

Minutes of Meeting of the VisitScotland Board held on 26 March 2026 at P&J Live Aberdeen, and via video conference (MS Teams)

Present:	Stephen Leckie (Chair) Barbara Smith Lindsey Paterson Steven Walker Cara Aitchison (MS Teams) Shona Marsh Paul Easto Keith Nicholson (MS Teams)
In attendance:	Vicki Miller (Chief Executive Officer) Rob Dickson (Director of Industry and Events) Ken Neilson (Director of Corporate Services) Cat Leaver (Director of Strategy and Competitive Intelligence) Jill Walker (Director of Marketing) Mike Slack (Chief Technology Officer) Lynn Jack (Chief People and Culture Officer) Emma Hallington (Senior Advisor to CEO) Joanne Hellen (Executive Assistant) (MS Teams) Anne-Marie Greer (Head of Financial Services) (MS Teams) – <i>part-time</i> David Jackson - (Regional Director for Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray) – <i>part-time</i>
Observers:	Gary Cox, Deputy Director for Business Strategy and Tourism (Scottish Government) Harris Bokhari, Chair of the British Tourist Authority Board – <i>part-time</i>
Apologies:	None
Minutes:	Joanne Hellen

INTRODUCTIONS

1. The Chair welcomed the attendees to the hybrid meeting.

MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING HELD ON 29 January 2026

2. The minutes of the Board meeting held on 29 January 2026 were approved as a true and accurate record.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

3. No conflicts of interest were raised for this meeting.

MATTERS ARISING

4. All matters arising were confirmed as either completed or covered during today's meeting.

(The Head of Financial Services joined the meeting)

ARC UPDATE

5. The Chair of the Audit & Risk Committee (ARC) provided an update to the Board on the recent ARC meeting and the associated papers in the Board pack.
6. The Chair of ARC highlighted the Internal Audit follow-up report and status of open actions.
7. The Chair of ARC noted that the ARC self-assessment is currently underway and, based on feedback received to date, some minor updates have been made to the draft Terms of Reference.
8. A recent fraud using the Cycling World Championships name was noted, as referenced in a copy of the minutes provided from the latest ARC meeting, with no concerns raised to the Board.
9. It was noted that the internal audit procurement process is currently underway and that a further update will be provided once this has been completed.

The Board noted the ARC Update.

STRATEGIC CHANGE PROGRAMME CLOSURE REPORT

10. The Chief Executive Officer presented the Strategic Change Programme (SCP) closure report, which had previously been considered by the ARC. The CEO noted the comprehensive nature of the report, which captured significant milestones, including workforce development, learning and outcomes.
11. The Chief Executive Officer highlighted an opportunity to adapt the internal report into a format suitable for an external audience, in order to share lessons learned with government and other organisations undertaking similar change programmes, particularly in relation to workforce development.
12. It was noted that any further development activity from the Programme is captured within the Activity Business Cases (ABCs) for 2026-27.

The Board noted the report.

CWC FINAL PROJECT SPEND

13. The Director of Corporate Services presented a final budget spend report for the Event, which had also been reviewed by the ARC.
14. The report showed a closing balanced budget, with total expenditure of £60.7m supported by £3.3m of commercial income.

The Board noted the report.

FINANCE & BUSINESS PERFORMANCE REPORT

15. The Head of Financial Services presented the February Finance & Business Performance Report, noting that all RF3 changes had been incorporated, along with Strategic Change Programme adjustments previously pending the closure of Rothesay, which have been carried forward into the next year's budget.
16. Commercial income to February was reported at 106% of budget, with staff costs noted to be on track to conclude within the approved budget and ring-fenced marketing activity funding now fully committed. It was noted that further funds remain to be expensed in March, typically a peak activity period for VisitScotland, and amplified this year by additional reinstatement activity.
17. The Board noted that prior-year comparatives were not included due to the lack of meaningful comparative data by pillar and the impact of Strategic Change Programme spend in the prior year. It was noted that the financial reporting pack will be reviewed for next year to provide more meaningful year-on-year comparisons.

The Board noted the Financial Business Report.

2026/27 ABCs & BUDGET

18. The Director of Strategy & Intelligence presented an overview of the 2026-27 business planning process, highlighting its focus on prioritised activity aligned to the Corporate Plan and government priorities. A more streamlined approach to ABCs was outlined, with increased cross-disciplinary, strategic and outcome-focused alignment, and evaluation embedded alongside financial monitoring.
19. The Board was presented a balanced budget outturn for approval.
20. The Head of Financial Services provided an overview of the budget settlement, including a flat core resource settlement, flat capital allocation, and £4m of RTIF funding, which was welcomed. Ring-fenced funding for major events was also noted, with ongoing discussions with Scottish Government regarding future funding for Euros-related activity and Tour de France 2027.
21. Resource pressures were noted, including pay awards, VR provision, and Rothesay, which amounted to an immediate 5% absorption of the budget. External economic and inflationary risks were also highlighted.
22. An overview of all funding received was provided, representing the first full year post-Strategic Change Programme. The Board noted a significant reduction in staff costs, directly attributable to the Strategic Change Programme. The allocation of total resources by pillar was outlined, with organisational development accounting for approximately 20% of total budget and commercial income, with 80% of investment now invested in strategic, outward-facing activity, which was considered consistent with strategic intent.
23. The Board welcomed the progress demonstrated in the paper and the forward-looking approach
24. It was clarified that organisational costs include property and staff associated with the People & Culture function. The rationale for the use of the term "investment" around this pillar was discussed, and noted to reflect alignment with other pillars and recognise that organisational

development activity, including people development and ways of working, were considered critical enablers.

25. The Board discussed the value in tracking year-on-year ratios of staff expenditure as a ratio of total cost. It was noted that the 80/20 split between external and organisational investment reflected a positive return to the organisation's desired balance.
26. The CEO noted a future Board strategy planning session was being scheduled to focus on the forward outlook.

The Board approved the 2026-27 budget.

(The Head of Financial Services left the meeting)

POLICIES FOR APPROVAL & UPDATED POLICY APPROVAL PROCESS

27. The Director of Corporate Services presented an update to the policy management process for Board approval. It was proposed that policies be presented and approved at the same meeting, to avoid undue delay and associated risk in getting policies approved and published.

The Board approved the updated Policy Management Process

28. The Director of Corporate Services presented the Register of Interests Policy for approval, following its presentation for consideration at the previous meeting.

The Board approved the Register of Interests Policy.

29. The Director of Corporate Services presented four policies for consideration, which had all been presented to ARC:
 - Whistleblowing Policy– minor updates made to names and external links, following a recent internal review and supported by legal counsel.
 - Health & Safety Policy – updated as part of annual review process.
 - Risk Management Framework – updated to meet audit points and improve readability.
 - Complaints Policy – providing a framework for ensuring VisitScotland's compliance with The Scottish Public Services Ombudsman Act 2002. Management proposed to implement this policy as a pilot in the interim period, with any operational issues reported to the July Board.
30. The Chair of ARC suggested that the Complaints Policy be reviewed to ensure it was clear to relevant stakeholders how a complaint could be made. The CEO noted that this detail was included in the document that would be published on vs.org.

The Board approved the use of Complaints policy as a pilot

ACTION: Supporting documentation to the Complaints Policy be provided to Board in the supplementary folder, for information.

ACTION: Board feedback on the above four policies to be provided via the dedicated email

channel prior to the next meeting.

PROCUREMENT – MEDIA BUYING

31. The Director of Corporate Services presented a request to directly award a new 18-month contract for International Media Planning, Buying and Associated Services (Lot 2) to Dentsu UK Ltd. The requested award was using the Scottish Government framework and up to a maximum value of £5.0m, as forecast spend will exceed the value of the current contract before its end date.
32. The proposed approach was noted to ensure continuity of service, compliance with procurement rules and best value, with no change to pricing or terms.
33. The Director of Corporate Services noted that ARC had recommended that an update be provided on how supplier performance had been operating. As monitored via regular governance arrangements, including weekly status calls, bi-weekly senior stakeholder check-ins, campaign reporting against forecast, management reported supplier performance to be strong
34. The Director of Corporate Services noted that an enhanced quarterly review process will be introduced, jointly overseen by Marketing and Procurement, to maintain focus on contract and supplier performance. Further updates on performance will be reported back to ARC after 6 months.
35. The Board discussed the levels of fees applied and value achieved from investment.

The Board approved the award of contract.

ARC TERMS OF REFERENCE

36. The Director of Corporate Services presented the updated Terms of Reference of the Audit & Risk Committee for approval. The terms have been updated following feedback received from ARC and Board, whilst ensuring alignment with the Scottish Government template.

The Board approved the updated Terms of Reference.

Follow a break for lunch, the Board welcomed Harris Bokari, Chair of VisitBritain, to the meeting.

(The Regional Director for Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray joined the meeting)

CHAIR REPORT

37. The Chair provided the Board with a written update on his recent VisitScotland activities, including attendance at the British Tourist Authority (BTA) Board Meeting.
38. The Chair confirmed that he would be leading the upcoming Board appraisal process.
39. The Chair noted the Scottish Parliamentary Elections in May and, with an anticipated new intake of Parliamentarians, the importance of VisitScotland's role in articulating the value of the visitor economy and the organisation's contribution. The position will be kept under review to monitor any potential changes in government priorities.
40. The Chair advised that discussions are underway between National Tourist boards from the devolved administrations who plan to come together to discuss the opportunity for collaborative

activity with VisitBritain.

The Board noted the Chair Report update.

CEO REPORT

41. The Chief Executive Officer introduced the CEO Report provided in the Board pack.
42. The Chief Executive Officer highlighted that the organisation had experienced its busiest quarter, particularly in market development activity, coinciding with Tourism Month.
43. The upcoming Connect Conference was highlighted, with a significant increase in number of international buyers and participating businesses, many of which are new. The Board noted this as a key example of VisitScotland's work in supporting businesses to become trade-ready.
44. The Chief Executive Officer provided an update on the Middle East situation, noting that a TIER group has been established by VisitBritain, with fortnightly check-ins to monitor developments. While no current evidence of significant negative impact on demand for Scotland, potential risks to direct air routes and increased fuel costs for businesses were noted. The organisation will continue to monitor developments closely, while maintaining an ambitious programme of work.
45. The Chief Executive Officer noted the strength of the major events programme and outlined work to maximise the opportunities presented by the World Cup, including strategic brand-building activity and the use of flexible budgets to respond to market dynamics. Engagement with government on trade and investment activity was highlighted, along with planned attendance at Tartan Week. The creation of a new events inventory, including video content showcasing Scotland's major events, was noted, which will be used to strengthen storytelling activity.
46. The Board noted the upcoming Global Agricultural Conference in Aberdeen in June, which will bring together a strong delegation of academics and industry representatives to share best practice. VisitScotland is supporting the sector to deliver the event. The CEO highlighted this as a strong example of effective business support intervention and collaboration with an industry sector that has significant growth potential.
47. The Chief Executive Officer highlighted the recent visit to Australia as a strong example of collaborative working with VisitBritain, with VisitScotland supporting activity alongside the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo.
48. An update was provided on the passage of the Visitor Levy Reform Bill. Local authorities will have the option to introduce a flat rate levy, with VisitScotland likely to have a role in reviewing guidance through participation in the Visitor Levy expert group.
49. Organisational development activity was noted, including team restructures recently completed within Insights & Communications and Industry & Events, with reviews underway across Marketing, Technology and Corporate Services. An induction programme has been scheduled for the incoming Director of Corporate Services, including a one-month handover period.

The Board noted the CEO Report update.

BOARD DEVELOPMENT & MEETING PROGRAMME

50. The CEO presented a paper drafted in response to a recent internal audit report, which noted that a more robust process should be documented around individual board evaluation and continuous monitoring of Board performance. The paper included a new proposed skills matrix and proposed meeting schedule for 2026-27.
51. The Chair confirmed that individual appraisals will be held with each Board member to discuss further and map their own experience against the framework. It was noted that the process will identify any skills gaps and opportunities to strengthen Board capability, which may inform succession planning and future role profiles.
52. The Board noted that the annual meeting schedule has been reviewed to improve alignment between the Board and the Audit & Risk Committee, and to establish a clearer cadence between governance and strategic focus. The Chair invited reflections on whether any areas were missing and noted the option to schedule thematic sessions if required. A post-election session will also be considered in June.
53. It was noted that Board appraisal is a Scottish Government requirement and that the Chair and Chief Executive Officer will also undergo appraisals. The importance of a proportionate and outcomes-focused approach was emphasised, with a commitment to keeping the process efficient.

ACTION: Individual appraisals to be scheduled between Chair and Board members.

The Board noted the paper.

EVENTS STRATEGY IMPLEMENTATION & UPDATE ON MAJOR EVENTS PROGRAMME

54. The Director of Industry & Events presented a proposed 18-month events transition plan to implement and embed the new strategic priorities, as approved at the September Board meeting.
55. The plan follows a strategic review of events and is intended to align delivery more closely with the national events strategy and VisitScotland's Corporate Plan, shifting the approach towards a more medium- to long-term, impact-focused model and reducing reactive activity.
56. The Board noted progress made since September, including organisational changes, stakeholder consultation and feedback and movement towards a partnership-led events model, changes to the approach to major contracts (including golf), and the introduction of a new investment and impact assessment framework.
57. The Board noted the phased transition plan for implementation, running from 1 April 2026 to 30 September 2027, with a short, medium and long-term outlook, being delivered alongside business-as-usual activity. Key risks highlighted included local authority capacity, wider sector pressures and partners' ability to move at the required pace.
58. The Board discussed branding, alignment with Brand Scotland, and VisitScotland's future role within the national events delivery landscape. The Director of Industry & Events noted ongoing discussions with the Scottish Government on roles and responsibilities.
59. The Board discussed the balance between sporting and cultural events, noting opportunities to strengthen the case for cultural investment where regional strategies are sufficiently developed to support inclusive growth and regional spread.

The Board approved the transition plan.

ABERDEEN & ABERDEENSHIRE VISITOR ECONOMY UPDATE

60. The Regional Director for Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray provided an overview of the regional visitor economy, highlighting the importance of tourism as a growth sector.
61. Performance across the region was described as mixed, with visitor volume growth not yet translating into equivalent growth in spend. While international visitor numbers are increasing, growth remains below the Scotland-wide average, resulting in continued reliance on the domestic market.
62. An update was provided on the regional economic strategy to 2035, including key priorities such as the North East Highland Way, route development, and product development linked to adventure tourism. A focus on international events and festivals was highlighted, with ambition to attract more large-scale events.
63. Recent investment across the region was highlighted, including P&J Live as a national asset, redevelopment of the art gallery and museum, growth in adventure tourism, and major events such as the Tall Ships. The impact of Trump International as a key golf destination was noted, alongside infrastructure improvements, including Aberdeen South Harbour enabling cruise activity.
64. The pipeline of future developments was highlighted, including city centre and beachfront regeneration, increased ambition around events, and the role of the Visitor Levy in enabling delivery. A continued focus on regional spread across Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray was noted.
65. The role of VisitScotland in supporting the regional visitor economy was outlined through strong industry engagement and effective cross-team working.
66. The Board recognised opportunities in golf, adventure tourism and food and drink, supported by a strong cultural and outdoor offering, available capacity and shared regional ambition and strong partnership working, alongside opportunities arising from continued investment.
67. The Board noted key challenges, including awareness and perception issues, and the challenging economic backdrop, including the downturn in oil and gas, employment pressures and reliance on domestic visitors.
68. The Board discussed ways to stimulate investment at scale and shift perception, including addressing relatively low average daily spend in Aberdeen, with the organisation looking at key areas of focus to align with sector strengths.

The Board noted the update.

(The Regional Director for Aberdeen, Aberdeenshire and Moray left the meeting)

CHAMPIONING THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF THE UK VISITOR ECONOMY – WITH VISITBRITAIN

69. The Board and VisitBritain discussed the strategic importance of the UK Visitor Economy,

VisitBritain's role and priorities and the opportunity for enhanced partnership working.

70. It was noted that a more joined-up strategic framework is emerging through the Strategic Partners Board, including closer collaboration between executive teams and strong recent campaign delivery. Opportunities were identified to strengthen economic measurement at both UK and nation level, including more integrated data, common standards and data-sharing agreements.
71. The importance of sustainable tourism and market prioritisation was highlighted as part of future UK-wide collaboration.
72. Different organisational and delivery models across the UK nations were noted, with strong examples of effective collaboration such as the Tour de France, however it was noted that the absence of a clear events strategy for England presented challenges to balance.
73. The CEO noted that feedback had been invited to the UK visitor economy strategy, and the importance of a collective UK approach to compete internationally and optimise finite resources in generating inbound international tourism.
74. The VisitBritain Chair noted opportunity for increased collaboration at Board and Chair level, with potential formation of a new committee.

AOB

75. The Board noted that the July Board meeting will be held at the VisitScotland Glasgow office. Potential opportunities for Board involvement in stakeholder events at Scotland House during the Commonwealth Games period were also highlighted.
76. The Chair noted that this was the final Board meeting for Dr Keith Nicholson as he reached the end of his term. On behalf of the Board, the Chair thanked Dr Nicholson for his significant contribution to Board discussions and his role on the Audit & Risk Committee.
77. The Chair also noted Ken Neilson's final Board meeting with his upcoming retirement at the end of April, after 22 years of service. The Board noted its appreciation for his substantial contribution to VisitScotland, including his work on the Cycling World Championships, Audit & Risk Committee, COVID-19 funding, and major strategic change programmes.

CLOSE

Thereafter, the meeting was brought to a close.