

**MINUTES OF THE 469<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE  
BRITISH TOURIST AUTHORITY (BTA) BOARD**  
HELD ON TUESDAY 30<sup>th</sup> January 2024 at 10.00  
Tag., 1-5 Poland Street, London W1F 8PR

**Present:**

Nick de Bois CBE (Chair)	BTA Board Chair
Dame Judith Macgregor DCMG LVO (JM)	Board Member (virtual attendance)
Ian Edwards (IE)	Board Member / Wales Representative (ex-officio)
Rt Hon Viscount John Thurso (JT)	Board Member / VisitScotland Chairman (ex-officio)
Peter Gowers (PG)	Board Member
Beth Knight (BK)	Board Member
William Burton (WB)	Board Member (virtual attendance)
Lady Borwick (LB)	VEAB Chair
Mark Taylor (MT)	London and Partners, Observer (virtual attendance)
Duncan Parish (DP)	DCMS (Observer)
Aileen Martin (AM)	Tourism NI (Observer)
Kaveh Navid (KN)	Boardroom Apprentice (Observer)

**In Attendance:**

Patricia Yates (CEO)	CEO/ Accounting Officer
Debra Lang (DL)	Director HR and Professional Services
Serena Jacobs (SJ)	Director of Finance
Andrew Stokes (AS)	Director, VE
Tracy Otabor (TO)	Company Secretarial Executive (minutes)

**In Partial Attendance**

Minister Julia Lopez (Minister)	Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Liz Herridge (LH)	Transformation Director
Satpal Chana (SC)	Deputy Director for Data Analytics and Insights Analytics

**Apologies**

Karin Sheppard	Board Member
Henry Banks	General Counsel and Company Secretary

**Welcome and Introductions**

**1.0 Welcome**

1. The Chair warmly welcomed Aileen Martin, a Board Member of Tourism Northern Ireland and Kaveh Navid, the new Board Apprentice to their first BTA Board meeting. The Chair also noted that this was the first Board meeting following the closure of the BTA's offices at Grosvenor Gardens. This was the reason why it was being held in the offices of Tag, who are the BTA's appointed marketing agency. He thanked Tag for their generosity in providing the venue.

## 1.1: Minister Lopez

2. The Chair welcomed Minister Lopez back to her post as Minister of State for Culture, Media and Sport following her return from maternity leave.  
The Chair gave an overview of the extensive work that had been undertaken at a national level by VisitBritain to seize the opportunities throughout last year with major events such as the Coronation and the Eurovision Song Contest.  
The Chair touched upon the forecast for 2024 with the UK expecting around 40m international visitors who, whilst 3% less in volume compared to 2019, were projected to spend more than that spent in 2019. The Chair explained that despite these signs of recovery, the sector still faced challenges such as rising costs, supply issues and a competitive European market. The Chair highlighted that growth in Europe far exceeded that of the UK and that by 2028 this gap was projected to have widened further. However the work of the BTA in areas such as marketing, the LVEP programme and pilot of the DDP helped to sharpen the UK's competitive edge and help drive regional growth which in turn supported the Government's Levelling Up Agenda.  
The Chair also updated the Minister on key delegations which included international visits to China, the USA and our mission to India as well domestic activities such as Showcase Britain, in which VisitBritain welcomed more than 120 international travel trade buyers for a series of educational visits across Britain. It was stressed that these were important platforms for boosting the UK's tourism economy and, indeed, more generally promoting the UK.  
The Minister invited the Board to give her a clearer understanding of what more could be done to help the tourism industry recover post Covid. Questions such as what type of tourists the UK was trying to attract were posed. The Minister also asked for a breakdown by region in relation to recovery and for a deeper insight into the function of the LVEPs.  
In response to this, the CEO shared some key activities with the Minister which focused on boosting the domestic visitor economy post Covid, these included The GREAT Campaign and the recent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between the British Film Commission and VisitBritain with the intention of boosting screen tourism throughout the UK's nations and regions.  
An insight into VisitScotland's current tourism landscape was also given. JT noted that the Cycling World Championships in Glasgow delivered more economic benefit to Scotland than the Ryder Cup and the Commonwealth Games. JT stressed that tourism created wealth, employment and contributed to the nation's general well-being.  
IE also gave the Minister an overview of the tourism landscape in Wales. There was still much work to be done to educate people on the importance of tourism in Wales and raise its profile. In response to a question from the Minister about local investment, IE explained that Business Tourism was still very new in Wales and new investments such as the new International Convention Centre for Wales acted as a catalyst for growth in the region. It was noted that business tourism spent 60% more than any other type of tourist activity however, the lack of funding to promote such tourism was a real concern.

*The Minister thanked all for their comments and left the meeting at 10.50am*

**IT WAS DECIDED THAT:** The Chair would write to the Minister with further submissions to support the case for adequate funding of business tourism.

## 1.2 Apologies for absence

3. Apologies for absence were recorded for:
  - Karin Sheppard – Board Member
  - Henry Bankes – General Counsel and Company Secretary

## 1.3 Declarations of Interest/Conflicts

4. There were no changes to the Declarations of Interests noted.

## 1.4 Minutes of the Meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2023 (For approval)

5. The minutes from the last meeting were approved.

## 1.5 Matters Arising / Action Tracker

6. Each action was reviewed and the tracker updated accordingly.

## 1.6 Chair's update

7. The Chair reported on his key activities since the last Board:

- Showcase Britain: The event spanned destinations in England, Wales, and Scotland, providing international buyers with firsthand experiences of the latest tourism products and offerings. The initiative aimed to showcase the diverse experiences available for visitors across Britain, encouraging the creation of unique travel itineraries and driving bookings. The Chair reported that the event was a success, however new product offerings reflecting new demands was needed. Strong representation from India was noted with discussions held on visa costs and shopping. There was an appetite from India to include the UK in their product offerings. The Chair commended the team on their efforts for putting the event together.
- ALB Review Engagement Meeting: A meeting between DCMS and the non-executive directors of the BTA and VEAB Boards was held on 29 January to further discuss the ALB Review. The devolved nations were also due to hold a similar meeting in the coming weeks. It was anticipated that the ALB Review would be published at the end of March. The Chair commended the post Review submission process with its willingness to collaborate.
- Joint Strategy Day: In consideration of the Joint Strategy Day taking place in October, the Chair noted that he would be seeking input from Board members on thoughts of VisitBritain's priorities post publication of the ALB Review.
- Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) Progress: The Chair reported that he was pleased with the progress of the ARA, which was in the planning stages and this would be discussed further later in the meeting.
- Organisational Design (OD): The Chair thanked the CEO and DL for their efforts in implementing the OD and asked that the Board join him in showing their appreciation for their commitment in their ongoing work in this area.

## 2.0 Strategic Matters for Discussion

### 2.1 CEO Report, Engagements and Dashboard

8. The CEO took the reports as read and highlighted the following key activities:

- Showcase Britain: The CEO updated the Board on the recent Showcase Britain event which welcomed buyers to the Britain and Ireland Marketplace on Friday 26 January 2024. The CEO highlighted that although Showcase Britain was a success, VB were critically reviewing which events were the most effective for the industry before committing to the 2025 programme, as cost was a large factor with Showcase Britain costing around £600k. The CEO noted a strong resurgence in the Travel Trade industry post Covid and reassured the Board that VB were stronger in this area of activity than they were a few years ago. The CEO noted that the Partnership Director had requested that the business development work of the BTA should be prioritised to increase sales and strengthen commercial relationships. Also noted were various trade missions planned for 2024 which included the Indian and Middle East Mission and smaller roadshows in Brazil and Australia.
- Finance: The CEO gave a brief overview of the latest financial forecasts. A forecast overspend reported to the Board in December had now changed to a forecast underspend of £824,000. By way of explanation, the CEO said that the original forecast had been made in at the start of the consultation stage of the OD process, and that the OD Process had resulted in a

decrease in staff costs for this year, due to staff leavers and slower recruitment.

Partnership income was also better than expected and The Saudi GREAT Futures event had been postponed into the next financial year, with a resulting saving in this financial year. The CEO warned though that the postponement of the Saudi event could lead to pressures on next year's budget.

- England: The accreditation of LVEPS continued to go well with the total appointed now 30. The CEO highlighted that the Southwest was an area of current focus and it was hoped that a LVEP would be appointed for that region shortly.
- Finance Director: The CEO confirmed that the process of recruiting for an interim Finance Director to replace SJ, who will leave the organisation at the end of March 2024, was underway. An agency would be appointed in due course to recruit for the permanent role, however in the meantime, an interim would be recruited for a minimum of 6 months.
- Organisational Design: All redundancies had been completed with costs agreed and within the business cases agreed by DCMS. VB were now selecting for roles in HR, Technology and Marketing. It was estimated there were 15 vacancies which would be filled internally with a small number of more specialist roles going externally. For 24/25 the focus would be on organisational development and embedding the organisational culture.
- Estates: The CEO confirmed that VB were still yet to announce the new office venue in Birmingham as an MOU was still to be signed with DCMS and GPA for the new office. This risk had been escalated to amber on the dashboard. With this in mind, the CEO took the opportunity to ask DP if the signing of the MOU could be one of DCMS' priorities in the coming weeks.
- The Chair asked the CEO to give some context to the Board as to what the Saudi Arabia event entailed. The CEO explained that this was part of the GREAT Campaign where British suppliers are sent out to Saudi Arabia and introduced to Saudi buyers to promote travel across Britain. DP mentioned that the Secretary of State, the Deputy Prime Minister, and the Saudi Crown Prince would be in attendance. The event is expected to take place at the end of April 2024. JM queried if geopolitical events were having an impact on the tourism industry and to the GREAT Saudi Campaign to which the CEO confirmed that there was no notable impact. The CEO reassured JM that the GREAT Saudi Arabia event was not postponed due to the conflicts taking place in the Middle East but rather that it was simply a case of arranging suitable dates to hold the event.
- Engagements: The CEO confirmed that she would be reinstating regular calls with the CEOs of VisitScotland and VisitWales following a recommendation contained in the ALB Review. VB would also be participating in a keynote speech with the London Film Commission.
- The Chair indicated he would be seeking a proactive approach from the engagements scheduling where Directors were notified of key events in good time that would be of interest to them.

### **3.0 Papers for Approval/Decisions**

#### **3.1 Financial Planning**

9. SJ took the paper as read and noted the following:
  - The Year-to-date Expenditure review showed that VB were slightly behind spending plans by £500k. Reviewing the full year and the remaining spend for the year, significant areas of underspends were identified, changing the forecast from a position of £372k overspend to a £824k underspend. Staff costs in December were as expected, delivering significantly high vacancy savings. Activity and Infrastructure spending was also below budget due to phasing. SJ noted that the underspend was an indication that good behaviour in relation to spending was now being adopted within the business.
  - The following actions were being taken to address the underspends and get back to a balanced position: (a) A non-consolidated performance-related payment to staff (b) bids from across BTA to fund new or enhance existing projects, with priority given to projects that deliver against VisitBritain's corporate priorities and KPIs and (c) a number of areas were being kept in view for additional savings with these being reviewed by Directors on a regular basis.

- Underspend to offset Retail totalling £1.2m had been identified since the last update across all areas of staff, activity and infrastructure. There had been an increase in the OD cost from the original budget of £400k to £650k, however VB were running at a 7% staff vacancy rate this year which delivered savings above budget, but this was likely to settle down as OD concluded, with no more savings anticipated.
- An extensive discussion was held to address concerns regarding the non-consolidated pay award. DP asked if the underspend would be wholly used on staff bonuses or if a portion would be returned to the Exchequer. DP noted DCMS' preference for the underspend to be spent on activity. SJ confirmed that no money would be returned to DCMS and that the organisation would use the money on staff bonuses and further business development activities. DL also reassured the Board that the original planned and approved consolidated pay award was cleared by DCMS and would only be paid if this was affordable. As substantial savings were found in the OD work, it was decided that it was reasonable to pay a non-consolidated award to staff to maintain pay competitiveness and to mitigate staff attrition. PG advised that more context behind the decision to award the non-consolidated payment should be provided. It was therefore agreed that a subsequent paper would be issued following the board meeting to directors. IE questioned how the forecasting process could be improved to quantify potential significant shifts in the financial position. The Chair reiterated that the OD was an important factor in the significant shift from the projected overspend to the current underspend position of VB and that this was an isolated event in addition to the unique impact of the postponed Saudi project into the next financial year, but the meeting agreed with the measures outlined to mitigate material forecasting variances.

**Action:** The Chair recommended that a paper be circulated to the Board providing the context and justification for the Non-Consolidated Pay Award.

### 3.2 Annual Report and Accounts Update

10. SJ updated the Board on the preparation of the Annual Report and Accounts (ARA). In short, it was making good progress and feedback that had been received from the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) was to be incorporated into the Report. Key recommendations by ARC included ensuring that the devolved partners were at the forefront of the Report and that England was more fairly represented; not just as a corporate priority. Thoughts on where the ALB Review would feature in the ARA were still being explored, however this would be clearer once The Chair's Foreword was finalised. SJ confirmed that The Chair's Foreword would be shared with the Board in March 2024.
11. SJ also asked the Board to consider and comment on the themes for the Performance Overview and Analysis sections of ARA 2023-24. The Chair thanked SJ and her team for her commendable work on the ARA.

## 4.0 Corporate Priorities.

### 4.1 RPC Update:

12. JM gave an overview of the issues discussed at the recent RPC. Areas of focus included Organisational Design, the People Strategy, Finance Director recruitment and the newly created HR Data Dashboard, which allowed HR to make data led decisions and secure deeper HR insights into performance, staff morale and development. The RPC also explored absence trends, labour turnover and the use of the HR Dashboard as an efficient resource to identify trends across divisions both within and between teams. The next RPC meeting would take place on 30<sup>th</sup> April 2024.
13. The Chair invited DL to explain to the Board the Locate for Your Day campaign which would be rolled out in February 2024. DL explained Locate for Your Day presented a new way of working which replaced the hybrid working guidelines published in May 2021 and represented the next stage in the evolution of how people work to maintain performance and productivity.

#### **4.2 ARC Update:**

14. WB updated the Board on matters discussed at the recent ARC meeting. WB reassured the Board that the issue of the significant shift to an underspend was explored at length and it was concluded that this was an isolated event due to the OD.  
Other points noted was the significant risk in the new HR systems replacement with a cost of £4.7m over 10 years, audit fees increase, the Internal Audit Report and risk ratings around commercial revenue.  
It was also requested by DCMS that ARC focus on cyber security going forward with regular updates on progress.
15. JT enquired about what was being done to train members on Cyber Security. DL confirmed that training was currently being arranged with Equantiis and the Board would be updated when a date had been confirmed.

#### **5.0 Deep Dive**

*LH and SC joined the meeting.*

16. LH took the paper as read. She provided an update on the Building our Future programme, which is a programme that enables the business to deliver the corporate priorities through its products and outcomes over the next 15 months and beyond. SC also provided an overview of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and how it was being deployed through the organisation. SC identified some key benefits of AI to the organisation which included the opportunity for staff to upskill and improve efficiency and output. However, the increased risk of data breaches, cyber-attacks and malicious content was also a concern. SC explained that the BTA would leverage controllable and secure 'clean rooms' to enforce governance and limit access to permissible data only to combat instances such as data breaches and malicious content. SC advised that the use of AI in the organisation would significantly open up the data landscape and would allow more data to reach a broader audience.

*LH and SC left the meeting.*

#### **6.0 Papers to Note**

17. The Chair noted these papers and no comment was brought for discussion at the meeting.

#### **7.0 AOB**

18. There being no further business to discuss, the meeting was declared closed.

The meeting closed at 13:30.