

**MINUTES OF THE 470th MEETING OF THE
BRITISH TOURIST AUTHORITY (BTA) BOARD**
HELD ON TUESDAY 18th June 2024 at 10.00
Visit Britain office, Victoria Square House, Victoria Square,
Birmingham B2 4BP

Present:

Nick de Bois CBE (Chair)	BTA Board Chair
Dame Judith Macgregor DCMG LVO (JM)	Board Member
Karin Sheppard (KS)	Board member
Peter Gowers (PG)	Board Member
Beth Knight (BK)	Board Member
William Burton (WB)	Board Member
Lady Victoria Borwick (VB)	Board member/VEAB Chair
Stephen Leckie (SL)	Board Member/VisitScotland Chairman (ex-officio)
Duncan Parish (DP)	DCMS (Observer)
Aileen Martin (AM)	Tourism NI (Observer)
Marie-Claire Costley (MC)	representing Visit Wales (Observer)
Kaveh Navid (KN)	Boardroom Apprentice (Observer)

In Attendance:

Patricia Yates (CEO)	CEO/Accounting Officer
Debra Lang (DL)	Director HR and Professional Services
Mark Wildig (MW)	Interim Director of Finance
Andrew Stokes (AS)	Director of Visit England
Gavin Landry (GL)	International Director
Henry Bankes (HB)	General Counsel & Company Secretary
Julia Howells (JH)	Company Secretariat Executive (minutes)

In Partial Attendance:

Fiona Macdonald (FM)	Head of Strategy & Business Planning (for item 4.3)
Neil Rami	CEO, WMGC (for item 6)
Becky Frall	Head of Tourism, WMGC (for item 6)

Apologies:

Ian Edwards	Board member/ Wales representative
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1.0 Welcome and Introductions

1. The Chair was pleased to open BTA's first Board meeting in VisitBritain's new Birmingham office. He warmly welcomed Stephen Leckie, Board member and Chairman of Visit Scotland, Mark Wildig, Interim Finance Director, and Julia Howells, Company Secretariat, to their first Board meetings.

1.1 Apologies for absence

2. Apologies for absence were recorded from Ian Edwards. Ian was represented at the meeting, in an observer capacity, by Marie-Claire Costley.

1.2 Declarations of Interest/Conflicts

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

1.3 Minutes of the Meeting of 19 March 2024 (for approval)

4. The minutes of the last meeting were approved.

1.4 Matters Arising/Action Tracker

5. Going forward a quarterly retail update would be included in meeting packs (see paper 7.5) and there would be opportunity for discussion at the September meeting. September's meeting was scheduled to feature a deep dive into the GREAT campaign. Cross-department dialogue with Ministers on business events was paused during the pre-election period and would remain on the action tracker. The Chairman had shared copies of his correspondence with Minister Lopez and thanked KS for her involvement in a related round table with Business and Tourism Ministers.

ACTION: JH to share the Engagements Calendar with the draft minutes. Board members to notify JH of any events they would be interested in attending.

1.5 Chair's update

The Chair reported on major activities since the last Board meeting:

6. Between 14-15 May he had joined PY, the team and sector representatives in Riyadh for the GreatFutures event, which was focussed on building collaboration and partnership. He had hosted a working round table with the Secretary of State, Saudi Tourism Minister and HRH Princess Haifa, led a Destination Britain showcase and attended a number of meetings/receptions. He had been very impressed with both VisitBritain's contribution and that of the GREAT team which had been met positively, and he hoped that momentum would continue in the region. The Government's announcement at the event of the establishment of a Tourism Taskforce was noted. In response to a question on matters arising from official Saudi delegates the Chair reported that the status of Tax Free shopping & VAT and FCDO continuing advice to visitors was raised, plus connectivity and inward hotel investment.
7. NdB had spoken at the BTA Annual Review and had been thrilled by the positive messages being shared and the strong sector turnout. He thanked all involved.
8. The Chair reported on his own position. Mindful of public appointees' roles and responsibilities and code of conduct plus guidance around impartiality during the pre-election period, he had proactively sought advice from DCMS and the Cabinet Office regarding his broadcast work. Following review, both were satisfied that his broadcasting (also covered by OFCOM rules which demand impartiality) did not present any undue reputational risk to BTA and he could continue in his role as Chair. He had also volunteered to control political content on social media (excluding broadcast channel driven content) for the period. DP affirmed that discussions had taken place and that DCMS was content with the outcome. The Board was asked for any comment, and, as none was given, it was taken that all were content with the approach. DL thanked NdB on behalf of the executive for his openness in this matter.

2.0 Strategic Matters for Discussion

2.1 Political update & 2.3 ALB review update

9.

- PY advised that the pre-election period put certain restrictions on areas of work due to purdah. Research, campaigns and social media activity had been paused, media requests were being turned down and follow-up with Ministers fell away. DCMS special approval had been granted for the VisitEngland Excellence Awards, Disney campaign (heavily contracted) and French Olympics activity.
- Annual Report & Accounts approval process (see item 20) and Board reappointments were also paused. Trade mission recruitment for the MEA and Australia missions was scheduled to end in June and would probably need to be extended.
- The ALB review was also paused and would begin again under new Ministers.
- Work on positioning to a new administration was in train with a 100-day plan for Minister engagement being developed as well as a letter from the Chair. Priorities were assumed to be delivering growth and anticipating the levers.
- It was anticipated that the 3-year Spending Review would follow normal timelines: commissioned in the summer; bids by September and conclusion in October/November. DCMS would have firmer details/timelines in mid-July.
- Timing around the Spending Review response and agreeing the organisation's next strategy was discussed (see item 22).

DECISION: The Board agreed to scheduling, if required, an online Extraordinary Meeting in the summer to ensure oversight of the development of strategic priorities ahead of any Spending Review.

2.2 CEO Report & Dashboard

10. PY reported on the Saudi GreatFutures event from an operational perspective. Event legacy included the VisitBritain Arabic website and plans for presence in the Embassy. Business to business had been an emphasis and effort had been directed to making sure the right people were engaged. A lot had been learnt, much around resourcing a full programme, which would inform future trade missions.
11. On 21 May (the day the General Election had been announced) a successful LVEP Parliamentary reception had taken place which had involved 30 LVEPs and 52 MPs. There had been some good levels of engagement and the event would be repeated.
12. PY drew out some dashboard highlights including:
- Independent endorsement by the Evaluation Task Force of VisitBritain's evaluation of the GREAT campaign was noted. A request to explore counterfactuals to instil greater confidence was being explored.
 - Business to business wins from the International team outlined.
 - Inclusion in the Sunday Times Top 100 Place to Work awards was celebrated and tribute paid to DL, her team and the Directors. Commendation had been received in respect of diversity and inclusion, with happiness and pride scores and flexible working policies being called out. Initial staff survey results were looking positive. The Board was thanked for encouraging a framework which supported the communication of colleagues' involvement in strategic delivery.
 - 13% of UK staff were in commutable distance of the Birmingham hub (year end target 19%) and the majority of new appointments were planned to be Birmingham-focused.

ACTION: Staff survey results would be included on a Board meeting agenda later this year.

- In response to a query, MW updated on the competitive tender process for a new cloud-based Finance system (Finance & HR systems now separated). Bids were due to be presented on 20 June. It was hoped that some elements of the HR system might be drawn back into the project. The incumbent provider had guaranteed system support for the interim period. As a result the risk level had been reduced and would remain closely monitored.
- It was agreed that the dashboard was developing into an effective business tool. It was felt that useful additions would be: year to date position and target metrics and an industry context one-page (informed by trends report papers) which might eventually include a link between sector challenges and VisitBritain approach.

ACTION: The dashboard will be amended to include year to date position and target metrics and an industry context one-page.

3.0 Corporate Updates

3.1 VEAB update

13. VB reported on her visits across the regions, beginning in English Tourism Week in the Lake District, followed by the West Country, Scilly Isles, Kent and Liverpool. She had recently seen for herself the many challenges being faced by operators, specifically around the weather, water pollution, seaside town economies, employment etc. VEAB members were working hard on the frontline to promote regional visitor economies and firsthand insight was vital when briefing stakeholders and planning future strategy. She stressed the importance of briefing any new Government on the current state of the sector.
14. She further reported on the recent VEAB meeting, held in Liverpool, at which the LVEP funding models were discussed. She highlighted the importance of the role of the regional VEAB development leads in ensuring that each LVEP had an approved growth plan. VisitEngland would be working on metrics that moved beyond the accreditation of LVEPs to look at how they would deliver growth.
15. DP highlighted a potential move to devolve powers to regional authorities and queried how this might work within the current structure.
16. SL responded to an invitation to comment about Scotland's strong performance, touching on an established national industry-led Tourism Strategy, good international visit numbers, airport investment, easy to navigate cities, the draws of Edinburgh, culture, food and whisky, but also the challenges of: a mixed picture for rural areas; a drop in domestic visits; ability to make profit and increasing pricing inhibiting reinvestment.

3.2 ARC Update

17. WB reported that the central focus of recent meetings had been the Annual Report & Accounts (see item 20).
18. WB reported on other considerations which included: Finance system procurement which remained on track and review of a digital asset management report to ensure internal compliance. Completion of the annual ARC effectiveness questionnaire concluded that current arrangements were satisfactory, however there was aspiration for greater diversity on the Committee and additional skills, specifically cyber (external experts were being used in the interim). Two members had attended an NAO briefing which had advised on the roll-out of new Audit Committee standards in early 2025. An additional ARC meeting had been scheduled for September 2024.

3.3 RPC Update

19. JM reported on the 30 April meeting. Current staff survey headlines and the Sunday Times award were encouraging given the changing landscape and Committee's objectives. The Committee had probed the next phase of the People Strategy with its new priority areas of: diversity, culture, leadership and technology (presentation by the Director of Transformation noted). The RPC had considered the opening of the Birmingham office and increasing capacity in the London office and would monitor hybrid working. Members of the People Board would attend the next Committee meeting. It was noted that the 2024/2025 pay remit has been delayed by DCMS.

ACTION: CEO/Secretariat to ensure an opportunity can be found for Board members and staff to mix at the September Board meeting taking place at Cannon Bridge House.

4.0 Papers for approval

4.1 Annual Report and Accounts 2023/24 (ARA)

20. WB paid tribute to the team for successfully bringing together a considerable amount of data and to ARC members for their conscientious review of the report. MW, in his interim role, was commended for his oversight of the final stages of the project. Key discussion points raised included:
- PG congratulated the team on the year end results: strong performance on metrics; no overspend on allocated budget; a clean audit opinion from NAO; moderate level of assurance from the Government Internal Audit Agency; and no substantive issues of irregularity or impropriety.
 - JM felt the whole process had been run well and was pleased with the way feedback had been dealt with.
 - A lessons learnt paper would be provided to the September ARC meeting.
 - The Board thanked ARC for its thorough oversight of this important piece of work.

The ARC recommended the Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 to the Board.

DECISION: The Board approved in principle the Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 and delegated authority to the ARC Chair, alongside the CEO/Accounting Officer, for clearing any minor adjustments that may arise in the period between 18 June and the date the ARA was laid in Parliament.

4.2 Finance report

21. MW reported that two months into the year finances were tracking forecast and risks were being monitored.

4.3 Joint Board Strategy Day

22. PY explained that this year a longer-term approach was being taken as VisitBritain was in the last year of its current 3-year strategy coinciding with the last year of a spending review. FM joined the meeting to discuss current plans for the 15 October Strategy Day in Birmingham. Key points raised by members included:
- Given anticipated timings around the Spending Review (see item 9) discussions in October would be too late to influence any bid and too early to consider any outcome.
 - It was felt that the overarching organisational strategy was broadly timeless and the date of the strategy day should remain – albeit a level of flexibility might be required re. next

level detail.

- More opportunities to talk together; with fewer invited guests to address the Boards.
- Devote as much time on the day to big issues/strategic priorities (suggestions: AI, technology, sustainability, resilience to shocks); less time required for context.
- Robust preparation to get the best out of the Board's time on the day – management team to provide an analysis-informed draft proposal, with options, which can be adjusted following the Spending Review outcome. Pre-read may include devolved nations' tourism strategies.
- Future strategy could be shaped by sector challenges, levers/barriers to tourism growth and VisitBritain's view of what it could do more of to drive growth.
- PG suggested that one approach could be considering the GREAT and DCMS funding streams separately.
- JM suggested inviting Government department observers.
- VEAB Board members would join the BTA Board for the external inputs discussion and would meet separately in the afternoon to discuss VisitEngland and its strategy. The BTA Board discussion would be focused on VisitBritain (to be flexed dependent on ALB review outcomes).

DECISION: It was agreed that the focus of the Joint Board Strategy Day should be the Board's review of an analysis-informed draft proposal, with options, from the management team.

ACTION: FM to rework the Strategy Day programme to reflect Board feedback.

5.0 Deep Dive – Middle East & Asia – Improving our Competitive Position

23. The Board was pleased to welcome International Director Gavin Landry to provide an update on the international state of play, strategy and challenges. GL was delighted to have the opportunity to present to the Board. He paid tribute to his team members for their support in building the pre-read paper. Key points raised during the deep dive discussion included:

- Promising growth opportunities in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, India and China
- UK performing well in competitive markets due to social media impact, good and consistent trade relationships, student travel, improving visa services
- Lack of Tax Free shopping is impacting on types of visits
- Positive impact of devolving some internal funding to the three international markets noted
- Targeting the premium experience traveller – curated product, longer stays, higher spend
- Developing regional products for the whole UK to drive dispersion – working in partnership e.g. North East DDP, WeGo
- Regional spread incremental and will be driven by: regional roots, airline investment; building the right products for the right market; packaging-up (initially for trade)
- Changes in India/China markets providing valuable opportunities – focus on student travel and in China working with social media key opinion leaders
- AS recommended revisiting the Discover England market training product

6.0 Guest Speaker – Neil Rami, CEO, West Midlands Growth Company (WMGC)

24. The Board was delighted to welcome Neil Rami and Becky Frall to the meeting. WMGC was a long-standing partner which had been instrumental in the decision by VisitBritain to open its Birmingham office. Key points of the presentation and following discussion included:

- Introduction to WMGC and the region
- Strong visitor economy that continues to grow – both leisure and business sectors are exceeding pre-2019 levels
- West Midlands Combined Authority has secured greater devolution with a single settlement

- deal to deliver on regional priorities, including the visitor economy
- WMGC worked with DTI, DCMS and VisitBritain on the 2022 Commonwealth Games, relationship continues resulting in the region becoming one of the first DDPs
 - Since the Games a strong inward investment pipeline including international and business tourism activity
 - WMGC drafting the International Strategy for the whole region, key focuses: target markets, connectivity, major events
 - Support for VisitBritain's regional approach and encouragement to build on this – cross government department approach to support areas in need
 - Challenges/barriers to visitor economy growth: capacity/resource; perception including geography, short-term lets, border management, visas

NR & BF were thanked for their contribution and they left the meeting.

7.0 Papers for noting/information

25. The Chair noted these papers and no comments were raised.

8.0 AOB

26. There being no further business to discuss, the formal part of the meeting closed at 13.30.

END