

# MINUTES OF THE 474<sup>th</sup> MEETING OF THE BRITISH TOURIST AUTHORITY (BTA) BOARD

held on Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> April 2025 at 11.00-14.00

Boardroom, BTA offices

Victoria Square House, Birmingham B2 4AJ

## Present:

Nick de Bois CBE (Chair)  
Peter Gowers (PG)  
Lady Victoria Borwick (VB)  
Michael Bewick (MB)  
Duncan Parish (DP)  
Karly Greene (KG)  
Kendra Blumsky (KB)

BTA Board Chair  
Board Member  
Board Member/VEAB Chair  
Board Member/Wales representative (Ex-officio)  
DCMS (Observer)  
Tourism Northern Ireland (Observer)  
Boardroom Apprentice (Observer)

## In Attendance:

Patricia Yates (PY/CEO)  
Debra Lang (DL)  
Serena Jacobs (SJ)  
Andrew Stokes (AS)  
Henry Banks (HB)  
Julia Howells (JH)

CEO/Accounting Officer  
Director HR & Professional Services  
Director of Finance  
Director of VisitEngland  
General Counsel & Company Secretary  
Company Secretariat Executive (minutes)

## Apologies:

Karin Sheppard (KS)  
Beth Knight (BK)  
William Burton (WB)  
Stephen Leckie (SL)

Board Member  
Board Member  
Board Member  
Board member/VisitScotland Chairman (Ex-officio)

## 1.0 Welcome and Introductions

1. The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting noting the smaller group of attendees due to apologies and a vacancy on the Board following the end of Dame Judith Macgregor's term. Due to other work commitments WB had advised that he would stand down from the Board on 1 August, he had already stood down from his ARC and PAC roles. It was confirmed that the campaign to recruit Dame Judith's successor would also be used to recruit WB's replacement.

### 1.1 Apologies for absence

2. Apologies had been received from KS, BK, WB and SL. Notwithstanding that, there were sufficient Board members in attendance and hence the meeting was quorate.

### 1.2 Declarations of Interest/Conflicts

3. As per the register dated 25 March 2025. Board members were reminded to advise the Secretariat of any changes as soon as they occurred.

### 1.3 Minutes of the Meeting of 28 January 2025

4. The minutes were approved as an accurate record of the meeting.

## 1.4 Matters Arising/Action Tracker

5. The Chair reviewed the action tracker. Board members were reminded they could request to attend events on the Engagement Calendar if practicable. All were encouraged to attend VisitBritain's Annual Review which was returning to its traditional October slot (21 October). A formal review of retail/the VB shop would take place at the June meeting. An internal working group, supported by BK, had been convened and an interim update was tabled (paper 6.2). The Chair thanked colleagues for taking part in interviews with Andrew Jackson which would feed into the Board Effectiveness Review. Andrew would present his interim findings also at the June meeting.

## 1.5 Chair's update

6. The Chair reflected on a time of political and economic uncertainty and the challenge this brought to the management team in evolving strategy and delivery across the year . He underlined the Board's role as a sounding board and support during this time in particular.
7. He commended the pertinent Tourism Trends paper (6.1a).
8. Board Effectiveness Review conversations with Andrew Jackson had covered maximising the involvement of devolved nations representatives, specifically around sharing best practice, common challenges etc. He had already spoken to SL on this matter and the other members present agreed to a post Board meeting discussion in June.
9. **Action: JH to convene a post Board meeting discussion for the Chair and devolved nations representatives on 17 June.**
10. The Chair reported on a visit to Stanstead airport, with Director of Partnerships Louise Bryce, to understand more about future expansion and VB's approach to exploiting commercial partnerships. He had enjoyed a helpful discussion with the new CEO of The Celtic Collection and had attended February's LVEP conference, which he felt had been a positive event.
11. The Chair formally confirmed that he would stand down from his role when his current term ended on 31 October. The process to recruit his successor was underway with the finalisation of the recruitment advert prior to the campaign's public launch. It was hoped that his successor might be able to attend the Strategy Day on 14 October.
12. 109 applications had been received in response to the recent BTA Board member recruitment campaign. The Chair, DP and an independent representative from English Heritage would undertake initial sifting on 4 April in advance of interviews and a recommendation to the Minister. The priority would be filling the Chair of Audit & Risk Committee (ARC) role. Recruiting for two vacancies offered an amount of flexibility. The Chair would update the Board after interviews had taken place.

## 1.6 ALB review update

13. DP advised that the ALB review was still with Ministers. Given the change in circumstances, particularly funding, PG's suggestion of reviewing ALB review responses was supported. DP did not feel that a request to amend responses would be problematic.
14. **POST MEETING NOTE:** This has been overtaken by the news that the Government is to review all ALBs to decide whether they should exist or be abolished or brought within the Department. This will be completed quickly within the next month or so.

## 2.0 Strategic Matters for Discussion

### 2.1 CEO's Update

15. The CEO reported on *Starring Great Britain* 6 weeks after its launch. The campaign continued to be very well received by stakeholders, trade and consumer markets (17m views of online videos and a 99% view through rate). It was driving attitudinal change around soft power, Britain as a welcoming and exciting destination, as well as delivering regional/national spread.
16. She advised that DCMS had formally confirmed BTA's core funding for 2025/26 as a roll-over, with a number of small uplifts to cover the National Insurance increase, some capital expenditure and a Security Operating Centre to mitigate against cyber-threat.
17. Disappointingly at the previous day's GREAT Programme Board it had been confirmed that VB's GREAT funding for 2025/26 had been cut significantly compared to the previous year. Tourism continued to be a crucial element of the GREAT campaign, and Cabinet Office Minister, Ellie Reeves, who chairs GREAT, emphasised that this was a difficult short-term budget reduction to be managed this year. The CEO explained that the Government divided budgets between mission critical and mission adjacent. She noted that tourism has been reclassified as growth driving and Tourism Minister Sir Chris Bryant had asked that BTA be prioritised for any underspends in mission critical budgets during the year.
18. The CEO outlined initial concerns around the impact of such a significant funding cut including: the ability to continue attracting private sector funding and to operate in all current markets at the same level as now.
19. In response to queries around confidence that the 2025/26 GREAT budget allocation was not the new baseline, DP reiterated this being a transitional year, that the cut was not at all specific to GREAT/tourism/BTA, but was the result of the budget division stated above.
20. There was support for the suggestion to write to the Minister quantifying the consequences of the funding cut. This might include risks to delivering the Minister's target of 50M visitors by 2030 and the impact on regional/national disbursement. It was recommended to reference both economic data and illustrative examples in support, and to ensure strong emphasis was placed on the work of the BTA in supporting the Government's growth agenda. DP advised that the DDP pilot evaluation included some helpful information. The Chair also recommended referencing organisation risk.
21. The CEO confirmed that the senior executive team was shortly meeting to discuss the impact of the funding reduction on budget planning for 2025/26. At present, it was believed that any underspend in mission critical areas would be known by September and hence the discussions would be focused on being in a position to argue strongly for those to be allocated to the BTA should any become available.
22. **ACTION: The CEO to draft a letter from the Minister on behalf of the Chair expressing strong concern in the cut in GREAT funding**
23. The CEO noted that SJ was involved in DCMS commissions on technical efficiencies/work forecast planning. She advised that the VisitEngland (VE) marketing budget was pending approval and was unable to be spent.
24. In advance of item 5, the CEO spoke about the implications of devolution for VB and VE. Although nothing had been confirmed, funding DDPs via VE appeared to run counter to current devolution principles. Learnings from the pilots indicated that DDPs' expectations of VB included a direct relationship and a programme of international trade, media, engagement and education activity.

She reported on her attendance of the Council of the North on 27 February; a powerful collaboration, supported by the regional Mayors, to drive a shared vision for the North, including an ambition to double inbound tourism numbers by 2030, with a major focus on inbound.

## 2.2 CEO's Engagements

25. The CEO highlighted her attendance at ITB, including the launch of *Starring Great Britain*, and the Wales Tourism Summit. She noted that all Board members had been invited to the VEAC's Visitor Economy Engagement Forum on 10 April in Birmingham. The CEO would lead on follow-up on the Parliamentary debate on seaside towns during English Tourism Week and would contribute to a COVID Inquiry roundtable on sector impact. GREAT funding had been secured for the LA Futures event in May 2026. The new LA Consul General was an advocate for tourism and was well engaged with the VB team on the ground its planning.

## 2.3 Dashboard

26. The 2024/25 year-end dashboard was noted.
27. **ACTION: The year-end dashboard narrative to be shared with the Board with the unconfirmed minutes.**

## 3.0 Corporate Updates

### 3.1 VEAB Update

28. VB reported on English Tourism Week and the LVEP Parliamentary event flagging strong engagement and thanking all involved. Referencing the Growth mission and Minister's target, she spoke about VE's role in dispersing visitors across the country. VB also talked about her regional visits meeting elected Mayors and hearing first-hand from those working in the sector (including in the Peak District, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire during English Tourism Week). The Chair congratulated VB, AS and the team on English Tourism Week's effective targeting of audiences, influencers and MPs.
29. At its March meeting the VEAB had reviewed its strategy. Future approach would focus on evidencing and evaluating its work and how this delivered on the Government's growth agenda.

### 3.2 ARC Update

30. Following WB's decision to stand down from ARC, PG had chaired the 25 March 2025 meeting. At the meeting the Committee had endorsed a recommendation that Nigel Wilkinson (VEAB member) act as interim Chair of ARC for the next 6 months.
31. **DECISION: The Board retrospectively approved Peter Gower's chairing of the 25 March 2025 ARC meeting.**
32. **DECISION: The Board approved Nigel Wilkinson as interim ARC Chair for the next 6 months.**
33. PG reported that at its March meeting the Committee had reviewed the 2024/25 financial forecast which was expected to conclude very close to budget. It had considered the 2025/26 budget, noting the complex and uncertain funding landscape.
34. PG outlined ARC's endorsement of the Annual Risk Review, including an overall organisational risk appetite of 'Open' consistent with previous years, noting the decision-making process which had fed into this. ARC had also endorsed the updated Risk Management Policy. On behalf of the Committee he recommended both items for approval.

35. **DECISION: The Board approved the Risk Appetite and its Application and Risk Management Policy as tabled. Updates to the Corporate Risk Register were also noted.**
36. Other items discussed included: review of a paper on how the BTA evaluated and calculated its ROI. Whilst noted as being robust in its approach, it had highlighted there was a need for greater consideration of social media evaluation: and update on lessons learned following a payroll error in December 2024 which had identified some areas for improvement.
37. Finally, he reported that the GIAA 2025-26 Internal Audit Programme had been reviewed and approved, albeit he asked that it be noted that the GIAA has increased its charges by 14% compared to 2024-25.
38. **DECISION: The Board approved the GIAA Internal Audit Programme and noted the increased fee for this compared to the prior year.**

### **3.3 Minor revision to 24 September 2024 Minutes**

39. HB advised of a correction required to para 22 of the minutes of the 24 September 2024 BTA Board meeting.
40. **DECISION: The Board approved the correction and asked the Secretariat to update and republish the 24 September 2024 minutes.**

### **3.4 Board Resolution re. Italian Banking Arrangements**

41. SJ asked the Board to approve a resolution to grant powers of attorney for Simona Blandi and Christina Bernabe Romero to operate the BTA's bank accounts in Italy. SJ reassured the Board that the resolution was required for operational reasons and the grantees would be reminded of the Delegated Authority Policy by way of further reassurance.
42. **DECISION: The Board approved the resolution which was signed by the Chair and CEO and asked the CEO to sign the two power of attorney documents to enable banking arrangements in Italy.**

## **4.0 Papers for Approval/Discussion**

### **4.2 2024/25 Finance Position Update**

43. SJ reported that, despite a difficult year of uncertainty and some complex movements, the current 2024/25 forecast position was a small underspend of less than 1% from the budget. The Chair and Board congratulated the team on the result.

#### **4.1 2025/26 Budget for Approval**

44. SJ updated the Board following formal confirmation of 2025/26 core and GREAT funding. She set out the overall picture of reduced funding and outlined the risks presented around partnership income, vacancy factor, retail income, 3 Grosvenor Garden dilapidations and additional FCDO costs.
45. The relationship between activity, infrastructure and staff costs was considered. The flat infrastructure cost on the previous year was the result of considerable savings made around office accommodation and the pension schemes. MB and PG suggested that there might be a more accurate way to illustrate the split between delivery/support functions costs. The impact of the significant compliance requirements on public sector bodies was noted.
46. **DECISION: The Board approved the 2025/26 budget as presented.**

### 4.3 2024/25 ARA Update

47. There was broad support for the document to date, including the Chairman and CEO's introductions and Tourism Landscape section. In response to PG's query about messaging around the impact of 2025/26 funding cuts, SJ advised that the ARA was in essence a backward-looking document and didn't require great detail about the current year.
48. **ACTION: Board members to forward any comments on the current iteration of the ARA to the Secretariat by 14 April. On 12 May the Secretariat to share the next iteration (the full front section of the ARA) with both Boards for comment.**

### 4.4 Risk Management Annual Review

See item 3.2

### 4.5 Pension Scheme Update

49. At the request of the then PAC Co-Chair, SJ updated the Board on the US Pension Scheme. Following consultation, the overwhelming response from scheme members was to move to a defined contribution model. The next step would be to draft a business case for DCMS approval.

### 4.6 Approval of the Pensions Advisory Committee Terms of Reference

50. Given various changes on both Boards, the PAC had reviewed its TOR removing the requirement for its ARC and RPC members to be members of the BTA Board (i.e. they can be members of either the Board or the VEAB). It was agreed that this was a pragmatic interim solution but given Committees were delegated from the BTA, the expectation was that Chairs should be Board members. PAC TOR to be reviewed again and updated when new BTA members were appointed.
51. **DECISION: The Board approved the updated PAC TOR as an interim measure.**
52. **ACTION: SJ/HB to update the PAC TOR as presented and to revisit these when new BTA members were appointed.**
53. The Chair thanked SJ for her contributions.

### 5.0 Deep Dive – Update on DMO Review Implementation and VisitEngland's Role in a Devolved Landscape

54. VB introduced this item stating that all of the regional Mayors' she had met to date had shown a real understanding and positivity around the value of the visitor economy as a driver of growth in their areas, and were complimentary of VE's role.
55. AS talked through his paper outlining VE's initial response to how devolution was impacting the DMO landscape. The following key discussion points were:
  - A strong role for LVEPs under devolved power but questions around DDPs in respect of Mayoral priorities, delivery structures, funding etc.
  - In a transition year with uncertainty around funding, VE's fundamental priority should be its role in making tourism a driver to deliver on the Government's growth agenda.
  - DP advised that VE should focus strongly on this area as demonstrating this was key to securing funding.
  - VB confirmed that all VE activities were currently being evaluated based on their ability to



deliver against the growth agenda.

- DP raised a query as to whether VE's proposed seaside towns project really addressed the social problems in those towns and encouraged the approach to be reconsidered.
- AS advised that the VE team was currently prioritising the 2025/26 business plan which included evaluation criteria.

56. The Chair thanked AS for the deep dive, the hard work being carried out and encouraged ongoing discussion with DCMS.

## **6.0 Papers for noting/information**

The papers tabled were noted. Virgin Atlantic's recent downward forecast of US inbound travel was noted.

### **6.4 ARC Policy Update**

57. **DECISION: The Board approved the new Information Security Policy for Supplier Relationships as endorsed and recommended by ARC.**

### **6.5 Anti Bullying & Harassment and Discrimination Training Update**

58. DL advised that this item was an outcome of the Staff Survey and encompassed new sexual harassment legislation. PG understood the importance of the training but flagged the costs of compliance to the organisation and suggested a proportional approach based on likelihood of risk.
59. **ACTION: DL to issue the Board with the Anti Bullying & Harassment Policy to read and acknowledge, and to follow up with training as appropriate.**

## **7.0 Any Other Business**

60. MB advised that Ian Edwards, his predecessor as Wales representative on the Board, had been posthumously honoured with a new National Tourism of Wales award. He also reported on recent visits in South Wales meeting sector representatives, he highlighted the positive response to involvement in *Starring Great Britain*, the importance of business tourism to Wales and access and connectivity.

The meeting was closed at 1350.

END