

MINUTES OF THE 473rd MEETING OF THE BRITISH TOURIST AUTHORITY (BTA) BOARD

held on Tuesday 28th January 2025 at 10.00

Boardroom, 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
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)
Michael Bewick (MB)	Board Member Wales representative (Ex-officio)
Duncan Parish (DP)	DCMS (Observer)
Karly Greene (KG)	Tourism Northern Ireland (Observer)
Kendra Blumsky (KB)	Boardroom Apprentice (Observer)

In Attendance:

Patricia Yates (PY/CEO)	CEO/Accounting Officer
Debra Lang (DL)	Director HR & Professional Services
Serena Jacobs (SJ)	Director of Finance (online)
Andrew Stokes (AS)	Director of VisitEngland
Henry Bankes (HB)	General Counsel & Company Secretary
Nick Khinchikashvili (NK)	Financial Controller (for item 4.3)
Richard Nicholls (RN)	Head of Forecasting and Intelligence (for item 6.2)
Julia Howells (JH)	Company Secretariat Executive (minutes)

1.0 Welcome and Introductions

1. The Chair opened the meeting welcoming new attendees: Wales representative Michael Bewick; Tourism Northern Ireland observer Karly Greene and 2025 Boardroom Apprentice Kendra Blumsky. He thanked VisitBritain's marketing agency TAG for hosting the meeting. It was noted that KS and PG's reappointments had been confirmed, both for another 5-year term. This was JM's last meeting as her final term as a Board member ended on 1 March. The process to recruit JM's successor was with DCMS. DP expected the role advert to be issued in February. VB added that two VEAB roles would be recruited for at the same time.

1.1 Apologies for absence

2. There were no apologies for absence. BK had to leave at 11.30 and KG had to step out at 13.00.

1.2 Declarations of Interest/Conflicts

3. As per the current register. Board members had been contacted earlier in the month to review their statements of interest and were reminded to advise the Secretariat of any changes as soon as they occurred.

1.3 Minutes of the Meeting of 3 December 2024

4. Following the correction of MB's role to 'Wales representative', the minutes were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

1.4 Matters Arising/Action Tracker

5. Of the two ongoing items, the Retail review was on the agenda and the executive team were asked to continue flagging events for Board attendance with plenty of advance notice. JM and BK were thanked for joining BTA and VEAB Chairs at the Showcase event on 23 January.
6. **ACTION: The CEO to advise the Board of the annual Review date as soon as this was confirmed.**
7. Ministerial engagement progressed with his attendance at World Travel Market and Showcase events, support for the Starring Great Britain campaign and attendance of the Manchester Visitor Economy Conference on 29 January.

1.5 Chair's update

8. The Chair reported on a successful Showcase event attended by 120 buyers from 17 markets. Observations included US and Canadian pillars for selling the UK resonating well with the Starring Great Britain campaign, France being considered Britain's leading competitor, the need to make the visa process more attractive and strong support for the 2-year visa offer for China. Responding to the desire for more trade missions he felt that there must be models to make missions cost neutral. The Chair highlighted the Minister's attendance of Showcase and referenced his follow-up letter included in the Board pack. He commended the Events team for their exemplary work and the fantastic setting of Hampton Court Palace.
9. The Chair drew attention to the pressure certain areas of the organisation (specifically the Finance team) were under and the broader impact this had.

2.0 Strategic Matters for Discussion

2.1 CEO's Update

2.2 CEO's Engagements

2.4 GREAT Update

10. The CEO talked through her reports. Following engagement at Government level there was more optimism around the level of GREAT funding. The BTA had been invited to join a steering group for the GREAT Futures event which would take place in Los Angeles in May 2026.
11. DCMS core funding for 2025-26 was a flat cash settlement, plus some additional amounts confirmed verbally (full report in item 4). Discussions continued around funding for the DDP/LVEP programme. The lack of clarity around funding made business planning a significant challenge and with the implementation of a new Finance system and ARA preparation added to the strain on the Finance team.
12. The CEO's report covered an encouraging first meeting of the Visitor Economy Council, which was co-chaired by KS. She noted that the Minister had written to the nations' Tourism Ministers inviting them to meet.
13. PG was invited to provide an update on the newly formed Soft Power Council which he had joined. Key feedback on its first meeting included:

- Membership reflected a wide group of interests with strong focus on the arts, cultural and education sectors. Tourism was flagged as PG's experience area. The Council's objectives were still to be finalised but the Foreign Secretary and Secretary of State for DCMS were clear that the high-level objective was supporting UK foreign policy and the Government missions, particularly growth, through the effective co-ordination of soft power assets.
- Discussion at the meeting had included discussion of the importance of ensuring that the UK brand was modern and forward-looking, possible routes to support the key Council objectives and the desirability of leveraging opportunities presented by our strong position in education, sport and the creative industries.
- PG suggested that given these objectives and emerging possible priorities, it would likely be constructive if BTA could continue to consider how these might best be reflected in future activities, building on the example set by the close links between the visitor economy and creative industries shown in the work already undertaken on Starring Great Britain.

14. PY was pleased to announce that today saw the formal launch of the Starring Great Britain campaign. It had involved a great deal of hard work and was resulting in excellent engagement and support, including content provided by 40 UK Ambassadors, the nations' CEOs and LVEPs. In response to the Chair's point about the campaign providing a perfect and timely opportunity to crystallise BTA's role and demonstrate its value, DP concurred but advised that different messaging would be required for different Government audiences (e.g. Treasury would require the economic story/data).

2.3 Dashboard

15. The CEO advised that GREAT results were tracking above target and was confident that ROI (return on investment) would be met. Financial contributions were just below forecast (mainly due to purdah) and were expected to hit year end targets. Business to Business leads were down as Chinese buyers had not been able to secure visas for the DBMEA event in India. Website hits were slightly down but Starring Great Britain would drive traffic to meet year end targets. Three more LVEPs had been accredited.

2.5 Retail Review Update

16. The paper was taken as read. Key discussion points about the planned June review included:
- The team had done a good job with the current business model in difficult circumstances.
 - The current model placed strong dependency on the TfL contract continuing.
 - BK recommended that the June discussion should focus on whether it was possible, given operating within an ALB environment, to develop a viable e-commerce strategy.
 - All related areas, such as the costs of supporting the shop by the broader BTA team, the VAT position of the shop and the overall impact on the BTA's resources should be included.
 - PG recommended that the June paper should include facts/targets as an aid to focus the discussion (e.g. what did viable look like, cost base, organisational costs, opportunity costs, product exposure).
 - Members were reminded that Subsidy legislation meant that Grant-In-Aid could not be used to fund the shop.
 - DP acknowledged that the shop could be said to address some elements of market failure, especially for SMEs, but suggested that the current model should be reviewed to ascertain how relevant this remained.
 - MB suggested work should be done to provide more regionally diverse product.
 - BK was thanked for her helpful input in her role as Retail sponsor.
17. **ACTION: The June review deadline was confirmed by the Board as optimum time to review commercial options for the shop. AS to bring an e-commerce review paper to the June Board meeting with full costings of the options.**

3.0 Strategic Planning

3.1 Review of BTA Strategy (work in progress)

3.2 Corporate Priorities sign off

18. The CEO talked through proposed corporate priorities for the year 2025-26. Subsequent discussion included the following points:
 - Next year would be a transitional year as funding for 2026-29 was expected to be announced in June
 - PG advised prioritising items to deliver on the political agenda (e.g. growth targets, dispersal, added value etc) based on the biggest levers and areas within VB/VE control
 - The Chair emphasised the importance of proposals being prioritised and must be able to demonstrate concrete evaluation models for outcomes
 - The target of 50 million visits to the UK by 2030 was felt to be achievable
 - DP cautioned that strong bids (based around jobs, development, regional growth supported by good evaluation) from DPPs could mean funding goes to them and not to VE
 - Discussions continued with DCMS around a Cybersecurity approach to suit the organisation
 - MB welcomed the document, affirmed Visit Wales's support for the strategic partnership framework and reminded of the need to talk about dispersal across the nations and regions
19. **DECISION: The Board approved the 2030 vision and the work in progress 2025/26 corporate priorities as presented, noting placeholders where CSR funding was still to be confirmed – in particular the funding for the England DMO landscape (regional leads and DPPs).**

4.0 Financial Planning

4.1 2025/26 High Level Budget

20. SJ reported that 2025/26 baseline funding had been confirmed as a roll-over. Capital funding and additional coverage for the National Insurance increase had been communicated verbally.
21. As part of the SR commission for 2026-29, and capital budget for 2026-30, SJ had recently led the submission of a complex and time-consuming line by line zero-based budgeting exercise and a workforce level review. This had included prioritisation of VB/VE activity according to its delivery on Government priorities and clearly measurable outcomes. Included in the exercise was a 2% cut and a pulling out of the lowest rated 20% of spend.
22. SR assumptions included: a roll-over in GREAT funding from the Cabinet Office, DPPs all funded; retail contribution at the current level; the continuation of the VE Quality Scheme; technical efficiencies (HR system/website); and savings around staff and activities. It was confirmed that the inclusion of a salary increase percentage was not a firm commitment and was dependent on Treasury guidance and other factors.

4.2 Current Financial Position

23. SJ reported that the current position was a very small overspend but was confident of a year end position of a small underspend, subject to no unforeseen issues or accounting adjustments. She advised that DCMS had been fully updated on the financial position. The Chair and the Board thanked SJ and her team for the huge amount of work being carried out.

6.0 Discussion topics

6.2 Board Effectiveness Review

24. Three providers had submitted costed proposals to undertake the review. Following discussion around the benefits of using a consultant who had a good understanding of a relatively unique organisation or a fresh set of eyes, and also considering value for money, a recommendation was made to appoint Stanton Marris. JM reminded that Stanton Marris had undertaken the last two reviews and felt them to be very competent. The Chair thanked Board members for their contributions to the review's content and HB for his work on this item over the Christmas period.
25. **DECISION: The Board approved the recommendation to appoint Stanton Marris to undertake the 2025 Board Effectiveness Review.**
26. **ACTION: HB to contract Stanton Marris to undertake the review.**

4.3 ARA Planning

27. NK joined the meeting to introduce the plans and timeline to complete the 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts. He confirmed no changes to accounting standards. It was reminded that it was the Board's responsibility to review and approve the ARA. WB advised that ARC had reviewed its role in the process and would consider the full report, not just figures, to ensure a consistent approach. PG highlighted the need to balance statutory information with narrative which promoted BTA and how it added value. The Chair's introduction would include clear messaging, supported by evaluation metrics, targeted to key audiences. PY advised that due to pressure on the Finance team, there would not be the opportunity, as previously hoped, to report on sustainability beyond legally required obligations.
28. **ACTION: NK/SJ to ensure the ARA production adheres to timeline. The next step being drafting narrative, including the Chair's and CEO's introductions, for review by 13 March.**

5.0 Corporate Updates

5.1 RPC

29. JM reported on the RPC meeting which had taken place on 14 January. Anti-Bullying & Harassment training would be rolled out to the Boards at an appropriate point. After full investigations two whistle-blowing cases had been closed down. Lessons learnt had included earlier communication between the RPC and ARC Chairs, which had been added to revised Committee TOR (see item 8.4). The emerging new People Strategy had been presented by members of its cross-organisation Shadow Steering Board. The Committee endorsed work to date, specifically the collaborative approach. There had been a deep dive into HR data, including absence statistics. Trends were comparatively good against benchmarks. It was felt that hybrid working was driving down short-term sick leave, although longer-term absence around mental health, stress and well-being issues remained. Although there were no major issues in the area, a fresh look would be taken at performance management. RPC terms of reference (TOR) reviewed and approved.
30. Given JM's departure, the Committee had appointed VEAB member Fiona Pollard (FP) as its new Chair. WB would fully adopt the Chair of the Pension Advisory Board role that he and JM had shared and BK would act as Boardroom Apprentice mentor.
31. **DECISION: The Board agreed that when FP attended BTA meetings to provide RPC updates she was welcome to attend the whole meeting.**

32. **ACTION: RPC TOR approved for publication.**

5.1 ARC Report

33. WB reported on the ARC meeting which had taken place on 21 January. The Committee had reviewed the Internal Audit Report (noting good progress) and approved the annual audit plans from the NAO. The Fraud policy had been reviewed and a note made in the minutes around the role of the Chair of ARC being proportionate to the size of the organisation. WB was pleased to report that procurement issues were being progressed and the Finance system implementation and India operating issues were heading in the right direction. ARC TOR reviewed and approved.
34. **ACTION: ARC TOR approved for publication.**

6.2 Inbound Tourism Forecast

35. RN joined the meeting and drew out some of the highlights from the 2024 report and 2025 forecast. He advised that a 3% growth rate would be required to deliver the target of 50 million visits by 2030 (2010-19 trend patterns and relative share considered).
36. The general consensus was that the forecast indicated some growth but there was no room for complacency as more growth was needed and this depended on a number of complex factors being addressed.
37. Other issues discussed included a perceived post-Covid downward shift in business travel, a soft domestic market, the 'squeezed middle' of the industry and impact on dispersal/jobs/ investment and the lack of tax-free shopping provision.
38. **DECISION: The Board approved the 2025 Inbound Tourism Forecast.**

7.0 Policy update

39. DL outlined the work being undertaken to review and refresh policies, drawing attention to the Policies Register which set out the review cycle and Committee oversight. Five policies which had been reviewed and endorsed by either ARC or RPC were recommended for approval. PG pointed out a missing word in item 2.2 of the Board Travel & Expenses policy.
40. **DECISION: Subject to the minor correction identified, the Board approved the Grants Management policy, the Delegation of Authority policy, the Recruitment policy, the Board Travel & Expenses policy and the Staff Travel & Expenses policy.**

8.0 Papers for noting

41. The Board acknowledged the papers issued, and approved updates to ARC and RPC terms of reference recommended by the relevant committee.
42. The Chair paid tribute to JM at her last meeting before her final term as a Board member ended. He thanked her wholeheartedly, touching on her exceptional balance of skills, and commitment to the organisation for over 6 years including a period serving as Interim Chair. JM spoke warmly of her time with BTA over a pivotal period. She highlighted the importance of keeping an international focus and expressed her gratitude to everyone for such a positive experience and for their friendship.

The meeting was closed at 1325.
END