

MINUTES OF THE 457th MEETING OF THE VISITENGLAND ADVISORY BOARD (VEAB)

Tuesday 10 September 2024 at 0930
Invicta Room, Crowne Plaza Hotel
Stephenson Quarter, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Present: Lady Borwick (Chair), VEAB Chair
Allan Lambert (AL), Board Member
Fiona Pollard (FP), Board Member
Nigel Wilkinson (NW), Board Member
Nadine Thomson (NT), Board Member (online)
Rebecca Norton-Price (RNP), DCMS Observer
Mel Harradine (MH), Board Apprentice (online)

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
Debra Lang (DL), HR and Professional Services Director
Robin Johnson (RJ), Director of Global Marketing (online)
Henry Bankes (HB), General Counsel and Company Secretary
Janet Uttley (JU), Head of Industry Development
Julia Howells (JH), Company Secretarial Executive (minutes)

Apologies: Sarah Fowler, Board Member
Andy Wood, Board Member

1.0 Welcome and Opening Remarks

1.1 Welcome

1. The Chair opened the meeting recording the Board's thanks to DDP Destination North East England and its partner organisations, for an inspirational evening (9 September) launching the North East's Regenerative Visitor Economy Framework at Newcastle Cathedral.

1.2 Apologies for absence

2. Apologies were received from Sarah Fowler and Andy Wood.

1.3 Register of Interests

3. Were as per the current Register of Interests.

1.4 Minutes from the last meeting

4. The minutes dated 5 June 2024 were confirmed as an accurate record of the meeting.

1.5 Action Tracker

5. The majority of items were concluded. Tourism revenue raising would be discussed later in the agenda.

1.6 Chair's Update & Diary

6. Diary noted. The Chair had spent time over the summer visiting destinations on the south coast. Next week she would visit Norfolk and Suffolk, hosted by AW.

2.0 CEO's Updates

2.1 CEO Report

2.2 BTA Update

7. The CEO reported on early engagement with the new government which included planned meetings for all ALBs with the Secretary of State. A date for a meeting with the BTA and VEAB Chairs was being arranged. The new Minister was understood to be particularly focused on international outbound and seaside towns. He was planning to host two tourism conferences per year. The ALB review remained on hold.
8. The new government had undertaken a review of all campaigns including GREAT. Ratification was expected that GREAT would continue and, pending that, Q3 work would proceed at the Accounting Officer's risk. The Co-op and Gateway campaigns had been paused and Starring GB continued in its planning stage in advance of launch at UK Inbound. The Los Angeles Consul General had made the decision to postpone the Great Futures event planned for autumn 2025 to April 2026. The CEO had spoken with the new Swedish Ambassador on mutual support for tourism growth and Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) announcement (which launched today).
9. The CEO reported on recent/current/future missions taking place in Bordeaux, Australia, India and Brazil. The Bordeaux event with the Liverpool sponsorship delegation underlined the importance of building relationships with regional mayors reinforcing VEAB's role and driving funding for tourism growth.
10. Cabinet Office had confirmed Pay Remit guidance of no more than 5% for any increase of the current wage budget, with a test as to whether that budget was affordable (no additional funding was available). The application of the affordability test meant that a 5% increase for all staff was not considered affordable and modelling continued.
11. The expectation was of a one-year Spending Review (SR) announcement in the autumn budget followed by a two-year announcement at the end of the financial year. The assumption was for a roll over for year one with some seed funding for areas that will make a difference in years 2-3.
12. Strategic communication of the organisation's values and productivity would be key, both in terms of SR and briefing the new government. Providing clarity around structures and their impact, adding weight with emphasis on communities, businesses and individual stories. International marketing focussing on specific regions might also be an option.
13. **ACTIONS:**

The CEO to share a copy of Lord Bassam's follow up report on the future of seaside towns with the Board published in July 2023.

CEO/RNP to find a solution to convening a meeting between the Chairs, CEO and new Minister. It was agreed to invite the Minister to the LVEP conference on 17 October.

2.4 Joint Board Strategy Day

14. The CEO introduced October's Strategy Day programme. In light of feedback on organisational capacity and workload: how activity might be affected by funding constraints; agreeing essential and non-essential activities; requesting a review of statutory duties; and further deployment of third-party service delivery, were suggested as additional topics for consideration. The replacement of the value of 'pace' with 'impact' was discussed.
15. **ACTION: The CEO to consider the suggestions made for Strategy Day focus.**

2.3 Dashboard & DMO Review

16. LTS stated that the KPI dashboard report was in a reasonably good place. She confirmed that the new format worked and was manageable. The November report would provide a clearer picture as to whether year end targets would be met. She expected a new iteration for 2025/26, possibly taking in LVEP/industry impact.
17. The East of England had been awarded LVEP status in June 2024. AW was thanked for his involvement in the process. Growth Plan reviews were progressing well. LVEP account managers communicated the plans' themes and priorities to DCMS; these and other regional reflections would inform the England Strategy. Activity/engagement was ramping up with strong interest in business events, traction with the Access Guide, Toolkits and Webinars and positive feedback on VE support.
18. Training had paused to allow focus on the Learning Management System launch. This major project had the potential to reach significant numbers; 30 LVEPs were signed up and future plans included roll-out to SMEs. The team was congratulated on the encouraging response to its face-to-face training.

3.0 Corporate Updates

3.1 Remunerations and People Performance Committee (RPC)

19. FP reported that at its 3 September meeting the Committee had considered: the results of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) audit, noting some areas to grow; the Employee Value Proposition; and an initiative to communicate non-financial employment benefits. The People Survey results had been broadly positive, and the team was congratulated. Areas for future focus included workload, learning & development, wellbeing and bullying and harassment (B&H). It was confirmed that B&H training would be rolled-out across the organisation, including to members of both Boards. The main discussion had been on the Pay Remit (as reported in item 10).
20. **Action: DL to circulate the BTA Deep Dive People Survey paper to VEAB members.**

3.2 Members' Reports

21. AL confirmed that the 2024 season remained challenging for many operators in the South West. Main concerns continued to include transport and water pollution, plus regulation, taxation, cost of living, and the impact of last-minute bookings and taxation/regulation of second homes.
22. NW concurred a similar picture in the North West and talked further about the impact of perceptions around water pollution. Tourism numbers remained c.80% of pre-pandemic levels and costs continued to increase. He highlighted the cumulative impact of existing and emerging legislation on sector growth (e.g. employment law). NW had recently hosted and fed back regional issues to Rebecca Risby of DCMS.
23. NT reported on technological and media matters, including a new focus on the automation of itineraries, pricing strategies and demand management. A realism check was being sensed around AI re. accuracy, reliability, cost and return. Media trends were showing a decline in broadcast TV and an increase in streaming, YouTube and radio audiences (esp. around the 15-24 age group).
24. FP advised that Bath's Roman Baths had just returned to pre-pandemic value levels (based on higher yields and lower customer numbers). She highlighted concerns that recent social unrest and crime levels were causing London to be perceived as a dangerous place by overseas visitors, a notion that was not being helped by certain press and social media reports focusing on the issue.
25. The Chair provided a report from the Plymouth and Exeter area following a recent visit. 2023 had seen recovery almost to pre-pandemic levels. Current concerns included: inflation; staff shortages; energy costs; supply side challenges; uncertain weather; customer caution; losses incurred during Covid and increasing costs of debt, resulting in closures/part-time openings. Availability/cost of finance meant many businesses' normal cycle of investment was being deferred.
26. RNP confirmed she would advocate points raised back to Treasury.

4.0 Deep Dive – Update on VisitEngland.com/Brand

27. RJ took the paper as read. The Board noted progress with the England Brand project and the redevelopment of VisitEngland.com. Discussion included the following key points.
 - VE's new website would be aligned with the VB site for efficiency and be built on the latest version of the Drupal platform which would be constantly upgraded. Site security was a priority; DL noted the current SR bid includes a Security Operating Centre for the site.
 - Reducing the number of pages on the website for greater impact was endorsed.
 - The majority of website costs were funded through the capital budget. A case was being made to DCMS for this budget's baseline to be reset.
 - There was confidence that the revised brand procurement process would bring forward the right creative agency. Final pitch stage would comprise bids from three agencies before appointment at the end of September.
28. The Board was content with the minor updating of the VE logo but did not support rolling out an initiative which would incur costs to third party businesses. It was felt that internal resource and effort would be more effectively directed to the brand proposition project.

5.0 Strategic Matters

5.1 Regenerative Tourism

29. JU took the paper as read. There was broad support for proposed actions. Updates and discussion included:
- Due to long-term sick leave some more resource would be needed to deliver actions planned for the remainder of 2024-25.
 - Good foundations had been set, moving into year 2 there would be some impactful stories to communicate.
 - Following user testing the decision had been made to progress with the Regenerative Tourism Handbook (launch in October). It was designed to provide a tailored approach for the user, would be available from the shop and would be supported by a series of webinars, round table conversations etc.
 - Umbrella identifier work was stalled whilst advice sought on EU legislation and broader trends.
 - Could the drop in visitors to nature between 2022-23 be linked to accessibility: transport, costs, parking? Might the move to electric powered vehicles change infrastructure need?
 - Was new resource needed to provide confidence in moving around rural areas e.g. Countryside Code. And how to reach non-digital audiences?
 - Absolute clarity was needed on VE's role (5 key pathways). To benchmark impact data gathering would need to begin now (sources: LVEPs, apps). And how would this information feed up to VB?
30. **ACTIONS:**
JU to pick up partnership work with the Wildling app with SF.
JH to circulate the Regenerative Tourism Handbook with the draft minutes.

5.2 Partnerships

31. JU took the paper as read. The Board endorsed work to date including the planned focus to build a domestic partnerships strategy and associated VEAB reporting framework. Discussion points included:
- Extension of current work with tier one stakeholders focusing on explaining destination landscape changes/clarifying routes for support, measuring/demonstrating value and making sure the right people were involved in conversations.
 - The positive impact of involvement in Railway 200 celebrations and recent Food & Drink roundtables.
 - Support for work with the Institute of Tourist Guiding encouraging its modernisation and promotion of its offer.
 - Board members were interested in being invited to any related partnership events.
32. **ACTION: LTS to share dates for upcoming events, including roundtable programme (as mentioned in item 39).**

6.0 Discussion Topic – Tourism Revenue Funding

33. AS took the paper as read. Since the Board's last discussion on this topic the new government had taken power, but as yet had not indicated a firm position on a visitor levy. Some Metro Mayors were considering introducing a visitor levy as an option at a local level.
34. The Board voiced a number of concerns about visitor levies, notably:
- How any tax would benefit the sector, specifically in rural and coastal areas?
 - Who would bear the cost the visitor or business?
 - International competitiveness
 - Why further tax a sector where growth and improvement were being encouraged?
 - Lack of awareness of any unintended consequences of the levy.
35. RNP noted that DCMS hoped to be at the heart of any discussions on tourism revenue funding and was broadly aligned with the Board's feedback.

7.0 Papers for noting

7.1 DCMS BTA Framework 2024-27

36. The revised DCMS BTA framework agreement, which set out how the two organisations operated together, was noted. There were a number of advantageous updates, demonstrating DCMS's confidence in the organisation, including the extension to 2027 and increases in the value of what could be procured without DCMS approval. RNP stated that she was delighted that the agreement had been signed and published.

7.2 2024-25 Board meeting plans

37. It was confirmed that the Board's next meetings would be: 12 November 2024 – London; 11 March 2025 – Shildon, County Durham; 3 June 2025 – location aligned to the Awards for Excellence; 9 September - Bristol/south-west (venue TBC); 18 November 2025 – London.
38. **ACTION: AS to circulate an update on 2025 meeting plans when the VE awards venue was known.**

8.0 Any other business

39. LTS thanked all Board members who were each taking part in a series of roundtable discussions. Outputs would feed into the Joint Board Strategy Day on 15 October and the LVEP conference on 17 October.
40. As BTA/VEAB has a statutory role in advising the Government on tourism matters there was an expectation that representatives would be involved in supporting the Minister's plans for a Tourism conference (see item 7). Clarity of VEAB's role in the event and a session on how to work with government were suggested.

41. In response to a query on previous Government consultations it was confirmed that the short-term lets registration scheme was now in the alpha stage of development with industry partners.

42. ACTION: RNP to report back on planning use classes and package travel regulations consultations.

43. SJ was warmly welcomed back to her VB/VE role.

44. DL reminded the Board of closed session guidance.

45. On behalf of the executive team the CEO thanked the Board for its commitment, support and spirit of encouragement.

There being no further business to discuss the formal part of meeting was closed at 1305.

The date of the next meeting - 12 November 2024

END