



SAUDI BRITISH
JOINT BUSINESS COUNCIL

BIANNUAL PROGRAMME REPORT

Saudi British Joint Business Council

Jeddah and Madinah, 4-6 November 2025

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Saudi British Joint Business Council convened its biannual programme in Jeddah and Madinah from 4-6 November 2025. The programme brought together senior business leaders, government representatives, and SBJBC members from both kingdoms to advance bilateral cooperation across multiple sectors aligned with Vision 2030.

The programme consisted of three main components: the biannual membership meeting, a tourism and hospitality roundtable, and an education partnerships discussion. Members gained direct insights into Jeddah's development plans, tourism infrastructure, and education collaboration opportunities. The Jeddah Chamber of Commerce hosted the sessions, providing members with access to local business councils and government entities.

Key outcomes from the programme include identification of partnership opportunities in cultural tourism, hospitality training, technology solutions for enterprises, and real estate investment. Members expressed strong interest in family office services, education sector collaboration, and technology transfer programmes. The Council committed to expanding member engagement through quarterly updates, sector-specific events, and enhanced research offerings.

BIANNUAL MEETING

Opening Remarks and Strategic Context

Jennie Gubbins, Chair of SBJBC UK, opened the biannual meeting at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce. She emphasised the growing cooperation between the two kingdoms and the Council's role as a private sector organisation focused on business facilitation. Mr. Emad Al-Oboud, Second Vice Chairman of the Jeddah Chamber, welcomed attendees and expressed enthusiasm for collaboration between Saudi and British partners. The meeting was also aimed to introduce the Council to the wider Jeddah Chamber network, strengthen bilateral relations, and explore opportunities for collaboration between the two countries.

The British Consul General, Cecille El Beledi, provided an overview of the bilateral relationship's strength. Saudi Arabia's GDP has grown from \$689 million to over \$1 trillion since Vision 2030 launched in 2016, representing an 80% increase. The IMF raised Saudi Arabia's growth forecast to 4% for both 2025 and 2026. Women's economic participation now exceeds 34%, surpassing the original Vision 2030 target of 30% by 2030 leading to a new target of 40% by 2030 was announced in October.

Mohammed El Nemer, SBJBC Saudi Deputy Chair, highlighted changes in collaboration patterns since Vision 2030's announcement. Previous years focused on government-level engagement, oil & gas, infrastructure, and large-scale projects whereas recent developments show expansion into creative industries, music, culture, entertainment, hospitality, education, and sports. Both kingdoms now have complementary visions, with SBJBC serving as the bridge to facilitate business exchange and collaboration.

Fatima Naghi, SBJBC Saudi Deputy-Chair, welcomed the engagement and participation. She expressed hope that meetings over the coming days would prove productive and increase collaboration between the two countries. She highlighted that cities outside of Riyadh, like Jeddah, offer significant opportunities, and these meetings provide a chance for members to not just connect and build relationships, but to truly experience and understand a new city that is diverse and rich in opportunity.

SBJBC Achievements Since November 2024

Cordelia Begbie, CEO of the SBJBC, presented the Council's activities since the last biannual meeting. The period has been marked by growth in membership, programming, and sectoral engagement. Cordelia mentioned the UK-Saudi Investment and Partnership Summit that took place in London during the summer, welcoming over 400 participants, including a 150-strong Saudi delegation attended, led by His Excellency Khalid Al-Falih. The Council plans to repeat this flagship event in 2026 with different themes, and encouraged attendees to consider sponsorship, speaking, or theme suggestions.

Cordelia briefly covered the Council's expanded team structure since the last biannual in KSA in 2024. In January 2025, Robert McNamara joined to lead the new research programme and Asil Albdour joined to focus on business development and the Diwan Programme. The Advisory Board has also been launched, bringing prominent UK figures to support missions and activities in the Kingdom, which will be highlighted in a series of interviews over the next several months, starting with Lord Mark Sedwill in November.

Since January, the Council has held over 40 initiatives across sectors. Activities included participation in Super Return, LEAP, two family office roundtables (one in Riyadh, one in Dammam), Money 2020, and a UK culture delegation. The Council also engaged with Saudi government entities on trade issues, and visited giga projects including Qiddiya and Diriyah, demonstrating the diverse offerings that the Council can offer its members. At the Future Investment Initiative, the Council co-hosted family office and UHNW roundtables, partnered with MISA and worked with His Excellency Khalid Al-Falih. More recently, a British health tech delegation by ABHI also attended Global Health Expo in Riyadh before continuing to Jeddah for an SBJBC led mission. Members are encouraged to propose sector-specific or company-specific activities, regardless of size, as the Council is eager to continue expanding the scope and scale of events and work.

Upcoming Programme and Events Calendar

The Council outlined its forward calendar, with Cityscape taking place in Riyadh between 17th and 20th November, with SBJBC working alongside the British Embassy and DBT on activities and side events. Members from both sides are invited to participate.

The World Football Summit in December also features a strong SBJBC delegation, being led by Olivia James. Sports, culture, and entertainment represent some of the fastest growing sectors within the Council membership and activities, making the World Football Summit an excellent chance to facilitate engagement across grassroots initiatives, commercial partnerships, and social development programmes.

A FinTech mission and defence/dual-use technology event are also scheduled for the New Year, split between Saudi Arabia and the UK. Matthew Jones will be leading a FinTech mission in January, and a

defence roundtable will be hosted in London, followed by a delegation and side events at the World Defence Show in February. Other programming includes the SBJBC New Year's Networking Reception taking place on 22nd January. Members are highly encouraged to attend and catch up with the team to discuss the years programming and align. The Council will also participate in Super Return and LEAP conferences in early 2025.

The UK-Saudi Partnership Summit, the Council's flagship event, takes place on 9 June 2025 in London. Side events will be held in partnership with the Saudi Embassy in the UK, with a VIP networking event taking place at Polo in the Park in London on 7th June.

Jennie Gubbins underscored the importance of the Sport, Entertainment and Culture programme being managed by Olivia James. During this programme, SBJBC have signed a memorandum of understanding with Football for Peace, a charity promoting not only the sport itself but also its impact on society, particularly around access and supply of water. The partnership focuses on grassroots initiatives, community education, training, and social development work.

New Council Initiatives

Diwan Programme

Asil Albdour introduced the Diwan Programme, launched in May 2025. The programme serves as a platform for family offices and UHNW individuals looking to navigate the UK-Saudi corridor in a discreet, confidential manner. The programme emerged from feedback at the previous biannual meeting in Saudi Arabia, particularly from Saudi members who indicated a need for support in the family office and private capital sector.

The programme provides personalised engagement for members, moving beyond the standard Council offerings, with intimate coordination between the Council and the Family Office to ensure a deep understanding of individual and organisational requirements. Through the programme, SBJBC offers private meetings, curated introductions to UK-Saudi business leaders, bespoke study visits to prominent family businesses, priority access to SBJBC events and delegations, with regulatory and policy intelligence coming as standard. This personalised approach enables SBJBC to provide relevant, useful services aligned with specific member needs.

Research Function

Rob McNamara outlined the new research function established in January. The function provides three main offerings to members; first, legal, economic, and regulatory updates focus on information the Council believes members should know. These updates keep members informed of changes affecting their business operations. Second, sector reviews cover a broad range of the Saudi business environment. These reviews ensure members stay current with the market and developments in their sectors through White Papers. Third, the function provides a platform for members to demonstrate thought leadership and expertise. Members can contribute to research outputs, showcasing their knowledge to the wider membership and stakeholder community.

The research programme has covered a wide range of topics so far, including artificial intelligence, infrastructure, and real estate. Future topics include healthcare, sports, tourism, entertainment, defence, and barriers facing Saudi entities entering the UK market.

A podcast series has also been launched, starting with interviews of Advisory Board members. The first episode featured Lord Mark Sedwell in November, covering his interest and insights in Saudi Arabia. Each podcast runs around 10-15 minutes and will be posted on LinkedIn and Twitter. The format provides quick insights into UK-Saudi collaboration and provide varying perspectives of where the opportunities lie for future engagement.

The research function offers content in both English and Arabic, serving both sides of the Council membership. Members are encouraged to engage with the research team to ensure outputs meet their needs and support their business objectives.

Saudi UK Tech Hub

The Saudi UK Tech Hub launched in 2024 and has become a key activity area for the Council. The Tech Hub serves as a trusted platform for UK and Saudi institutions as well as government entities, and provides advisory services, events, and initiatives across key technology sectors such as Fintech, Edtech, and Health tech. This year, the Tech Hub has conducted a roadshow with the Saudi Venture Capital Company (SVC), bringing representatives to the UK to examine the deep tech ecosystem across London, Oxford, and Cambridge.

Member Discussion and Feedback

Family Office and Corporate Overlap

A member who noted their company as a co-founding member of SBJBC reflected on the Council's evolution into a truly dynamic and forward-thinking organisation. The member noted the difficulty of separating families from companies in the Kingdom. Family companies in Saudi Arabia have become sophisticated across various industry sectors, from artificial intelligence to sport and entertainment. These entities look not only inward, seeking to bring British companies to Saudi Arabia, but also globally, pursuing private equity investments and joint ventures externally, areas where SBJBC can support through their wide network.

Due Diligence and Partnership Formation

A member raised concerns about due diligence in cross-border partnerships. The member has observed numerous agreements signed between British and Saudi companies, but questioned outcomes when partnerships were based on misleading information or misunderstanding. The member stressed the importance of both parties' conducting thorough due diligence, checking bank statements and financial situations before entering deals, warning that companies should not enter agreements without understanding the financial components, such as understanding payment terms and contractual obligations that may differ from other jurisdictions.

Real Estate and Freehold Ownership

Mohammed Al-Swaidan who sits on the SBJBC Saudi Board, raised an important note on an upcoming change in real estate law. Foreign ownership was introduced in July but will take effect in a new Real Estate law coming in January 2026, but this did raise many questions from the UK side about how to proceed, with information gaps in guidance. The member suggested special events focusing on awareness and addressing "how to" questions. Inviting experts from the Saudi and UK sides of the membership to focus on this significant change would help entities take full advantage of the new regulations by filling in this information gap.

These points were acknowledged and previous events held by SBJBC with International Investment Gate (IIG) were noted, with the trip to Madinah the day after the biannual connecting the real estate work done in the UK during the summer with the necessary on the ground experiences in Saudi to provide a full picture of the opportunities in the Kingdom.

Technology Solutions for Enterprise Challenges

A technology company raised challenges in accessing information about problems facing corporates in the Kingdom. The representative suggested the Council could host events bringing together entities, allowing them to present their challenges to which members of the Council could then propose direct

solutions to technology issues, as used in the example. A direct format such as this would result in better positioning and cultivation of business relationships in the Council

It was noted that the Council does conduct significant work in the technology space. However, every company and person has technology problems, so addressing all challenges would consume the entire year so SBJBC's focus needs to be narrow.

Cordelia Begbie also described two programmes the Council is running. One programme starts in 2026, while another ran during the current year with SVC that was previously discussed. The 2026 programme involves working with Saudi banks looking to implement fintech solutions by placing bank staff in UK fintech member companies for six-week programmes. This allows Saudi professionals to experience the technology in the UK environment before returning to implement it in Saudi Arabia, ensuring that there is a better chance that investments in new technology will have stronger results. A similar opportunity might work for other technology sectors, combined with roundtables or events. Cordelia lastly noted the Council has numerous members in the cyber security sector. Several challenges around cyber security exist in the Kingdom, and these members are keen to engage.

Healthcare Research

A member asked about the timeline for healthcare research. Cordelia Begbie explained that the Council just completed a health tech delegation at Global Health Expo, followed by visits in Jeddah as mentioned at the start of the meeting. A Healthcare Sector Whitepaper is also being written by the research arm, with Robert McNamara stating he was targeting the end of November for it to be realised.

Artificial Intelligence Regulation

A board member with experience in privatisations, initial public offerings, and public-private partnerships noted that a colleague has worked with authorities on artificial intelligence regulation over the past year. From this experience, the member noted AI regulation as an area where the UK and Saudi sides could collaborate as AI regulation represents a significant gap globally and requires serious attention which Saudi Arabia is taking this seriously, as is the UK. This represents an area where both sides could share knowledge and expertise, ensuring that the two Kingdoms remain at the forefront of AI development, management, ethics, and regulations.

Facilities Management and Operational Strategy

The same board member raised another topic. As Vision 2030 moves from conception, development to deliver, and as Saudi Arabia develops outlets for people to enjoy themselves and the economy develops, facilities management and operational strategy have become increasingly important. The member distinguished this from simply employing janitors and cleaners, referring instead to overall strategy. He identified that the UK became a world leader in facilities management and operational strategy in the 1980s and 1990s so this represents something both sides could share, as it is lacking in the region. The member noted this is not a matter of one side being ahead of another, but rather Britain was forced to change practices when government stopped running everything as in the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, the private sector was small but now it represents the majority. A similar trend is emerging in Saudi Arabia, so both sides could now benefit from sharing knowledge in this area.

Regional Development and Provincial Opportunities

A member noted the positive trend of increasing attendance and enthusiasm at biannual meetings, also expressing appreciation for holding the meeting in Jeddah. While Riyadh is noted as "wonderful to visit", Jeddah represents a different aspect of Saudi Arabia. The member suggested continued exploration of opportunities in provinces and regions, particularly regarding tourism just as the UK showcases provinces like the Northeast, Saudi Arabia and the Council should explore opportunities in regions beyond Riyadh. This would help members understand and invest in opportunities across the

Kingdom, in towns beyond Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam. It was noted that the trip to Medinah on 5th November by the Council is a part of this mission to explore other regions, and it was confirmed that SBJBC is eager to explore these other regions to encourage wider understandings to the opportunities outside Riyadh.

Ambassador and Embassy Engagement

The arrival of new Ambassadors on both sides was also discussed. The new Saudi ambassador to the UK has not come into post yet, but is a young, upcoming ambassador with a previous ambassadorial post in Germany. The current deputy ambassador, Banda Al-Saderi, will remain at post, and has been supportive and keen to engage with UK companies in London. This represents a good opportunity to have fresh conversations with embassies and ambassadors and Cordelia Begbie confirmed engagement with both sides. The new commercial attaché is also yet to come to post, but the MISA team in London are available.

Jeddah Chamber Business Councils

A representative from Jeddah Chamber described a new structure for representing business voices. The Chamber established seven business councils covering logistics, healthcare, education, culture, industrial, retail, and urban development. Members from Saudi or UK sides investing in Jeddah are invited to join these councils if they have a commercial registration. The councils serve as a platform for the businesses to engage in dialogue, with strategic partners from government entities, private sector, and universities involved as well to provide support and insights.

TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY ROUNDTABLE

Introduction and Context

Following the biannual meeting, the first roundtable of the biannual programme was convened to focus on tourism and hospitality, part of the programme led by Olivia James. Jennie Gubbins opened the tourism and hospitality roundtable, noting the meeting would focus on leisure, tourism, and opportunities specifically in Jeddah and the wider region. The session featured talks from both Jeddah Chamber's Tourism Council and Jeddah Historical District representatives, highlighting the range of opportunities present for UK entities to invest and take part in.

Jamil Attar, Vice Chair of the Tourism Board at Jeddah Chamber, delivered opening remarks on behalf of the Chair. He emphasised the strength of partnerships between the regions of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom, reflecting commitment on both sides to strengthening cooperation across sectors. Jeddah Chamber seek to enhance the sector through the Tourism Council, which comprises members from the tourism sector, including hospitality, entertainment, restaurants, events, sports, and exhibitions.

The remarks highlighted Jeddah's role as the Kingdom's gateway, not only to the holy cities of Mecca and Medinah but also to the Red Sea. Jeddah holds its status as a key hub for the hospitality and tourism sector, with the city possessing characteristics combining historical authenticity with modern development, making it an attractive destination for both investment and tourism. The roundtable represents a step toward deepening cooperation between Saudi and British business communities and exploring opportunities in tourism, hospitality, and other vital supporting sectors that are witnessing rapid growth under Vision 2030.

Jeddah Historical District Development

Presentation Overview

Representatives from Jeddah Historical District provided an overview of the development programme, master plan, and opportunities within the 2.5-kilometre radius area. Most notably, Jeddah Historical

District achieved UNESCO World Heritage Site designation in 2014. In 2017, under Vision 2030, plans emerged to renovate the area and increase investment and in 2018, the district became its own municipality. The Ministry of Culture launched in 2018, with Jeddah Historical District as one of its first initiatives, receiving a significant focus due to its sentimental and cultural value, combined with the fact that Jeddah has served as a port for over 1,000 years.

The district contains more than 700 historical houses, some of which are not in the best conditions, but restoration has begun for all 700 under UNESCO guidelines. Multiple UNESCO-listed houses, sites, and buildings exist within the district, and the site is one of few UNESCO-listed areas that remains inhabited, with residential areas where events take place combining history with the modern world in a unique blend.

Footfall increases approximately 100% annually. Two years ago, annual visitors reached 2 million, last year the numbers reached 3 million, and this year, numbers reached 4 million. The programme increases the number of events each year to attract more people to the district because it represents a beautiful place where culture, history, and heritage exist, along with sentimental value for people from Jeddah.

Master Plan Development

The strategy focuses on making the area liveable, not just a weekend destination. The programme aims to bring people back to live in the district so work concentrates on the public realm and public areas. Development occurs at public expense but, after infrastructure is ready, projects will shift to the private sector to ensure maximum commercial value.

The master plan shows the northwest area will contain more than 1,000 hotel room keys and this area is currently vacant land while the southwest area around the lagoon will feature a marina currently under construction. The lagoon area itself is expanding and development at the marina includes a yacht club and the middle of the master plan contains all the 700 historical buildings undergoing renovation. After renovation, buildings are to be offered as boutique hotels, special buildings, or for commercial use.

Development Guidelines and Investment Opportunities

Guidelines have been established to allow developers, investors, and anyone developing historical or non-historical buildings to comply with regulations for the specific area. These guidelines were developed in coordination with UNESCO and all developers must comply with building codes that apply specifically to the area with the guidelines are published on the Ministry of Culture website.

The guidelines create a consistent architectural style throughout the 2.5-kilometre radius, maintaining the traditional Jeddah style (known as **Hijazi architecture**). Implementation occurs through construction by the Ministry of Culture and Jeddah Central following the guidelines. After both entities complete their buildings following the architectural style, the style will be enforced on private sector owners within the area. Moreover, since the programme became its own municipality, it can issue licenses and enforce building codes.

Focus areas include integrating heritage with modern development, generating revenue streams through proper restoration and activation, creating a liveable neighbourhood (not just a tourist destination), and providing guidelines to ensure consistent quality throughout the development. The programme welcomes investors and developers to explore opportunities in this unique district combining UNESCO heritage with economic development potential.

Cultural Tourism and Public Art

Identity and Authenticity

A participant involved in public art and cultural institutions described these mediums importance in developing cultural tourism in Jeddah. These institutions demonstrate the identity of Jeddah with public

art at the centre of new developments. What makes Jeddah distinct is how the millions of pilgrims who have come through the city, travelling to Mecca and returning, became a part of the collective memory of the city. Current visitors are invited to continue building the history and story of the city, and public art is central to demonstrating this continued story. Creative talent makes the difference, as Jeddah is well known as the creative hub of the Kingdom, so considering the whole ecosystem and cultural supply chain is important.

Heritage Preservation and Tourism Development

A representative described how Jeddah has introduced Islamic schools, heritage conservation programmes, and entertainment facilities. Programmes include artist residencies, cultural exhibitions, and workshops to engage visitors with heritage, with traditional foods and crafts representing important elements. Transferring cultural values and the history of the area to the world helps others see and experience Jeddah's heritage, connecting tourism development with cultural preservation while changing the perception more generally on Saudi Arabia's role as a tourism hub.

Economic Impact of Cultural Tourism

A participant noted economic modelling shows cultural tourism's impact on Jeddah reaches approximately half a billion dollars, comparable to cities like Cairo. This represents an extraordinary economic driver. Entrepreneurs operating restaurants and hotels create businesses that benefit from cultural tourism investments, and an entire trickle-down system is fostered. The historical district development supports these business activities and participants discussed how religious sites and buildings in the city could be highlighted through tourism initiatives, potentially developing signature elements that define the city's identity into the future, without limiting it to a place that only pilgrim's travel.

Festivals and Cultural Programming

A participant from a small Irish town shared an example where the town started an opera festival 74 years ago with the population working together annually to host the opera. The festival does not programme shows everyone has seen elsewhere and instead, it programmes rarely performed operas that people have not seen. This approach, combined with marketing, attracts visitors to the town and puts it on the map. The lesson is that culture includes not just outstanding things like a world class museum or religious site, but also markets, festivals, and community events. While major projects and infrastructure are important, other aspects of culture matter equally. Festivals and fringe programming complement large-scale developments, differentiating the destination from others and is a lesson for those Saudi destinations in fostering a greater international identity. This has been worked on as members pointed to the recent Riyadh Comedy Festival, and is at the centre of the arts and heritage movement in the Kingdom.

Sustainability and Infrastructure Development

World Cup 2034 and Hotel Supply

A member raised concerns about sustainability, particularly regarding assets after major events conclude. The World Cup 2034 presents specific challenges and FIFA informed hosting cities, including Jeddah, that each must offer a set amount of hotel keys that Jeddah and other cities have yet to meet. This leaves a gap in supply that will require significant development over the next eight years.

Sustainability needs to be understood on corporate levels with green building standards and ISO alignment regarding development and construction. However, the hospitality factor raises questions about what happens with these assets when the tournament finishes, and the sustainability of repurposing of assets, stadiums, restaurants, outlets, and entertainment facilities must be addressed. Qatar hosted around 2.5 million visitors during the World Cup, but has themselves reported issues with

post-event reuse, creating concerns for Jeddah and other cities about how to maintain momentum following the tournament.

Master plan initiatives have a responsibility to plan for post-tournament usage, and the Ministry of Tourism will carry out initiatives to activate Jeddah and make it sustainable. The goal is to avoid being left with a hosted or ghosted city where multiple investments are not generating healthy returns. Planning must address both capital works delivery and revenue generation, including the whole life cost of running assets as often the cost of running an asset over 20 to 30 years exceeds the capital cost of initial delivery.

Green Building and Islamic Principles

A member involved in establishing the Saudi Green Building Council in 2003 described efforts to apply green building measures across Jeddah's built environment. All five green building measures have been applied to buildings constructed 800 to 900 years ago, demonstrating that sustainability has formed part of the region's architectural heritage since the beginning, partly as Islamic regulations incorporate sustainability principles that extend beyond buildings to encompass entire ways of life.

Through efforts to establish the Green Building Council, the government has now implemented regulations requiring all buildings to meet sustainability standards, including residential properties. Requirements encompass heat insulation, water conservation measures, and other sustainability elements. These standards originate from Islamic cultural principles rather than representing adopted Western practices, but Western best practices should still be examined to assess if there are other lessons to be learned.

Transportation Infrastructure

A member enquired about plans for electric vehicles and integrated transport systems, noting that such infrastructure aligns with efforts to reduce carbon footprint for travellers and tourists visiting the Kingdom. A Jeddah Chamber representative outlined seven major solutions being implemented to address movement challenges across the city. The international airport has been upgraded to handle 90 million passengers annually. A high-speed train now connects Mecca, Jeddah, and Madinah, whilst 450 intersections are being converted to light traffic-free operation without signals. Plans include building a metro system for Jeddah and constructing a light rail train running north to south parallel to the coast. Marine taxis operate on a trial basis following their launch last year. Public buses are being implemented with stations under construction, and the system will provide arrival times accurate to seconds rather than minutes.

It should be noted that the Metro was approved in 2013 for three lines, but this has faced delays. Indeed, all seven solutions remain under construction or in execution. Whilst these projects require substantial time to complete, they are included in the master plan and progressing towards implementation. Strategies encourage reduced private car usage through parking regulations and park-and-ride facilities. The historical district also actively promotes walking to increase quality of life under Vision 2030 objectives. Electric vehicle charging stations are now required in new developments, and multiple charging stations have been deployed throughout the area to support this infrastructure transition.

Education and Training for Tourism Sector

Current Training Landscape

A member described the substantial evolution of tourism education in Saudi Arabia over recent years. Tourism visas were approved in 2017, when visitor numbers stood at 10.6 million. Today, numbers exceed 100 million visits to Saudi Arabia annually, with the goal of reaching 150 million by 2030. Before 2007, tourism visas were not available in current numbers, and visitors came almost exclusively for religious purposes.

This growth creates substantial opportunities for partnership in education and training. Manpower is needed to manage projects including NEOM, AMAALA, Jeddah Historical District, and other major developments throughout the Kingdom. The Ministry of Tourism requires trained professionals across multiple disciplines to support this expansion.

Training programmes have expanded considerably to meet demand. In 2007, there were only 18 tour guides operating across the entire Kingdom. Today, there are more than 4,000 tour guides, with training covering reception, housekeeping, and tour guide skills but professional people are needed to handle and manage the scale of projects under development.

A Chamber representative noted that the education and training meeting scheduled for Thursday 6th November would benefit substantially from participants bringing questions grounded in business realities. Training centres need to create new curricula and learning experiences that address practical requirements. Learning involves not only acquiring theoretical knowledge but also understanding how to act and react appropriately in real-world situations.

The Ministry of Tourism has established programmes to receive travellers from India and China, representing major source markets for future tourism growth. These programmes must address not only language skills but also cultural behaviours, food preferences, welcoming practices, and appropriate greetings. Mecca residents understand from long experience that receiving Hajj pilgrims requires managing all these aspects to ensure visitors have positive experiences, even though the primary purpose of their visit is religious rather than recreational.

Building the Talent Pipeline

Members discussed the growing disconnect between UK companies entering Saudi Arabia and the local talent pool they need to access. Saudi universities are launching new hospitality, leisure, and tourism courses aligned with Saudisation requirements, yet most UK businesses remain unaware these programmes exist despite facing regulatory obligations to hire locally.

One member noted that establishing a British business in the Kingdom requires parallel investment in local talent development, and the core challenge lies in knowing where to find appropriately trained professionals. Student placement programmes emerged as one solution, with members suggesting that Saudi undergraduates could work in UK firms during holidays or study periods, giving young professionals international experience while allowing companies to build relationships with future Saudi talent. The Council could broker these arrangements through structured engagement with universities on both sides.

Jeddah Historical District offers another pathway, with culinary and fine arts schools opening within the district boundaries alongside subsidised residential buildings for students. The programme welcomes proposals from those interested in establishing schools focused on tourism, culture, or archaeology.

One member's company already runs structured training programmes that bring Saudi staff to facilities abroad before returning them to the Kingdom, and the company expressed interest in university introductions to reach students earlier in their academic journeys. This model creates mutual value, providing development opportunities for Saudi youth while giving British businesses a reliable talent pipeline as they navigate Saudisation requirements.

Sports Tourism and Facilities

Sports Infrastructure

A member discussed Jeddah's sports facilities and their growing role in tourism development. Jeddah has more than five sports facilities operated throughout the city, with facilities designed to

accommodate various types of events. Some facilities host events with 5,000 spectators and athletes, whilst other facilities support different types of sports competitions, training camps, and international tournaments. Jeddah stands ready to host multiple types of sporting events and tournaments across disciplines. The infrastructure exists to support this ambition, and flexible policies encourage event hosting at various scales.

Sports and Community Development

A member emphasised that sports represent far more than hosting events or staging temporary occasions. Whilst major events like Formula One in Jeddah generate substantial economic impact and international visibility, sports should be viewed more comprehensively as part of social and economic development. Britain offers a strong case study for sport-related topics, given its long history of integrating sports into education, community health, and economic development.

Meetings could connect British companies and consultancies with Jeddah companies through the Chamber's established networks. The region demonstrates considerable enthusiasm for sports development across multiple levels, with even municipal work encouraging people to walk and exercise aligns directly with Vision 2030 goals around public health. The "sports for all initiative" aims to create a healthier community through accessible facilities and programmes and the municipalities have created numerous public parks supporting this vision of active, healthy lifestyles.

Sports connects directly to education priorities as well. With the right people and experts involved, numerous initiatives become possible across sports science, sports medicine, coaching education, and sports business management. The sports sector offers substantial opportunities for collaboration and partnerships between UK and Saudi organisations.

A member from the sports sector observed that sports encompass far more than professional athletes or elite competition. The ecosystem includes physiotherapy, sports therapy, nutrition, sports psychology, coaching, facility management, and numerous other career paths within the sports industry. Not everyone becomes a professional athlete, yet many rewarding career paths exist in sports-related fields for those with appropriate training and qualifications. The sports sector would benefit from structured discussions to identify specific gaps and create functional bridges between UK and Saudi organisations. These conversations could determine where partnerships make most sense and how to develop them sustainably over time.

World Football Summit

Cordelia Begbie announced that SBJBC will host a sport-specific delegation for the World Football Summit taking place in December. The Council will maintain a presence at the Summit and conduct side programming with delegations from both Saudi and UK sides. Members in Riyadh at that time, or willing to travel to Riyadh for the event, are invited to participate.

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMIC CITY VISIT

Real Estate Eevelopment

On the 5th November, the Council took a delegation to Medinah as part of a wider event hosted by Knowledge Economic City (KEC), co-hosted by IIG who also had their own delegation. The purpose of the visit was to understand the incredible developments occurring in Medinah and assess potential real estate opportunities for international buyers in the city. Targeted at Muslims abroad and new tourists, KEC is a wide sweeping project that spans a significant portion of Medinah, with a master plan that includes many new international hotels, thousands of modern residential units, serviced apartments, ten international and Islamic schools, hospitals, mega-malls, gyms and leisure spaces.

Beyond simply showcasing property developments, the visit served to educate members on the scale of change in a city that had previously been restricted from significant foreign investment and mixed-use development. With new real estate laws inbound for 2026 permitting foreign ownership in almost every city in Saudi Arabia, with Medinah open for international Muslims, the opportunity is enormous. Moreover, Vision 2030 regulatory reforms now permit the kind of integrated urban development that has become commonplace in other Gulf cities, fundamentally transforming what is possible in Medinah for these international buyers to consider. At the same time, delegates needed to evaluate concrete business opportunities across construction, hospitality, education, and property management sectors where UK expertise could find a natural home.

What became apparent throughout the presentations and site visits was a market experiencing remarkable transformation driven by expanding demand and constrained supply. Medinah's visitor numbers have grown substantially in recent years, with the average length of stay increasing from two days in 2019 to ten days in 2024. Visitor spending exceeded 15 billion SAR in the past year, whilst hotel occupancy rates reached 72%, with five-star properties exceeding 90%. The gap between demand and available supply is evident across residential, hospitality, and commercial sectors, creating the investment opportunity that brought delegates to the city.

Throughout the day's presentations, KEC's leadership emphasised a development philosophy focused on lifestyle rather than conventional real estate transactions. Rather than simply selling property, the company positions itself as creating communities for families who want to establish permanent lives in Medinah, bringing their businesses, children, and long-term ambitions to the city. This approach shapes design decisions across the master plan, from the emphasis on pedestrian connectivity and central parks to the integration of schools and commercial amenities within residential developments. Delegates toured completed residential communities that demonstrated this philosophy in practice, observing how walkability, green space, and family-oriented facilities reflected international best practices in community planning. By cultivating this welcoming and community-oriented environment, KEC is positioning Medinah to be a Holy City where tourists are encouraged to engage deeply, spend meaningful time, and build enduring attachments.

The presentations revealed KEC's strategic positioning between the Prophet's Mosque and the high-speed rail station, providing connectivity to major Saudi cities and the broader transport network. The company is developing 6.8 million square metres with projected investment spanning 15 to 20 years, encompassing residential, hospitality, retail, educational, and healthcare components designed to function as integrated neighbourhoods rather than isolated projects. KEC's chairman stressed repeatedly that the development's success would be measured not by sales volume but by the value created for residents and visitors, with every element of the master plan designed to support this objective through significant green space allocations, community amenities, and careful integration between different land uses.

Delegates learned about KEC's approach to international partnerships, which has already produced agreements with hotel operators including Hilton, Hyatt, and Marriott. Of particular interest was the recently announced joint venture with Maison Prive, which will manage residential units as holiday homes when owners are not in residence. This arrangement addresses a key consideration for international buyers who intend to use property only occasionally, creating a professional management solution that generates rental returns whilst preserving owner access.

Site tours of completed and under-construction developments allowed delegates to move beyond presentations and assess the physical realities of the projects. Walking through the Multakamul Mall, residential communities, and hotel properties, whilst viewing master plans for future phases, members could evaluate construction quality, spatial planning, and market positioning. The mock-up units demonstrated finishing standards and layouts for residential products being marketed to international buyers, providing tangible evidence of the quality levels KEC is delivering.

Several sectors emerged as particularly relevant for UK businesses seeking to engage with Medinah's development. The master plan's inclusion of multiple international schools reflects growing demand from expat families and Saudi nationals seeking Western curriculum options within an Islamic environment, an area where British educational institutions possess the expertise and international credibility to deliver. Healthcare facilities represent another under-served sector, with the city requiring modern medical infrastructure to serve both permanent residents and millions of annual visitors. Retail operations, hospitality management, and facilities services all present partnership possibilities for firms with relevant capabilities and willingness to adapt to the local context.

The visit also clarified the operational requirements specific to Medinah that distinguish it from other Gulf markets. The city's profound religious significance imposes design and operational constraints that shape every aspect of development. Projects must align with Islamic values in both physical design and operational practices, whilst mixed-gender facilities require culturally appropriate solutions. Understanding these requirements emerged as essential for any UK company considering partnership arrangements, with cultural awareness proving as important as technical expertise.

The broader lesson for UK businesses is that Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 extends well beyond Riyadh and the mega projects receiving international headlines. Cities like Medinah are experiencing transformation that creates opportunities for companies willing to invest time understanding local requirements and building relationships with capable partners. SBJBC's visit demonstrated the value of direct market exposure, as reading reports cannot substitute for visiting developments, meeting local partners, and assessing market dynamics firsthand. The trip equipped delegates with practical market intelligence on the regulatory environment, partnership structures, and community development approach necessary to evaluate opportunities within Medinah's ongoing transformation.

EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

The Education Roundtable, titled "Advancing UK-Saudi Educational Partnerships", took place on 6th November at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, bringing together a wide range of UK and Saudi education providers, education related entities, and government representatives. The discussion centred on ways to encourage greater participation between the two countries education sectors and what challenges or misconceptions remain to be overcome.

The post-roundtable report is available by request as part of the wider SBJBC Education Report. For more information and to request a copy, please contact Robert McNamara, SBJBC Research Manager, at the email in the Key Contacts below.

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