



LVEP Advisory Board Meeting

Thursday 4th June 2026, 1330-1600

Firle Estate

Item No.			
	13:00	Arrival and informal networking	
1	13:30 (5 mins)	Introduction and welcome from Mardi Roberts, Chair	Chair
2	13:35 (10 mins)	Chair actions and updates since last meeting	Chair
3	13:45 (5 mins)	Update from Destination Forum representative Summary of key discussions and insights shared at the Destination Forum meeting held on Tues 21 st April 2026.	Garry Mortimer-Cook, Enterprise Manager, Horsham District Council
4	13:50 (20 mins)	Operational Updates	Chair Richard Dawson, Head of Service Economic Development, Skills and Infrastructure, East Sussex County Council Jo Williams, Manager, Experience Sussex
5	14:10 (10 mins)	Progress towards the Sussex Visitor Economy Strategy - Highlights from 25/26 and latest data - Key priorities for 26/27	Lynn Trapano, LVEP Project Officer
6	14:20 5 mins presentation (20 mins presentation, 5 mins Q&A) (30 mins discussion,	Food & Drink Development in Sussex & Brighton Sussex Winelands update A brief update on Sussex Winelands progress – a cluster-based approach to wine tourism growth. Gastro-tourism – what is it worth and what are the opportunities for Sussex & Brighton? A detailed look at the food & drink industry in relation to the visitor economy, future trends and opportunities for Sussex & Brighton. Workshop Discussion	Jo Williams, Manager Experience Sussex Mark Griffiths, Owner, Woodfire Camping All

	15 mins feedback)	Explore and discuss what Sussex & Brighton need to focus on if we want to grow as a food & drink destination. What should we be doing, and what steps will help get us there?	
7	15:35 (25 mins)	AOB	All
	End		

Attendees

Industry & Sector representatives:

Mardi Roberts (Chair), Ridgeview Wine Estate (MR)
 Anne Ackord, Brighton Pier Group (AA)
 Sarah Broadbent, Swallowtail Hill & 1066 Country (SB)
 Mark Griffiths, Woodfire Camping (MG)
 Nigel Greenwood, So Sussex (NG)
 Chris Hannon, South Downs National Park Authority (CH)
 Nathaniel Hepburn, Charleston (NH)
 Celine Leslie, Gravetye Manor (CL)
 Richard Lennard, Gatwick Airport (RL)
 Kim Jack-Riley, Cruise Lines International (KJ)

Lead Local Authority representatives:

Tom Cottam, Brighton & Hove City Council (TC)
 Richard Dawson, East Sussex County Council (RD)

District & Borough / DMO Representatives:

Garry Mortimer-Cook, Horsham District Council (GMC)
 Andy Willems, Adur & Worthing District Council (AW)

Secretariat/ Other Local Authority Representatives:

Lynn Trapano, LVEP Project Officer (LT)
 Saffron Phillips, East Sussex County Council (SP)
 Jo Williams, Experience Sussex (JW)

Apologies:

Carolyn Carr, West Sussex County Council (CC)
 Lucy Davies, Brighton Dome (LD)
 Rob Cottrill, Lewes & Eastbourne Councils, Hastings Borough Council (RC)
 Claire Ford, VisitEngland
 Dawn Hudd, Arun District Council (DH)
 Lauren O'Keefe, DoubleTree by Hilton (LO) – maternity leave
 Marilena Reina, Wakehurst (MRe)
 Sally Staples, East Sussex County Council (SS)
 Gavin Stewart, Brighton BID/Brighton DEG (GS)
 Amy Yeates, Goodwood (AY)

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

- 1.1. MR welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked MG for hosting. MR acknowledged the unfortunate double booking of the barn and the estate's assistance in finding an alternative venue for the meeting.
- 1.2. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved.
- 1.3. Members had no interests to declare.

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

- 2.1. MR updated the group on LVEP activity since the last meeting.
- 2.2. MR noted a pending action from the last Advisory Board meeting in February 2026 to explore next steps with the Sussex & Brighton Strategic Authority (SBSA), including inviting Steve Skelton to a future meeting. MR highlighted that significant work has been happening in the background as the SBSA becomes established and RD will give an update later in the meeting.
- 2.3. MR reflected on her attendance at a parliamentary roundtable during English Tourism Week in March, titled 'England's Front Door to the World' which she described as very successful, with a strong spotlight on the region and clear recognition of the importance of the LVEP. It was organised by the APPG for the Southeast and Gatwick Diamond Growth Gateway.
- 2.4. MR also attended the Gatwick Airport Economic Taskforce meeting in March, but unfortunately missed the meeting in April. This Taskforce has now concluded, but we will keep the group updated on what's happening.
- 2.5. JW provided an update from the VisitBritain LVEP conference, which she attended in Bristol yesterday. She reported that:
 - VisitEngland is facing a 10% budget reduction and is reviewing its workstreams.
 - There is a move toward greater alignment with Strategic Authorities at a national level.
 - Business events support is being scaled back.
 - There are discussions around a potential product development programme similar to the Discover England Fund, although no funding has yet been confirmed.
 - Treasury has announced a fund to support domestic tourism, particularly coastal areas, although further details are not yet available.
 - DCMS gave a brief update on the short-term lets registration scheme.
 - There is continued work to build an evidence base for a potential overnight visitor levy.
- 2.6. NG asked whether the government VAT reduction scheme to help provide cheaper family days out had been mentioned; JW confirmed that it had not but that discussions on high VAT levels within the sector are ongoing.
- 2.7. MR highlighted the Tom Kerridge "VAT's The Problem" campaign and urged members to support it.

- 2.8. MR reiterated the importance of aligning with the Strategic Authority; JW commented that many other LVEPs in attendance at the conference she attended were embedded or funded by Mayoral Authorities.
- 2.9. MR also reminded members to inform LT if they attend events in their capacity as LVEP Advisory Board representatives so that advocacy activity can be tracked.

3. ITEM 3 Update from Destination Forum representative

- 3.1. GMC provided an update from the Destination Forum meeting held on 21 April in Haywards Heath.
- 3.2. GMC explained that the meeting's main focus had been a presentation on AI from a digital tourism think tank.
- 3.3. GMC highlighted that AI is fundamentally changing how visitors search for, discover, and plan trips. He emphasised that there is a shift from traditional SEO towards Generative Engine Optimisation (GEO), meaning that content must be structured, factual, and easily interpreted by AI platforms such as ChatGPT, Copilot, and Google's AI summaries.
- 3.4. GMC stressed the importance of blogs, FAQs, and clear visitor information such as opening times and pricing. GMC noted that AI complements existing marketing rather than replacing it and highlighted the importance of sector collaboration across products, as AI draws on broader, interconnected sources of information.
- 3.5. GMC suggested some practical steps to the board that businesses can take, including identifying five key visitor questions and ensuring they are answered prominently, particularly within the first paragraph of high-traffic webpages, and embedding relevant FAQs on each page.
- 3.6. NH queried the opportunities around AI-enabled ticketing and linked booking systems, while JW confirmed that similar discussions had taken place at national level, highlighting the importance of bookable products and itineraries.
- 3.7. NG suggested building on the Sussex Stories initiative to better align with AI, and MG emphasised the importance of ensuring businesses are properly represented on Google Maps.
- 3.8. GMC noted the Forum had had an interesting discussion around upcoming anniversaries, including the 100th anniversary of *Winnie the Pooh* and the millennium celebrations of the birth of William the Conqueror, with related events already being planned in various locations.
- 3.9. GMC highlighted that Experience Sussex had suggested Destination Forum members could consider developing ideas to lever anniversaries and spread the benefit across the region. An example related to the Winnie the Pooh theme this year is a proposed honey trail in Horsham for the summer.
- 3.10. Destination Forum members reflected on the broader opportunity to maximise impact across the region, exploring how they could generate wider

- regional benefits. It was agreed that taking a more holistic, joined-up approach could unlock new business opportunities across Sussex.
- 3.11. MR reinforced this point, reiterating the importance and value of collaboration in ensuring the region capitalises on such opportunities effectively.

4. Operational Updates

- 4.1. MR confirmed that she has agreed to extend her role as Interim Chair until April 2027.
- 4.2. MR also noted that the LVEP will now operate under the name *Sussex & Brighton LVEP* to align with the SBSA, with updated branding and website changes underway.
- 4.3. MR formally thanked Julia Gallagher from VisitBrighton for her contribution as part of the secretariat, noting her current secondment to Museums & Heritage Business Manager at Brighton & Hove City Council.
- 4.4. MR also acknowledged the departure of Cllr Birgit Miller from the board and thanked her for her contribution and welcomed Tom Cottam as the interim representative from BHCC to the meeting.
- 4.5. RD provided an update to the board on the formation of the Sussex and Brighton Strategic Authority (SBSA), noting that its first board meeting took place in April.
- 4.5.1. RD explained that the focus has been on establishing governance structures, assurance frameworks, and setting a direction of travel for strategy development and future funding, with a number of key appointments currently being progressed to support this work.
- 4.5.2. RD outlined that the next six months will focus on developing an overarching framework for the prosperity strategy for the region, including defining vision, priorities, and funding mechanisms. An initial update is expected at the July AGM, followed by further development of the strategy content in the autumn and a public consultation at the end of the year.
- 4.5.3. RD noted that funding allocations include £15 million annually in the short term, increasing to £38 million from 2028, evenly split between revenue and capital investment. The funding is not restricted to the current financial year, allowing the SBSA to take a strategic considered approach to spending, and to focus on developing well-evidenced investment proposals.
- 4.5.4. Whilst tourism is not currently a standalone function within the Strategic Authority, RD reiterated that the SBSA is clear on the value of tourism in our region, and it is recognised as an important component within the wider economic development function, whilst straddling across all functions under the SBSA responsibilities.
- 4.6. MR emphasised the importance of ensuring the LVEP has a strong voice in shaping the prosperity strategy.

- 4.7. JW provided an update on the LVEP international focus. Following the initial international sub-group meeting, initial scoping work has been progressed to identify key building blocks for a potential international project supporting the 10-year Visitor Economy Strategy for Growth priority.
- 4.8. MR encouraged the integration of themes such as AI, data, and bookable products into this work.
- 4.9. RD also provided an update on the make-up of East Sussex County Council following the recent elections, noting there has been significant change, with 35 new councillors out of 50 which has led a Reform-led minority administration.
 - 4.9.1. The new Leader is Cllr Andy Woolley, with Cllr Pete Morley as Deputy Leader and also Lead Member for Economy taking responsibility for economy, including culture and tourism.
 - 4.9.2. There is a focus on economic growth which aligns with the SBSA agenda.
- 4.10. JW added that West Sussex County Council has also seen substantial change, with many new members, highlighting the significant learning curve required across the region. A new Liberal Democrat-led cross party alliance has been formed and the newly appointed Leader of the Council is Cllr Jay Mercer, with Cllr Sam Raby as Deputy Leader.
- 4.11. NG asked whether the newly appointed councillors would remain in post for only one year. RD confirmed that this is likely if Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) proceeds according to the current timetable, noting that we are still awaiting the outcome of the latest public consultation which closes on 15 June 2026 and then the Government will make its decision.
- 4.12. NH asked for clarification on the leadership arrangements for the SBSA, noting that East Sussex County Council had previously held the chairing role and querying whether future arrangements had been agreed. RD responded that this would need to be formally ratified at the next S&BSA meeting and that no final decision had yet been confirmed.
- 4.13. NH emphasised the importance of developing the proposed “shopping list” of projects, particularly in relation to establishing a clear tourism pipeline. He raised governance considerations, including how projects would be selected, approved, and prioritised within such a pipeline. MR agreed with the need for clarity and structure in this area. NH further noted that the pipeline should not be limited to projects originating from board members but should reflect wider sector input.
 - 4.13.1. RD noted that initial discussions have taken place with the three upper-tier councils responsible for managing the LVEP, but that there remains a need to understand the level of resource requirements necessary to manage and deliver such a pipeline effectively.
 - 4.13.2. NH responded that work on establishing the process should not be delayed pending confirmation of funding.

- 4.13.3. RD reiterated that the three constituent councils will consider the resource requirements upon the LVEP and update the board with its proposals. In the meantime, partners are encouraged to prepare proposals ready for potential submission to SBSA whenever that call is made.
- 4.14. MR highlighted the importance of cross-sector collaboration in developing this work and noted that the LVEP is well positioned, building on the progress achieved over the past six years. She emphasised that the Board has a potential key role in encouraging and shaping future projects and concluded by reinforcing the need to align with the overarching strategy to guide next steps.

ACTION	
Further consider whether and how a tourism pipeline process and governance structure might be developed, subject to wider strategic direction and funding clarity.	ESCC, BHCC, WSCC

5. Progress towards the Sussex Visitor Economy Strategy

- 5.1. LT provided a brief update on progress in capturing and recording achievements against the Visitor Economy Strategy for Growth 2024-2034 over the past 12-18 months. A written report will be circulated in due course.

6. Food & Drink Development in Sussex & Brighton

6.1. Sussex Winelands Update

- 6.1.1. JW updated on Sussex Winelands, noting ongoing work across Rother and Wealden, including the formation of a new cluster group. Sandra Grant has joined Experience Sussex in an interim capacity to continue this work, following the departure of Kat Beer.
- 6.1.2. MR emphasised the importance of wine as a key element of the Sussex visitor economy narrative.

6.2. Gastro-tourism – what is it worth and what the opportunities for Sussex & Brighton?

- 6.2.1. MG delivered a detailed presentation on gastrotourism.
- 6.2.2. MG described gastro-tourism as when food & drink are the reason to travel, not just an activity once visitors arrive. It includes festivals, food trails, producers, restaurants, cookery classes and hands-on experiences.
- 6.2.3. It is a growing global sector, currently estimated at US \$1 trillion in 2024 and forecast to reach US \$4-5 trillion by 2034.
- 6.2.4. Key success factors include having a strong and distinctive food identity, developing bookable experiences and delivering consistent place-based storytelling, supported by coordination and long-term investment across

- producers, chefs and tourism bodies. Case studies from France and South Korea demonstrated the impact of sustained, strategic approaches.
- 6.2.5. Whilst the UK performs strongly as a visitor destination, only 4% of visitors cite food as a reason for choosing the UK, creating a perception and positioning gap.
- 6.2.6. Sussex is well positioned to capitalise on this, given its distinct landscapes and strong existing food and drink offer. The opportunity lies in coordination, not creation – better storytelling and development of market-ready experiences.

6.3. Workshop discussion

- 6.3.1. A wide-ranging discussion followed.
- 6.3.2. JW noted that gastrotourism is a piece of work that has developed over several years and suggested that the LVEP should review and build on existing historical work. She emphasised that gastrotourism is highly interconnected and proposed undertaking a mapping exercise to bring together existing activity, create clearer focus, and support a more coordinated approach.
- 6.3.3. NH agreed, highlighting the need for a single, compelling story for Sussex, noting that local food narratives have evolved significantly over time. He questioned what unique offer Sussex could define that would differentiate it from other destinations.
- 6.3.4. NG questioned what specific food Sussex could genuinely claim as its own, noting the difficulty in identifying a defining dish. In response, MG pointed to examples from elsewhere, such as crepes linked to Normandy through ingredients and tradition, suggesting that Sussex could similarly develop a distinctive product based on local produce.
- 6.3.5. CL emphasised that wine offers a strong and existing unifying narrative, noting that while Britain may lack a clearly defined culinary identity, Sussex wine is widely accessible and already embedded across hospitality settings.
- 6.3.6. CL suggested the opportunity to celebrate this through festivals that bring together producers and consumers, although she also highlighted the financial pressures facing businesses and the challenges around supply and demand. MR added that producers often face barriers to participating in festivals due to cost.
- 6.3.7. NG referred to the “Weald to Waves” initiative, noting that while it has gained traction, the food element has not yet been fully explored.
- 6.3.8. CH commented that wine is particularly effective as it is visible and tangible, and highlighted the role of Sussex’s chalk downlands in shaping the landscape and its produce.
- 6.3.9. CH also pointed to venison as a strong local product, particularly in West Sussex, noting both its quality and its link to conservation.

- 6.3.10.CH also suggested the “Sussex Smokie” as another example of a distinctive local product, and highlighted the opportunity to develop both land-based and coastal food narratives.
- 6.3.11.MG suggested that a dedicated “Sussex menu” in pubs could encourage venues to feature local dishes.
- 6.3.12.NH referenced the banoffee pie story as an example of how food narratives can gain traction over time.
- 6.3.13.AW stressed the importance of strong storytelling, suggesting that the specific product matters less than how effectively its story is communicated.
- 6.3.14.RL reinforced that storytelling and branding are critical from a retail perspective, noting that products must stand out and avoid being overshadowed by London-centric brands.
- 6.3.15.Members also noted that regenerative tourism is part of the wider strategy and should align with gastrotourism development.
- 6.3.16.MR referenced successful international examples, such as Margaret River in Western Australia, where food festivals featuring leading chefs have driven strong visitor engagement. She emphasised the importance of identifying champions and connecting storytelling across initiatives, suggesting that any future Sussex food festival would need to link closely to the broader destination narrative.
- 6.3.17.NH noted that products such as the Sussex Smokie and venison work well because they connect to landscape, heritage, and conservation, and can appeal across different market segments.
- 6.3.18.JW summarised that there is a strong strategic opportunity for Sussex and asked how this work could be progressed. She suggested bringing together existing stakeholders, including MG and others already active in this space, to map activity and define priorities. She emphasised the need to determine what the visitor economy should seek to achieve through gastrotourism and how best to bring this together in a coordinated way.
- 6.3.19.MR asked whether a dedicated food and drink subgroup should be established.
- 6.3.20.CL noted that for such work to be effective it would require sustained funding over a number of years.
- 6.3.21.NH suggested starting with a small-scale approach, such as a pilot festival and encouraging venues to feature products like Sussex Smokie and venison.
- 6.3.22.NG questioned whether the focus should remain linked to wine. MR responded that, particularly for international audiences, wine is a key driver for Sussex and should remain central within a broader food and wine (gastrotourism) offer.
- 6.3.23.NH stressed the importance of clearly defining roles and responsibilities, noting that key producers such as Weald Smokery should be involved,

and suggested identifying a small number of priority actions that could significantly transform the sector.

6.3.24.MR invited AA to share her perspective from Brighton. AA commented that while there is lots going on, nothing is connecting it. She also noted that many people do not associate Brighton with Sussex, making it harder to present a cohesive story. AA stressed the importance of choosing a single, clear narrative rather than trying to represent everything.

6.3.25.GMC agreed that the LVEP should operate at a strategic Sussex-wide level, noting that while there is good work happening locally, there is no national body promoting English food and an opportunity exists for the SBSA to support this agenda.

6.3.26.SB added that there are limits to what can be achieved at grassroots level without an overarching strategy, citing the Rye Bay Scallops Festival as an example of a strong concept that struggles with scale. She noted the importance of such events in supporting shoulder-season tourism but highlighted ongoing challenges.

6.3.27.MR suggested that a coordinated, year-round itinerary approach could help strengthen and connect these initiatives. SB reiterated that smaller festivals find it difficult to grow without wider support.

6.3.28.In closing, MR noted the strong ideas and enthusiasm expressed, highlighting the significant opportunity if collaboration can be achieved.

6.3.29.It was agreed as an action to establish a dedicated food and drink subgroup, initially meeting online, to take this work forward. The subgroup would not require full board participation.

6.3.30.NH queried whether this should include only board members or also co-opted sector representatives. It was suggested that broadening participation to incorporate wider expertise, particularly through the inclusion of sector champions would be a positive and beneficial approach.

ACTION	
Establish a dedicated Food and Drink subgroup to progress this work, with meetings to commence online.	LVEP Secretariat

7. AOB

There was no AOB.