

## **MINUTES OF THE 454<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE VISITENGLAND ADVISORY BOARD (VEAB)**

**TUESDAY 12<sup>th</sup> September 2023 at 1000**  
Boardroom, 3 Grosvenor Gardens, SW1W 0BD

### **Present:**

Lady Borwick (Chair), VEAB Chair  
Allan Lambert (AL), Board Member  
Fiona Pollard (FP), Board Member  
Nadine Thomson (NT), Board Member  
Dr Andy Wood (AW), Board Member  
Nigel Wilkinson (NW), Board Member  
Laura Backhouse (LB), DCMS Observer  
Andrew Huggins (AH), Board Apprentice

### **In Attendance:**

Patricia Yates (CEO), Chief Executive/ BTA Accounting Officer  
Andrew Stokes (AS), England and Commercial Director  
Serena Jacobs (SJ), Finance Director  
Lyndsey Turner-Swift (LTS), Deputy Director England  
Suzy Faulkner (SF), Head of Product Development and Distribution  
Debra Lang (DL), Professional Services Director  
Aidan Rose (AR), Company Secretarial Executive (minutes)

### **In Partial Attendance:**

Sarah Green (SG), Guest Speaker  
Rachael Farrington (RF), Head of Tourism Affairs  
Janet Uttley (JU), Head of Business Support Transformation Project

## **1.0 Welcome and Introductions**

### **1.1 Apologies for absence**

1. Apologies were received from Sarah Fowler and Henry Bankes.

### **1.2 Register of Interests**

2. There were no comments made on the register of interests.

### **1.3 Minutes from the last meeting**

3. The minutes from the previous meeting were approved.

## 1.4 Action Tracker

4. All actions on the action tracker were reported as complete.

## 2.0 Corporate Updates

### 2.1 New Chair Welcome

5. The Chair thanked FP for her work as interim Chair and for her help and support during her induction as permanent Chairman.

### 2.2 CEO Report

6. The CEO gave an outline of key activities since the last meeting:

- **Transformation budget** - The business case for the third year of the Transformation budget had been approved by DCMS, and £700k of the £1.2 million activity budget had been committed.
- **The Estates Strategy** – This had been announced and VB/VE would be in situ in Birmingham from April 2024. The 3 Grosvenor Gardens London office will close on 15 December 2023.
- **ALB Review** - We are expecting a draft report of this for fact checking and onward submission to Ministers imminently.
- **Political update** - Two new shadow ministers had been appointed. Thangam Debbonaire [MP for Bristol West] was appointed Shadow Secretary of State for Culture. The new Shadow Minister for Music and Tourism was Barbara Keeley [MP for Worsley & Eccles South]
- **LVEP visits** - The CEO has visited several LVEPs, and while in Manchester met Mayor Andy Burnham.
- **LVEP challenges** - In Wiltshire, the relationship between the local council and VisitWiltshire seems to have changed. With ongoing discussions taking place with local LEP in Oxfordshire, suggesting revisions to their Destination Management Plan. AW and AL suggested that more should be done to make the role of regional leads and LVEPs clear and enabling regional co-operation. FP advised remaining close to regions to understand why quick changes of direction took place.
- **The Bath and Bristol LVEP** – This LVEP felt that VE needed to support the whole LVEP landscape and not be focused exclusively on the DDP.
- **The Board Strategy Day** – This would be held in Edinburgh the following month.

### 2.3 Remuneration and People Committee (RPC)

7. FP reported on the key points from the RPC:

- Organisational Structure proposals were agreed; implementation of the new design would continue for approximately three months.
- The Employee Value Proposition had also been discussed, which focused on innovative ways to be competitive in a marketplace.
- The RPC had looked at work underway on the Pension Fund. They were currently looking at two pension funds: the UK scheme and the US scheme. A Pensions sub-group of BTA Board was to be created to specifically look at the US pension funds.

### 2.4 Audit and Risk Committee (ARC)

8. NW provided an update on ARC:

- ARC had not met since the previous VEAB meeting in June. It was anticipated that a member of the BTA would be appointed as permanent Chair before the next meeting in November.
- On 17 July, the annual reporting accounts for 2022/23 were laid in Parliament and accepted. He thanked SJ and her team for their work on this document.

### **3.0 Review of Strategic Matters**

#### **3.1 A Year in Politics and Implications for BTA**

9. RF joined the meeting and talked through the paper that had been shared.
- LB outlined possible options for the Secretary of State's "Tourism Moment." The Board had a focused discussion around skills and youth as an opportunity for employment and social mobility.
  - Over the medium-term, the Chair emphasised the importance of advocating tourism to Government. The Chair felt that, when they gave presentations to MPs, they could give a snapshot on the value of tourism in each constituency. DL reminded the Chair of VEs statutory remit and the need to be impartial. The Chair agreed.
  - AL observed that tourism could provide immediate economic growth compared to longer-term infrastructure projects.

#### **3.2 DMO Review**

##### **a) DDP Pilot (early learnings and amplification)**

10. SG, who was invited to attend this meeting to give a presentation on Destination North East England, thanked the Board for the opportunity to present, and for recognising the importance of investing in regional infrastructure and tourism.
- SG suggested that the skillset of people was of key importance when LVEPs are being developed into DDPs. People in the visitor economies needed to be trained to work with politicians and senior civil servants to develop influence in those areas.
  - Delivering the DDP was an excellent opportunity but was resource intensive.
  - The DDP had given Newcastle-Gateshead Initiative the leverage to work with major delivery partners and local authorities. The strength of the DDP was in coordinating different groups rather than in direct delivery. It had also given the North East a seat at the table for the Mayoral Combined Authority discussions.
  - Timescale was a challenge – the DDP effectively had only two years and a few months to deliver.
  - NW expressed his view that the LVEPs were crucial in binding together the groups in a region. SG advised that LVEPs in the North-East might be too small to link the private and public sector together effectively.
  - AS felt that the DDP would have been unachievable without having the three LVEPs.
  - AW wondered how the DDP learnings and benefits could be replicated in other areas. He said he would work closely with SG and the North-East region to understand on a granular level what were the key skills and measures of success.
  - SG stressed the importance of a flexible structure. She also questioned whether they should be working primarily with local councils and groups, or whether they should be sitting on mayoral council dealing with top-level partners.

## b) LVEP Programme Update

11. AM presented on the LVEP Programme Update:

- AM reported on good progress. There were now 22 LVEPs, and still on track to reach the target of 40 by the end of the 2024-25 financial year.
- She noted that the West Midlands and the North East would be upweighted as part of DDP amplification, and asked the Board to consider how the rest of England would still be supported.
- NW noted the importance of using accredited LVEPs when building relationships with a regional tourism industry to ensure the benefit of LVEP status and the future sustainability of the LVEP itself.
- AS pointed out that if LVEPs failed to achieve their targets, their accreditation would be removed, so the LVEP should have the premium relationship with the tourism industry.
- LB said there was a huge challenge to make the case for national rollout of the DDP scheme. The 6 per cent growth target would be difficult for regions to meet.

**Action:** The Chair asked LB to consider undertaking a risk analysis for the future.

## 4.0 Activity for Board Feedback or Approval

### 4.1 Commercial and TXGB

12. SF presented the Commercial and TXGB asking the Board to focus on commercial targets, the purpose and main risks.

- SJ observed that the shop was fundamental to supplementing the organisation's funding. There previously had been unrealistic expectations about what the shop could deliver. It was more important than ever to be aware of possible risks and what could be realistically achieved in light of these.
- The Board discussed the Subsidy Act. AS told the Board that Henry Bankes had provided strong cases for DCMS Lawyers. They were still waiting for a ruling and so would proceed as before for the time being.
- SF said they had been very successful in building up a domestic shop over Covid. There were things which used to be sold which were no longer available, so work needed to be done to make these available again.
- AW asked if customer profiles had been mapped. SF said that they hadn't been able to map the customer profiles fully due to budget constraints, but informed guesses could be made.
- The Chair asked if there were gaps in the market where TXGB could have success. SF felt that they could work with LVEPs on ticketed events to provide a link to the VB shop. AS stressed that the VisitEngland Marketing Team worked to advertise events and services in an area; TXGB was an add-on to this work rather than the main focus of VisitEngland.

### 4.2 Quality Schemes

13. JU joined the meeting to present on Quality – modernizing to fuel growth and took the paper as read.

- JU highlighted that the AA were moving in the right direction on delivery and had recently brought Historic Royal Palaces and Royal Museums Greenwich back into the Quality Schemes alongside a positive discussion with English Heritage both accommodation and attraction sides.



- The task and finish approach with the formed Quality Advisory Board was going well and all were contributing to the change in accommodation standards. It was confirmed that the outline fundamental changes to the lower star ratings would be shared with the formed Common Standards group (all nations) after the third meeting of this Board (28<sup>th</sup> September) to enable their view to be shared at the final session.
- She outlined a licensing approach to build the product thus making the star ratings more attractive for online travel agents to engage with us could help.
- The Chair sought views on the accreditation scheme. AW recognised the benefit, but that traction would depend on how much accreditation cost and whether they would see sufficient return for the investment.
- JU pointed out that user-generated opinions online could not be verified, whereas an accreditation scheme would provide a third-party assurance of quality.
- NT asked what other options were available if they did not go with the licensing model, JU pointed out that the growth would continue but perhaps not with the pace of bringing in larger group offerings such as recognizing National Trust Acorns.
- AL pushed back against the argument that consumers distrusted online reviews. He considered it to be the most important thing. JU agreed, but said that there was a perception among consumers that online reviews were being checked by a quality assurance body, when this was not the case. AL pointed out that the main reason organisations wanted to be accredited was for search engine optimization.
- A key part of the scheme was to provide businesses with the guidance and support they needed. It was not good value for money if it was solely viewed as a marketing resource because we would not enter into an assessed only approach to use of product with wider team.
- AL asked if a free entry level scheme could be run. LB and JU explained that DCMS and VE wanted to ensure they understood the outcome of the registration consultation first.
- The Chair raised a point on the current consultation on registration and the impact this might have, expressing concern that VE may be expected to do something but not being given money to fund it. PY said the Board must not agree to do something if the funding or resource was not there.

**Action:** AL will introduce JU to cottage operators/platforms who could talk her through some of the challenges they had had with quality schemes.

- AW asked how this fitted with the VE brand. He broadly supported the scheme, but was worried about basing it on the success of the We're Good to Go scheme, as this came out of a particular set of circumstances at a particular time. He felt that the 'Safe and Legal' terms were probably insufficient. AS responded that he would not recommend using the phrase "Safe, Clean and Legal."

## **5.0 Deep dive**

### **5.1 England Visitor Economy Strategy**

14. LTS and AM presented England Visitor Economy Strategy – Principles and Development and took the paper as read. This was in response to a specific ask made at the previous VEAB that they present on England strategy, and it was a corporate priority for the 2023/24 year.
  - AM asked if the Board agreed with the scope and objectives of the strategy, and asked what their overarching ambition should be.
  - AL pointed out the importance of skills. The Chair agreed, feeling that people were key to the strategy. AW shared these opinions, but thought that skills were already covered under jobs-related headings of the strategy and that they did not need to be specifically mentioned.

- The Chair asked that diversity was added alongside sustainability in the suggested principles. She thought this fitted in with the social element of sustainability.
- PY suggested that “managing negative impacts” of the visitor economy in busy periods should be reframed as “managing success.” She stressed that there was a social benefit to tourism which needed to be emphasised in the strategy.
- AW argued that they should be thinking mainly through the lens of the visitor.
- AM spoke about the suggested pillars. The Chair suggesting adding “communities” to the “thriving and resilient businesses” pillar. The Board agreed. NW suggested reframing the case of maximizing benefits for locals as maximizing benefits for communities.
- The Board discussed the upcoming film tourism markets. AH added that virtual reality would play an increasingly important part in visitor experiences.

**Decision:** AW agreed to be Board sponsor to the England Visitor Economy Strategy.

- AW stressed being clear about what they intend to do and what they do not. LTS agreed, and said they need to be clear what their role was in delivering the strategy.
- NW suggested the word ‘quality’ should be included in the strategy.

## **6.0 Papers for noting/comment**

### **6.1 Risk Register**

15. SJ presented on the Risk Register.

The Chair told the Board that she would meet separately with SJ to go through the Risk Register in more detail. She will raise matters arising at the next VEAB.

### **6.2 Dashboard**

16. LTS reported that they were on track with LVEPs.

## **7.0 Any Other Business**

17. NT told the Board about the success of the Rose Awards.

18. AL noted this was the most challenging period for domestic tourism in recent years. The market had been anticipated to return to 2019 levels, but it hadn’t yet done so. He advised that VisitEngland should be cognisant of this. He said they were looking at poor booking performance, a reduction in demand, increasing cost pressures, and additional regulation. NW added that it was particularly difficult for businesses still carrying Covid debt. AL said that VE was doing well in inbound travel from European markets, especially the Dutch market. PY agreed and said the American market was still showing strong growth.

**Action:** NW asked if the Board could have an update at a future meeting on England research and the domestic data review recently undertaken.

19. AH thanked the VEAB for being allowed to continue in the Board Apprentice programme.

The meeting closed at 1400

The date of the next meeting is the 21<sup>st</sup> November 2023 at 1000.