

## **MINUTES OF THE 459<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE VISITENGLAND ADVISORY BOARD (VEAB)**

**Tuesday 11 March 2025 at 1030**

The Hackworth Room, Locomotion

Shildon, County Durham DL4 2RE

**Present:** Lady Victoria Borwick (Chair/VB), VEAB Chair  
Allan Lambert (AL), Board Member  
Fiona Pollard (FP), Board Member  
Nigel Wilkinson (NW), Board Member  
Nadine Thomson (NT), Board Member  
Sarah Fowler (SF), Board Member  
Laura Backhouse (LB), DCMS Observer (online)  
Katie Panagou (KP), Boardroom Apprentice Observer

**In Attendance:** Patricia Yates (CEO/PY), Chief Executive/BTA Accounting Officer  
Andrew Stokes (AS), England and Commercial Director  
Serena Jacobs (SJ), Finance Director  
Debra Lang (DB), Director of HR & Professional Services  
Henry Banks (HB), General Counsel and Company Secretary (online)  
Janet Uttley (JU), VE Head of Industry Development (for item 6.1)  
Julia Howells (JH), Company Secretarial Executive (minutes)

### **1.0 Welcome and Opening Remarks**

#### **1.1 Welcome**

1. The Chair thanked the team at Locomotion for hosting today's meeting and providing the Board with a volunteer-led tour of the national railway vehicles collection. She thanked Suzanne Donnelly, Customer & Revenue Growth Director of the Great British Railways Transition Team, who had spoken virtually to the Board in advance of the meeting. VB was pleased a connection had been made with this group and looked forward to taking the relationship forward as improving the transport network is vital for tourism.
2. LB was welcomed back after Maternity Leave. She and HB both joined the meeting online. VEAB Boardroom Apprentice Katie Panagou was welcomed to her first meeting.
3. Dr Andy Wood had resigned from the Board on 28 February 2025 after 5 years of service. The Board paid tribute to him and his contribution to the work of VisitEngland (VE). The Chair, AS and NW highlighted the energy and enthusiasm he had brought to championing careers for young people across the sector, driving the establishment and funding of the Norfolk and Suffolk LVEP and his role on the LVEP accreditation panel.
4. The Chair reminded members that she would be undertaking annual appraisals of members over the next month, and that placeholder invitations for the 2026 Board meetings would be circulated shortly.
5. **Action: The Chair to contact VEAB members (as appropriate) during March regarding annual appraisals. [completed]**
6. **Action: The Secretariat to schedule 2026 meeting dates when approved. [completed]**

#### **1.2 Apologies**

7. There were no apologies for absence.

### 1.3 Register of Interests

8. The updated register was noted and members were reminded to forward any amendments to the Secretariat.

### 1.4 Minutes from the Last Meeting

9. The minutes dated 12 November 2024 were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

### 1.5 Action Tracker

10. On the one outstanding action, LB referenced the change in Ministers and noted that some areas were live pieces of work.
11. **Action: LB to provide updates on the outcomes of Government consultations on planning use classes, the visitor registration scheme and package travel regulations.**
12. SF noted that the Planning & Infrastructure Bill would be presented to Parliament later in the day and queried how this was being viewed by DCMS through a tourism lens.
13. **Action: LB to make inquiries and issue a summary note re. DCMS's view of the Planning & Infrastructure Bill through a tourism lens.**

### 1.6 Chair's Update & Diary

14. Noted. English Tourism Week runs 14-23 March. The Chair would be visiting Derbyshire and the Peak District including meeting representatives of the devolved authorities.

## 2.0 CEO's Updates

### 2.1 CEO's Report

15. PY provided an update on the Government's new Visitor Economy Advisory Council (VEAC). This now comprised a group of high-level, mainly private sector, representatives, currently co-chaired by BTA member Karin Sheppard with the BTA attending as an observer. Work progressed at pace with three working groups (Inbound; Whole of the UK; Skills & labour, with customer experience and business events running as threads throughout) established and the next meeting planned for 10 April. LB added that a Visitor Economy Growth Strategy roadmap was being co-created with DCMS and Deloitte had just begun work on an investment thesis. PY referenced an intervention from the Mayor of the West Midlands around how tourism provided foundation level jobs to address youth unemployment. NW queried how the VEAC's TOR aligned with VE strategy and how the Council heard the voice of SMEs.
16. **Action: In response to NW's queries, LB to explore when the VEAC TOR and meeting minutes will be posted online, and feed back on how the Council heard the voice of SMEs.**
17. **Post meeting note: All VEAB members have been invited to the Visitor Economy Engagement Forum in Birmingham on 10 April.**
18. The CEO confirmed that uncertainty around funding remained challenging. Written confirmation of the 2025-26 rollover core funding remained outstanding.

19. Verification of BTA's GREAT funding, for work beginning 1 April, was not expected until the end of March. Following the suggestion in December of a review of funding the Minister had used *Starring Great Britain* to advocate for BTA's GREAT allocation.
20. **Post meeting note:** 2025-26 roll-over funding was confirmed in writing on 12 March 2025. Confirmation of Cabinet Office GREAT funding remained pending - a GREAT programme board is now in the diary for 31 March.
21. The *Starring Great Britain* campaign was launching successfully with events in the US, France, Germany, the GCC and Australia, aligned in places with the launch of the new Bridget Jones film. Strong support continued from the FCDO with over 30 supporting videos from Ambassadors.
22. GREAT funding had been secured for the LA Futures event. The new LA Consul General was an advocate for tourism, was well engaged with the VB team on the ground and hoped to host a *Starring Great Britain* event to coordinate with a visit to the west coast by British Ambassador to the US Lord Mandelson.
23. Another significant scheduled project was the Osaka Expo in May. Plans potentially included UK national and B2B days, a Manchester showcase and attendance by the BTA Chair, however involvement remained under review in respect of spending taxpayers' money.
24. PY also reported on her attendance of the Council of the North on 27 February. A collaboration, supported by the regional Mayors, to drive a shared vision for the North, including an ambition to double tourism numbers by 2030.
25. In response to a point by SF, AS advised that the North-East DDP's Regenerative Visitor Economy Framework was well supported (by the Mayor and seven local authorities), was bedding in and being applied to all strategic development in the region.
26. In response to FP's query around how devolution would re-focus CEO/Chair's visits, PY advised that the priority would be structured pitches to regional Mayors around VE delivery, featuring messaging around LVEP impact. The DMO structure enabled strong LVEP engagement with the *Starring Great Britain* campaign. The North York Moors *Starring You* video was shared after the meeting.
27. It was confirmed that BTA Chair Nick de Bois would stand down on 31 October 2025 at the end of his current term. Planning for the recruitment of a new Chair was underway. VB reminded Board members of the current campaign to fill two VEAB vacancies and asked members to share information across their networks, focusing on the need for relevant skills/knowledge and regional diversity.

## 2.2 Update on current DCMS approach and how it is working with arm's length bodies

28. LB shared her thoughts and answered questions around operating in the context of the Government's aspirations for devolution and providing local leaders with tools to deliver growth.
  - She confirmed that the LVEP structure would be unaffected by devolution, which was at the DDP level.
  - She indicated though that although no final decision had been made on funding mechanisms, whether via VE or direct to regional Mayors, there was discussion of the likelihood of funding being provided direct and she would therefore recommend VE should engage with all the regional Mayors.

### **3.0 Finance update**

29. SJ presented the 2024/25 Finance update. She was pleased to report that the forecast showed that VE was on track to be within budget for the year.
30. SJ talked the meeting through the draft 2025/26 budget. Although discussed with DCMS the budget remained unconfirmed until full SR details were received. Key features of the draft budget included the continued funding of the LVEP programme and two DDP pilots. Members thanked SJ and requested greater detail for each budget line, in particular, in relation to the research budget.
31. **Action: SJ to provide Board members with a more detailed budget 2025/26 analysis. JH to add the Finance slides to the Board meeting folder.**
32. **Action: SJ to lead a deep dive into the budget at the June Board meeting.**

### **4.0 Strategic Matters**

#### **4.1 VisitEngland Strategy & Purpose discussion**

33. The CEO and AS were thanked for drafting a summary note of the previous evening's discussions around VE's role and purpose delivering to the Government's agenda in a devolved landscape, and within budget constraints. PY recapped on thinking around:
  - Protecting the foundations: showing delivery of growth and regional dispersal
  - Programmes where VE has the expertise and is doing the 'right thing'
  - Projects: Seaside Towns – this would require a funding bid
  - How VE would flex its offer to support devolution, working with regional Mayors and working with LVEPs in areas without regional Mayors
34. Key discussion points included:
  - Strong support for protecting the foundations of the LVEP programme and delivery via the DMO network, noting Ministers' interest in DDPs and need for a flexible approach for different Mayors.
  - Questions around future funding, in a devolved landscape and via bids to other sources. Plus VE's role as DDPs develop and LVEPs mature.
  - Understanding that the Seaside Towns project would require additional funding and a partnership network, both within competitive environments.
  - Agreement that the project aligned with the Government agenda including: growth; skills; sense of place, coastal communities, support for working families.
  - LB indicated that the strategic outline under discussion reflected the correct direction of travel.
  - FP felt that only bold directives would attract additional funding and recommended evaluating and reprioritising current work in order to resource new projects.
  - On reprioritising activities: were there any areas of significant investment that could be adjusted?; consulting LVEPs/RDLs to prioritise business support areas; review of training approach; could training be monetised?
  - AL supported moving forward with current framework and strategy until there was clarity on the future.
  - FP underlined the need to be prepared and signal that the organisation was ready to enter dialogue.
  - In considering future role and approach, NW drew attention to VE's TOR as set out in clauses of the BTA Framework Document 2022-27 6.1.3.1 – *Lead and enable a*

*sustainable and resilient visitor economy in England and 2.3 - ...the Secretary of State will agree the specific priorities of the BTA within a Chair's Letter, issued to the BTA on an annual basis. It was confirmed that the annual letter aligned with the SR had not yet been received.*

- 35. **Action: CEO to present an updated strategy and purpose paper at next meeting to reflect member input and funding position.**
- 36. **Action: As per NW's request, the CEO to follow up with DCMS to request the Chair's letter.**

## **5.0 Corporate Updates**

### **5.1 Members' reports on activities since the last meeting**

- 37. NW reported on a positive LVEP conference (11 February) and Parliamentary reception (25 February) and commended Rachael Farrington and the team for delivery of an excellent event. The LVEP accreditation panel continued its work.
- 38. NT had attended the Marketing roundtable (November 2024). She highlighted discussion around strategy and creating more of a welcome for international visitors. She suggested revisiting the Marketing strategy once the SR had been understood and corporate priorities set.
- 39. **Action: The Marketing strategy would be reviewed at the September meeting.**
- 40. AL reported on uncertainty and varied market performance in the South-West region. He flagged the negative impact of Government policy and rail network disruption on smaller businesses.
- 41. FP relayed intelligence received that insolvency was at its highest rate since 2008, with c.600k companies dealing with financial stress. She reported on the Family Imagination Digital Experience Leaders Day. A key takeaway from the big attractions was the positive impact of membership, in many cases driven by a blockbuster event and resulting in a new type of connected audience.
- 42. Staffing trends often acted as an economic indicator. It was noted that a number of industry partners were undertaking restructure and seasonal recruitment appeared easier than since before the pandemic.

## **6.0 Deep Dive – Visit England Awards for Excellence**

- 43. JU attended for this item. She was thanked for her work leading VE's successful partnership with this year's Railway200 celebrations which was reflected in the meeting venue and speaker.
- 44. The 2025 Awards were now contracted to take place on 4 June in the Corn Exchange, Brighton. A number of Board members were already involved in the judging process.
- 45. After comprehensive discussion it was agreed that the event delivers, but at too high a cost. The Board asked the Executive to do more work on a cost neutral approach for 2026 and viability of increasing sponsorship that might align to a day conference for LVEPs.

46. It was also agreed that for the 2025 event there should be a “test and learn” on ticket pricing, but the cost be kept realistic. FP agreed to work with the Events team going forward to reduce procurement costs.
47. **Post meeting note:** Additional industry, stakeholder, supplier tickets for the Awards for Excellence 2025 will be sold via the VB shop platform.
48. Noted that decision on viability of the event after 2025 would need further discussion at the Board meeting in June. Some regional Awards have already begun in their entry process (Cumbria/Herefordshire) with events in June/July and change would need careful handling, a delayed decision beyond June would be difficult.
49. **Action: JU to develop an updated agreed recommendation for the 2026 Awards for Excellence as a cost neutral event to be presented at the June Board meeting. NB: JU to discuss procurement costs with FP.**

## **7.0 Website Update**

50. Rescheduled to the next meeting. The link to the website was sent to VEAB members after the meeting.

## **8.0 Committee Updates**

### **8.1 ARC report**

51. NW reported on a routine meeting on 21 January. SJ advised that subsequently the LVEP process had been granted a substantial assurance rating. This would be reported to the ARC meeting on 25 March and formally to the Boards afterwards.

### **8.2 RPC report**

52. FP reported that the meeting on 14 January had noted the conclusion of two whistleblowing cases and had received an update on the developing People Strategy, a second update was due at the Committee's next meeting on 29 April. It had been BTA member, Judith Macgregor's, last meeting and FP had been appointed to succeed her as Committee Chair. The VEAB thanked FP for agreeing to take on this role.
53. DL advised that following approval of the policy, Anti-Bullying & Harassment training would be rolled out to both Boards, including issue of pre-read information. The VEAB agreed to a face-to-face training session at a future meeting (after June).
54. **Action: DL to arrange for the VEAB members to be issued with pre-read information and to be provided with Anti-Bullying & Harassment training (in September/November).**

## **9.0 Papers for noting**

55. The dashboard had been introduced as an evolving business tool. It would be updated to reflect evaluation of the new VEAB strategy/ 2025-26 corporate priorities and would be positioned earlier in the agenda so the Board could discuss VisitEngland outcomes

56. **Action: New targets will be discussed and agreed, and a revised Dashboard will be presented at the next VEAB meeting this will also include new evaluation criteria to assess purpose, methodology, findings and recommendations against intended goals to achieve outcomes. Dashboard to move to the front of agenda to be used to assess VisitEngland progress against objectives.**

#### **10.0 Any Other Business**

57. There was no other business.

The meeting concluded at 13.50

The date of the next meeting – Wednesday 4 June 2024, DoubleTree by Hilton Brighton Metropole, Brighton

END