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Ashford Borough Council

TOURISM REVIEW 2013/2014

DECEMBER 2014



Ashford Borough Council

2013/2014 Tourism Review



Cllr Mrs Clair Bell
Portfolio Holder for Tourism, Rural Focus and Customer Services
December 2014



www.ashford.gov.uk
www.visitashfordandtenterden.co.uk

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1. Introduction and Strategic Context

- 1.1 The current Tourism Development Framework, 2006-2011 has expired and a new portfolio for Tourism, Rural Focus and Customer Services has been established.
- 1.2 'The AshFORd model: A Blueprint for Integrated Growth' sets out Ashford Borough Council's commitment to economic growth and job creation. In addition, the Council's entrepreneurial approach demonstrates that there has never been a better time for tourism and the visitor economy to contribute to realising these ambitions.
- 1.3 Ashford's connectivity, growing international status and reputation as a desirable place to live mean that the borough is a highly attractive place to live and work. Ashford was recently ranked number one as Kent's 'best town for business' in terms of location, a welcoming and co-operative approach and the positive attitude of the local authority. These factors also help provide the visitor numbers needed to support a successful and growing tourist economy.
- 1.4. Ashford's 'Big 8' priority projects will all contribute to a successful visitor economy. For example the Commercial Quarter development focused around the International Station, a new town centre cinema and complimentary commercial development, the expansion of the Designer Outlet and the creation of the Jasmin Vardimon International Dance Academy. Also in the pipeline are an International Model Railway visitor attraction and a Space Science Centre and Planetarium.
- 1.5 Signalling solutions at the International Station will mean new Eurostar stock can continue to stop, enabling visitors to access a much improved town centre, before sampling the tourism honeypot of Tenterden and the rural charm of the countryside villages.
- 1.6 The tourism landscape, particularly in terms of partnerships and consumer behaviour and expectations has changed. There has been an increase in domestic tourism, in terms of 'Staycations', 'Down from London' visitors (DFLs) and 'Visiting Friends and Relatives' (VFR) as well as an increase in overseas visitors. The demand for real time information, with social media at the forefront, is also changing the way we and our partners work.
- 1.7 The value of tourism to Kent and Ashford Borough cannot be underestimated. It is worth an estimated £3.75bn to Kent's economy and £250m to Ashford where it accounts for approximately 4,000 jobs representing an estimated 7.3% of all employment in the borough (figures based on forward projections of the 2011 Cambridge Model Economic Impact Study).

2. Aims and Scope of the Review

- 2.1 This review places at its heart the needs of our local tourism businesses and organisations. It seeks to establish how the Council can best support and develop these key partners. The Council is committed to economic growth, job creation and improving the infrastructure that supports and encourages a thriving tourism economy through an ever-improving visitor offer and experience.
- 2.2 £20,000 of New Homes Bonus was allocated to fund the review. The Portfolio Holder believed it would be more productive and better received by the businesses, if the review was conducted in-house by the Portfolio Holder and Tourism, Heritage and Nature Conservation Manager whilst the budget was reserved for a number of small projects predicted to be identified by businesses during the course of the review.
- 2.3 Therefore in order for the review to be focused and for the consultation and engagement with our partners and businesses to be meaningful, a number of clear, but flexible, objectives were set.
- 2.4 It was also acknowledged that some form of monitoring would need to be put in place to measure our performance against these objectives. It was agreed that until the outcomes of the review were known, it would not be feasible to address this in detail. Mechanisms such as an annual tourism report, a destination management plan, the commissioning of regular economic impact studies and the monitoring of new developments and businesses, as they are set up, are possible means of achieving this.
- 2.5 The objectives of the review were to:
- Ensure the tourism service is fit for purpose, relevant, and that it complements and provides added value to the activities currently undertaken by tourism and hospitality businesses in the borough.
 - Ensure the review contributes to making Ashford and Tenterden an international destination.
 - Communicate the role that the Council will play in supporting tourism activity in the borough and, in doing so, set expectations accordingly.
 - Ensure that the review (a) reflects the views and aspirations of the borough's visitor economy partners and (b) develops a shared approach to marketing and promoting the area.
 - Ensure that the review supports the Council's aspirations to promote economic growth and job creation and, in particular, contributes to a successful visitor economy that in turn creates a dynamic and prosperous place to live, work and play.

- Ensure the review is 'action driven', focused on delivering tangible results rather than being seen as an inward looking strategy.

3. The Current Position – Ashford’s Performance, Strengths and Challenges

- 3.1 The review has looked at our current performance, strengths, challenges, and most pertinently what’s most important to our tourism businesses.
Tourism in Ashford remains buoyant in spite of the current economic climate.
- 3.2 Growth areas include a strong day visitor market linked to McArthurGlen and an increasing number of overseas visitor stays and related spend linked to Ashford’s connectivity, location and the rural appeal of Tenterden and the villages. Also when bench marked in comparison to other areas in Kent, Ashford performs well, but still with room for improvement. On the distribution of overseas visitor night stays Ashford ranks fourth after Canterbury, Thanet and Medway. In relation to day visit spend Ashford again ranks well in joint third place with Medway after Canterbury and Thanet.
- 3.3 Ashford’s strengths as a borough can be summed up by its wealth of picturesque villages, stunning countryside, the delightful rural town of Tenterden, known as the ‘Jewel of the Weald,’ and for the fact it boasts the greatest number of listed buildings in Kent. It has easy access to the M20 and excellent connectivity to London (38 mins) via High Speed 1. Eurostar currently connects the town with Paris (1 hr 52 mins) and Brussels (1 hr 39 mins). A direct service to Marseille is expected to launch in May 2015. In addition the Ashford Designer Outlet welcomes an estimated 3.2 million visitors a year.
- 3.4 Growing Ashford’s share of the South East and Kent tourism market is a challenge but we must seek to capitalise on our proximity to existing attractions in neighbouring areas, such as Canterbury, Leeds Castle, Sissinghurst Castle Gardens as well as developments coming forward such as the Paramount Pictures theme park near Ebbsfleet.
- 3.5 We know we already have a healthy number of overnight stays and demand is likely to increase with the expansion of the Ashford Designer Outlet and aforementioned developments and the Borough being aggressively marketed as just 37 minutes from London, rather than the other way round. As such, one challenge might be to attract a destination or boutique hotel that fits our international aspirations. As we capitalise on our connectivity and international credentials we will need to ensure that our businesses offer the very best in terms of welcome and hospitality.
- 3.6 We will receive the 2013 Economic Impact of Tourism report for Ashford shortly and the key facts summary will be added to the website early next year.

4. Engaging with our tourism businesses and partners - process and participation

4.1 Having established clear aims for the review, it was important not to be too prescriptive or limiting when the views of our tourism businesses and partners were sought.

4.2 In order for the interviews to be focussed, informative and productive, a series of informal questions were devised based around potential topic areas from our initial desk research and feedback from a brainstorming meeting held with the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association. It was felt that the Association, which represents more than 50 businesses, would be a good representation of the tourism economy in the borough.

4.3 The discussions fell into two areas:

Current and emerging issues:

- Future expansion of the Designer Outlet.
- Increased marketing opportunities with Ashford Town Centre including HS1 & Eurostar.
- Linking into future developments such as the model railway attraction, Jasmin Vardimon, Conningbrook Lakes and the Planetarium.
- Growing the borough's quality food and drink offer.
- Establishing better coach parking facilities.
- Exploiting and developing Ashford's cycle network.

Specific areas where the Council could have a role include:

- Visitor information services
- Tailored public relations activities
- Greater focus on the group and travel trade market
- The general appearance of the borough, including measures to welcome and move visitors around better.
- Improved online and social media activity
- Greater resources and funding allocated to the Tourism Association.

- 4.4 This process helped inform discussions with a wide range of tourism businesses and partners and led to an open, informal approach being taken, where no subject was off limits and where businesses were able to raise any issue they wished.
- 4.5 Information about the review taking place was widely circulated including at the Parish Forum and Conference, the 2013 Tourism Association AGM and at meetings of the Tenterden Town and Rural Partnership and the Tenterden Economy Group. It was also featured in Tourism Association newsletters and in a business feature on the Portfolio Holder.
- 4.6 In addition a large number of businesses and organisations were personally invited by the Portfolio Holder to either meet with her, schedule a phone call or send in their comments. A note was also taken of conversations which took place on an ad hoc basis at exhibitions and other events attended by the Portfolio Holder.
- 4.7 Feedback was received from a significant number of businesses and organisations including:
- Visit Kent
 - Tourism South East
 - The Ashford & Tenterden Tourism Association
 - Ashford International Hotel
 - Biddenden Vineyard
 - Broadhembury Holiday Park
 - Chapel Down Winery
 - Eastwell Manor
 - Elvey Farm
 - Kent & East Sussex Railway
 - McArthurGlen Designer Outlet
 - Rare Breeds Centre
 - Stable Cottage, Woodchurch
 - The Dering Arms, Pluckley

- Tenterden Museum
- Tenterden Town Council
- Tenterden Chamber of Commerce
- The Woolpack at Tenterden
- Wye Business Association

4.8 In addition the Portfolio Holder spoke with parish councils at the 2013 Rural Conference, met with Tenterden Town Council, in April 2014, attended the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association AGM, May 2014, the Tenterden Tourism and Business Exhibition, June 2014 and a farewell event for the Chairman of the Tourism Association, Sept 2014. (See appendix 1)

4.9 The Portfolio Holder also spoke with the Head of Culture and the Environment, The Tourism, Heritage and Nature Conservation Manager and The Tourism Operations Officer, who manages the tourist information service. She also visited the TICs in both the Tenterden Gateway and Ashford Gateway and spoke to staff there.

5. Valuable feedback from our tourism businesses and partners

- 5.1 The Tourism Association was of the view that its members are professionals in their particular area of business, be it hoteliers, attraction specialists, B & B owners or wine growers. They are not looking for support in these specific areas, but would appreciate the input of the council on projects that bring added value to their business and to the area as a whole. They felt there are a number of initiatives, particularly promotional ones, which are cost prohibitive for individual businesses. However, collectively and with the support of the Council these would become feasible.
- 5.2 The Tourism Association sees the Council's role as complementing Visit Kent's role in attracting people to visit Kent and then the Ashford Borough. The role of the businesses and the Tourism Association is to ensure that visitors have good reasons to stay in the area and 'circulate locally' in preference to other places in Kent.
- 5.3 The borough's tourism businesses and partners believe that the Council's support for tourism in its current scope and extent was productive but highlighted some key areas and projects that they felt we should focus on in partnership with themselves.
- 5.4 There were no major concerns although there were some recurring issues:
- The welcome and appearance of the borough
 - Signage
 - Tourist information
 - The challenge of how to meet visitor needs with changing customer expectations. For instance the balance of traditional printed marketing and electronic developments.
- 5.5 Businesses appreciated the fact that the review was taking place and that they had been consulted and that Ashford Borough Council was serious about tourism and showed a positive commitment from the most senior level down.
- 5.6 They understood and supported Ashford's vision to realise its ambitions in creating an improved and successful visitor economy and were all willing to play their part in this. Businesses can see that Ashford is an ideal place in which to invest and grow a business. This is evidenced by our award -winning vineyards, ice cream maker, silversmith and rocking horse manufacturer.
- 5.7 There were initial concerns over duplication between tourism organisations and that there might be confusion as to who does what in Kent and the South East, particularly in regards to marketing and promotion. Discussions with Visit Kent, Tourism South East and our businesses revealed that this was not

the case. Businesses have a good understanding of their own roles and how this relates to the customer journey as the potential visitor initially researches and selects a destination, makes a booking and finally stays in and visits places in the area.

- 5.8 A consistent message was that the visitor offer was relatively sound, but with occasional gaps in provision. For example, the disparity between the quality food and drink offer of the villages compared to Ashford's more limited offer and the need for Ashford to be more of a destination rather than a base to visit the rest of the area due to its lack of 'attractors'. The positive impact of the designer outlet was however noted.
- 5.9 Businesses told us what is important to them and the successful running of their organisation. This divided into both day to day and ad hoc issues pertinent sometimes to just that individual business. Although not under the control of the council, businesses were keen for pressure to be brought to improve poor mobile phone coverage in the rural areas, including many village high streets
- 5.10 The subject of parking was raised a number of times, particularly relating to parking charges and the difference that free or reduced parking would make on Sundays to encourage people to visit both Ashford and Tenterden. This matter was progressed by the Portfolio Holder and her colleague the Portfolio Holder for Transportation and Highways during the recent parking review and it was ensured that designated car parks in Ashford and Tenterden will be free on Sundays and Bank Holidays. We will therefore work with the tourism businesses to promote this opportunity and ensure that it brings maximum benefit to both towns.
- 5.11 Another recurring message was that good communication with the planning department was vital for many of the businesses. Feedback from contributors suggested the council says it wants to support and develop tourism businesses, but this is not the experience of some businesses when it comes to the actual planning process. A number of businesses expressed a desire to have more in depth pre-planning advice, relative to the contribution that they feel their development brings to the local economy.

6. Issues and aspirations raised by our tourism organisations and businesses

Need for an improved Tourist Information Service

- 6.1 Businesses shared their concerns about the Ashford tourist information service. The quality of customer service is perceived as good but there are issues over the location, its visibility, opening hours and range of services which can be offered. It was noted that Tenterden has a thriving visitor economy in its own right, underpinned by the work of an invigorated Chamber of Commerce and the importance attached by the Town Council to the part played by tourism in the success of the local economy. The positive legacy of the Tenterden Improved Project is also acknowledged.
- 6.2 A number of businesses expressed the view that a stand-alone information service to further promote the town was desirable. Businesses felt that the location of the TIC facility in a High Street 'shop front' environment was right. Tenterden Town Council has expressed an interest in setting up a dedicated TIC

Making more of Ashford as a visitor destination in its own right

- 6.3 The possibility of building on Ashford's existing heritage, particularly its railway heritage, as well as its new international and cultural aspirations was raised. The emerging developments mentioned previously in this document are key. Equally is supporting the town to attract the type of businesses that will create a significant 'buzz'. Examples include quality restaurants, cafes, bars and specialist shops. In addition, unique town centre accommodation, such as a boutique hotel, as well as lower cost hotel accommodation was mentioned. Businesses were keen to understand how best to engage in this process and be kept informed about commercial opportunities.

Supporting a co-ordinated approach to destination marketing

- 6.4 Many businesses felt that there should be a more co-ordinated approach to marketing and that there was an opportunity to expand on the number and range of successful joint campaigns already taking place. This shared approach was mentioned by attractions, retailers and accommodation providers alike who felt that this activity could be led by the Tourism Association. There were a number of added value marketing campaigns which were identified as logical continuations of those currently being undertaken by the Council and individual businesses. For instance, heritage tours, food, drink and wine trails and shopping experiences.
- 6.5 **Developing our online and social media activity** - Businesses welcomed the launch of our new, award-winning www.visitashfordandtenterden.co.uk website, which has been developed in partnership with Visit Kent. It is easily viewable on devices such as phones, tablets and pcs. Businesses felt it was

vital that we continued to invest time and resource in further developing the site so that we keep abreast of and benefit from new technology and also looked at ways to embrace new social media applications.

- 6.6 **Improved welcome to the borough** - This subject was raised many times and encompassed a wide range of issues, some under the borough council's control and some not, for example, the lack of 'off the motorway' and 'welcome to the borough' signage. Better landscaping and a cleaner environment were also flagged as desirable. The number of pot holes across the borough, the lack of consistency with how the brown tourism signage scheme is applied and the lack of visitor signage in council car parks and coach parks were raised. It was felt more could be done to direct and encourage visitor flows between Ashford, Tenterden, the villages and our respective attractions.

Promoting more opportunities with the travel trade and group market

- 6.7 A number of our businesses rely on and work closely with the group market and it was felt there were opportunities to take a co-ordinated approach to support and build on this growing segment. Business felt this could include improving coach facilities and drop off points in Ashford and Tenterden (we have already noted the start of this work in Tenterden with the launch of free coach parking), dedicated marketing and familiarisation visits, driver incentives, dedicated itineraries and packages.

Increased support for the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association

- 6.8 The Association raised the subject of increased support in terms of a dedicated staff resource and/or funding. While the Association is funded through membership subscriptions and actively recruits new members, additional resources would enable the Tourism Association to increase the range and remit of their marketing activity beyond what they can currently achieve. Examples included increased print runs and distribution of their brochure, joint projects with neighbouring tourism associations and bespoke public relations activity.

A focus on the importance of Tenterden and the villages

- 6.9 This was raised particularly in relation to our local food and drink offer, which could be categorised as:
- International Class (wines from Biddenden, Chapel Down and Gusborne and a Michelin starred restaurant at Biddenden),
 - Emerging (Old Dairy Brewery, gastro villages pubs, local produce and quality farmer's markets)
 - Patchy (particularly in the urban areas)

- 6.10 A need to effectively co-ordinate and promote our offer and at the same time use this to attract more quality operators was identified. Support for rural festivals such as Tentertainment, Tenterden Folk Festival and Egerton Music Festival along with unique, local events such as our traditional fetes, open gardens, farmer's markets, Christmas celebrations and the varied events staged by our attractions and museums, were felt to be important.

The importance of cyclists and walkers to the visitor economy

- 6.11 Several businesses felt that cycling and walking presented a real opportunity to their business and to the area as a whole and as such warranted additional attention and investment. There was a desire for walkers and cyclists to be able to access their attractions and properties via safe, non-main road routes. The need to promote the footpaths and cycle paths that connect neighbouring attractions was also highlighted.

Have we forgotten anything?

- 6.12 The intention has not been to address every single issue in the visitor economy, but to listen to our partners and businesses as to what is important to them. Although the formal part of the review has now finished, this does not mean that a comment or issue is not valid, we just need to draw a line at a certain point and if the issue is something that is relevant to the review, then it will be given due consideration.

7. Achievements while undertaking the review

- 7.1 A flexible approach to the review has meant that it has been possible to respond to issues as they have arisen and to take advantage of opportunities as they have presented. This has been greatly appreciated by our businesses who can see that this is a results driven approach, while at the same time knowing that any more major issues will be picked up at the end of the formal review process.
- 7.2 The Portfolio Holder has spoken at length with the Tourism Association and individual stakeholders at Tenterden parking strategy meetings and taken on board their comments about coach parking in Tenterden. After considerable work by the Portfolio Holder, supported by Cabinet colleagues and officers, free tourist coach parking was launched on April 1, 2014 in an effort to attract more groups to the town and so increase stay time and spend. This was promoted widely to group and coach operators at travel exhibitions and through social media activity and as a result has been well received by the industry and local businesses. For instance, the first coach operator using the service brought visitors staying in Canterbury to Chapel Down and free coach parking was an incentive for the group to extend their trip and visit the town.
- 7.3 Saturday opening of the Tourist Information Service at the Ashford Gateway was also reviewed. Changes to Saturday working by other partners in the building meant that it was becoming increasingly difficult to operate the service. However, consultation and feedback from our customers and businesses showed that there was still a need for tourist information on Saturdays. Saturday is the key day when families, thinking of moving to Ashford, visit the town to find the information they need to make important relocation decisions. We have therefore put procedures in place to ensure that we can maintain the Saturday service.
- 7.4 We have met with representatives from Tenterden Town Council and have established a much closer working relationship. This has resulted in both member (portfolio holder) and officer level representation on the new Tenterden Town Council Tourism and Business Committee. Specifically we have asked Visit Kent to give a presentation on Destination Management Plans with a view, if Tenterden feel this is the right approach, to support the process working alongside Visit Kent.
- 7.5 We have listened to concerns about the Ashford Tourist Information Service and as a result the Council's Cabinet has agreed to allocate significant funding to deliver an improved service which responds to the changing demands and needs of visitors and residents.

8. Taking the review forward

- 8.1 We have listened to and examined what our businesses and partners have told us and have identified some short term 'quick win' projects as well as a range of medium/longer term actions that will both expand and support our tourism economy. These are set out in the Action Plan below.
- 8.2 It is therefore proposed to (a) agree to fund the short term projects listed in the Action Plan from the £20,000 which was originally earmarked for undertaking this review and b) agree a range of longer term actions, costed individually, that members of the council would be asked to prioritise and which are also set out in the Action Plan
- 8.3 It is also proposed to consider either developing a Destination Management Plan (DMP) or commissioning a discrete piece of work that takes the review forward. This might focus, for instance, on product development or market segmentation and build on the work and valuable feedback achieved by the review to date. The likely cost of a plan is in the region of £25,000 - £30,000 and so the value to the borough of undertaking such an exercise must be fully examined and evaluated. The local tourism industry should be consulted and the experience of neighbouring districts who have commissioned a DMP should also be considered.

Projects and Key Issues	Short Term - 'Quick Wins'	Action/Remarks	Medium/Longer Term	Action/Remarks
Improved Tourist Information Service	Interim improved location such as expanded Designer Outlet or ground floor of Ashford Gateway	Cabinet Lead and Tourism Manager to draft a proposal for the administration 2015/16	Develop a proposal for an improved, high quality town centre TIC with Visit Kent	Cabinet Lead, Tourism Manager and Visit Kent prepare a proposal in 2015/16 for the administration including options appraisal
	Support Tenterden Town Council in setting up a dedicated TIC	Cabinet Lead and Tourism Manager to meet Town Council to develop proposal early 2015		
Improved Destination Offer and Visitor Experience in Ashford	Develop a town centre heritage trail and introduce guided walks	Tourism Operations Officer to produce trail and launch with a guided walks programme for summer 2015	Look at working with Visit Kent and key partners on a Destination Management Plan or commissioning a relevant study	Cabinet Lead and Tourism Manager and Visit Kent to prepare a proposal for the administration 2015

Projects and Key Issues	Short Term - 'Quick Wins'	Action/Remarks	Medium/Longer Term	Action/Remarks
	Develop a 'Town and Around Passport' to package the offer of key attractions such as Ashford Museum , Willesborough Windmill, Godinton House and Environment Centre	Tourism Operations Officer & TIC Team to work with attractions to draw up proposal for summer 2016	Engage hotel consultant to actively promote the town to attract a 'destination or boutique hotel in the Commercial Quarter/International Station hub	Tourism Manager and Economic Development Manager assisted by Visit Kent develop brief and appoint consultant - 2016/17
	Encourage start-up of more town centre B & Bs	Tourism Operations Officer and Visit Kent's Tourism Business Service Manager organise a seminar for potential new businesses, summer 2015	Support organisations such as Ashford International Model Railway Centre, Ashford International Space Science and Discovery Centre with their feasibility, business planning, funding and visitor studies	Team of officers from Cultural Projects, Tourism, Economic Development and Finance to support aspects of these projects at key stages in 2015- 2019
	Establish closer working with Economic Development, the Town Team, Revelations St Mary's and Jasmin	Tourism Manager and Tourism Operations Officer to meet with key contacts on a regular basis and ensure all relevant activity links	Look at working with Visit Kent to host the 2015 Tourism Society Symposium in Ashford	Chief Executive and Tourism Manager to put forward a costed proposal for consideration by the

Projects and Key Issues	Short Term - 'Quick Wins'	Action/Remarks	Medium/Longer Term	Action/Remarks
	Vardimon	with the inward investment & cultural campaigns being led by ABC and its agencies		administration late 2014
Co-ordinated Destination Marketing	Further develop the tourism website and invest in additional social media activities (ie new area for tourism association members, managing Ashford & Tenterden on Trip Advisor)	Tourism Operations Officer with support from Visit Kent and digital agency Rippleffect 2015-2019	Develop a proposal for a dedicated tourism public relations campaign including the appointment of a travel trade PR consultant with a view to building on the work of individual businesses	Tourism Manager to prepare proposal in partnership with tourism association -2015/16
	Produce a wine trail - app and brochure- focusing on Tenterden and surrounding area	Tourism Manager to work with vineyard partners, Tenterden Town Council & Tenterden Chamber and food and drink outlets with launch autumn 2015	Develop a wine festival (including a food and drink offer) in and around Tenterden and/or investigate feasibility of adding to an existing event	Tourism Manager to prepare proposal in consultation with vineyard partners, Tenterden Chamber and food and drink outlets for a 2016 event

Projects and Key Issues	Short Term - 'Quick Wins'	Action/Remarks	Medium/Longer Term	Action/Remarks
	Take part in the 3 year China campaign led by Visit Kent and partners including Ashford Designer Outlet	Tourism Manager to oversee and to co-ordinate with relevant partners, 2015-2018	Invest in an annual undergraduate or intern programme to support a range of marketing initiatives with a strong focus on social media	Tourism Manager to scope the options with support from Personnel Manager with view to appointing in autumn 2015
Improved Welcome to the Borough	Improved facilities to make the borough more accessible and friendly to motor homes	Tourism Operations Officer to work up options with Parking Services - 2015	Bring forward a welcome / signage proposal for the borough to determine those elements that would make a real difference to a visitor's experience	Tourism Manager to prepare a brief to appoint a transport consultant to take proposal forward 2015/16
			Bring forward a proposal to improve the walking and cycling links and connectivity for visitors between individual attractions, villages and towns	Tourism Manager assisted by Sports Development Officer to work with Sustrans and colleagues in Planning to prepare a proposal 2016/17

Projects and Key Issues	Short Term - 'Quick Wins'	Action/Remarks	Medium/Longer Term	Action/Remarks
			Deliver a programme of International Welcome Host training for businesses in the borough with a view to becoming a World Host Borough	Tourism Manager to work up a proposal with Visit Kent in 2016 for roll out in 2017
Opportunities with the group and travel trade and markets	Improved facilities and welcome for groups and coaches including a coach drop off point in Ashford Town Centre	Tourism Manager and Tourism Operations Officer to work up options with Parking Services - 2015/16	Develop a group and travel trade programme	Tourism Manager to prepare a proposal in partnership with the tourism association in 2017
Support for the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association	Increase the print run and distribution of the tourism association annual brochure	Tourism Operations Officer to agree in partnership with Tourism Association - 2015/16	Support the Tourism Association in developing a strategy and action plan to secure additional funding and resources	Tourism Manager with support from Visit Kent 2015/16
Maintaining a focus on Tenterden and the Villages	Support the work/projects of the Tenterden Town Council Tourism and Business Committee	Cabinet Lead, Tourism Manager or Tourism Operations Officer to take lead depending on project, 2015 and	Work with Tenterden Town Council and relevant villages on a Tenterden area Destination	Tourism Manager with support from Visit Kent 2015/16

Projects and Key Issues	Short Term - 'Quick Wins'	Action/Remarks	Medium/Longer Term	Action/Remarks
		ongoing	Management Plan (if Town Council pursue the option)	
	Signpost and advise parishes and businesses on initiatives and opportunities that enable them to promote and grow their rural tourism offer	Tourism Manager or Tourism Operations Officer to take lead depending on project, 2015 and ongoing		
Growing the quality food and drink offer and experience	Promote the rural 'gastro' pub network with a focus on improving the accommodation offer	Tourism Manager and Tourism Operations Officer to scope with Visit Kent's Business Services' Manger, 2015/16	Develop a proposal for a PR campaign to promote and 'talk up' the borough's food and drink experience including potential to attract pop up restaurants and cafes	Tourism Manager to work with Economic Development Team on a proposal for 2016/17

10. Key action plan proposals

- 10.1 The majority of the short term and some of the long term actions are self-explanatory however there are a number of proposals that warrant a more detailed explanation.
- 10.2 **Ashford visitor information service** - Cabinet has allocated funding for a high profile, town centre visitor information centre. Ideally this will be in a high street location with good shop front visibility and in an area of high footfall. It could be a dedicated stand-alone service or co-located with partners with a complementary offer such as the town team, an arts organisation, or café and shop. There are many challenges to achieving all of the above, not least identifying premises which are suitable in terms of location and cost.
- 10.3 A new visitor centre planned for the expanded designer outlet also offers potential for joint working. It is therefore proposed that an options paper is developed taking into account town centre vacancies and opportunities presented by the new development.
- 10.4 At the same time Visit Kent will work with the Council to look at what form a Visitor Information Centre for 2020 might take. This could include projecting how visitors might want to consume and receive information in the future. An Interreg bid could possibly be developed to look at ways of unlocking and funding some of the new technologies needed to drive this. This would make any new 'bricks and mortar' visitor centre much more than a static environment. This could also embrace the use of super trained volunteers and Greeters.
- 10.5 **2015 Tourism Symposium** - This is a proposal being put forward by Visit Kent with the support of Kent County Council and Medway to win the event for Ashford in 2015. This is in the very early stages, but the likely theme of the event will be around connectivity and infrastructure as a key driver for tourism success. Evidently there is a strong reason for Ashford to take centre stage in this theme and for the event to be one of the milestones in Ashford's branding timeline which could spotlight our achievements to date and aspirations for the future.
- 10.6 **Destination Management Plan (DMP)** - The plan is a collaborative approach to creating a shared story and shared delivery focusing on three or four key actions. Visit Kent would lead on this, having had experience with this process in Medway, Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury. As some of our proposed developments are visitor economy focused such as the model railway centre, planetarium, expansion of McArthurGlen and development of the commercial quarter, a DMP approach could be an effective and advocacy-led way of collating our ambitions and ensuring they are co-owned across the stakeholder group.

- 10.7 **Dedicated Public Relations Campaign-** This would be led by a dedicated travel PR consultant to build on the work already carried out by Visit Kent and individual businesses. It could include press and familiarisation visits focusing on both the consumer and travel trade markets in the UK and overseas and potentially the creation of an Ashford and Tenterden ambassador type role. There is much untapped potential in terms of product and media interest in the borough and a desire and willingness on behalf of the businesses to pro-actively develop in this respect. It would be developed so as to complement any other relevant campaigns that the borough council is undertaking at the time.
- 10.8 **Welcome to the Borough -** This will focus on improving the overall welcome to the borough and begin with a wide reaching study to find what will make a positive difference to the visitor experience and how visitors move around the borough and decide what to do or visit next. It will include:
- Motorway exit signage for Ashford
 - Welcome to the borough signage
 - Improved brown tourism signage
 - Visitor signage in car parks and at the stations
 - Apps for welcoming and moving visitors around
 - Electronic, real time information boards.
 - Improvements to grounds maintenance in relation to greenery on the verges and roundabouts.
- 10.9 We also know that a first class welcome is one of the key drivers for the visitor economy and Visit Kent are keen to work with us to set a target for Ashford's visitor economy staff to be World Host Trained with the borough committing to becoming a World Host Borough. This could be tailored to key Ashford Borough Council messages concerning growth aims and product knowledge to widen the reach of the advocacy message way beyond that which the Council and its own staff can achieve.
- 10.10 **Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association-** As the Tourism Association approaches its 30th anniversary, it will be consulting with its members to ensure that it remains as relevant and effective as it was when first set up. What is apparent is that membership fees, despite annual inflation increases, are no longer able to fund all the activities that the association wishes to carry out and so the association is looking to put in place a strategy to ensure its long term viability. The Council may therefore wish to consider negotiating a Service Level Agreement with the association to deliver agreed marketing activities on its behalf.

11. Conclusion and recommendations

- 11.1 The review provides confirmation that Ashford has a thriving visitor economy. Critically it also has a significant number of tourism organisations and businesses willing and able to join the Council in developing and taking our ambitions to the next stage. Together we will work to ensure that Ashford and Tenterden really does become a first-class, international visitor destination.
- 11.2 The review has also demonstrated the Council's commitment to supporting and investing in the borough's visitor economy. It is therefore the Council's intention to implement as many of the short term projects as possible at the earliest opportunity. We will then agree, prioritise and identify budget and resources to deliver our longer term actions.
- 11.3 It must be stressed that this is just the beginning and that while some projects and initiatives will start straight away, others, linked to major developments in the borough and involving other agencies, will take longer to come to fruition. It is our intention to keep stakeholders updated with our progress and to involve them where required. The review has made it possible to meet and begin a meaningful dialogue with so many of our businesses and again it is our intention to maintain this relationship and momentum.
- 11.4 The review would not have been possible without the active contribution of so many businesses and partners and we would like to place on record our sincere thanks to all those that took the time to participate.

Appendix 1

Ashford Borough Tourism Review, 2013 2014 - Consultees

In addition the Portfolio Holder had the opportunity to meet with the following businesses through meetings held by the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association (committee meetings, Annual General Meeting and social events) and at the Tenterden Tourism and Business Exhibition (section 4.8 refers).

- Ashby Farms Ltd
- CM Booth Collection of Historic Vehicles
- Bramley and Teal Holiday Cottages
- Fact or Ficton Tours
- Paul Foston Golf Academy
- Godinton House and Gardens
- Green Farm
- Holiday Inn Ashford North
- London Beach Hotel, Spa and Country Club
- Little Dane Court B & B
- Mulberry Cottages
- Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Railway
- Stocks Mill
- Take One Media
- Tophill Marketing
- Willesborough Windmill