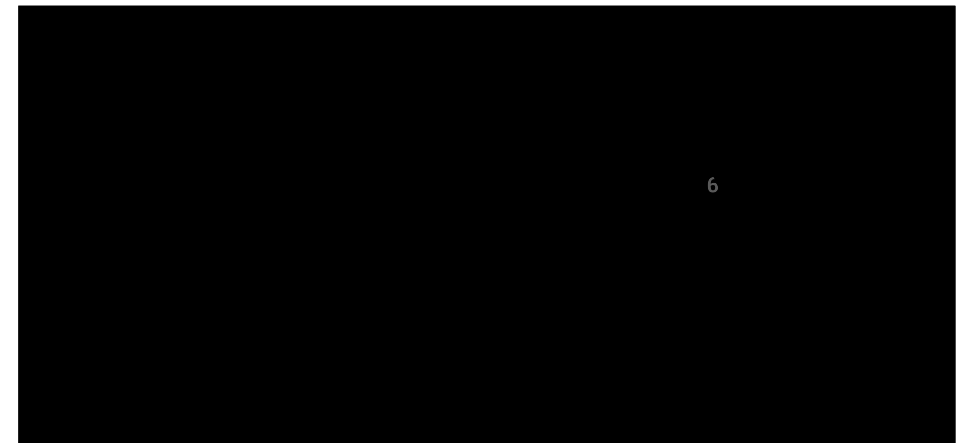
Budget category					£'000
Pay					3,165
Non-Pay					1,473
Pension payment					404
Depreciation					125
IFRS16 Lease Depreciation					343
<b>Total Admin</b>					<b>5,510</b>
Annually Managed Expenditure (AME)					1,329
Capital					160
<b>Total Resource Funding</b>					<b>6,999</b>

33% of our total resource funding accounts for non-cash items, such as depreciation and annually managed expenditure (spending that cannot reasonably be subject to firm three-year limits).

The breakdown of areas regarding our total budget spend for 2023-24 are:



Our operational spend (non-pay) reflects 21% of our indicative budget. This is the area of budget that assists us in developing and supporting our service. The projected allocation of non-pay costs for 2023-24 financial year are:



## Our Key Performance Indicators for 2023-24

Our key performance indicators measure our success against our statutory function, and our stretching and realistic 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
		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
		User Survey	65% of users surveyed are satisfied with the administrative service we provide
	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
		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.