



Valuation Tribunal Service Corporate Plan 2019-22

incorporating the
2019-20 Business Plan

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Introduction by the Chairman

Our purpose and strategic objectives are set by Ministers. We wish to excel at achieving these objectives and this Plan sets out our priorities for the next three years.

In essence, the priorities recognise that increasing the diversity and capability of staff and Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE) Members combined with effective information technology will further improve efficiency and customer satisfaction, resulting in being recognised as experts in all that we do.

We do not underestimate the challenges and hard work that lie ahead. However, knowing the enthusiasm and commitment of our staff, our excellent relationship with the VTE and its Members and the support of our sponsoring Ministerial Department we are confident of achieving continuing improvements to our service over the period of this Plan.

Robin Evans
Chairman

Foreword by the Chief Executive and Chief Operating Officer

Created on 1 April 2004 as an independent body, the statutory role of the Valuation Tribunal Service (VTS) is to deliver a wide range of services that allows the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE) to exercise its jurisdiction in the hearing and determination of council tax and non-domestic rating appeals. Each type of appeal we administer brings its own challenges. Our aim remains to facilitate as speedily as possible a resolution of the disputes ratepayers and council tax payers may have with their local authority regarding council tax banding, council tax support schemes, discretions, reliefs, exemptions and/or rating assessments compiled by the Valuation Office Agency (VOA). We also need to be flexible enough to react promptly in embracing and implementing changes in procedure resulting from new statute or case law.

As part of our obligation as a public body, we produce a corporate plan setting out our mission and priorities for the next three years, which includes our business plan for the coming year. This sets out how we will fulfil our statutory role and support government policy in non-domestic rating (business rates), finance and the digital agenda, while focussing primarily on Tribunal users' needs.

Over the next three years, we should see the full impact on appeals of the 2017 business rates revaluation and the new Check, Challenge and Appeal (CCA) system for challenging non-domestic rating appeals. This was a welcomed reform of the appeal system and one that we fully supported. Historically, many appeals were made as a matter of routine, with the majority not requiring an appeal hearing nor resulting in a change to the rating list. Now an appeal can only be made once the 'check' and 'challenge' stages have been completed with the Valuation Office Agency. This means that we can focus our resources on legitimate cases, where supporting evidence has been provided early on in the process and reduce delays for ratepayers. Another major change for us has been the introduction of a fee charged for lodging a non-domestic rating appeal against the 2017 rating list, which is refundable if the appeal is successful.

Whilst we have already dealt with some appeals under this new legislative process, it is too early to have any view of the impact it will have on appeal volumes, particularly as appeals will not reach us until appellants have gone through the check and challenge phases, which can take many months.

As part of government reforms on non-domestic rating, the usual quinquennial cycle has been reduced and the next revaluation will take place on 1 April 2021, a year earlier, with a second three years later in 2024. This will add some challenges for us.

Our priorities reflect what we need to achieve so that we can continue to deliver a high quality and value for money service, which remains responsive to the inevitable changes and challenges that arise.

Tony Masella
Chief Executive and Chief Operating Officer

Who we are and what we do

Sponsored by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), the Valuation Tribunal Service (VTS) delivers a range of services to the Valuation Tribunal for England (VTE) to hear and determine disputes that have arisen between those who pay council tax or non-domestic rates and their local council or the Valuation Office Agency (VOA).

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

To provide the fairest, most effective service we can to those involved in local taxation appeals.

The VTE is headed by a President and is a separate statutory body charged with¹:

- 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.

OUR VALUES

- **Impartial** – we act with integrity, honesty and openness in exercising our statutory functions, to maintain confidence in us as a public service.
- **Professional** – we deliver on our commitments by applying high levels of expertise, conduct and personal responsibility and developing our skill base.
- **People focussed** – we are responsive to the needs of our users in taking care to get things right.
- **Efficient** – we actively embrace change and bring new ideas to deliver excellent, value for money services for our users, demonstrating agility and flexibility in our approach.

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

Our priorities

Our strategic objectives, identified in the Framework Agreement governing our relationship with our sponsoring body, are to:

- Support the VTE by administering a fair, efficient and accessible appeals system
- Enhance the quality and consistency of our service to all stakeholders
- Operate with financial and organisational initiative and efficiency
- Build capacity and capability in our staff, learning from their experience and from their feedback.

We have translated these into aims that will assist us to meet our statutory duty.



Strategic objective	Priority	What we will do and why	When we will do it	Current position	Key Indicators of success (KSIs)	KPI/ internal target
Support the VTE by administering a fair, efficient and accessible appeals system	Be an exemplar national tribunal, delivering a local service	Commission a survey of rating professionals on aspects of the appeal process. This will provide feedback from another category of service users to help us identify further improvements in practice and procedure, especially in relation to Check, Challenge and Appeal.	Quarter 1	We currently commission a monthly survey of unrepresented appellants	Having a clear understanding of the requirements of rating professionals for Check, Challenge and Appeal	Increase in customer satisfaction from rating professionals
		Review our on-line appeal forms to ensure that they continue to be written in plain English and are user friendly, avoiding legal jargon where possible and making them consistent in look and feel to assist staff	Quarter 2	There is some misunderstanding about what is required on our forms resulting in unnecessary staff input	Fewer enquiries made to staff about filling in the forms and fewer misunderstandings/ misattributions in submitted forms	VTE Members and staff report improvement in respondent submissions
		Introduce more standard, user-friendly forms for VTE judicial processes to assist consistency and remove unnecessary jargon, writing them in plain English to assist understanding of the appeals process for unrepresented appellants	Quarter 2	Evidence and submissions are received in a variety of formats creating inefficiencies and difficulties at hearings	Better prepared appellants and their representatives and greater clarity of issues for VTE panels	Positive feedback from Appellants
		Implement training events for billing authorities, professional representatives and the Valuation Office Agency to assist them in presenting at hearings so expectations are clear and to assist the judicial decision-making process	Quarter 2	Appears to be a misunderstanding of what is required by BA's and professional reps at hearings	More relevant and clear presentations from respondents and professional representatives making VTE panels' decision making easier	Reduction in postponement levels
		Create off line free information packs for presenting staff from billing authorities and the Valuation Office Agency, to guide them on appeal process including template suggestions for wording decision letters and preparing for hearings.	Quarter 1	The quality of presentations does not always assist their case; or the appellant's; or the panel's understanding	Better understanding of our processes from our users	Increased quality in presentations at hearings

Build capacity and capability in our staff, learning from their experiences and their feedback	Build the diversity and capability of our staff and VTE	Introduce a VTE members' appraisal scheme to assess judicial performance and soft skills in handling proceedings	Quarter 2	Previous appraisal system abandoned in 2011, since then many new members have been appointed	Ability to identify any particular training needs for individuals or groups	Increase attendance of members at training events
		Create on-line training modules on a live platform for staff and VTE members to inform and train on legislative updates, reducing delay in providing updates and the costs of face to face training	Quarter 1	Four Training events held across UK and involves excess travel	Speedier application of new knowledge and more consistency in hearings	Fewer complaints; reduced training budget
		Introduce a lifelong learning strategy that allows staff to develop skills and qualifications which aid future career development and delivers on-line training to VTE Members	Quarter 3	Maturing age profile in both VTS and VTE	Increased capability and confidence of staff and VTE members to fulfil their role. Appraisal analysis on VTE members and tribunal taking staff	Increase staff and VTE Member satisfaction
		Introduce national planning to better deploy staff and VTE members, avoiding where possible long distance travelling (time and costs) to facilitate hearings	Quarter 1	Currently around 20% of hearing days involve staff travelling over 5 hours in the day	Better work/life balance; increased staff satisfaction; reduced T&S costs	Increase in staff satisfaction
		Review the need for more peripatetic working across all staff grades	Quarter 1	Currently 15 home-based staff facilitating tribunals nationally.	A more flexible organisation that can respond to peaks and troughs in workload	<20% of hearing days where staff / members travel > 5hrs
		Invest in customer care training for all staff to equip them for interaction with service users	Quarter 1	Staff handling calls from council/rate payers at point of receiving bills, which can sometimes be hostile	Improved customer satisfaction and reduction in complaints	Overall customer satisfaction at 57% or better; <15 customer complaints In the year

		Continue dialogue with the Ministry of Justice's Judicial Reform Team over VTE recruitment process	Quarter 1	Initial meeting held and issues identified.	More focussed VTE recruitment programme and for VTE to be included as part of JAC's recruitment exercise	Increase in VTE Members from diverse backgrounds and in areas of greatest demand
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	Research technology methods available within the judicial environment that will assist appellants through the appeal process	Quarter 4	We have Texthelp on our website to assist users and can provide assistance at hearings but no other facilities	Improved accessibility and increase in customer satisfaction	Increase in staff satisfaction
		Make available to parties a portal to enable 'drop in' evidence, etc and view information regarding status of their appeal in real time	Quarter 3	Documentation is submitted by parties by email and managed by staff who deal with queries about appeal status	Direct management of the appeal documentation by ratepayers/agents	Improved processes
		Create improved dashboards and management information to meet both internal and external data requirements.	Quarter 3	Information is in place, but new technology permits new ways of working	Board and EMT benefit from improved business reports and information	Improve both performance measurement and executive information development
		Review current telephony to deliver a modernised and more efficient call handling solution.	Quarter 2	Current telephony is old and new technology is available	Customer satisfaction. High productivity/quality in managing of inbound calls	Reduce delay and/or miss calls
		Review and implement solutions to enhance communications by utilising Short Message Service (SMS and) social media as a means of providing notifications and updates.	Quarter 2	Only method of notifying parties to hearings is formal Notice of Hearing and phone calls	Introduction of SMS technology for hearings	Increase in customer satisfaction

		Continue to develop and expand use of tablets by VTE Members at hearings	Quarter 4	IT pilot shows appetite for this technology by VTE Members in hearings	Successful rollout of tablets with document management for hearings	Increase in VTE satisfaction and reduction in delays at hearings.
		Achieving a smooth transition for appellants from 'Challenge' to 'Appeal'	Quarter 1	Previously an automatic proposal to appeal process	A simple process to appeal that meets regulatory requirement	Customer satisfaction on ease of appealing
	Continue to improve customer/ user satisfaction	Provide a dedicated help line to assist parties requiring general information and advice regarding their appeal journey	Quarter 3	All staff currently have responsibility to assist callers but aptitude is variable.	Improvement in customer satisfaction; reduction in complaints	Overall customer satisfaction at 57% or better; < 28 customer service or staff error complaints in the year
		Review the current guidance to ensure that it is consistent, easy to understand and reflects recent changes in the business rates/council tax environment	Quarter 2	Under continuous review but always room for improvement	Better understanding of processes by those attending tribunals to present cases, resulting in greater customer satisfaction	Improve customer satisfaction with our written guidance above 64%
		Review ways of cutting down waiting times from receipt of appeals to decisions	Quarter 2	We aim to list council tax and CCA appeals to a hearing date that is within 5 months of receipt of appeal. We achieve this is about 90% of cases	Speedier access to justice and resolution of cases	Improve on this year's percentages of appeals listed by the target, for each appeal type.

		Carry out in-house an exit survey of our hearing venues to gauge views of all users on the 'local' aspect of our service and adequacy of venues, and identify improvements that could be made	Quarter 1	Previous survey carried out in 2016 since when requirements for venues have changed and new venues used	Positive feedback from parties, staff and VTE panels about the venues we use, including suggestions for improvement so we can gauge whether we have the correct criteria for venue selection	>94% of those responding judge the venue they used as adequate or better
Operate with financial and organisational initiative and efficiency	Seek out efficiencies which leads to greater effectiveness	Research developments in technology to find alternatives to face-to-face meetings with staff.	Quarter 3	Staff meetings are in offices or external buildings	Reduction in travelling and improved work/life balance	Increased staff satisfaction
		Reduce the use of paper at every stages of the appeal process.	Quarter 3	Too much and not always focussed paperwork received for 2010 rating appeals. New CCA regulations permit VTE to dictate how it receives evidence and information	Greater use of electronic communication and electronic platform	Increase number of VTE members opting for electronic comms
		Keep under review the staffing structure to ensure it is able to flex up and down to meet the challenges of workload.	Quarter 3	Staffing structure was implemented to address VTE Practice Statements introduced. Consolidated	Ability to manage workload effectively and to reduce potential delays	Reduction in delay and quality in what we do.
		Develop training to reflect changes in data protection so that managers and Information Asset Owners become exemplars for their teams in following policies and guidance and how they store data.	Quarter 1	Practice Statement introduced in 2018 introduces a different way of working.	Greater understanding by staff on data protection and security issues and reduce as far as possible the risk of personal data breaches	No breaches need reporting to the ICO

Key performance indicators

We have a number of internal and external key performance indicators (KPIs) used routinely by the Board and the Executive Management Team to monitor our performance against the strategic objectives. We regularly review the effectiveness of our KPIs and similarly look at ways that we may improve the presentation of available information. Our published KPIs for 2018-19 and the performance outcome to Quarter 3 of 2018-19 are as follows:

Service provision	Standard/target	Performance to Q3 2018-19
Meet customer expectations in issuing tribunal decisions quickly	Issue 88% of decisions within 1 month of the hearing Issue 100% of decisions within 2 months of the hearing	97% 100%
Implement appeals from Check and Challenge process	List 2017 rating list appeals within 5 months of receipt.	100%
Reduce wasted resource by maintaining deferral rates below 10%	Postpone fewer listed appeals than in 2018-19 (11% of listed appeals)	11%
Reduce wasted resource and delays in hearing appeals	Plan tribunal lists so that 80% or more result in 2 or more cases being heard on the day	81%
Increase operational efficiency	Operational cost per appeal decided is lower than in 2017-18 (£1,358)	£1,432
Manage staff sickness absence	Sickness absence (excluding long term illness) is maintained at or less than last year (3.2 days per full time equivalent)	3.2 days
Ensure accessible high standard hearing facilities that meet customer expectations	Those contacted as part of a survey were satisfied with hearing venues used	70%
Reduce time to payment by increasing automation of financial transactional processing	Improve on percentage of invoices paid within 5 working days of receipt from 2017-18 level (90.8%)	76%

Full details for the whole year will appear in our Annual Report and Accounts.

Our KPIs for 2019-20 build on many of those listed for last year, taking account also of revised processes and tribunal procedures. We will also continue to monitor tribunal user feedback.

Delivering financial efficiency

The VTS receives grant in aid funding from MHCLG for its activities. We recognise that these continue to be challenging financial times for the public sector and we are committed to providing excellent value from the funding entrusted to us. We continually identify and drive forward more efficient ways of working, particularly across our IT and customer-facing services.

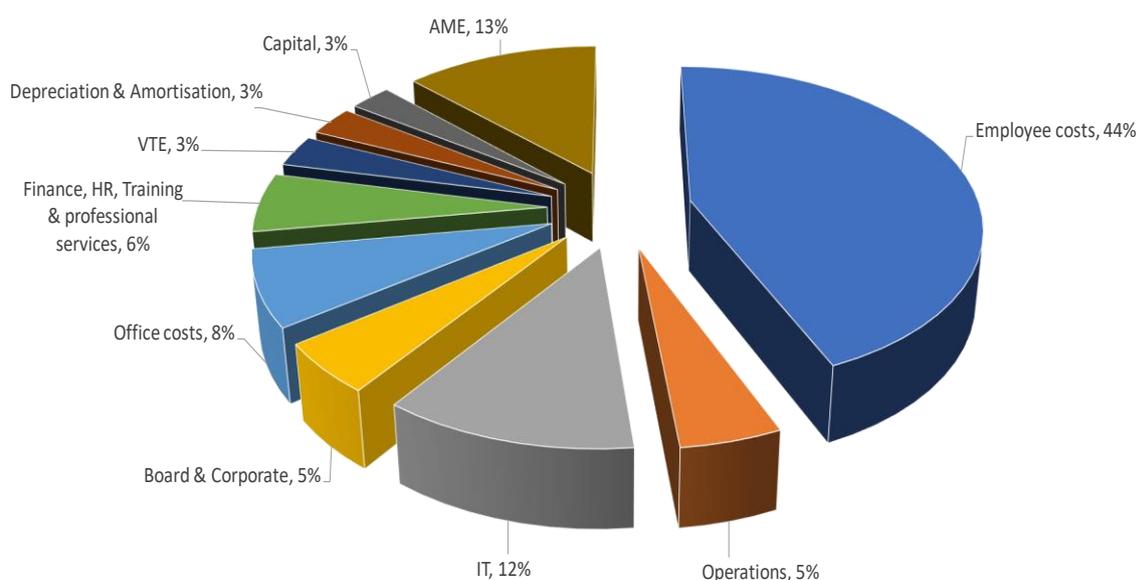
Regulatory changes can create additional costs and processes. However, we will work with our sponsoring department to deliver financial efficiencies whilst we continue to comply with the requirements of our Framework Document and maintaining the statutory service required of us by Parliament.

2019-20 Total Resource Funding

Based on current spending review the total resource funding for 2019/20 is £7,439k (12% reduction from 2018-19). The table below illustrates the breakdown of this indicative funding.

Budget category	£'000
Pay	2,872
Pension payment	370
Total Pay	3,242
Depreciation	222
Non Pay	2,831
Capital	200
Resource Annually Managed Expenditure (AME)	945
Total Resource Funding	7,439

The pie chart below shows the areas of spend our funding is allocated to:



2019-22 Total Resource Funding

The Table below sets out our own estimates of funding needed over the next three years, taking in to account our current thinking regarding staffing, the estate, IT development, appeal volumes and VTE requirements. Naturally, our estimates are subject to consideration and approval from our sponsoring department and subject to wider public decisions.

	2019/20 (£'000)	2020/21 (£'000)	2021/22 (£'000)
Admin - Pay	2,872	2,881	2,944
Admin - Non Pay	2,831	2,491	2,616
Pension payments	370	385	393
Depreciation	222	243	280
Total Admin	6,295	6,000	6,233
Capital	200	100	100
Resource AME	945	945	945
Total Resource Funding	7,439	7,045	7,278

Last financial year we invested in capital development to improve our IT. Our requirement for capital in the next three years is to reflect application developments to 'fine tune' any current technological changes as well as future development of our IT in preparation for revaluation 2021, etc.

Workload

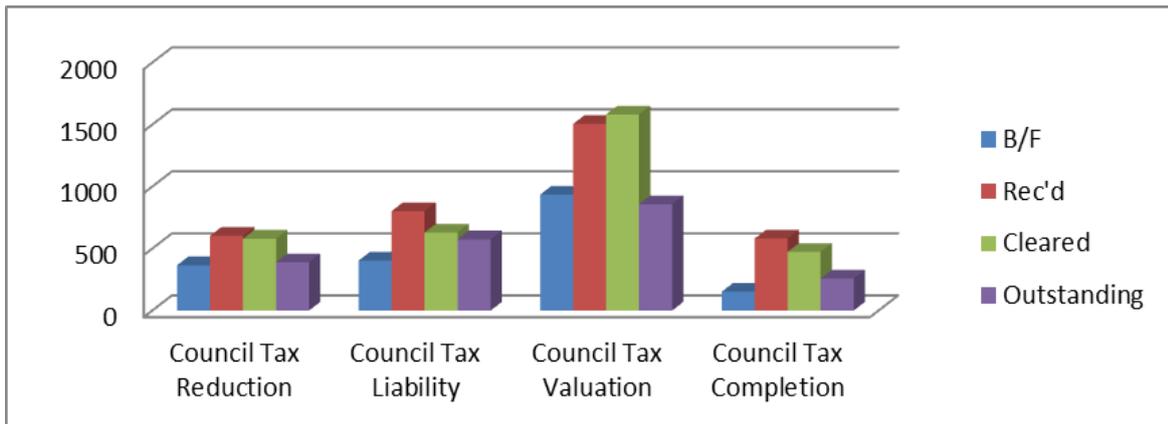
We start this new financial year with 78,991 outstanding appeals. The outstanding appeals are broken down by type below:

Council tax appeals (by type)	
Council tax reduction	389
Council tax liability	575
Council tax valuation	858
Council tax completion	259
Non-domestic rating	
Non-domestic rating (2010 List Appeals)	76814
Non-domestic rating (2017 List Appeals)	16

Our workload comprises a number of appeal types all connected with local taxation of property.

Council tax appeals

The breakdown below highlights how our council tax appeal work has progressed during 2018-19. The volume of receipts across these appeals types has remained consistent year on year and there are no known legislative changes that will impact on our forward projections.

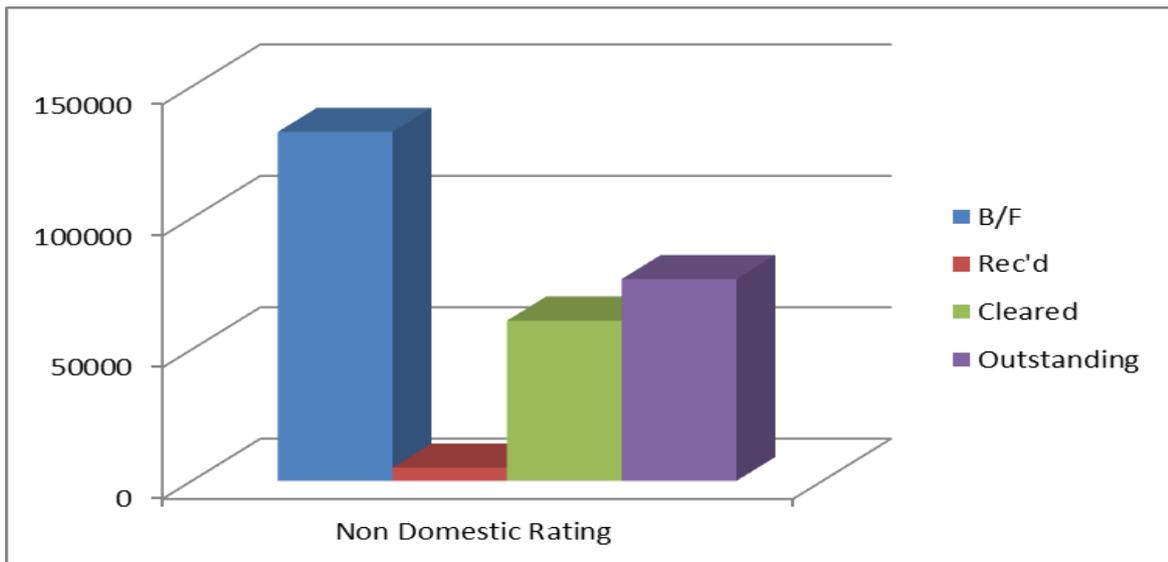


Non-domestic rating appeals

A core focus of our work has been on facilitating the clearance of 2010 list non-domestic rating appeals, resulting in 61,016 appeals being settled. Our aim in the year ahead is to provide a listing for all the outstanding appeals on the 2010 List by 30 September 2019, with the exception of cases held up in litigation or new appeals received under legislative changes following the “Mazars²” case.

The volume of appeals received under CCA (2017 rating list) has been low, 69 appeals received to date. However, this has given us the opportunity to scrutinise appeal activity and to be proactive in ensuring that practices and procedures introduced as part of this reform are well established, ahead of any increase in numbers. We are maintaining a dialogue with the Valuation Office Agency (VOA) and the professional bodies to ensure that we are well prepared for potential increases speculated around the end of 2019-early 2020.

Our commitment remains to list all CCA appeals to a hearing date that is within five months of receipt. The table below provides an overview of how our non-domestic rating appeal work has progressed during 2018-19.



² Rating (Property in Common Occupation) and Council Tax (Empty Dwellings) Act 2018

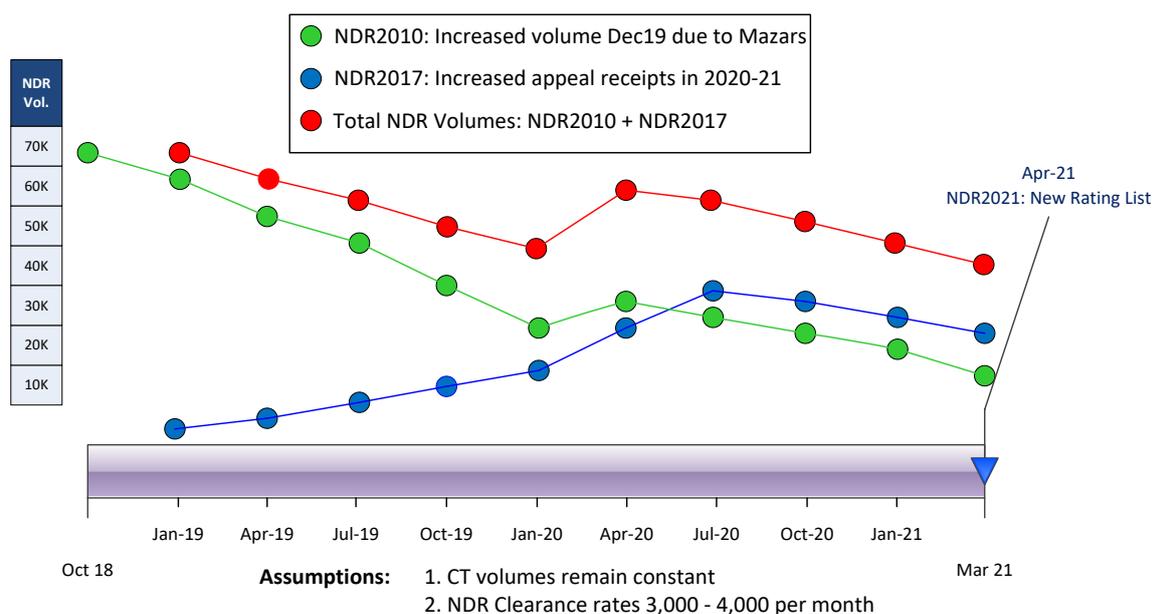
The resource plan for 2019-20 is to maintain consistent listing volumes throughout the year with approximately:

- 240 hearing days per quarter
- 12,000 appeals listed per quarter
- 3,000 business rate appeals and 350 council tax appeals per month.

Future appeal volumes

Although the CCA process has been in force since 1 April 2017, in recognition of the small numbers received to date, it is still too early to estimate how many ‘challenges’ to the VOA that will eventually translate in to appeals. While we had always expected that appeals under CCA would take some time to materialise given that (a) any appeal is subject in the first instance to the formal VOA stages and (b) the new regime needed to embed itself, the small numbers of appeals received to date have not yet clarified the situation.

The graph below can give only an indication of our estimate on non-domestic rating appeal volumes leading up to the revaluation on 1 April 2021. What appears likely is that at the time of the 2021 revaluation, we will be administering appeals on three different rating lists (and under two different appeal systems), which is unprecedented.



The additional challenge to the 2021 Revaluation will be the appeal impact of the 2024 revaluation, which will set the scheme for more frequent three-year revaluations.

Information Technology (IT)

We have moved to lap top use, working off the government Wi-Fi system, which allows us to work more flexibly. Many of our IT services are now cloud based and this has given us greater opportunities in the wider IT world. The investment we have made in IT last year will help us to achieve our priorities by:

- focussing on becoming fully and demonstrably independent regarding our developed appeal system
- allowing direct interaction with the appeal parties
- improve our support to VTE members
- reducing staff resource time on routine tasks
- improving data security
- making financial savings in the IT budget

As a service delivery organisation, we want to explore other technological advancements by investigating how we can bring this technology in to the hearing environment to enhance the user experience better. This includes a paperless hearing where evidence is shared and viewed on an IT platform.

Risks to the organisation

The VTS's risk management process provides a structured approach for managing risk, with risk registers maintained at project, operational and strategic level. Our principle risks and uncertainties are as follows:

Risk description	Mitigation
Uncertainty of workload for appeals received post 1 April under the CCA regulations.	Our IT system has been developed to cope with a large influx of appeals.
2010 Appeals increase with impact of 'Mazars' legislation.	We will list them as part of current processes.
Need to find replacement offices when leases expire in 2020.	We will work with Cabinet Office to identify suitable locations within the Government estate.
Retention and recruitment of key staff	We will look at our retention policy and build in effective succession planning where necessary.
Inability to recruit the VTE Members we need	We will work with the Ministry of Justice's Judicial Reform Team and the Judicial Appointments Commission to identify recruitment possibilities.

Staffing

Our staff are key to our success and we shall continue to help them develop their skills and increase job satisfaction. The impact of recent legislative changes in the non-domestic rating environment will inevitably take some time to work through. Our aim is to ensure that we have sufficient administrative, specialist and technical staff to meet these challenges head on. The need for technical staff to work peripatetically to support the VTE members to provide technical, legal and procedural advice at hearings around the country remains paramount. In 2018-19 the VTS arranged 1100 hearing days, a process that has involved

setting up VTE panels, case managing lists and individual appeals, providing general assistance to appellants and their representatives, issuing statutory notices and then supporting the VTE panel technically at the hearings.

In changing times it is important that we continue to review our staffing structure to ensure that we are able to not only meet the demands of our workload, but also to ensure that we remain fit to carry out our statutory purpose.

Valuation Tribunal for England

Our statutory purpose is to support and provide advice to the VTE. The statutory retiring age for VTE members is 72 and within the next three years there is a significant percentage of VTE Members who will be affected by this retiring age. Discussions with both the Ministry of Justice and the Judicial Appointments Commission has identified the need for a recruitment exercise that will attract applications from a wider cross section, including the rating and surveying community.

The estate

We operate from two offices (London and Doncaster). The London office lease expires in July 2020 and the Doncaster lease in September 2020. We need to consider carefully where we relocate to when these leases expire. The Cabinet Office's Places for Growth program, and any impact on the non-pay admin budget, will inevitably impact on those considerations. However, maintaining our service and meeting our statutory functions is of paramount importance. We shall seek to create an organisational structure that remains flexible and delivers the best possible service for the funds available. We will endeavour to locate our offices where we can retain and recruit the skills we need whilst ensuring our customers and stakeholders get access to services and staff they need.

Governance arrangements to support the Business 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 MHCLG 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 which considers and controls 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 MHCLG through regular Accounting Officer meetings.