

As holidaymakers head for the beach or the countryside this summer, they are unlikely to give much thought to the public sector labyrinth that lies behind Britain's tourism industry. If they did, they would soon find that the Hampton Court Maze is child's play by comparison.

There are now 34 separate public bodies with fingers of varying size in this multibillion pound pie. At the top sits the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, which funds the quango VisitBritain. This was created on April 1, and is charged with promoting Britain overseas and England within the UK.

Then there are the nine regional development agencies (RDAs), the ten regional tourist boards (RTBs), the regional chambers and the several hundred local authorities that all have a stake in the industry. Lines of command and funding streams between the different agencies are obscure, to say the least.

Yet, ironically, the present structure – introduced this spring, after a four-year departmental review by the DCMS – is an attempt to rationalise public sector involvement in this ailing sector. British tourism – which accounts for 8% of GDP and employs 2 million people – is in trouble. The number of overseas visitors coming to the UK slumped from 25.4 million in 1999 to 22.8 million in 2001 and 23.9 million in 2002, thanks in part to the effects of the foot and mouth crisis and September 11. This year, the Gulf War and Sars have contributed to a further 15% cut in arrivals, with London particularly badly hit.

Meanwhile, the number of Britons holidaying for more than just a few days at home has continued to decline: from 41% of the population in 1991 to just 29% last year. The recent hot weather has improved the

and central government grants. But the latter do not come from VisitBritain, they come from the nine regional development agencies, which in turn have inputs from their regional chambers. However, there are 10 RTBs, any of which can promote its region abroad separately from VisitBritain, and neither their names nor boundaries always coincide with the nine RDAs.

Local authorities in main tourist areas group themselves under the British Resorts Association and do their own promotional work, and there are separate tourism bodies for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Confused? You're not the only one. Quite how the convoluted structure fits together can puzzle even a council where tourism is central to the local economy.

Sheila Jesson, Cotswold District Council's tourism manager, runs or part-funds five information centres and heads a small marketing department which produces a tourists' guide. But to promote the region overseas, it looks to neither VisitBritain nor the regional tourist board but collaborates with Gloucestershire County Council and its four fellow districts. The council would be hard put to work with an RTB even if it wished to. It, along with the rest of Gloucestershire, comes under the Southwest RDA, which funds the South West Tourism board. However, the Cotswolds are covered not by the SWT board but by the Heart of England, which is funded by the Advantage West Midlands RDA.

Jesson says ruefully: 'It is not sensible at all. It is a big bone of contention and we find it very difficult.' Cotswold hoteliers pay subscriptions to Heart of England, but promotional material produced by Advantage West Midlands does not include Gloucestershire

# The tourist trap

As if foot and mouth, September 11, the Gulf War, Sars and terrorist threats were not enough, British tourism also has to cope with a muddled mix of funding bodies. Mark Smulian reports

picture a bit, with hoteliers reporting increased bookings in the UK. But the overall picture is gloomy.

These trends have prompted the tourism industry to clamour for more government support, and in particular for more active promotion of England abroad. VisitBritain's inaugural mission statement said its immediate priority would be 'to reassure overseas visitors about travelling to Britain in the current political climate'. After foot and mouth, terrorism, war and health scares, the government decided it needed to give tourism a decisive new push. The problem though is that reorganisation seems to have made matters even more confused.

Take VisitBritain, formed out of a merger between the old British Tourist Authority and the short-lived English Tourism Council. The DCMS provides it with a budget of £49.6m. It employs 450 staff, the majority based in 27 overseas offices. VisitBritain launched a domestic marketing campaign for England almost as soon as it was formally established. But this was not funded by its sponsor, the DCMS. It was paid for by the nine regional development agencies. The campaign encouraged people to visit attractions owned by members of RTBs.

These boards receive private sector subscriptions

because it is not in its area. 'We just want it sorted out so we can get the business,' Jesson says.

The private sector is equally perplexed. Miles Quest, public affairs manager for the British Hospitality Association, welcomed the arrival of VisitBritain with its remit to promote England domestically, but says: 'We see a tremendous problem because we don't know how the RDAs will work with the RTBs. At least the English Tourism Council was industry-specific. We do not want tourism to disappear into some great maw in the RDAs, which include every other industry under the sun.'

Quest complains that while VisitBritain has promoted holidays in England, the RTBs have been competing with each other to promote their own regions: 'There has been less effectiveness than if there was one overall campaign, there is something of a wasted effort.'

His concerns are echoed by the British Incoming Tour Operators Association, which targets overseas visitors. Its chief executive Stephen Dowd says: 'I am very concerned that the RDAs have not woken up to the importance of tourism. Some of them are good but some have gone back to basics and spent lots of money on consultants to do research that was all done years ago

## Drawing the crowds

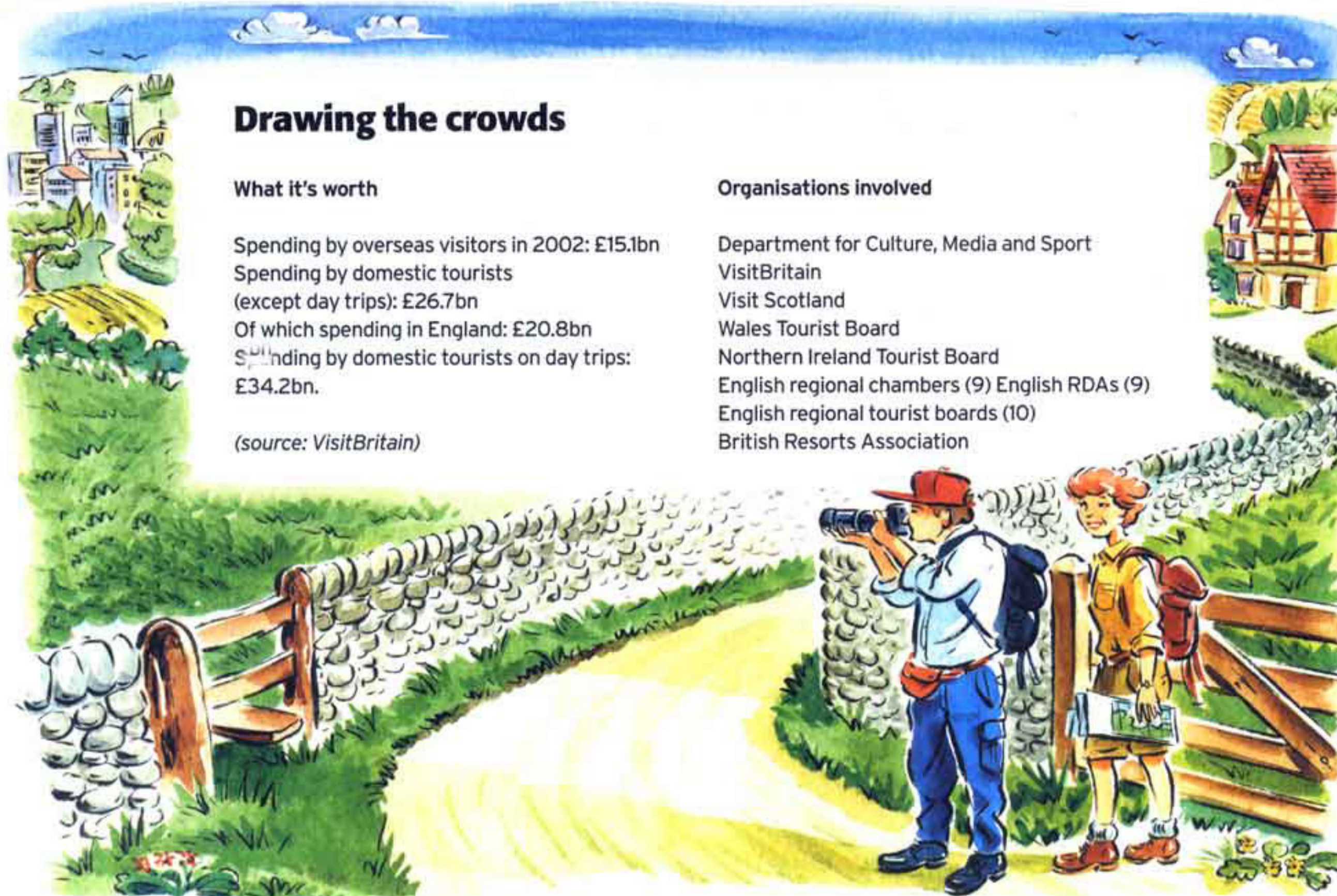
### What it's worth

Spending by overseas visitors in 2002: £15.1bn  
Spending by domestic tourists  
(except day trips): £26.7bn  
Of which spending in England: £20.8bn  
Spending by domestic tourists on day trips:  
£34.2bn.

(source: VisitBritain)

### Organisations involved

Department for Culture, Media and Sport  
VisitBritain  
Visit Scotland  
Wales Tourist Board  
Northern Ireland Tourist Board  
English regional chambers (9) English RDAs (9)  
English regional tourist boards (10)  
British Resorts Association



anyway and is just regurgitating stuff from the English Tourism Council. I am very concerned that money that should be going to the frontline marketing of England is being wasted on consultants.'

The RDAs have to take tourism seriously, he says, given its importance to their local economies. But Dowd's members are suffering from the anomaly at the heart of VisitBritain's mission: it can promote England in the UK, but abroad it can only promote Britain. VisitBritain works with Visit Scotland and the Wales Tourist Board and has a looser association with Northern Ireland. But while these three countries have their own overseas marketing organisations overseas, nothing in, say, the US or Australia, promotes England.

Dowd says: 'No one is marketing England. Funding is supposed to come from RDAs [to the regional boards] but they are each concerned with their own little corner of England and not with England as a whole. England is not being promoted as a brand internationally, yet it takes 70–80% of visitors. If you are in Chicago, Heart of England or East of England does not mean much.'

The problem does not stop there. Even within England, hardly anyone knows where the regions are. A VisitBritain spokesman explains: 'Emerging research shows English visitors to other regions of England do not see themselves as going from one region to another. They just do not recognise them, and they don't say I'm going to the Heart of England, or the East of England, they say they are going to Brighton, or the Cotswolds or a county, not to one of the regional names used.'

VisitBritain is developing a strategy for this, though it is already obvious that the RTBs' corporate names have little recognition factor. The first fruit of VisitBritain's work with the RDAs is the domestic Enjoy England campaign, which started in April and is due to end this month. It cost £4m, of which £3m came from RDAs.

Its spokesman says: 'The RDAs have a lot more money than us, and have influence over infrastructure and environment, not just attractions. There is an increasing role for regional chambers, and the majority take tourism seriously and have specific strategies.'

But a further complication is that while the tourism boards receive central government funds through RDAs, they have to pay some of this back if they buy into any VisitBritain promotions overseas. VisitBritain is now sorting out a strategy of how it will work with the regions.

John Taynton, corporate communications manager of the South West Regional Development Agency, speaks for all RDAs on tourism. He says: 'We take very much a strategic view on tourism, as it is one of our key sectors. It is very important to the regional economy. We look at the skills needed and have training skills networks.' One example of this is the Southwest's £3m Its In Our Nature campaign, developed by the RDA, the regional chamber and South West Tourism.

Taynton argues that this reflects the spirit of the new system, which separates strategic RDAs from delivery specialists in RTBs, so that both are more effective. He says: 'It would be very easy to load us up with delivery roles that we are not really equipped to do. There are lots of organisations that can help us to deliver.'

When VisitBritain was launched, the then tourism minister Kim Howells, said: 'The government is convinced that we have in place a credible and effective organisation that can quickly develop campaigns for use at home and abroad.'

Credible and effective VisitBritain no doubt is. But so are nearly three dozen other bodies, all of which might be looking for the traditional guide with furred umbrella raised aloft to point the way to success in attracting tourists. ●

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