

## **Summary Minutes of the Valuation Tribunal Service Board 146<sup>th</sup> Meeting held on 27 September 2023 at 10:30 am in Lemn Street**

**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); Steve Watts (Head of HR & Training – item 6 only) 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.

There were no new declarations of interest.

Minutes of the meeting held on 26 July 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. He advised that member engagement remained a growing concern and referred to the table in his report depicting engagement levels at hearings since 1 April 2023, which is impacting on the number of hearings convened and the cases listed. He advised that the optimum number of Tribunal days per month is 80, but current engagement of VTE Members was only allowing 60. The Planning Manager had been asked to increase monthly hearings days to 65. Not holding sufficient Tribunals and not clearing adequate cases builds a backlog, which was not in the best interests of appellants. There was still no decision regarding the proposals submitted to the Ministry of Justice.

The Membership Engagement Lead, Matthew Jones, joined the VTS on 4 September 2023. He had begun planning a programme which included a member survey and forums. Tony Masella had written to all members to introduce Matthew, and to invite them to participate in the forums to air any frustrations, challenges, and any good things which can be built upon. Matthew will report his findings to the Board in January. The Chair suggested Matthew provide an interim update to the Board in November.

The Clerk recruitment programme had been successful, therefore the risk on the Strategic Risk Register had been reduced. This was the last year of a recruitment round for Clerks and due to budget pressures recruitment had now been reduced from five Clerks to three trainee positions. Tony Masella was pleased to report 435 applications had been received for the trainee vacancies. Successful candidates would be expected to achieve the IRRV qualifications within a two-year fixed term contract. Success would determine the possibility of a permanent contract.

It was the Government's intention to move civil servants and ALBs (arms' length bodies) outside of the M25 London. The Board had already decided that the VTS would not seek a new lease in Lemn Street when the current lease expired. It had been clarified that a move to 2 Marsham Street would require business case approval. Tony Masella requested a clear direction of travel from the Board as a firm decision will need to be

made by the end of the calendar year. The matter will be discussed at the November meeting.

### **Approval of Business Plan (DLUHC approved)**

The Business Plan had been circulated, showing the latest amendments in track, which had been approved by DLUHC. Final approval was requested from the Board before the plan was published. The Chair thanked the Executive for the work carried out in order to finalise the plan. The revised plan was agreed.

### **Finance**

**Management Accounts to 31 August 2023.** Keung Wong presented the management accounts showing the position as at 31 August, reflecting a total resource funding forecast of £6,783k. The original budget was still shown and this would remain unchanged until after the supplementary estimate review. The revised budget agreed with DLUHC is reflected in the forecast.

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

**VTS Revised Budget 2023-24.** This matter had been fully discussed earlier. Keung Wong referred the Board to the details of where savings had been found. He highlighted that he was comfortable with the budget for this year, but the baseline is flat which will be challenging in future years. The Finance Team will work with budget holders to identify any challenges and ensure value for money. The Board noted the revised budget.

### **Staff Survey Update**

Steve Watts, Head of HR & Training, attended the meeting to present his report on the findings from the Staff Survey 2023. He was pleased to advise that 83% of staff completed the survey and overall, the responses were positive.

Steve Watts explained both positive and negative responses were set out in his report and there was an action plan at the end outlining areas to be investigated further with an indicative timescale. Some issues were already being addressed during staff meetings and further meetings will be held in order to obtain greater detail of what the issues were.

It had been suggested that pay grades were restrictive and staff wanted to earn more as a result of hard work and effort. Reaching the highest SCP for their grade meant they had reached a ceiling and could not progress further. Steve Watts highlighted that feedback had ignored the fact that salaries had increased each year. He pointed out that increasing salaries was not a realistic option in today's climate and would require DLUHC approval. He advised that to provide a better indication of salaries and benefits, he was exploring a statement of benefits to be issued to all staff to show the value of what they receive in addition to their salary.

Work/life balance is key and it was interesting to note the distinction between the satisfaction of office-based staff (73%) compared to those who were based at home (89%). There was a degree of mixed messages as office-based staff felt they do not have as much flexibility but they liked engaging with colleagues in the office. Staff had been reminded of the need to build in breaks during meetings and hearings.

The Board was keen to hear more about the distinction between home-based and office workers; currently two thirds of staff are home-based. It was pointed out that while the

responses of the office-based staff appeared to be more negative, it could be because of the different type of roles rather than where the individuals were based. The function could create more dissatisfaction, particularly with some of the specialised Head Office roles where higher salaries were offered elsewhere. Neil Buckley felt it was creditable that the office workers were so positive attending the office three days per week bearing in mind how other organisations are struggling to get staff to return. He opined that the feedback was very encouraging.

The action plan had been agreed by the Executive. The deadlines in the report are in January 2024, and a staff event is planned in February 2024. The Board will receive a progress update at the end of the financial year.

## **Risk Management**

**Strategic Risk Register & Assurance Map.** Tony Masella presented the Strategic Risk Register and referred the Board to the nine risks, categorised as four green, two red, one yellow and two amber. The Board noted the register and Assurance Map; 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 31 August 2023. The Board noted the following:

- 2,497 appeals received
- 2,525 appeals cleared
- 4,766 appeals outstanding at the start of September 2023

Lee Anderson reported that over the five month period 28 more cases were cleared than received. There was an expectation that the number of NDR appeals received will increase, but no change in Council Tax receipts was expected. There had been a spike in Council Tax Valuation receipts in April, but this was typical during the billing period.

A significant improvement in the clearance of NDR appeals was expected towards the end of the financial year due to discussions taking place in respect of the 1,500 outstanding office fit-out appeals. Lee Anderson referred to the appeals that were agreed or withdrawn without the need for a full hearing. He expressed concern that 54% of appeals fall into this category resulting in a waste of Tribunal resources. Cases are listed with the expectation that 99% will need a full hearing, but many are settled at the last moment. Investigation was being carried out to see if any trends could be identified in order to alter the listing programme to make the process more efficient.

**Performance/KPI data (Q1).** Lee Anderson had circulated two dashboards; the first set which was approved by the Board but not agreed by the Minister for the Business Plan, and a second set which had received Ministerial approval. The only significant difference was including more granular detail around determination timelines (within six, nine or 12 months of receipt). These figures show appeals determined within six months had improved since last year at 33% against a target of 50%, but this target is not included in the Business Plan.

## **Chair's Report**

The Chair advised the process of recruiting new Board Members had begun. Neil Buckley would attend his last meeting in November, and both Suzanne McCarthy and

Lola Moses will leave early next year. Discussions were taking place with the Department with the aim to have appointments to the roles by January.

### **VTE President's Report**

The President reported that despite receiving no judicial complaints for a long time, he had received a couple about one of the Senior Members. However, he had found no evidence of misconduct and the concerns raised had been addressed.

The current recruitment programme had now finished. One competition was for 30 Senior Members; due to the calibre of those interviewed the President had requested extra Senior Members be appointed. The other competition was for two Vice-Presidents. It was hoped the new Vice-Presidents would be in post by the end of the year.

**Date of next meeting:** Wednesday 29 November 2023 at 10:30 am.