



SAUDI BRITISH
JOINT BUSINESS COUNCIL

Doing Business in Saudi Arabia: Workshop Report

Edinburgh, 26th February 2026

Executive Summary

The Saudi British Joint Business Council (SBJBC), in partnership with AEI Saudi and hosted by CMS Edinburgh, held the latest in the “Doing Business in Saudi Arabia” workshop series on 26th February 2026. This Edinburgh edition marked the first time the series has been held in Scotland, bringing together representatives from engineering, financial services, architecture, energy, education, and manufacturing, reflecting the breadth of Scottish interest in the Saudi market.

The half-day workshop provided practical insights into Saudi Arabia’s business environment through a data-led market presentation and two panel discussions. Key themes emerged around the need for physical presence in the Kingdom, the importance of understanding Saudi Arabia’s distinct legal and contractual environment, the realities of payment delays, and the growing role of Saudisation as both an obligation and an accelerator for business growth.

Introduction

The workshop brought together experienced practitioners and newcomers to share insights on market entry, operational realities, and available support, with the event format combining a data-led presentation with two panel discussions. A majority of attendees had not visited Saudi Arabia before, creating a valuable mix of perspectives between those exploring the market for the first time and those with existing operations. SBJBC CEO Cordelia Begbie opened by emphasising that the Council is not a promotion agency and that the session was designed to provide honest, candid advice about entering the Saudi market.

Market Overview: Saudi Arabia’s Economic Transformation

The workshop opened with a presentation by Robert McNamara, Head of Research at SBJBC, outlining Saudi Arabia’s economic trajectory and the specific relevance of Scottish capabilities. Saudi Arabia’s GDP stands at approximately \$1.3 trillion, the largest economy in the Middle East and Africa, and the IMF is forecasting 4.5% growth in 2026, placing the Kingdom among the fastest-growing G20 economies. Non-oil GDP now exceeds 55% of total output, up from 30% in 2016, with growth driven by construction, services, technology, tourism, and financial services. Vision 2030 remains on track, with 93% of KPIs meeting targets, over 675 international companies having established regional headquarters in Riyadh, and S&P upgrading the Kingdom to an A+ credit rating. The project pipeline stands at \$1.5 trillion.

Total UK-Saudi bilateral trade stands at over £16.5 billion, with the UK targeting £30 billion by 2030. UK exports to Saudi Arabia total £13.2 billion, of which 63% is in services, a composition that plays

directly to Scotland's strengths in financial services, education, and engineering. Nine British schools have been licensed in the Kingdom and two universities have established themselves, including the University of Strathclyde. In October, Chancellor Reeves attended the Future Investment Initiative in Riyadh with the largest ever UK delegation, closing £6.4 billion in deals, and the UK-GCC Free Trade Agreement, currently in its eighth round, is expected to increase bilateral trade by an estimated £8.6 billion when signed.

The business environment has undergone rapid reform, with the regulatory landscape changing more in the last 12 months than in the previous decade. A new investment law has shifted the system from licensing to registration, with foreign and domestic investors now receiving equal treatment. Commercial registrations no longer expire, non-Arabic business names are permitted, and since January 2026 foreign companies have been able to own property in designated zones. Four special economic zones offer 5% corporate tax compared to the standard 20%.

The presentation addressed specific sector opportunities relevant to Scottish firms, beginning with infrastructure, where priorities have shifted towards Expo 2030 and the FIFA 2034 World Cup, creating a procurement cycle running for at least the next eight years. Saudi Arabia has launched Humain, backed by \$100 billion in PIF funding, targeting 7% of the global AI workload by 2030. The British curriculum holds 33% market share in Saudi private education, with the market expected to grow to \$24 billion by 2030. The presentation gave an honest account of mega-project adjustments: NEOM's The Line has been scaled back to 2.4 kilometres by 2030, and Trojena has been postponed and repurposed as an AI and data centre hub. Delivery is progressing elsewhere, with Red Sea Global operating nine luxury resorts, Qiddiya's Six Flags opening on New Year's Eve, and tourism reaching 122 million visitors.

On energy, renewable capacity has tripled in 18 months to over 10 gigawatts, with a 58-gigawatt pipeline, and Saudi Arabia has 106 gigawatts of offshore wind potential, targeting 16 gigawatts by 2030, an area of direct alignment for Scotland, which holds 25% of Europe's offshore wind resources. The fiscal picture shows oil at \$63–70 per barrel against a breakeven of \$90–94, a gap that Saudi Arabia is bridging through international borrowing and, increasingly, through private sector partnerships, with up to 300 PPP projects worth \$190 billion available.

Panel 1: Practicalities of Doing Business in Saudi Arabia

The first panel, led by Cordelia Begbie, brought together Adam Hosier, Founder and Director of AEI Saudi; Asfandyar Sheikh, Immigration Manager at Fragomen; and Philip Norman, Partner at CMS.

Adam Hosier opened by providing context on Saudi Arabia's population dynamics, noting that the Kingdom has approximately 20 million Saudi nationals and 10 million foreign workers, a ratio that is almost the inverse of other GCC states where foreign nationals dominate. Vision 2030's economic transformation is designed to create a functioning economy for those 20 million people. He noted that the female workforce has been a particular success story, with Saudi women emerging as highly educated, competitive candidates who, in AEI's own experience, have outperformed expectations, and that Saudi Arabia now ranks second globally in female entrepreneurship, ahead of the United States.

The importance of committing to a physical presence in the Kingdom emerged as a central theme throughout the discussion, with Cordelia Begbie noting a strong correlation between time spent in Kingdom and commercial success and warning against the "fly in, fly out" approach that some companies adopt from Dubai or other Gulf markets. Adam Hosier reinforced this point, noting that businesses must plan for a permanent footprint as their activity grows, and that the Saudi market is loyal

to those who demonstrate sustained presence: once a company establishes a reputation for delivery, procurement teams will actively seek them out for repeat work. Mark Lawrie of Trivandi, speaking later in the event, noted that tensions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE over companies based in Dubai but serving Saudi clients are increasing.

On visas and immigration, Asfandyar Sheikh explained the distinction between business visas, tourist visas, and work authorisation. British nationals are able to obtain tourist visas on arrival, and business visas are available for one, two, or five years, intended for meetings and scoping rather than productive work. Sheikh noted a growing pattern of rejections for business visa renewals where Saudi authorities determine that the holder's activities have crossed into work requiring employment authorisation, and advised companies to maintain supporting documentation including letters of invitation and schedules. Adam Hosier recommended obtaining a five-year business visa early, as the regime is likely to tighten further.

Philip Norman of CMS addressed the legal environment, emphasising that Saudi Arabia operates a different legal system and that UK companies should not assume contract terms carry the same meaning or enforceability as at home. Risk allocation approaches standard in UK construction or services contracts do not translate directly, and Saudi buyers are sophisticated purchasers experienced at pushing risk onto suppliers. He highlighted that legal reform has progressed substantially, including the establishment of commercial tribunals and improved dispute resolution mechanisms.

On entity setup, Adam Hosier explained that the process has two phases: securing a licence through the Ministry of Investment, and then operationalising the entity through commercial registration, bank account setup, office establishment, and employment authorisation. Commercial registration typically takes around two weeks, and employer-of-record services, provided by appropriately licensed local firms such as AEI Saudi, offer a route for companies to hire staff and begin operations before completing the full licensing process, keeping overheads proportionate to a company's stage of growth.

Payment culture received substantial attention from all panellists, with Adam Hosier describing payment delays as a structural feature of the market and advising companies to secure large mobilisation payments upfront. He warned that Saudi clients are shrewd buyers who will seek to expand scope while extending payment schedules, giving the example of clients who will ask a company to write the RFP, award the work, and then expand the requirements during delivery while the original payment terms remain unchanged. Having someone on the ground who is able to follow up directly with a client's finance team on outstanding invoices is a practical necessity.

Saudisation, the requirement for companies to employ Saudi nationals at prescribed ratios, was discussed at length by both Asfandyar and Adam. Asfandyar explained that the required ratio depends on the company's ISIC code, sector, and size, and that ratios are increasing: in some sectors, the requirement has risen from 30% to 60%. Companies that fall out of compliance move from green to red status, which blocks new hires and affects visa renewals. Adam stressed the importance of selecting the right ISIC code at the point of licensing, as changing codes later to reduce Saudisation obligations is viewed unfavourably by authorities, who understand the motivation behind such changes.

Panel 2: Success Stories and Options for Available Support

The second panel featured Mark Lawrie, Chief Strategy Officer and Saudi Arabia Office Leader at Trivandi; Karen Beamish, Executive Director of Products and Services at RIBA; and Carol Harvey,

Export Finance Manager at UKEF. A representative from Scottish Development International also contributed.

Mark Lawrie described Trivandi's deliberate decision to be based in Riyadh, closing its Dubai office to invest in the Kingdom. Trivandi has worked on projects including Qiddiya and major sporting events across the Gulf, and Lawrie described Saudi Arabia as now the clear centre of gravity for major events in the region, with Expo 2030, the FIFA 2034 World Cup, and the Islamic Solidarity Games in the pipeline. He noted smart people at the top of Saudi decision-making structures and said the country is unrecognisable from even a few years ago, but cautioned that there is a culture of "hurry up and wait", giving a personal example of being called at 9pm to attend a meeting that did not begin until well past midnight, only to be appointed by the CEO's office of Expo the following day. Trust, he said, is the most important factor in winning work. On Saudisation, Lawrie reframed it as an accelerator rather than a burden, describing how Trivandi's first Saudi hire became their general manager and proved instrumental to the firm's growth.

Karen Beamish outlined RIBA's experience of building an institutional presence in Saudi Arabia, an effort that has taken several years of sustained engagement. RIBA has signed memoranda of understanding with Saudi bodies, including the National Housing Company, and is working with the Architecture and Design Commission on developing capability and capacity within the Saudi architectural profession. She emphasised that the process requires patience, giving the example of the NHC MOU: RIBA had done everything requested and had everything in place to sign at the Future Real Estate Forum, and then had to wait further before the agreement was finalised. A number of large UK architectural practices are operating in the Kingdom, many through partnership with Saudi firms, and the RIBA Plan of Work is being used by PIF and other entities. Beamish cautioned that UK firms must understand the local environment and respect Saudi Arabia's architectural identity, noting that colour palettes and materials suitable for the UK will not work in a desert context like Riyadh.

Carol Harvey explained UKEF's three core functions: direct lending to overseas buyers, guarantees to banks supporting UK exporters, and insurance against non-payment. She stressed that UKEF has no minimum or maximum transaction size and is actively supporting SMEs. As an example of scale, she cited a guarantee of approximately \$700 million for the Qiddiya Six Flags project, but emphasised that within such mega-projects there are substantial supply chain opportunities for smaller UK firms, and that UKEF actively invites companies to register as potential suppliers. Her key advice was to work out financing before committing to a contract, to expect late payments, and to explore instruments such as advance payment guarantees and letters of credit.

A representative from Scottish Development International noted that Saudi Arabia has been elevated to one of 26 priority markets in Scotland's export strategy, with SDI highlighting opportunities in energy transition, digital technology, agritech, medical devices, and education. Cordelia Begbie provided a practical example of a Welsh lamb producer who joined a food trade mission, secured a distributor, and is now making more money exporting to Saudi Arabia than selling domestically.

The discussion also addressed market entry structures and regional strategy. On joint ventures, Adam Hosier noted that while 100% foreign ownership is now permitted across most sectors, local partnerships remain valuable for market access and credibility, though he cautioned that exclusive distributor agreements require care, as a partner strong in the Eastern Province may not have the same reach in Jeddah or Riyadh. Karen Beamish highlighted trade shows such as Cityscape as a practical entry point for testing the market and meeting potential partners without a full in-Kingdom presence.

Key Insights and Practical Considerations

Several themes emerged consistently across both panels. Physical presence in the Kingdom is essential, and the fly-in, fly-out model from Dubai or elsewhere is increasingly unsustainable. The legal and contractual environment operates differently from the UK, and companies need specialist advice rather than assuming UK norms will apply. Financial planning must accommodate payment delays as a structural feature of the market, and Saudisation should be treated as a strategic opportunity rather than a compliance burden. Trust and patience are prerequisites for success, with Asfandyar noting from his own experience of living in Riyadh that 60 to 70% of a meeting should be spent on personal rapport before any business discussion, and that even a proposal that is not perfect in a client's eyes will progress if the relationship is in place. Scotland has specific advantages in offshore wind, engineering, financial services, education, food and drink, and architecture, all of which align to the Kingdom's development priorities.

Conclusion

The Edinburgh workshop reinforced Saudi Arabia's position as a high-potential market requiring careful preparation and sustained commitment. The transformation underway creates substantial opportunities for Scottish and UK businesses willing to invest time and resources in understanding local requirements, and the scale of the opportunity rewards those who prepare properly and commit.

The networking lunch that concluded the event allowed participants to connect directly with speakers and fellow attendees. Scottish Development International's presence underlined the institutional support available to Scottish firms exploring the market.

SBJBC extends its gratitude to all speakers: Adam Hosier, Asfandyar Sheikh, and Philip Norman for their insights on the practicalities of market entry; and Mark Lawrie, Karen Beamish, and Carol Harvey for their perspectives on building successful operations in the Kingdom. Thanks also to CMS Edinburgh for hosting the event at their offices on Castle Terrace and to AEI Saudi for their continued partnership in delivering the workshop series.