

## **Summary Minutes of the Valuation Tribunal Service Board 150<sup>th</sup> Meeting held on 7 June 2024 at 10:30 am via MS Teams**

**Present:** Suzanne McCarthy (Interim Chair); Stephen Chappell (Member); Kevin Everett (Member); Gary Garland (VTE President, *ex-officio* member).

**In attendance:** Tony Masella (Chief Executive & Chief Operating Officer); Keung Wong (Finance Director); Nick Pellegrini (ALB Business Partner, DLUHC – as an observer); Amy Dusanjh (Data Protection Officer for item 5.1 only); Matthew Jones (Membership Engagement Lead for items 6.1 & 7) and Nicola Hunt (Board Secretary).

### **Welcome, Apologies, Declarations of Interest, Confirmation of Minutes**

Apologies for absence had been received from Alison Griffiths (Member) and Lee Anderson (Director of Operations & Development).

There were no new declarations of interest.

Minutes of the meeting held on 3 April 2024 were confirmed as a true record of the meeting. Actions had been completed as required.

### **Chief Executive's Report**

Tony Masella advised that following the announcement of a general election on 4 July, Parliament would be dissolved leading up to this date so any Ministerial decisions would be delayed. The *General Election 2024 Guidance* had been circulated. The day-to-day work of the VTS would not be impacted in the interim.

Tony Masella had attended a positive meeting with the Judicial Appointments Commission (JAC) recently to discuss VTE Member recruitment. He had suggested developing an outreach programme. An advert had been drafted and sent to JAC setting out the requirements of the role. It explained that roles are voluntary and there is no requirement to have a legal qualification. He had also requested that publication is focussed towards the surveying community as well as other public sector groups. The recruitment programme for 2024 aims to recruit 12 Senior Members and 18 Members. Interviews are planned to take place over nine days in November, the President and Vice-Presidents would be on interview panels.

There had been some improvement in terms of VTE Member engagement, but it was too early to draw any conclusions. Tony Masella set out his plan to increase the number of hearings to 80 per month by October, currently circa 75 hearings were held each month. Two induction events had taken place in Lemn Street for 42 new Senior Members. The next step was for them to complete the modular training, a requirement prior to presiding on hearings. A process had now begun with the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office (JCIO) to remove those members who were not engaging.

DLUHC had confirmed that irrespective of the July general election, the VTS/VTE review would proceed as planned.

**Business Plan Achievements 2023-24.** Tony Masella reported that against the 17 objectives highlighted in the 2023-24 Business Plan, 14 had been fully met and two

were partly met. One objective was not met, but this was in the direct control of the VOA.

## **Finance**

**Management Accounts to 30 April 2024.** The management accounts to 30 April 2024 reflected a total resource funding period 1 forecast year to date of £6,165k, against a budget of £6,168k, and an underspend of £3k. It was noted:

- Total resource funding was 100% vs the supplementary budget
- April cashflow remained within the £150k mark
- CCA fees of £1,373,250 had been received as at 30 April 2024
- 4,948 2017 List appeals had been received
- Bank transactional costs for appeal refunds totalled £23,871 to date

There were no significant concerns to note. Keung Wong pointed out that the NJC pay award had not yet been finalised, and that discussions continued between the unions and the employer.

**Data Protection & Security Annual Report.** Amy Dusanjh, VTS Data Protection Officer, attended the meeting to present the Data Protection & Security Annual Report. She advised the new Data Protection and Digital Information Bill did not receive Royal Assent before Parliament was dissolved. Therefore, there were no changes to the UK's data protection legislation. She confirmed a review of all VTS data protection policies had begun which should be completed by the end of June.

Training on data protection was ongoing, all staff and Board Members were required to complete an annual module. Contracts continued to be reviewed to ensure they were in line with GDPR and contract review forms were completed prior to contracts being signed or renewed.

The number of Freedom of Information requests had decreased in comparison with the previous year total; 55 had been received in 2023-24 compared to 77 in 2022-23. The number of Subject Access Requests had increased between the two periods; 22 during 2023-24 compared to 14 in 2022-23. All requests were dealt with within the statutory time limits.

The Board approved the report.

**Health & Safety Statement 2024-25.** This Statement set out the responsibilities of the VTS under the *Health & Safety at Work Act* in terms of VTE Members, staff, contractors and members of the public, and it was a legal requirement to display it.

The Board approved the Statement.

**Stakeholder Engagement Strategy.** The *Stakeholder Engagement Strategy* had been reviewed by the Executive Management Team. This was a live document which set out the VTS's aims in terms of stakeholder engagement. Tony Masella advised that feedback from participants is obtained to ensure the various forums in place remain meaningful and fit for purpose. He was pleased to report that feedback remained positive, with the various bodies participating finding them useful. He added that all forums had individual terms of reference. Tony explained that

Appendix 2 had been updated to reflect the changes in respect of working with billing authorities contained in the *Consolidated Practice Statement*.

The Board noted the document.

**Member Engagement Update.** Matthew Jones, VTE Member Engagement Lead, referred to his circulated report and drew attention to key items of interest. He explained that the statistics for the last financial year would provide a benchmark for 2024-25. A tracker had been set up so that progress could be reviewed over the coming months, looking at key metrics such as leavers, average sittings, the percentage of members engaging and the cancellation rate. It was too early to gauge any progress but it looked encouraging so far.

The recent new entrants were currently progressing through the onboarding process. Two induction sessions were held at the Leman Street office which were attended by 42 individuals, the remaining three Senior Members would meet separately with Tracey Banham, VTS Training Manager. A Judgecraft session was planned for 12 June, at which 22 were expected to attend.

An internal Member Engagement Programme Group meeting would be held next week to discuss communications and strategy, processes around members raising concerns and the new entrant process. In recognition of National Volunteers' Week all VTE Members had been sent thank you cards; Board Members who were also VTE Members confirmed they had received their cards and appreciated the sentiment.

**Contracts Register.** Keung Wong explained that during an internal audit on procurement management it was agreed to implement a facility to monitor and manage contracts in terms of the procurement process. The contracts register was reviewed quarterly by Keung and Amy Dusanjh, to ensure contract managers adhere to the process and it was up to date. He pointed out that the majority of contracts were via the Crown Commercial Service (CSS) Framework, but there were a number of smaller contracts set up directly with suppliers as these were more cost effective.

**Complaints Annual Report 2023-24.** It was noted that 10 formal complaints had been received, of which five were upheld (two in part). Tony Masella explained these complaints were dealt with under stage 1 of the process. If individuals remained aggrieved, they could escalate the matter to stage 2 for him to investigate. During the year two complaints were escalated to stage 2, and he was pleased to report that he had found no evidence of maladministration in either case, nor were they referred to the Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman. He added that matters relating to an actual decision or complaints against the VTE could not be considered under the administrative complaints process.

**Customer Survey Annual Report.** Savanta carried out a user survey on behalf of the VTS during 2023-24, which reviewed the experience of appellants based on four pillars of justice (Fairness, Impartiality, Voice and Transparency). Tony Masella advised that this research had become less useful, and the action plan provided reflected changes which had already been tried rather than new ideas. Following the changes in processes, a new supplier had been found, Beehive Research. Work was currently being carried out on the new script; the four pillars of justice would be

retained. Beehive Research would provide an update this time next year, but the results would only cover six months rather than a full year.

Tony Masella was pleased to report increases in satisfaction had been seen on all four pillars. Historically levels of satisfaction were impacted by the actual decision, so the fact that satisfaction levels had increased was good news. He hoped that the implementation of active case management would further improve the experience for appellants.

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

The President was pleased to report the new Vice-Presidents had settled in well and would be on the interview panels for the new VTE Member recruitment in November. The advertisement and job description had been sent to JAC, and the situational questions and competency framework had been drafted. He hoped the new process would be quicker than the previous one, but time would tell.

### **Risk Management**

**Strategic Risk Register.** Tony Masella presented the Strategic Risk Register and referred the Board to the seven live risks, categorised as one red, four amber and two yellow. The register had been reviewed by EMT on the 16 May 2024.

The Board noted the register.

### **Operations and Programme Update**

**Appeal Workload Analysis.** The analysis of operational workflow for the period 1 April 2023 to 30 April 2024 had been circulated. The Board noted the following:

- 6,801 appeals received
- 6,835 appeals cleared
- 4,868 appeals outstanding at the start of March 2024
- The focus of appeal types had moved from NDR to Council Tax

**KPIs for Q4.** The KPI Performance Report had been previously circulated which showed the performance at the end of the financial year and the position for each target. Tony Masella explained that CT appeals determined within six months had been challenging, but this increased at the nine-month stage. He hoped the implementation of active case management would mean the engagement at the front end of the process would stop issues being raised at hearings which were irrelevant to the case where appellants did not understand the system. The Interim Chair requested that if possible future KPI reports should include the number of cases determined at six, nine and 12 month periods, in addition to percentages shown.

### **Chair's Report**

The Interim Chair confirmed that DLUHC had provided assurance that the Board could statutorily function whilst vacancies existed (*Local Government Act 2003 – Schedule 4*). In response to this assurance all Board Members had confirmed they were content.

**Committee Memberships.** Kevin Everett had chaired the ARAC meeting on 29 April. The Interim Chair proposed that he should be made Chair of the Audit Committee; this was agreed.

**Update on VTS Board Recruitment.** The Interim Chair informed the Board that she would be part of the interview panel for Board Member appointments. The panel will be chaired by a civil servant and would include an independent member. The shortlisting exercise had been carried out and interviews would take place in July. The recruitment for the Chair position had been paused until after the election. The closing date for applications was 17 June.

Kevin Everett's term of office would expire on 31 August 2024. The Interim Chair had asked that his appointment be extended.

### **Committee Reports**

**ARAC Draft Minutes.** The draft minutes from the meeting on 29 April 2024 had not yet been approved by the Committee but were circulated to the Board for information. Kevin Everett pointed out the only outstanding action was in respect of the sponsoring Department to confirm details of ALB workshops.

The Board noted the draft minutes.

**Date of next meeting:** Thursday 25 July 2024.