



## East Sussex, Brighton & Hove, West Sussex LVEP board meeting

Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2025

Wakehurst

Item			
1	13:30	<b>Introduction and welcome from Mardi Roberts, Chair</b>	Chair
2	13:35	<b>Chair actions and updates since last meeting</b>	Chair
3	13:40	<b>Update from Destination Forum representative</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summary of key discussions and insights shared at the Destination Forum meeting held on Wed 24<sup>th</sup> Sept 2025.</li> </ul>	Jack Brownell, Head of Tourism for Eastbourne and Lewes District and Strategic Tourism Lead for Hastings
4	13:45	<b>Maximising Opportunities from International markets for our LVEP</b>  <b>International Markets, A National Overview by VisitEngland/VisitBritain</b> A detailed look at VisitEngland/VisitBritain's strategies for attracting international visitors.  <b>Working with the Travel Trade</b> Exploration of the travel trade sector and its role in driving inbound visitors to a destination.  <b>Workshop Discussion</b> Explore and discuss what is already happening in Sussex to encourage international visitors.	Claire Ford, Regional Development Lead, VisitEngland  Joss Croft, CEO, UKInbound  All
	15:10	<b>Update on Gatwick Airport expansion and Airport Economic Zone</b>	Richard Lennard, Economic Partnerships Manager, Gatwick Airport
	15:15	<b>Devolution &amp; Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Discussion</b> Understanding the implications and impact of devolution and LGR on the visitor economy and the role we can play as LVEP Advisory Board members.	All
6	15:25	<b>AOB</b>	Chair
	End		

**Attendees:****Industry & Sector representatives:**

Mardi Roberts (Chair), Ridgeview Wine Estate (MR)  
Celine Leslie, Gravetye Manor (CL)  
Chris Hannon, South Downs National Park Authority (CH)  
Gavin Stewart, Brighton BID/Brighton DEG (GS)  
Lauren O’Keefe, DoubleTree by Hilton (LO)  
Marilena Reina, Wakehurst (MRe)  
Nathaniel Hepburn, Charleston (NH)  
Nigel Greenwood, So Sussex (NG)  
Richard Lennard, Gatwick Airport (RL)  
Sarah Broadbent, Swallowtail Hill & 1066 Country (SB)

**Lead Local Authority representatives**

Carolyn Carr, West Sussex County Council (CC)  
Sally Staples, East Sussex County Council (SS)

**District & Borough / DMO Representatives**

Jack Brownell, Head of Tourism for Eastbourne and Lewes District and Strategic Tourism  
Lead for Hastings (JB)

**Secretariat/ Other Local Authority Representatives**

Jo Williams, Experience Sussex (JW)  
Julia Gallagher, VisitBrighton (JG)  
Kim Bulgin, East Sussex County Council (KB)  
Lynn Trapano, LVEP Project Officer (LT)

**External Speakers**

Claire Ford, VisitEngland (CF)  
Joss Croft, UKinbound (JC)

**Apologies:**

Anne Ackord, Brighton Pier group (AA)  
Amy Yeates, Goodwood (AY)  
Cllr Brigit Miller, Brighton & Hove City Council (BM)  
Dawn Hudd, Arun District Council (DH)  
Kim Jack-Riley, Cruise Lines International (KJ)  
Lucy Davies, Brighton Dome (LD)  
Rob Cottrill, Lewes & Eastbourne Councils, Hastings Borough Council (RC)

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**1. ITEM 1 - Introduction and welcome - Mardi Roberts, Chair**

- 1.1. MR welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Wakehurst for hosting the group at the Millennium Seed Bank. MR also welcomed two guests to the meeting, Joss Croft, CEO of UKInbound and Claire Ford, Regional Development Lead for London & SE from VisitEngland.

- 1.2. The group approved the minutes from the last meeting.
- 1.3. Members had no interests to declare.
- 1.4. All the actions from the last meeting were completed.

## **2. ITEM 2 - Chair actions and updates since last meeting**

- 2.1. MR updated the group on LVEP activity since the last meeting.
  - 2.1.1. A response to the SDNPA Partnership Management Plan was submitted on how it aligns with the LVEP 10-year Visitor Economy Strategy for Growth.
  - 2.1.2. A letter of support was sent to SMPAT (Joint Syndicate for the Promotion of Cross-Channel Activity) in Rouen, France, regarding the importance of the Newhaven Dieppe Ferry route to the visitor economy in our region.
  - 2.1.3. MR attended the Sussex Growth Forum at Wilton Park in July and was a panel member on the 'Brand Sussex' session highlighting the work of the LVEP.
  - 2.1.4. MR attended Airport Economic Zone Taskforce meeting in September, working to promote the region as a place to do business, live, and invest.
- 2.2. MR reminded the group to let LT know if they are invited to events as an LVEP Advisory Board member. LT records this information for advocacy purposes and can provide briefing notes and advice if needed.
- 2.3. MR recognised the tough climate the Visitor Economy sector is currently facing with the recent shifts in the DMO landscape with VisitKent, VisitHerefordshire, and VisitCornwall sadly ceasing operation. These are challenging times not just for DMOs, but for businesses across the board. Collaboration is now more important than ever between the private and public sectors. The LVEP is not funded, but the three Local Authorities (East Sussex County Council, Brighton & Hove City Council and West Sussex County Council) fund LTs role to ensure collaboration is not lost.
- 2.4. The focus of today's meeting is international tourism, a key driver to accelerate growth. In Sussex, only 2% of visitors are international but they account for 19% of all spend.

## **3. ITEM 3 - Update from Destination Forum representative**

- 3.1. The Destination Forum is a key element of the LVEP governance structure. It comprises tourism representatives from District and Borough Councils, as well as formalised Destination Management/Marketing Organisations (DMOs) across Sussex. The group meets three times a year, aligning with LVEP Board meetings, to ensure there is a consistent flow of information between the two bodies. To support this connection, a rotating representative from the Forum attends each LVEP Advisory Board meeting.
- 3.2. JB updated the group on the last Destination Forum, which was held on September 24th 2025 at Horsham Library.
  - 3.2.1. There was good attendance with only a few apologies.

- 3.2.2. Danielle from The Great Sussex Way was the Destination Forum rep at the LVEP Advisory Board Meeting in June 2025, so she gave an update.
- 3.2.3. There was a focus on international tourism and LT shared some statistics covering the UK, Sussex and the wider region, followed by a discussion.
  - 3.2.3.1. The overarching observation from most of the destinations was that they either aren't engaged in this sector or aren't able to do enough due to limited time and resources.
  - 3.2.3.2. Most still rely on Tourism SE (TSE), but many are reconsidering their membership, due to lack of budget or uncertainty on where TSE now sit in the wider landscape of tourism in Sussex.
  - 3.2.3.3. Measuring the ROI from trade shows, previously used as an international promotional activity by some destinations, remains challenging due to limited tracking mechanisms.
  - 3.2.3.4. The group still has the appetite for international marketing and are very much open to opportunities, but more so than ever are looking to do so collaboratively.
  - 3.2.3.5. Experience Sussex and VisitBrighton are talking with the Gatwick Gateway Group about running a campaign targeting the Nordic market.
  - 3.2.3.6. Coach holidays – hoteliers reference this as a market they always relied on but feel it is declining. Coaches aren't as full and it makes it less financially viable for hotels.
  - 3.2.3.7. In Beachy Head, due to issues with vehicle movements, overcrowding, and the fact that many coach visitors from London or Brighton spend little time or money in town while contributing to litter, efforts are underway in Eastbourne to collaborate with coach companies to incentivise more positive engagement with the destination.
- 3.2.4. Discussions also took place around BIDS, wine tourism, data and the future of AI in tourism.
- 3.2.5. Finally the group had some points they wanted to bring forward to the Board:
  - 3.2.5.1. Working in local government continues to be challenging, with ongoing pressures such as limited resources, local government reorganisation (LGR), and devolution.
  - 3.2.5.2. There is a need to advocate to central government regarding the fragile state of DMO funding. Several well-established DMOs (including VisitKent and VisitCornwall) have recently ceased operations, highlighting the urgency of addressing this issue.
  - 3.2.5.3. The LVEP Board should have a strategic voice at the local level. The forum felt that as representatives of the visitor economy, we need to be prepared with clear ideas and project proposals that can be taken forward when opportunities arise.
- 3.2.6. The Destination Forum is proving to be a worthwhile forum where our counterparts can all get together and discuss some of this bigger ticket items but also some of the more day to day operational challenges and share best practice on how to tackle them.

- 3.2.7. Lewes and Eastbourne colleagues welcomed SMPAT to Newhaven on Friday for the launch of the 200 years of the ferry line exhibition and organised a meeting that will now likely transition into a working group to expand on opportunities for tourism presented by the ferry link. Currently only 20% of people using the ferry route are inbound visitors.
- 3.3. NH asked if the LVEP had a strategic position on TSE, and if other members knew why VisitKent collapsed.
- 3.4. JW noted that VisitKent, a large private organisation, previously benefited from European funding, which is no longer available. They cited a complex and challenging set of circumstances, such as a challenging economic climate and rising costs for the sector, as the reason for their closure
- 3.5. The group discussed regional marketing initiatives, recognising the value TSE campaigns can bring SMEs. However, shifting priorities and constrained budgets are creating challenges around geographic fit and strategic alignment.

#### **4. ITEM 4 - Maximising Opportunities from International markets for our LVEP**

- 4.1. MR introduced the main discussion of today's meeting, international tourism, and reminded members of previous work the LVEP has commissioned including baseline reports and analysis of the most promising international markets for Sussex.
- 4.2. MR introduced CF who presented to the board on the work that VisitEngland and VisitBritain do on a national level.
- 4.2.1. The ambition is for Britain to welcome 50 million visitors by 2030. In 2024, there were 42.6 million visits with a combined total of 293.4 million nights, and a spend of £32.5 billion. Spend is above pre-pandemic levels, but visitor numbers are still slightly below.
- 4.2.2. North America leads on number of visitors and highest amount of spend, then France, Germany, Ireland, and Spain are our largest visitor markets. China has shown a strong year on year growth but overall recovery from the North East Asia markets is slow since Covid.
- 4.2.3. VisitBritain research shows that the UK is losing interest from visitors, with other countries having larger marketing budgets. International audiences are familiar with Great Britain, but it is not viewed as welcoming and there is little urgency to visit. The role of VisitBritain is to influence visitor choice in favour of Britain over other destinations, and to encourage travel beyond London to other regions.
- 4.2.4. VisitBritain must be active in 22 markets to reach 80% of visitors, compared to Ireland who only need to be active in 7.
- 4.2.5. Visiting TV and film locations is a powerful motivator for travel, so the team have launched a new campaign showcasing the areas to visit, [Starring Great Britain](#). This campaign is set to run for a couple of years and is currently live in five key markets.
- 4.2.6. VisitEngland supports the English visitor economy, providing businesses and destinations with advice, training and insights. An example of this is the Taking

England to the World Trade Education Programme, which is a free to attend e-learning programme designed to equip tourism businesses with the skills and foundations to develop and promote their product for sale in international markets.

4.3. MR introduced JC, the Chief Executive of UKInbound, representing interests of business with inbound visitors.

4.3.1. Key facts:

- The UK is the 7th most visited country in the world
- There were 38.7 million inbound visits in 2024
- The UK spends 0.81p per head on marketing, Ireland spends over £35 per head

4.3.2. JC presented to the group on their work and the role of tour operators with visitors. Attitudes are different in other countries, with up to 50% of visitors from our leading markets booking through travel operators.

4.3.3. NG asked if the LVEP had engaged travel operators on inbound tourism. JC responded that while domestic tourism dominated during the pandemic, the focus has shifted back to international visitors. Working with tour operators involves commission costs, but it's crucial the industry understands their needs and adopts proven, successful models to remain competitive. CF added that VisitBritain holds valuable market insights and can help test ideas.

4.3.4. NH asked if we know which tour operators bring visitors to Sussex and whether hotels support them. CL said they work with luxury travel agents, but late commission payments from hotels can deter operators. DMCs also take a cut. JC added that many operators plan years ahead, with some fully booked until 2027.

4.3.5. MR asked if we could get a regional breakdown on visitors, JC replied they can identify the value and volume of who tour operators bring, and what operators specialise in what areas.

4.3.6. [The MIDAS Report](#) is a large-scale study which looks at international travellers' motivations, influences on their holiday decision-making, their perceptions of Britain and attitudes towards sustainable tourism.

4.3.7. Feedback suggests growing demand for smaller 16-seater vehicles for coach trips. LO noted that group tours are a key focus at Hilton, while MRe shared that Wakehurst now has a part-time staff member promoting to the travel trade. On the whole, members found group engagement particularly difficult this year.

4.3.8. JC noted that September is often the busiest month for travel trade operators, as accommodation providers don't want to offer rates in the summer months, but are happy to provide allocations in the shoulder season when there are less direct bookings.

4.3.9. Travel trade was identified as an area to work on further and an assessment on how each member works in this area. CF added that there are easy wins, such as giving good imagery and ready-made itineraries, but this may take a long time, with tour operators beginning to promote 2027 in early 2026.

4.3.10. LT is working on a Sussex-wide project, looking to audit and assess business readiness for travel trade and current DMO activity. JG noted that Sussex lacks a dedicated travel trade resource, presenting an opportunity for collaboration. Experience Sussex is also running a funded pilot with vineyards to engage the travel trade.

4.4. Each table engaged in discussions around three key topics: the extent to which board members have a defined focus or strategy for international markets; their engagement with travel trade and intermediaries; and the availability and accessibility of relevant data. Each group provided a summary of their insights and perspectives.

4.4.1. Not all Board members are currently working with international markets.

4.4.2. Whatever does happen in the future needs to be sustained with a medium-long term plan, given the longevity of lead-in times.

4.4.3. There was an appetite to come together to develop fam trips and itineraries, as there is currently no central source of information or coordination.

4.4.4. Taking proactive steps now is essential to demonstrate to the MCCA that this project is both viable and strategically valuable.

4.4.5. There is a substantial amount of data already available, including the [International Segmentation for Sussex Report](#), produced by Blue Sail in 2022, which informed the [Strategy for Growth](#). These documents should be re-visited, and clear KPIs must be identified to guide ongoing tracking and evaluation.

4.4.6. There are other potential sources of data that may not have been explored yet, for example Arts Marketing Association.

4.4.7. RL noted the value of tracking flight origins to help identify priority/emerging international markets. For example, Gatwick has seen an increase in flights to/from Africa. However, CL highlighted that other factors must also be considered, noting the majority of their U.S guests typically arrive via Heathrow rather than Gatwick.

4.4.8. It was also mentioned that Canada is also a good market for the UK at the moment, given that Canadians are not travelling to the USA as much.

<b>ACTION</b>	
Synthesise the group discussions, identifying emerging themes and shared objectives for the international market.	LT/JG/JW
Set up a subgroup of members to agree actions and take this work forward and develop concrete proposals.	LT

## 5. ITEM 5 - Update on Gatwick Airport expansion and AEZ

5.1. RL updated on Gatwick Airport's expansion and the Airport Economic Zone (AEZ). The Secretary of State has approved the second runway, backed by a £2.2 billion private investment. Gatwick is now reviewing planning conditions. Gatwick

currently handles over 5.5 million inbound passengers, with projections forecasting 9 million by 2038 following the new runway, expected to be completed by 2030.

- 5.2. The AEZ Task Force was announced in 2024 as part of Gatwick's northern runway strategy, which aims to boost business opportunities and regional promotion across Surrey, Sussex, Kent and parts of London. MR represents the LVEP, and CC is also part of the Task Force representing WSCC. Recent activity includes launching a brand, with future plans focused on attracting inward investment. There is potential for this work to be supported through the Employment, Skills and Business Strategy which would form part of the DCO agreement and is backed by £20 million secured through the Section 106.

## **6. ITEM 6 - Devolution & Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) Discussion**

- 6.1. MR reminded Board members that the agenda for this meeting was accompanied by a briefing note on devolution and Local Government Reorganisation (LGR). She then provided a brief update on Sussex's current position regarding both matters.
- 6.2. The board agreed that MR would write to all three Local Authorities and all mayoral candidates on behalf of the LVEP Industry/Sector Members to highlight the vital role and value of the visitor economy across Sussex.
- 6.3. NH added that a group of the large cultural organisations across Sussex have also written to candidates. In addition, Culture East Sussex is producing a document, and a pan-Sussex cultural conversation is underway to align with Arts Council England's new approach, which now requires engagement exclusively at a Pan-Sussex level. On discussion of what the ask is in this letter, JC added that it is not just the ask of what you want, but also what you don't want.

<b>ACTION</b>	
MR to write to all three Local Authorities and all mayoral candidates on behalf of the LVEP Industry/Sector Members to highlight the vital role and value of the visitor economy across Sussex	MR
Information on tourism levies to be disseminated on what's happening elsewhere to Board Members. JC and CF to provide supporting information.	LT

## **7. AOB**

- 7.1. The LVEP are aware of an invitation being circulated from a Sussex Tourism Alliance and a VIP launch party. This group is in no way affiliated with the LVEP, DMOs affiliated with the LVEP or the official Tourism Alliance (umbrella trade association for the tourism industry in the UK).
- 7.2. The next LVEP Advisory Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 12th February 2026. Venue will be confirmed shortly.

<b>ACTION</b>	
Confirm venue for Feb 2026 LVEP Advisory Board Meeting	LT