

Minutes of Meeting of the VisitScotland Board held on 18 September 2025 at VisitScotland’s Office in Stirling, and via video conference (MS Teams)

Present: Stephen Leckie (Chair)
Barbara Smith
Cara Aitchison
Keith Nicholson (MS Teams)
Lindsey Paterson
Paul Easto
Shona Marsh (MS Teams)
Steven Walker

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 and Digital
Mike Slack, Chief Technology Officer
Lynn Jack, Chief People and Culture Officer
Emma Hallington, Senior Advisor to CEO
Chris Taylor, Destination Development Director
Laura Kirk, Business Manager (MS Teams)
Joanne Hellen, Executive Assistant (MS Teams)

Observers: Gary Cox, Deputy Director for Business Strategy and Tourism, Scottish Government)

Apologies: None

Minutes: Joanne Hellen (Executive Assistant)

INTRODUCTIONS

- 1. The Chair welcomed the attendees to the hybrid meeting. Gary Cox was welcomed from Scottish Government in an observer capacity and Mike Slack to his first Board meeting as new Chief Technology Officer for VisitScotland.

MINUTES OF THE BOARD MEETING HELD ON 30 July 2025

- 2. The minutes of the Board meeting held on 30 July 2025 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.

POLICIES FOR APPROVAL

5. The Director of Corporate Services presented two policies for consideration. Both policies will be brought to the next Board meeting for approval.
 - Fair Work First – a new policy drafted to guide how VisitScotland will comply with the Fair Work legislation.
 - Business Continuity – which had been upgraded following recent internal audit work and now including additional information on business impact assessments.

ACTION: Board feedback to be provided via the dedicated email channel prior to October meeting.

CHAIR REPORT

6. The Chair provided the Board with a written update on his recent VisitScotland activities, including several meetings with both internal and external stakeholders.
7. The Chair noted his upcoming attendance at the British Tourist Authority Board and Strategy meeting to represent and promote Scotland and welcomed any advance input from other Board members.

The Board noted the Chair Report update.

CEO REPORT

8. The Chief Executive Officer introduced the CEO Report provided in the Board pack.
9. The Chief Executive Officer noted recent Scottish Government (SG) budget commissions relating to the Scottish Spending Review, which had requested 3-year projections on resource, corporate functions and workforce reduction.
10. The VisitScotland submission outlined the work already delivered via the Strategic Change Programme, through which SG targets were noted to have already been significantly exceeded.
11. On core capital, the CEO outlined an ambitious approach to the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF), aligned with known infrastructure plans and the positive impact on visitor experience, and significant support to an ambitious digital transformation programme.
12. The Chief Executive Officer noted that a baseline budget had been supplied, but with risks to delivery clearly highlighted. Key delivery opportunities had also been highlighted via ringfenced funds, including investment opportunities to supporting digital infrastructure for events which would have a significant positive impact in future years.
13. VisitScotland's full submission to SG was included for Board information in the supplementary

folder and was noted by Scottish Government to have been of a very high standard.

14. The Board pack included a detailed forward look at industry performance, with a supplementary folder providing a full picture for 2024. It was noted that despite growth in international tourism, the domestic market had declined. Forward indicators suggest shorter trips potentially due to economic factors. A positive outlook in European markets was reported, particularly from Germany. The domestic market overall is fragile, but Scotland remains a favoured destination within UK, with late booking behaviour observed. Media campaigns have been booked to support autumn/winter awareness and conversion. All figures were confirmed to have been adjusted for inflation.
15. It was noted that there was an understanding that many businesses remain only marginally profitable, limiting reinvestment opportunities, and the upcoming visitor levy presented additional challenges. VisitScotland's response includes a strategic, long-term focus on international connectivity, re-invigorating the domestic market, supporting regional events and leveraging regional investment and delivering a comprehensive business support programme aligned with the Corporate Plan targets to support businesses.
16. The Director of Industry and Events reported that VisitScotland will refresh its guidance on the Visitor Levy to update on camping and caravanning and to clarify points raised by stakeholders, with HMRC and SG working on additional details. An FAQ document is also being developed for the industry, although it was noted that some questions can only be answered by Local Authorities and certain aspects will remain business decisions. The FAQs will be co-branded by Scottish Government, VisitScotland and the business sector, and are expected to be released alongside the updated guidance.
17. The Director of Industry and Events noted that a decision is pending on whether to proceed with the 1 October implementation date for pre-bookings in Edinburgh. Glasgow is expected to follow in January, then Aberdeen. No other councils have made formal decisions, with consultations ongoing. VisitScotland is encouraging each Local Authority to conduct its own impact assessment based on visitor mix and local tourism strategy. It was noted that the format of these assessments will vary by Local Authority.
18. The Chief Executive Officer reiterated that VisitScotland's role in relation to the Visitor Levy in addition to the development of the above guidance was to engage with Local Authorities who have made the decision to enter the consultation process, ensuring that they fully consider the implications of introducing a visitor levy. Where appropriate providing data and insights around the potential impact on visitors and expectations around the growth of the visitor economy. We will continue to do this.
19. The Chief Executive Officer reported a positive summer of events, with the focus now on promoting day visits and last-minute decision-making on travel plans.
20. The Chief Executive Officer highlighted a new balance scorecard which has been developed to continue monitoring progress across range of activities and outcomes, all contributing to NEI figures. It will be used internally and to report quarterly to the SG. The scorecard was noted to be a work in progress and Board members are invited to provide feedback offline. The scorecard will be shared with Board quarterly as context alongside the CEO Report and the Finance and Business Report.

The Board noted the CEO Report update.

ACTION: Board to provide feedback on balance score card

STRATEGIC CHANGE PROGRAMME UPDATE

- 21. The Chief Executive Officer introduced the Strategic Change update included in the Board pack.
- 22. The Chief Executive Officer updated the Board on the decision to close the Strategic Change Programme (SCP), running since 2023. Noting that the programme had put the organisation in a much stronger financial position and provided it with a clear strategic focus. With the majority of workstreams now delivered the Executive Leadership Group has agreed to move all remaining workstreams into BAU projects. These will be tracked under a 6-weekly portfolio report and will continue to be audited against defined outcomes. A final closure report will be issued in coming months. The Audit and Risk Committee has confirmed its contentment of this approach.
- 23. The data strategy will be presented to Board at a future meeting.

ACTION: Data Strategy update to be provided at a future meeting

Workforce Planning

- 24. The Chief People and Culture Officer introduced the Workforce Planning update included in the Board pack.
- 25. The Board received a recap of Phase 1, which had focused on the closure of the iCentre network and refreshing our approach of the delivery of business support. It was noted that a variety of workforce tools had been employed, including redeployment of staff to new roles, to manage impact to staff and achieve the key objectives of this phase, with headcount expected to be reduced overall by 27% by October.
- 26. Phase 2 is underway and following a top-down approach. The organisation is using this opportunity to review the organisation holistically and apply learnings from earlier phases. Starting with the Senior Director Structure (Level 1), changes have been communicated to staff and Level 2 is in progress, with Directors and Heads of Department working to ensure functional alignment of roles and teams.
- 27. Level 3 represents the most substantial part of the process, involving a comprehensive review across departments to assess existing talent and identify skills required for future needs. The process will be staggered through to the end of March, beginning with the Industry and Events and Strategy and Competitive Intelligence Directorates. The Corporate Services Directorate will follow in the new financial year, once the new Director of Corporate Services is in place. People and Culture will be reviewed post March 2026, once the majority of the wider changes have been implemented.
- 28. The Board discussed the reduction in the gender pay gap, which was noted to be partly attributable to the closure of the iCentres. The Chief People and Culture Officer confirmed that addressing the remaining gender pay gap remains a focus, although it was noted that any remaining imbalance in like-for-like roles was largely influenced by factors such as length of service and technical level. The Board requested to be kept informed of progress.

29. It was noted that a recommendation had emerged from internal audit to the Audit and Risk Committee to combine IT and Digital strategies. The Chief Technology Officer confirmed that work is underway to unify these strategies and ensure a digital-first approach.

People and Culture Plan

30. The Chief People and Culture Officer introduced the draft People and Culture Plan, as included in the Board pack, noting that both internal and external versions were in development. The Plan aims to establish a clear framework for all people and culture activities, with defined objectives and actions to support the organisation's focus on people, quality, and engagement following a recent period of organisational change. A final version will be brought to the next Board meeting for approval.
31. The Board commended VisitScotland on its progress to date across its workforce planning and People and Culture activities, particularly noting the successful redeployment of staff into new roles and the associated learning and development opportunities.

ACTION: People and Culture Plan to be brought to next meeting for approval

Events Strategy

32. The Director of Industry and Events presented to the Board an overview of the Events Strategic Review. The review had followed a phased process of discovery and development, and included extensive consultation with internal teams, stakeholders, industry partners and SG.
33. The strategic importance of Events was affirmed, with a clear need to build on past successes and strengthen the organisation's leadership role within the sector. The review highlighted the need for a more clearly embedded long-term approach to planning and funding to enable greater leverage of investment and more effective delivery. Other key themes included improved functional integration of Events across the organisation and a refreshed measurement framework.
34. The Board was presented with core development principles and strategic recommendations for implementation, including new organisational arrangements and functional changes to support delivery.
35. VisitScotland Events branding was considered as part of the review with the Board agreeing in principle to the changes outlined. Further consideration would be given to this post stakeholder consultation.
36. The current implementation phase of the full Events review will run from September to March 2026. A transition period will follow between 1 April 2026 to latest 31 March 2028 to complete the move from current funding models. Updates on the transition plan will be provided at future Board meetings.
37. The Board commended the thorough approach and consultation process which had been followed. The proposals were approved and noted to provide clarity and a strong strategic framework.

The Board approved the strategic recommendations.

HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS VISITOR ECONOMY

(The Destination Development Director joined the meeting.)

38. The Board received a regional update on the Highlands and Islands.
39. The region's strong tourism assets were highlighted, alongside a resurgence in cultural and wellness experiences. The critical role of tourism in the regional economy was emphasised, particularly in relation to addressing population challenges. Key challenges were identified, including attracting visitors, supporting local businesses, and managing the geographic diversity and extended travel times across the region. The importance of a place-based approach was highlighted, with specific areas identified as having both capacity and appetite for growth, aligned with consumer interest. Feedback from both visitors and residents was felt to be generally positive, in contrast to some media narratives. The long-term impact of the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) was noted, having invested £11m across 46 projects.
40. The Board discussed the importance of continuing to communicate and demonstrate the positive impacts of tourism and regional development, including significant investment opportunities for the region. Opportunity was also identified to place communities at the heart of development initiatives, whilst continuing to monitor and respond to emerging issues and opportunities.
41. The Board noted value in taking a segregated approach to data to offer more accurate and actionable insights for the different areas. The importance of partnership working and leveraging networks to address region-specific issues was also highlighted.
42. The Board discussed the opportunities and challenges associated with campervan tourism in the region. While concerns were raised regarding reduced income for campsites, environmental impact, and potential resident resentment, it was also noted that extended stays by campervan visitors can contribute positively to the local economy through increased spend on local products and services.
43. The Chief Executive Officer noted a recent summit of the Visitor Management Group which was attended by the Deputy First Minister. The group is helping to share best practice and support infrastructure development across all regions.

ACTION: Strategy and Competitive Intelligence Director to consider options around segmentation of regional data

(The Destination Development Director left the meeting.)

AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE MEETING UPDATE

44. The Chair of the Audit and Risk Committee (ARC) provided an update from the meeting held on 5 September.
45. Financial sustainability had been identified by the ARC as a key theme in the year. Management presented on the process used by the organisation to manage both short- and long-term financial stability through effective financial planning. It was noted that such work in earlier years had been part of the catalyst for the organisation to commence the Strategic Change Programme.
46. The first draft of the financial statements were presented for review. It was noted that this

represents a transitional year between the previous and new Corporate Plans, and the organisation is considered to be in a strong position. The ARC asked for several changes to be considered in updating the next draft before presentation to the October Board.

47. The internal audit programme was reported to be progressing well. An advisory review of the Digital Strategy, having been conducted early in the project lifecycle, was reviewed at the ARC.

The Board noted the ARC meeting update.

FINANCE AND BUSINESS PERFORMANCE REPORT

48. The Director of Corporate Services presented the Finance and Business Performance Report. The ABC review process identified some short-term spend issues but no long-term concerns.
49. The Director of Corporate Services confirmed that independent verification of all RAG ratings is provided by the Finance team, which flags any areas of underspend or failure to deliver planned activity.
50. The ARC had recently reviewed the risk register, with updates made and new risks identified relating to optimisation of pension assets. This will be monitored via the Pensions Committee with support from external advisors.
51. The half-year financial report was noted to raise no immediate concerns. The second reforecast of the year is underway which will report to the October Board.
52. Three properties - Rothesay, Ballater and Glasgow - were noted to present financial risk, two of which had potential solutions under consideration. Clarification is being sought regarding repair requirements for Rothesay.

The Board noted the Finance and Business Performance Report.

AOB

53. The Chief Technology Officer noted four strong responses from VisitScotland to the Future Scot AI challenge, with one being accepted for further development. This project focuses on creating an AI travel companion for Scotland. A proposal has also been put forward in response to a request from the Edinburgh Futures Institute to work with PhD students at the Centre for Doctoral Training.
54. Dates for 2026 Board meetings are being finalised, and invites will be issued.
55. The next Board meeting on 23 October will be held in the new Boardroom at VisitScotland's Glasgow office, with opportunity for Board members to meet some VisitScotland staff over lunch.

CLOSE

Thereafter, the meeting was brought to a close.