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VISITORS PLACES DESTINATIONS

THANET DESTINATION MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

REPORT FOR THANET DISTRICT COUNCIL

JANUARY 2020

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1 ABOUT THIS FRAMEWORK

This Destination Management Framework (DMF) is for all the partners in the destination – public, private and 3rd sector. It sets out their shared headline priorities for the next 5 years when it comes to strengthening and growing the visitor economy. It's not about everything that can or should happen: it's about the things that will make the biggest difference, can be realistically achieved in the current climate, and will provide a focus for working together.

The Framework focuses on growing the value of Thanet's visitor economy. It is about Thanet staying competitive by developing higher-value tourism and quality visitor experiences. It is about making sure Thanet's visitor economy is sustainable – i.e. tourism that is year-round, allowing businesses to invest in their offer and their people, that attracts and satisfies visitors, and that is good for industry, the community and the environment.

This Framework builds on Thanet's first Destination Management Plan (DMP). The DMP was developed in 2012/13 by public, private and 3rd sectors working together, and it has proved the value of having a shared vision and plan. It inspired more partnership working, and a number of initiatives to develop the visitor offer. Looking at the DMP's three priorities:

- ▶ There have been strides forward on *Beach Management*: the partnership between the council and beach stakeholders has been a strength but has faltered over the last few months. This Framework seeks to re-energise it.
- ▶ *Coastal Regeneration* – this strand was about major development sites: it started with investor material and a feasibility study, but there has been little progress in the last 2-3 years. This Framework refocuses it on a small number of council-owned coastal assets.
- ▶ The *Shared Story* has been used to inspire improvements and marketing. It is still relevant as a narrative promise to visitors and encapsulates the destination's distinctive selling points. It has been reviewed and updated for this Framework.

This Framework draws on views of stakeholders in Thanet's visitor economy gathered through meetings and interviews, at an interactive workshop for more than 50 people and via an online industry survey. It uses recent research into visitor volume, value and satisfaction. It was commissioned by Thanet District Council (TDC). TDC's senior executive team have input to its development.

2 CONTEXT

Visitors are vital to Thanet. Not just for the jobs – and 1 in every 5 jobs is in tourism – but because they support local services, and locals' quality of life. They play a really important role in making the Isle of Thanet a good place to live, and an attractive place to study, work and invest in.

Tourism growth has been impressive in recent years: annual visitor spend (direct and indirect) has grown to £319m – that's 30% more than in 2013, the year the first Destination Management Plan (DMP) was published. There are over 2,000 more jobs (1.4k FTE) – bringing total jobs to 7,950. Visitor satisfaction has risen (see text box) and research shows external perceptions have improved.

Industry stakeholders continue to have a strong level of commitment and passion for the place – and enthusiasm for developing the visitor offer.

But – despite improvements, growth and increased visitor satisfaction – Thanet's visitor economy feels vulnerable. In common with many UK towns, especially on the coast, there is a down-at-heel feel to the town centres. The local authority has dwindling resources and competing pressures, despite some success in securing grants for certain activity.

VISITOR SATISFACTION

From Thanet Visitor Research 2018

- ▶ Overall satisfaction up from 3.77 in 2010 to 4.36 (out of 5) in 2018
- ▶ Likely to recommend – 4.32 (out of 5)
- ▶ Highest scores for:
 - Ease of finding your way around
 - Quality of beach experiences
 - Beach/coastline cleanliness
- ▶ Lowest scores for:
 - Shops
 - Toilets – availability & cleanliness
- ▶ Broadstairs scored highest on 11 out of 17 factors, including general atmosphere and feeling of welcome
- ▶ Margate scored highest on arts & culture

3 OPPORTUNITIES

Nearly 90% of visitors to Thanet are day visitors. Some 30% of visitors come in June, July and August. Staying visitors spend 7 times as much as day visitors and are much “kinder” to the local community and environment. For the visitor economy to be genuinely sustainable – good for industry, community and the environment – Thanet needs to attract more staying visitors, and more visitors outside the summer months.

Competition for people’s leisure spend is strong. But the number of people who take several breaks a year has increased in recent years. Destinations that offer a range of distinctive experiences, events and activities – and are relatively easy to get to from large urban populations (increasingly by public transport) – are well placed to attract new staying visitors. But they need to respond to evolving tastes and trends, for example the increasing interest in travel that benefits health and wellbeing both physical and mental, the desire for distinctive “authentic” experiences that allow them to connect with and learn about a place, and a growing awareness of the impact of travel on the environment and local communities.

Our ageing population, societal changes and people starting families later is leading to “different-shaped” families, multi-generational travel, and an increase in solo travel – all of which impacts on the types of experiences, facilities and accommodation that destinations should be offering.

The National Coastal Tourism Academy (NCTA) says that the coast is perceived as satisfying important visitor needs for beautiful natural landscapes, good places to eat including pubs and cafés, a feel for local life and a welcoming environment for tourists. NCTA says activity holidays offer the chance to grow coastal visitor economies: when compared to other types of destination, 37% of respondents would prefer a coastal destination for an activity holiday.

NCTA found the things that put British people off visiting England’s coast are: inertia in the face of competing leisure options; the desire for something more exotic (i.e. abroad); our unpredictable weather; 45% believe the English coast is “closed” in the winter; and perceived expense.

HOLIDAY TRENDS 2019

- Domestic holidays of 4+ nights are on the rise – due to Brexit, exchange rate and 2018 summer heatwave – and the British seaside is expected to be the biggest beneficiary
- Brits want to visit the coast for food & drink; walking/hiking; history & culture; beaches; nature & wildlife; festivals & events; health & wellness
- The coast was regarded as preferable for wellness holidays – Brits interested in this type of holiday would consider visiting the coast for wellness in Spring (50%), Autumn (42%) or Winter (25%) as well as summer (74%)

Source: consumer insight consultancy BDRC

So Thanet needs to continue to develop and position itself as a distinctive place with a strong local culture, a healthy natural environment and with plenty on offer year round when it comes to accommodation, food and drink, special shopping, experiences, events, attractions and activities.

Nearly 1 in 5 visitors currently are from London and it makes sense to continue to build on this huge potential market within easy reach of Thanet. The key target market for growth identified in the 2013 Destination Management Plan – early-adopters living in London in their 20s to early 40s – is still a strong market opportunity for Thanet. It is a sub-segment of Visit England's "Free and easy mini-breakers" – a large segment of the domestic holidays market that takes frequent breaks across the year.

4 PRIORITIES & ACTIONS

It is time to build on the original Destination Management Plan, reframe the priorities and re-energise the partnerships.

In a competitive marketplace and in times of public sector financial constraints, it is important that the focus of this Framework – and the visitor economy more widely – is on priorities that: kickstart investment in accommodation and town centres; encourage ownership and collaborative working between the industry and within the community; and deliver distinctive experiences that meet increasingly demanding customer expectations and take them to market so that they stand out from the competition.

The headline priorities for the next 5 years are:

Vibrant Towns – making Thanet’s town centres more attractive for visitors and providing more of the right kind of accommodation

Coastline Focus – focusing on providing year-round experiences, activities and facilities at key sites along the coast

The Isle of Thanet Promise – using the strong themes from Thanet’s Shared Story to develop brilliant experiences and a brilliant welcome.

These are priorities that will deliver higher visitor spend, more prosperous businesses and bring benefits to the local community ... priorities that will ensure the people of Thanet get the most out of the visitor economy. This means continuing to focus on the three towns, where there is the greatest opportunity for economic growth. Following are the three priorities, and short-to-medium-term actions for each:

PRIORITY 1 – VIBRANT TOWNS

While Thanet’s rural hinterland and villages will benefit from a stronger visitor economy, the opportunity for growth continues to lie in the three towns. Visitor spend will create more vibrant high streets but to generate that spend requires planning and support. Enlivening the days-into-evenings – building on recent growth in the food/drink sector – would persuade visitors to stay longer and spend more.

Increased activity and animation of the towns – from arts & crafts retail spaces and studios to pop-up galleries and exhibitions, from artisan food and drink producers, street markets and events to changing opening patterns – should be led by businesses and the 3rd sector, working with community organisations and town councils. Through the government's 'Towns Fund' the council has been successful in their pitch for funding for the High Street Heritage Action Zone, and is competitively bidding for the Future High Street Fund – both in Ramsgate. Margate has been named as one of the Town Deal

places and the council is working with stakeholders to develop the proposition. The vision for both Ramsgate and Margate is to support the growth of the visitor economy and understand how the sector can diversify the towns' current offering. This would be a positive response to the changing nature of retail and would enhance and enliven the attractiveness of the town centres.

Lack of volume and choice of visitor accommodation restricts the ability to grow higher-value tourism and at times to secure large-scale events. A concerted proactive campaign and targeted activity is needed – TDC working with Visit Kent and Locate in Kent – to deliver more retail and visitor accommodation, especially in the town centres.

Vibrant Towns – short to medium-term actions

What	When	Who
<i>Town Animation</i>		
▶ Bring together community organisations/representatives to consider how each town can enliven their offer for visitors with a particular focus on the transition period from day to evening and the shoulder periods of spring and autumn.	2020	TDC and community organisations
▶ Each town to identify the actions relevant to its own area but this may include: public realm, events, lighting, decoration, planting, re-purposing vacant premises, markets, pop-up restaurants and galleries. Where grant funding is being sought or secured, actions should align with those funding objectives e.g. developing mixed uses in Margate town centre under the Town Deal proposals and improving facades in Ramsgate under the High Street Heritage Action Zone.	2021-2023	Community organisations with Town Councils & Businesses
<i>New and Improved Accommodation</i>		
▶ Encourage the upgrading of existing B&Bs, to improve the quality of existing bedstock. Promote and highlight all improvements and investments to the trade, media and prospective visitors on social media, to show how the quality is improving.	Ongoing	Tourism Team (TDC)
▶ Support the development of new serviced accommodation to include midrange hotels, lodge and camping pods and high-quality independent B&Bs.	Ongoing	TDC and Locate in Kent
▶ Promote sites with potential and support developers at pre-planning stage (from the Tourism Team) to develop concepts that meet local needs.	Ongoing	TDC and Locate in Kent

PRIORITY 2 – COASTLINE FOCUS

It's time to look again at the coastline and find imaginative ways to deliver improved experiences and enhanced facilities at key sites in response to the visitor market's growing interest in breaks that feature "wellbeing" experiences and outdoors activity.

TDC needs to look at using assets in a different way if it wants income from them, and the visitor economy presents some opportunities to do that at specific coastal sites and with specific buildings. A new coastal project group should look at what other coastal towns have achieved in recent years and work to identify a key site or coastal "asset" (as a pilot) that could be developed to provide year-round activities and experiences, most likely incorporating a "destination" food and drink outlet, and including upgraded beach facilities (such as showers, lifeguard facilities and toilets). Thanet needs soft marketing for this development site: the group could develop outline ideas before TDC takes the site to market to test developer interest.

Coastline Focus – short to medium-term actions

What	When	Who
<i>Beachfront Facilities</i>		
▶ Identify a site (as a pilot) that could combine essential public services (toilets, changing, showers, water, lifeguard station) with destination food and drink experiences and activities. The commercial operation is to support the capital and revenue costs of the public function. A more modest model which blends commercial/public functions could be suitable at smaller locations.	2020/1	TDC and coastal project group
▶ Market the site identified above with a clear set of requirements for potential developers.	2021/2	TDC with stakeholders
▶ Identify and roll out further site development opportunities using the lessons from the pilot to refine the model and customise to each site.	2022 on	
▶ Concept development and feasibility of a mixed-use regeneration of the land at Viking Bay.	2024	TDC
▶ Explore opportunities for enhancing the beach hut offer.	2020/1	Your Leisure
<i>Activity & Wellbeing</i>		
▶ Market-test the watersports hub concept proposed for Ramsgate East Cliff to provide further activity and wellbeing experiences as part of a mixed-use leisure development that includes food/drink and accommodation lodges/pods.	2020-2021	TDC/Ramsgate Town Council and Locate in Kent

<i>Seafront Regeneration</i>		
▶ Develop concepts for Margate Harbour to improve it for visitors, to include improved public realm, animation and commercial activity (retail, dining, fish market) and to knit it together with the Turner Contemporary, town centre and beaches.	2021-2024	TDC
▶ Place a visitor lens over any other proposed seafront regeneration sites and developments to ensure that they are contributing to a vibrant and animated seafront. Tourism Team to engage with developers at pre-planning stage to influence positive investment.	Ongoing	Tourism Team (TDC) & Developers/Investors
▶ Identify and learn from best practice examples of coastal development elsewhere and consider opportunities for study tours.	2020	TDC, Town Council and Private Sector

PRIORITY 3 – THE ISLE OF THANET PROMISE

The Isle of Thanet Promise priority is about making sure that the destination meets and exceeds visitor expectations – through *Brilliant Experiences* and a *Brilliant Welcome*.

Experiences: Visitors are increasingly seeking out experiences that are distinctive and authentic. Stakeholders should be developing the offer – the facilities, services and experiences – and providing the Tourism Team with the content, ideas and inspirational stories that will achieve cut-through for the destination and attract Thanet’s target markets. Visit Thanet will play a role facilitating and supporting the private sector to develop experiential tourism that delivers the Isle of Thanet Promise, via the Interreg-funded Experience project. The updated Shared Story (see Appendix) will be relaunched to stakeholders across sectors, emphasising its role as Thanet’s *promise* to visitors, and foregrounding the storylines (themes) in order to inspire/invite investment in experiences and events that will deliver the promise.

Welcome: This strand will underpin the Promise. This is a programme of work to make sure that Thanet presents its best possible face to the outside world – and locals feel proud of their place. It will be about aiming for higher quality standards when it comes to the public realm and facilities, and harnessing locals’ passion-for-place to make the welcome as positive as it can be. It should be about making sure the destination’s stakeholders deliver against 21st century expectations of quality, including environmental sustainability. It should involve the local community in providing the welcome, and as advocates for the place.

Isle of Thanet Promise – short to medium-term actions

What	When	Who
<i>Experiences</i>		
▶ Re-launch Shared Story with an emphasis on its role as the Promise, and giving examples and lessons of where it has already been used by business, and ideas of how it can be used in experience development as well as promotion.	Q1/Q2 2020	Tourism Team
▶ Use the Shared Story storylines to inspire private and 3 rd sector providers to develop off-season bookable experiences as part of the Experience project	Q2 2020	Businesses and Tourism Team
▶ Develop the Tourism Team's social media presence with an increase of quality content and engagement from tourism businesses, thinking about how and where their offer can add to the quality and currency of Thanet's promotional efforts.	2020	Businesses and Tourism Team
▶ Identify a potentially new and large-scale event which draws in large numbers of visitors and helps extend the season. Engage with national organisers of similar/existing events to indicate willingness to help them build a new successful event in Thanet.	2021	TDC with Businesses
<i>Welcome</i>		
▶ Review the first and last impressions for visitors arriving in Thanet as well as the individual towns – at bus and rail stations, car parks, entrances to towns and the district. Look at whether the first impression is positive and welcoming and identify what can be done to improve it.	2020	Business-led review with support from Tourism Team
▶ Review and develop an improvement plan with a sensible timeframe and resource plan for the 'Brilliant Basics' such as toilets, parking, signage and wayfinding: things that will put visitors off if they are not working well.	2021	Business-led review with support from Tourism Team
▶ Expand the model of disaggregated tourism information – where tourism businesses and local communities become ambassadors for helping visitors with tourist information. Provide training, materials, enhanced ambassador programmes and local greeters to support and develop this approach.	Ongoing	Tourism Team lead with support from Tourism Businesses

5 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

DELIVERING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Visitors have a “hierarchy” of needs from a destination (see graphic – the Travel Experience Hierarchy). Everywhere needs to be safe, secure and functioning. Then enjoyable, hopefully engaging ... and ideally immersive.

When it comes to roles and responsibilities, while all sectors can work across all levels, the public agencies will lead on ensuring delivery of the foundation level of this hierarchy of needs, and businesses will take the lead in the higher levels to create the unique and compelling experiences.

The sorts of things at the foundation level of the pyramid will not motivate a visitor to choose a particular destination, but if they are not delivered then visitor satisfaction plummets, and reputational damage can be immense, especially since user-generated content on review sites and social media is now so powerful.

DELIVERING THE FRAMEWORK

This Framework was commissioned by Thanet District Council but it is a strategic approach and plan of action *for the destination*, not just for the council. The council will play a strategic, enabling role. It will engage with organisations, companies and individuals from public, private and 3rd sectors and invite and encourage them to deliver against the priorities. Through its strategies, policies and plans, and via the strategic allocation of resources, the council will provide the right environment for the priorities to be delivered. The council will facilitate meetings and help set up partnerships.

Other stakeholders will play a central role in developing and delivering the visitor experience. Strong public, private and third sector partnerships are at the heart of successful destinations and there are already examples of this in Thanet – but, using the Framework to set the direction of travel, we hope to see a new era of collaboration and encourage stakeholders from organisations beyond the council to play their full role. The DMP Consultative Group should be re-formed (and renamed) as an Action/Delivery Group for the Framework, led by industry partners – with TDC involved but not in the lead. All tourism businesses in Thanet should be using the Shared Story – as the promise to visitors – to develop their experience and think about how they are



meeting visitors' changing needs. Providers in all sectors need to agree core opening hours for businesses, facilities and services – at dusk and beyond the summer months and school holidays, so that there is a positive visitor experience year round.

The relationship between the public and private sectors is changing. While previously businesses may have been content for TDC through the Tourism Team to take a lead delivery role in marketing and selling the destination, the available resources mean that going forward that role will likely shift from “deliverer” to “enabler”. That will mean that while the Tourism Team will continue to provide marketing and promotional platforms (website, social media, other media), businesses will be expected to invest time, energy and money in getting the very best content to potential visitors through these platforms, and in helping to spread the destination message. Industry-led sub groups (comprising businesses and organisations with specific special interests) should be developing product and marketing campaigns to target specific segments and niches based on activities and special interests.

Businesses need to work together to create visitor experiences, to develop special events and offers, to agree to stay open longer and into the ‘shoulder’ months and to cross-sell across the district and beyond, to make sure visitors get the most out of their stay and realise the range of experiences Thanet and East Kent offer. While there are many experienced businesses already collaborating to do that, there is a need for capacity building to encourage more businesses to become involved. That might be delivered through mentoring either by staff in the Tourism Team or by coordinators for new funding delivery programmes.

There is also a push nationally to encourage community engagement and participation in all aspects of a place, including as part of delivering the wellbeing agenda. Communities know their own area well and are often a source of specialist knowledge and creative ideas for new visitor experiences. TDC needs to encourage and support the community to bring forward and deliver tourism experiences by supporting capacity building within the community. This may be about ensuring existing initiatives are fully briefed on the opportunities in the tourism sector and/or providing access to materials and expertise within the Tourism Team. Tourism creates opportunities in the community that can help fulfil wellbeing targets to tackle issues of loneliness and isolation through volunteering, e.g. in visitor attractions and at events. TDC needs to encourage organisers and businesses to think about the role of volunteering when planning activities and developing business plans and provide a signposting service to training and funding support, drawing on the expertise in TDC and within KCC.

6 APPENDIX 1 – THE SHARED STORY

The Shared Story – developed with the industry for the first DMP – captures and articulates the essence of the Isle of Thanet as a visitor destination. It informs promotional messages and content but more importantly it is an agreement about the promise Thanet makes to visitors. It acts as a kind of checklist against which to measure performance, and it should inspire and direct development and investment to make sure visitors experience the promise.

The Isle of Thanet Shared Story has been reviewed and updated for the Framework (see text box on next page) – tweaking some of the language and adding references to the offer being year-round, to the friendly, welcoming vibe and creative scene, and including a few more famous names associated with the place.

These “storylines” are the key things that Thanet wants to promise to visitors, and this Framework recommends ways in which everyone involved in Thanet’s visitor economy can help to deliver that promise:

- ▶ **A place to escape to, year round:** “Londoners have been escaping to the Isle of Thanet for more than 200 years ... for the laidback seaside vibe ... breathtaking sandy beaches ... fresh sea air... and romantic Turner skies ...”
- ▶ **A place with history:** Georgian & Victorian resorts, 18th/19th century architecture, classic seaside heritage, historic landing place – Romans, St Augustine
- ▶ **A friendly creative place:** “quirky and convivial feel ... friendly creative scene ... classic seaside heritage ... eclectic attractions and events ... galleries & music venues ... special one-off places to shop, eat, drink and stay, year round.”
- ▶ **A place with natural beauty:** “a string of secluded, unspoilt sandy bays ... closest surfing beaches to London ... rockpools, rare chalk reefs, teem with wildlife.”
- ▶ **A place that inspires:** “Artists, writers and musicians have long been inspired by this almost-island ... and continue to be drawn here.”
- ▶ **A place that’s ‘happening’:** “And now with the Turner Contemporary gallery and high-speed trains from the capital ... a new generation is discovering this original seaside escape.”

ISLE OF THANET SHARED STORY – THE PROMISE TO VISITORS

Londoners have been escaping to the Isle of Thanet for more than 200 years ... for the laidback seaside vibe ... breathtaking sandy beaches ... fresh sea air... and romantic Turner skies ...

Here at the very edge of the Garden of England, three Georgian and Victorian resorts, each with its own distinctive character – Margate, Broadstairs and Ramsgate – cluster around the bays at the far end of a peninsula.

There's a quirky and convivial feel to these harbour towns, with their friendly creative scene, their remarkable 18th and 19th century architecture, their classic seaside heritage, their eclectic attractions and events, their galleries and music venues large and small, and their special one-off places to eat, drink, shop and stay, year round.

Miles of low chalk cliffs edge the peninsula, sheltering a string of secluded, unspoilt sandy bays. Chalk rockpools, chalk stacks and rare chalk reefs teem with wildlife. These are the closest surfing beaches to the capital city: a popular choice with south-east boarders.

Artists, writers and musicians – from Van Gogh and TS Eliot to Bob & Roberta Smith and the Libertines – have long been inspired by this almost-island and continue to be drawn here. Turner said Thanet had “the loveliest skies in all Europe” ... for Dickens Broadstairs was “the freshest, freest place” ... and Tracey Emin declares in pink neon on Margate seafront: “I never stopped loving you”.

The Isle's a historic landing place steeped in symbolism for the story of Britain ... the first Saxons Hengist and Horsa arrived and settled here ... and St Augustine first stepped onto these shores on his way to nearby Canterbury.

For this is the furthest south east you can go in Britain ... almost touching mainland Europe ... yet these days only 75 minutes from central London ...

And now with Turner Contemporary and high-speed trains from the capital ... a new generation is discovering this original seaside escape.

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