

## **Summary Minutes of the Valuation Tribunal Service Board 151<sup>st</sup> Meeting held on 25 July 2024 at 10:30 am in Leman Street**

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

**In attendance:** Tony Masella (Chief Executive & Chief Operating Officer); Keung Wong (Finance Director); Amy Dusanjh (Business Development Analyst for item 6.2 only); Matthew Jones (Membership Engagement Lead for item 8.1 only) and Nicola Hunt (Board Secretary).

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

Apologies for absence had been received from Lee Anderson (Director of Operations & Development) and Nick Pellegrini (ALB Business Partner, MHCLG – as an observer).

There were no new declarations of interest.

Minutes of the meeting held on 7 June 2024 were confirmed as a true record of the meeting. Actions had been completed as required.

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

Tony Masella advised that the sponsoring Department is now to be known as the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG), and that the new Minister is Jim McMahon, OBE.

VTE recruitment and engagement remained a shared significant risk for both the VTS and VTE. As part of ongoing work to address this, Tony Masella had arranged an online seminar with the MoJ and JAC to give an overview of the work and requirements of the VTE. This was held on 17 July and seemed quite successful. Tony was most grateful for the participation at this event by Gary Garland (VTE President), Frazer Stuart (Vice-President) and Laura McDermott (Chairman). The campaign to recruit 12 chairmen and 20 members was launched on 23 July.

VTE Member engagement continued to be sporadic and remained a concern. This was affecting KPIs as appeals cannot be cleared without members sitting. It was noted five hearings had been cancelled due to a lack of members so far during this financial year. Tony Masella was hopeful that the implementation of active case management and triaging would avoid wasting valuable tribunal time as any issues could be identified earlier. The Board asked for regular updates on the new triaging process.

Tony Masella advised that he was open to finding solutions which would address the issues of engagement and in clearing the workload, but he would require VTE support in doing so. The President agreed to work with the VTS to review the position. Discussions would take place during the next Valuation Tribunal Interface Group (VIG) meeting to see what can be achieved.

Tony Masella was pleased to confirm that the Risk Management audit had been completed and resulted in **substantial assurance** being awarded.

**Business Plan Achievements to Q1.** Tony Masella referred to the 16 priorities highlighted in the Business Plan 2024-25, of which five were expected to be delivered by Q1. He was pleased to report all five had been fully met. The remaining priorities were ongoing and the Board would receive regular progress updates. Tony hoped the new active case management process would be achieved by Q3. This should give staff the tools to help address the issues experienced regarding the backlog of cases and allow appeals to be dealt with quicker.

### **Public Body Review (self-assessment model)**

The Interim Chair explained the VTE/VTS would be reviewed as part of a wider public review of all ALBs to see whether the current mechanism in place to deliver the service was the best way, or if there was a better delivery mechanism. Completion of the self-assessment form was the first step in the process. The completed form had been circulated to the Board for review before being submitted to the Department.

### **Finance**

**Management Accounts to 30 June 2024.** The management accounts to 30 June 2024 reflected a total resource funding forecast year to date of £6,159k, against a budget of £6,168k, and an underspend of £9k. It was noted:

- Total resource funding was 99% vs the supplementary budget
- June cashflow was within the £225k mark
- Total CCA fees of £1,668,450 had been received as of 30 June 2024
- 5,941 2017 List appeals had been received
- Bank transactional costs for appeal refunds totalled £27,183 to date

The delegation letter approved the expected budget of £6,168k. It was still early in the financial year, but Keung Wong confirmed he was content with the position at the end of the first quarter.

### **Operations and Programme Update**

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

- 7,492 appeals received
- 6,776 appeals cleared
- 5,552 appeals outstanding at the start of July 2024

Tony Masella reported that the volume of 2017 Rating List appeals was increasing, which was expected following the closure of the list. During May 295 appeals were received, in June this increased to 622.

It was noted that the increase in appeals would impact on the transactional costs which were paid from the Operations budget. Appeal fees provide no benefit to the VTS, all monies were paid into the Consolidated Fund.

Council Tax Valuation remained the dominant workload. During this period nearly 3k appeals had been received. It was noted 50 2023 Rating List appeals had been received. Tony Masella referred to the Performance Summary and explained where the RAG status was red the target had not been achieved. The Department had

expressed concern because the KPI for a six-month turnaround of appeals had not been met. This was due to member engagement. It was noted that the figures improved by the nine-month stage.

**Projects update.** Amy Dusanjh, Business Development Analyst, attended the meeting to provide an update on the eight live projects. Two business cases had been approved recently (System Enhancements and AI). The following was noted:

- *System Enhancements* – staff put forward change requests for Dynamics to make processes more efficient. Requests were considered during monthly Change Approvals Board meetings. Once approved they were placed on the backlog list and prioritised depending on business need and progressed.
- *AI* – this project was being moved very slowly. Some operational business areas where AI could help bring efficiencies have been identified.
- *Member engagement* – time had been spent researching different platforms that could act as a volunteer management system. This platform would manage onboarding, training and enable members to self-serve to hearings.

### **Risk Management**

**Strategic Risk Register.** The register was presented by Tony Masella who referred the Board to the seven live risks categorised as five amber and two yellow. The register had been reviewed by EMT on 16 July 2024. The Board noted the register.

**Assurance Map.** The Board reviewed the Assurance Map and had no further comments to make.

**Member Engagement Update.** Matthew Jones, VTE Membership Engagement Lead, referred to his previously circulated report and drew attention to key items of interest. He confirmed that 45 new Senior Members were currently completing their training, of which nine sat as wingers in July and another five will sit as chairmen in August. It was hoped the impact of this engagement would be seen soon.

Matthew Jones advised that the President had requested the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office (JCIO) to remove four individuals from membership due to lack of engagement and another eight had been identified who will be contacted to ascertain the reasons why they have not been sitting.

The Board thanked Matthew Jones for his efforts, in particular the thank you cards and long service certificates which were presented at the recent face-to-face event. It was noted that a monthly newsletter was planned which would hopefully encourage communication between members and staff.

Matthew Jones explained that he reviewed data on sittings for individual members. Where they have not participated in hearings, he liaised with staff to see if there were any issues he was not aware of which prevented them from sitting. He hoped the new volunteer management system would be a central database to hold such information. The Board was keen to receive a more detailed report from Matthew. It was noted that as another survey had been issued to members, an update should be provided at the November Board meeting to allow Matthew to focus on whether changes were impacting and to give him the opportunity to obtain more material.

**Staff Survey update.** Steve Watts, Head of HR & Training, was unable to attend the meeting but had submitted a paper for the Board to consider. Tony Masella explained that this provided an update on the actions previously proposed following the staff survey. Each overall assessment was colour coded to show whether it had been completed, in progress or not delivered.

Another survey would be conducted in circa 24 months' time once the relocation to 2 Marsham Street had taken place. Tony Masella advised that the approval to remain in London had been discussed at the AO meeting, staff were aware and he would be arranging for them to view the accommodation nearer the time. The Board asked to be kept updated.

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

The President advised that everything was in place for the next VTE Member recruitment campaign. He remained concerned at the lack of engagement shown by some existing members and would be reviewing the sitting figures in September. He advised he will be writing to those members who had not fulfilled their sitting commitments to remind them that the Terms and Conditions of their appointment include an expectation that they undertake 12 duties per annum for members and 15 for chairmen.

The President had just concluded a three-day hearing of office fit-out cost appeals. Another date had been scheduled for 9 August when the matter would hopefully be concluded.

The President expressed his thanks to the VTS staff for their assistance. In addition to the help Nicola Hunt provided, he wished to formally record his thanks to David Slater (Registrar & Chief Clerk) and William Hamilton (Deputy Registrar), for their continued assistance. They always dealt with matters promptly ensuring a swift resolution.

### **Chair's Report**

**Update on VTS Board Recruitment.** The Interim Chair reported that interviews for new Board Members had concluded. It was hoped the successful candidates would be identified by mid-September. Confirmation was awaited on whether Kevin Everett's term of office would be extended.

### **Any Other Business**

A query was raised about when applications were received for parties to join hearings from outside the jurisdiction. Tony Masella confirmed that a rule was in place that parties should only join hearings from within the UK. The President added that VTE Members were aware of this rule and if they tried to link into the VT system from outside of the UK their access would be blocked.

**Date of next meeting:** Wednesday 25 September 2024.