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VISITORS PLACES DESTINATIONS

MAIDSTONE DESTINATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

REPORT FOR MAIDSTONE BOROUGH COUNCIL

BLUE SAIL WORKING WITH

JULY 2015



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1 ABOUT THIS PLAN

This is a 3-year Destination Management Plan (DMP) for the Borough of Maidstone – town and countryside – developed over a 6-month period in 2015 (see diagram) and steered by a Project Group comprising senior officers and councillors from Maidstone Borough Council, Visit Kent, and representatives from tourism businesses. It follows a destination planning template originated by VisitEngland and further developed by Blue Sail working with Visit Kent. It is a process that brings together the people in a place to agree a practical programme of actions.

Around 70 people – from private, public and third sectors – have contributed their views and been involved in helping to shape this Plan. As well as the Project Group, there have been interviews with industry representatives, including leading visitor attractions and hotels, and with other public agencies, a workshop and three Action Planning sessions – to tap into a wide range of knowledge and expertise, and to make sure there is support for the process and the recommendations. Visit Kent gathered together existing research and carried out new primary research about the Borough of Maidstone as a visitor destination, to make sure that the DMP is market focused.

At the heart of this DMP is Maidstone’s Shared Story™¹, developed with the stakeholders. The Shared Story is the foundation for the destination brand. It sets the scene for the DMP, as it captures what is special and different about Maidstone as a destination. The aim is for everyone involved in tourism and the visitor economy to use it when they are planning how to invest in improvements and new experiences – so that Maidstone’s unique selling points (USPs) become stronger, and the image of the place becomes clearer.



The Maidstone DMP Process

¹ “Shared Story” is a process created and designed by Blue Sail

2 MAIDSTONE'S VISITOR ECONOMY

Definitions

The visitor economy encompasses everything to do with attracting and welcoming visitors, providing for their needs, and the experiences they have during their stay.

The visitor economy touches on nearly every aspect of the day-to-day life of a place. Visitors contribute to the local economy by using local transport, shops, eating places, cultural and entertainment venues and car parks. They contribute to the vitality of the town centre during the day and in the evenings. Visitors want to enjoy the public spaces in towns and the scenery of the countryside. Many of the services and facilities are the responsibility of local authorities and public sector agencies which need to take account of visitors' needs in their policy, planning and service delivery. All the elements that make up the visitor economy need to work together to create an excellent experience for visitors and to realise the economic and social benefits.

"Visitors" means everyone travelling to the Borough of Maidstone for leisure and business, including people visiting friends and relatives (VFR). It excludes people on regular journeys – for example travelling to work, for regular shopping, or for a trip to the dentist. As the County Town, Maidstone is a centre for business visits, and a popular year-round day-trip destination for people living elsewhere in Kent. The Borough has good road links to the Channel Tunnel and ports, which makes it attractive for business meetings and for leisure stopovers.

In this Plan, **"Maidstone"** or **"the Borough"** mean the whole geographic area – town and countryside. Where we are talking about just the town or just the Borough Council, we make that clear.

The Maidstone economy and where the visitor economy fits in

Maidstone's Economic Strategy 2014-2031 identifies the visitor economy as one sector that will contribute to raising the economic outputs (GVA) of the Borough and creating over 14,000 new jobs. The Economic Strategy identifies a Destination Management Plan as the delivery mechanism to enable the tourism sector to achieve its potential.

The Economic Strategy sets out the Borough's ambition to create *"a distinctive place, known for its blend of sustainable rural and urban living, vibrant service sector-based economy ..."*. It goes on to say: *"Our rural communities are important community and commercial centres in their own right. They are*

a major part of our tourism offer, which also includes Leeds Castle and the riverside in Maidstone town centre". This DMP identifies practical ways to help achieve that ambition, and recognises the importance of town and country.

To realise the full potential of tourism in Maidstone – and for the DMP actions for Maidstone Town to be delivered in full – the Town Centre Vision must be delivered, in particular investment on the River Medway and in the town centre. Tourism marketing and visitor support for local cultural events and activity will also contribute to the delivery of Maidstone's Cultural Strategy – which in turn will support tourism, as heritage and local cultural activity is an important part of what makes a destination special and appealing to visitors.

This DMP will also align closely with the council's Green & Blue Infrastructure Action Plan – currently in development.

Volume & value headlines²

- ▶ **A huge impact:** Maidstone Borough attracts over 4 million visits a year and visitors spend over £250 million in the local economy, supporting jobs and services for local people. Nearly £66 million of that visitor spend is on shopping and £56 million is on food and drink.
- ▶ **Most visits are day trips:** Like most UK visitor destinations, day visits dominate – at 91%. This is not surprising, as the Borough is centrally located for Kent residents and within relatively easy reach of large resident populations in London, South East England, and near-Europe. In addition to people visiting the Borough from home, Leeds Castle and other large heritage visitor attractions in the area bring in day visits from tourists staying elsewhere in Kent or in London.
- ▶ **Staying visitors spend more per trip:** 35% of all visitor spend comes from the 9% who stay at least one night in the Borough.
- ▶ **Most UK staying visitors are "VFR":** Nearly half of Maidstone's UK visitors are visiting friends and relatives (VFR). UK VFR to Maidstone only accounts for 13% of visitor spend: most UK staying visitor spend is from holidays/short breaks, then from business visits.
- ▶ **Overseas staying visitors spend most per trip:** Of staying trips, 21% are from overseas, but they contribute 40% of staying-visitor spend. Most international visitors are coming on business or VFR – only 9% are on holiday.

² from Economic Impact research 2013

Current leisure visitors headlines³

- ▶ **Leisure visitors from within Kent** are very important, as you would expect for a County Town:
 - They come year round (although numbers are higher in the summer months).
 - They are more likely to be motivated by Maidstone's shopping than visitors from further afield. Around half said they visited Leeds Castle, Fremlin Walk and Mote Park.
 - Other attractions they went to (on the same visit) were Bluewater, Chatham Historic Dockyard, Rochester Castle, and McArthur Glen – reflecting the importance of shopping as a leisure activity when visiting places closer to home.
- ▶ When it comes to **leisure visitors from outside Kent**:
 - 78% are travelling without children
 - 62% are 55+ – which matches the strong propensity among baby boomers (born 1946-64) to take multiple short breaks
 - 81% use the web to plan their travel; 55% use Visit Kent website; 47% use Visit Maidstone website. Nearly two-thirds say they look to recommendations from friends and family when choosing a places to go
 - The main drivers for UK visitors to Maidstone are historic aspects/heritage (54.9%), closely followed by an interest in the attractive countryside (53.5%). (NB shopping was not a motivating factor for people from further afield – although 1 in 4 said they shopped once in Maidstone.)
 - Once in Maidstone, main activities were: heritage (46.5%), eating out (42.3%), visiting countryside (35.2%), and country pubs (31%). One in three visited Leeds Castle.
 - There is strong evidence of people using Maidstone as a base to visit other places in Kent – on the same visit, 42% visited also Canterbury Cathedral, 27% Chatham Dockyard, 22% visited Bluewater, 18% Dover Castle, 17% Hever Castle.

³ Key findings from Visit Kent's new survey into Visit Maidstone's database of leisure visitors

3 GROWTH MARKETS FOR MAIDSTONE

PRIORITISING VISITOR MARKETS

When planning investment and marketing, it makes sense:

- ▶ **To get more benefit from the visitors who are already coming here:** for example, to persuade people on a day visit to stay longer, do more, repeat and recommend, and to persuade people who are staying overnight in the Borough but then exploring further afield to spend more of their money within the Borough itself.
- ▶ **To have in mind and target people who will bring money into the local economy to support local jobs and services.** So higher-spending day visitors, staying visitors (especially staying in serviced accommodation), business visitors and international visitors are all important targets.
- ▶ **To prioritise people who can visit at times when the local accommodation providers have capacity.** Maidstone's annual occupancy figures are between 70% and 80%. The most-recent hotel study (2011 – so patterns may have changed) showed strong midweek occupancy year round, thanks to corporate business but also to some midweek leisure in the summer months. Saturday nights were particularly strong throughout the year, with weekend visitors coming for weddings, functions and events & festivals as well as leisure breaks (independent travellers and groups).
- ▶ **To target those people who will enhance the place and local people's quality of life and so be welcomed by the community.** This means not proactively targeting those segments where increased numbers would present management challenges and costs, or environmental damage, without significant positive economic and community benefits to counterbalance the negative impacts.
- ▶ **To prioritise people who will be easiest to persuade** – that is, people who are already receptive to the idea of visiting places like Maidstone, and are already looking for a break that features one or more of the special activities and experiences the area can offer. Focusing on people who will really enjoy visiting the area – and so will recommend it to others and may become repeat visitors – is more important than ever now that online user reviews and social media are such a key part of the decision-making process.

This does not mean that other people won't come. It is just a question of targeting finite resources where they will have most impact. Individual organisations and businesses will continue to invest in their own specific markets. The DMP is about the destination as a whole, and where best to put joint effort.

TARGET MARKETS

There are lots of different ways to segment markets. None of them tells the whole story. But for this DMP, a useful way to think about Maidstone’s visitor markets is **by purpose**: what is motivating them to visit? Studying existing market intelligence, talking to the industry, and researching visitor reviews online, three strong motivations emerged for higher-spend, staying visitors with potential to grow.

Below are three bespoke categories created to guide the next stages of thinking about product development and marketing strategy. Visitors are already coming to do these things, so the critical questions for Maidstone are how to **increase their spend** (e.g. by lengthening their stay and/or diverting them away from other Kent destinations to spend more within the Borough) and how to **attract more** of the same type of people to visit.



SEGMENT 1: “ME” TIME

- Leisure segment
- High-spend couples & friends
- Staying in hotels, upmarket B&Bs
- Looking for relaxing, indulgent and unique experiences
- Leisure shopping & enjoying eating/drinking are important
- Good market for – spa hotels, golf courses, vineyards, gastro pubs, upmarket restaurants & retail brands



SEGMENT 2: GETTING TOGETHER

- Business & Leisure segments
- Strongly linked to location – easy access
- Looking to get together – for corporate meetings, reunions, family celebrations etc
- Seeking shared experiences – a big event or a visit to an iconic attraction could be the catalyst/centrepiece to the trip, and so the deciding factor



SEGMENT 3: EXPLORE

- Leisure segment
- Linked to location – using this as a base to explore Kent
- Looking for stimulating, authentic experiences, & strong sense of place
- Staying in characterful independent accommodation – serviced & self-catering
- Good market for – heritage attractions and experiences, local producers, niche events

4 CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The research, audit and consultations identified the following challenges and opportunities for Maidstone's visitor economy that have shaped the Shared Story and the priorities for action:

Location is a strength but comes with challenges

- ▶ Maidstone is a convenient base for a business or leisure trip. Its accessible location has encouraged investment in new quality hotels in the Borough, creating local jobs and attracting visitor spend. However, Maidstone does not have the strong visitor appeal of nearby places such as Canterbury, Chatham Historic Dockyard and Rochester. As a result, people may stay the night in the Borough, but spend their money elsewhere during the day
- ▶ Several of Maidstone's larger hotels and visitor attractions are more strongly associated with Kent than with Maidstone and are promoted that way. Those attractions and hotels bring significant benefits to the Borough attracting higher spending international and business visitors. Maidstone needs to find opportunities to build stronger relationships with these businesses that make it relevant and desirable for them to position their businesses both within Kent and within Maidstone. A stronger destination brand and offer for Maidstone will help encourage that.

There is a need to define and strengthen the town's visitor offer

- ▶ Visitors need a reason to choose Maidstone over other destinations. The County Town status in itself is insufficient; the status needs to mean something to visitors. Visitors are looking for experiences that are special, true to the place and which resonate with what interests them.
- ▶ The most significant opportunity is the river – as a place to spend time on the water and along the riverbank. It presents a real opportunity to create a blue-green corridor to link the town with its countryside and to open up All Saint's Church and the amphitheatre to visitors.
- ▶ Within the town there is a need to make it easy for visitors to find their way around and for the town partners to address issues of car parking and pedestrian signing and access to the river and along the riverbank. Visitors need to feel confident to explore. Providing more activities and animation will encourage visitors to discover the town's heritage and culture.
- ▶ There is a tendency to see the town and countryside separately – yet connecting the town to the countryside in tangible ways creates a stronger critical mass of experiences and provides opportunities to extend the visitor stay and spend across a wider area.

Maidstone's countryside is an underplayed asset

- ▶ The Borough's rural offer is a strong asset – the villages, a concentration of oast houses, the river valleys, the Downs and Weald and a thriving horticultural sector with opportunities to strengthen Maidstone's associations with local produce and the Borough's rural heritage.
- ▶ Long-distance walks pass through the Borough. These are brand names that guarantee quality footpaths, but the Borough is not strongly enough associated with these routes.
- ▶ There is an opportunity for Maidstone to make more of the Garden of England brand, by positioning Maidstone at its heart, and associating the Borough strongly with Kent produce, tapping into the growing interest in local produce and food provenance to offer distinctive experiences for visitors.

Major events is a strength with potential for further growth

- ▶ Maidstone benefits from having several large event venues and significant event-management expertise – in private and third sectors as well as within the Council. It has developed a reputation for hosting very successful events and festivals – both home-grown and bought-in.
- ▶ However, the programming of events could be better coordinated, marketing strengthened and opportunities for joint projects and new events explored.

5 MAIDSTONE'S SHARED STORY

ABOUT THE STORY

The Shared Story is the foundation for the destination brand. It is a commonly agreed positioning that everyone uses when they are planning how to invest in improvements and new experiences, and when they are talking to people who don't know the place.

It is a short and simple brand narrative that makes it clear what is special and different about the place. It does not overpromise; it goes with the grain of the place and it is authentic and true. It focuses on the brand values – the distinctive qualities that capture the essence of the place: it isn't a list of everything that is on offer.

If everyone uses the same broad ideas to develop the place and then uses some of the same concepts and phrases to talk about it externally, the image of and the experiences in the place will be much stronger. That leads to greater impact, which means more visitors and stronger investment.

The Maidstone Shared Story sets the agenda for developing and managing the destination: so the first draft of the Story was created before the priorities for the DMP were decided, and before the Action Planning took place.

The Story's main themes – the brand values – are:

- ▶ **Kent & Kentishness:** *"At the heart of the Garden of England", "a strong Kentish feel", "oasts, orchards and vines", "Blossom Trail", "the natural place to stay when visiting the county", "prosperous villages", "Pilgrims' Way", "North Downs", "Kent Weald", "the best of Kent produce"*
- ▶ **A destination with status and history:** *"Kent's historic County Town", "one of England's great rivers", "an important battle", "Roman and Medieval roots", "quintessential Tudor England", "the loveliest castle in the world", "Kent's capital"*
- ▶ **A great location:** *"less than an hour from London", "halfway between the channel ports and the capital city", "a great base for exploring", "always within easy reach"*

There is a separate report that explains the rationale behind the choice of words and phrases in the Story.

The Story was created by:

- ▶ Looking at what is currently being said and written about the place – by locals, media, and visitors
- ▶ Working with stakeholders in a creative workshop to explore what they believe is the essence & difference of the place
- ▶ Applying Blue Sail's knowledge about what differentiates places
- ▶ Testing and discussing a first draft with the DMP Project Group
- ▶ Taking on board Project Group and Action Planning Group feedback and producing this final version.

THE STORY

In a page:

At the heart of the Garden of England is Kent's historic County Town of Maidstone, set in a region of wide fertile river valleys and ancient woodlands, dotted with prosperous villages. Less than an hour from London and you're in another, gentler world ...

The busy County Town itself – the site of a famous battle from the English Civil War – stretches across one of England's great rivers, the Medway. To the north is the Pilgrims' Way, an ancient route from London to Canterbury along the tops of the North Downs. To the south is the gentle rolling landscape of the Kent Weald, with its oasts, orchards and vines ...

There's a strong Kentish feel to Maidstone and its villages ... the ragstone walls, the weatherboarding, the Kent peg tiles, the green hop ales, the soft fruit and top fruit ... apples and cobnuts, and bowls of cherries at the farm gate. The County Town's roots may be Roman and medieval, but you could say the countryside – with its timbered 16th century houses – is quintessential Tudor England: it was Henry VIII, after all, who ordered the cherries to be planted, and who first called this "the Garden of England". And Leeds Castle – just east of the County Town and known as "the loveliest castle in the world" – was home to six medieval queens then transformed into a fairytale Tudor palace.

This area at Kent's heart is the natural place to stay when visiting the county – half way between the channel ports and the capital city. It's a great base for exploring – along the Medway on a river cruise, hiring a boat or canoe, or walking and cycling beside the river. Following the Blossom Trail in the spring. Visiting vineyards in the autumn. Sampling the best of Kent produce in contemporary restaurants and gastro pubs. Enjoying the shops and markets in the broad streets and squares of the County Town.

It's Kent's capital for big events too – with tens of thousands at a time coming here for the South East's biggest pop concerts, classical extravaganzas, and business shows.

And always within easy reach are Canterbury, Chartwell, Hever, Sissinghurst, Romney Marsh, and the coast.

In a paragraph:

There's a strong Kentish feel to Maidstone and its villages. At the heart of the Garden of England is the historic County Town, surrounded by oasts, vineyards, orchards and hop fields, with the great River Medway running through it. The town has Roman and medieval roots; the countryside is quintessential Tudor England. Less than an hour from London and the Channel ports, this area is the natural place to stay to explore Kent – to sample the local produce, shop in the broad streets and squares of the County Town, walk the Pilgrims' Way, cycle beside the river, experience Kent's biggest events, and visit the loveliest castle in the world ...

In a sentence:

There's a strong Kentish feel to the County Town of Maidstone and its historic villages – a region of rivers and oast houses, of vineyards and cherry orchards, of gastro pubs and ancient castles ... and a natural place to stay to explore the Garden of England.

6 PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

Taking into account the growth markets, challenges and opportunities, these are the Strategic Priorities:

- ▶ Increase the value of tourism by targeting higher-spend markets with growth potential
- ▶ Use tourism to reinvent what a County Town means for the 21st century
- ▶ Encourage more overnight visitors to the Borough to come into the town centre – including in the early evening – and to explore Maidstone’s countryside and villages
- ▶ Connect the town with its surrounding countryside in tangible ways that encourage visitors to explore further and stay longer
- ▶ Strengthen potential visitors’ awareness and image of the Borough by using the Shared Story to develop a strong brand positioning.

ACTION STRANDS

The DMP process has identified three important “strands” where resources should be focused over the next three years, in order to deliver the promise of the Shared Story. These three strands are:

- ▶ Improving the **County Town’s** appeal to visitors;
- ▶ Improving the impact of **Events** on the visitor economy; and
- ▶ Making more of the **Countryside**.

There are detailed Action Plans – worked up by stakeholders in the Action Planning sessions and then finalised by Blue Sail and the Project Group – for the Shared Story and then each of these strands in Appendix 1. Below is an overview of each of the three strands.

Strand 1: Improving the County Town's appeal to visitors

Tourism could help Maidstone redefine what it means to be a County Town in the 21st century, using the Shared Story as inspiration.

Investment in the public realm has created a high-quality environment in the town centre. The town has many fine historic buildings and is home to the Maidstone Museum and Bentrif Art Gallery, the new County archive building – the Kent History Centre, and the Hazlitt Theatre. It is an important retail centre for visitors from Kent: the open-air Fremlin Walk (the fourth most-visited shopping centre in Kent) is complemented by independent shops, which account for over half the retail units in the town.

The key distinctive assets for visitors are the river, interesting heritage including the Museum, and Mote Park, which is a major events venue that attracts over 1 million visits p.a., and was voted 2nd most popular park in the UK in a national poll. There is considerable opportunity to make more of these assets for visitors. Investment in tourism will also enhance the offer for people living and working in the town and help drive higher spend and contribute to a thriving local economy. But as a visitor destination the town faces some challenges:

- ▶ **The offer is fragmented**, with heritage sites and independent shops located across the town
- ▶ **Access into the town by car is challenging** for people who don't know the place and it is not clear where best to park for different activities e.g. shopping, visiting the museum, the river
- ▶ **Access to the river is difficult to find** and via subways in places – the sound and presence of the bridge gyratory dominates the river experience in some parts
- ▶ **The rail stations provide no sense of arrival** or orientation for visitors – the first impression is more commuter town than visitor destination
- ▶ **There is a limited early evening economy** for visitors – later evening economy is dominated by pubs and clubbing aimed at a younger regional audience, which may put off target visitor markets
- ▶ **Most of the Borough's visitor accommodation is outside the town centre**, so visitors staying overnight in the Borough need a strong reason to come into the town centre or to extend their day time visit into the early evening before returning to their hotel.

To help address these challenges, the Action Plan for this Strand focuses on three areas – **realising the potential of the river** as an important visitor attraction in the town and a reason to visit; **redefining the County Town** for visitors including connecting the town more strongly with the surrounding countryside; and **encouraging visitors to explore** the town and in its fringes.

Strand 2: Improving the impact of Events on the visitor economy

Events have many positive impacts on local economies and communities. The DMP is focusing on ways to improve the impact of business and leisure events *on the visitor economy* – which in turn will support jobs and services for local people. The DMP takes into account MBC's Festivals & Events Strategy, which is about events that take place in the Borough's parks and open spaces – but the thinking includes larger venues such as Leeds Castle, Kent Showground and Kent Life.

The DMP's actions will support the development of events *with wider reach* (actual or potential) – i.e. events that will draw visitors from further afield (from beyond Kent), and/or enhance the image of the area further afield as a vibrant place to visit.

The Shared Story says Maidstone is “Kent's capital for big events ... with tens of thousands at a time coming here for the South East's biggest pop concerts, classical extravaganzas, and business shows.” This is a USP for Maidstone, so maintaining and strengthening the “capital for big events” status is a priority. It also means that there is significant events expertise in the Borough – in the big event venues as well as in the public agencies. The DMP should aim to tap into and make the most of this professional expertise.

This does not mean that the DMP will ignore smaller events – but from a visitor economy perspective the focus for actions will only be on those smaller events that are either clustered into festivals or seasons to give them greater reach, or that have a strongly distinctive niche appeal that draws visitors and generates publicity from further afield.

Broadly, over the next three years, the aim is to achieve:

- ▶ **More partnership working** – between the big event venues themselves, between venues and the public agencies, and between venues and the tourism sector (especially accommodation providers) – on programming, marketing and infrastructure.
- ▶ **An “events-welcome” environment** – streamlining processes and provide toolkit to assist with traffic management and signing,
- ▶ **Better event development** – a strategic, proactive approach to event development that supports the visitor economy, including attracting new events, nurturing/growing existing events, and clustering events and joint marketing for greater impact, in line with the Council's Festivals & Events Strategy.

The DMP actions – in general, but for this strand in particular – need to look beyond the administrative boundaries and take into account the impact of major events taking place in neighbouring areas. KCC's input will be important and helpful for this.

Strand 3: Making more of the Countryside

While Maidstone is perhaps best known for being the County Town, the Borough includes a substantial area of countryside and many rural villages with a strong Kentish feel, a concentration of oast houses, orchards and vineyards. This rural landscape further reinforces Maidstone's positioning as part of Kent, the Garden of England. Part of the North Downs AONB and the Kent Weald lie within the Borough, and several long-distance footpaths including the Pilgrims' Way pass through it.

The majority of the Borough's visitor attractions, including Leeds Castle, destination pubs and visitor accommodation are located in the countryside. The Borough's rivers – the River Medway and its tributaries – provide opportunities to get on the water and by the waterside, and walking, cycling and boat links between town and country. There are footpaths and cycle routes out from Maidstone town to nearby villages, and more managed rural landscapes and rural parks such as the Hucking Estate present good countryside for the less intrepid explorer. The countryside offers a network of footpaths, bridleways and cycle paths.

There is potential to make more of Maidstone's countryside offer through developing trails, 'soft packaging' and marketing, and to position rural Maidstone more strongly within the Kent Garden of England brand. More investment is needed to bring together the range of information and activity already happening, to make it easy for visitors to find and to inspire them to explore. There are opportunities to develop more activities. The objective is to encourage visitors staying in the countryside to explore further, do more and to visit the town of Maidstone too.

The DMP will concentrate on three areas of activity:

- ▶ Making more of the offer through visitor marketing, communications and information
- ▶ Developing **new themed trails** that use local produce, Tudor and other Kentish associations for inspiration ('software')
- ▶ Investing in wayfinding 'hardware' – **new routes** (e.g. along river towpaths, routes that link Maidstone town to its countryside, circular routes: walk/cycle one way and train back), visitor **information points** and improved footpath/towpath **signing**.

7 MAKING IT HAPPEN

OVERSEEING DELIVERY OF THE DMP

The Project Group which has managed the development of the DMP will evolve into the DMP Group, responsible for overseeing the delivery of this Plan. The DMP Group will meet quarterly to review progress. It may want to meet more frequently in the first 6 months, as it moves forward with early tasks.

The core DMP Group will comprise one member and two officers from Maidstone Borough Council, a representative from Visit Kent and six industry representatives, chosen for their interests and expertise in the themes of the action plans – events, town and countryside. Additional people will be co-opted as needed, for their specialist input.

The role and composition of the DMP Group will be reviewed at year three to check it remains the best way to deliver the DMP.

The DMP Group will oversee delivery of the Action Plans. Early tasks will be to cost and prioritise the Action Plans and to identify a Lead Organisation for each Action.

Some of the DMP actions will be driven forward by individual members of the DMP Group. But the Group will also set up a number of themed **task-and-finish groups** to progress actions over the life of the DMP, e.g. for the Shared Story/Destination Branding, for audits, food and drink, developing toolkits. The Steering Group will identify and invite members of different local organisations and individuals to be part of these task-and-finish groups. This will build ownership and engagement with different interests in the Borough and encourage ownership of the DMP and its delivery.

PARTNERSHIP WORK

Partnership is key to a strong visitor economy. The DMP Group will:

- ▶ Develop **strong working partnerships** between all the organisations and businesses involved in tourism
- ▶ Involve local businesses to help **create a distinctive joined-up experience** across the Borough
- ▶ Develop **strong relationships with Kent-wide organisations** to strengthen Maidstone's County Town status

8 ACTION PLANS

S = short term (1 year) M = medium term (2-3 years) L = long term (3-3+ years)

FOUNDATION ACTION PLAN: EMBEDDING THE SHARED STORY / DESTINATION BRANDING

To ensure that Maidstone's brand positioning is strong and delivers on the promise it makes to visitors, the Shared Story should be used by stakeholders in public, private and third sectors to inform business decisions, steer investment, and shape marketing and management priorities. "Fit with the Shared Story" should become a criteria against which to judge investment decisions for businesses, grant applications for agencies, planning decisions and resource allocation for local authorities. To achieve this, the Shared Story needs to be widely shared, the rationale understood, and the themes and concepts applied. The Shared Story has set the scene for the DMP. Now it can be used as a tool to bring people together and continue to agree priorities and actions – both individual and collective – to strengthen the visitor economy.

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescale	Potential funding sources
Run Workshop sessions for tourism and other businesses and organisations involved in tourism , to familiarise them with the Story and to help them think creatively about how they might use it to develop and differentiate their own offer, service or business and help to deliver the Action Plans.	Maidstone Borough Council Visit Kent	S	Kent Business Rates pool
Develop an Online Shared Story Toolkit for tourism stakeholders to use, comprising Story-inspired product development ideas plus downloadable marketing copy (tailored for use in different markets) and images based on the Shared Story – so that people in the place are "singing from the same song sheet".	Maidstone Borough Council Explore Kent Produced in Kent Visit Kent Visitor attractions/businesses	S	Kent Business Rates pool

ACTION PLAN 1: COUNTY TOWN

RIVER

Major investment plans have been identified for the river in the past. Realising some of these investments is critical to unlocking the full potential of the river for the visitor economy. Some of these investments are long term and unlikely to be completed within the lifetime of this plan but actions to move them forward need to begin now. The priorities are to make the river an attraction in its own right – a “must see” for visitors to Maidstone. To achieve that requires improving access, investing in visitor hubs along the river and enabling visitors to use the riverside as a pedestrian/ cycling green corridor to explore more of Maidstone and its countryside. This needs to be supported by events on the river and by marketing activity that profiles the river more strongly to target markets. One of the biggest challenges for improving the river is the very large number of single-interest groups. It is important to bring together all the interests and broker solutions to shared issues.

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Programme of enhancements and improvements to make the river more accessible and appealing to visitors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • signing and entrance points to the river from the town centre • footpath investment – signing to include distances to key points, accessibility for cyclists • investment in moorings • parking for river visitors 	<p>Kent County Council – cycle routes and infrastructure Maidstone Borough Council Environment Agency Town Centre Management</p>	<p>M-L</p>	<p>£2m of Single Local Growth Funding has been allocated to create a cycle path along the river from Allington to East Farleigh. MBC £500,000 subject to final decision on funding.</p>

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Focus on strengthening visitor hubs on the river:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve access, facilities, activities and interpretation • Explore opportunities for more camping cabins/pods (luxury camping huts – alternative to camping in the open) to enable long distance walking, canoeing etc <p>Priority hubs :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Church of All Saints/amphitheatre • Cobtree by Kent Life • Lockmeadow 	<p>Attractions and businesses e.g. Kentish Lady River Cruises, boat restaurant, All Saints Church, Museum of Kent Life, Lockmeadow Maidstone Borough Council Visit Kent Environment Agency Medway River Users Association, Rowing Club Kent County Council</p>	<p>M-L</p>	<p>Arts Council – Grants for the Arts</p>
<p>Create river-based events & activities that will appeal to visitors, animate the river, provide a reason to come today, contribute to extending the visitor day into the early evening. Opportunities could include – dragon boat racing, rowing events, festival of lights, regattas etc</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Business owners Medway Valley County Partnership Maidstone Town Team Town Centre Management Invicta Rowing Club and other river user groups</p>	<p>S-M</p>	<p>Sponsorship Town Centre Management, Town Team, Arts Council – Grants for the Arts</p>
<p>Build up marketing activity over time linking to countryside theme. Develop marketing collateral – maps, trails, leaflets</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Visit Kent Business owners Explore Kent Kent Downs AONB Unit</p>	<p>S-M-ongoing</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Businesses involvement in campaigns/advertising in leaflets etc</p>

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
Prioritise river management – litter, dredging, landscaping, lighting, policing, anti-social behaviour, mooring, illegal camping	Police Environment Agency – dredging, water litter picks Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council – Highways Town Centre Management and Maidstone Town Team	S-M and ongoing	Volunteering e.g. for litter picks with Environment Agency, prioritisation of existing maintenance budgets

CREATING A DISTINCTIVE COUNTY TOWN			
<i>This is about animating the town and providing reasons for visitors to come, stay longer, explore further and spend more – supporting local shops, places to eat, and leisure and cultural venues. It is about using the assets and resources the town has to reposition it as the County Town for visitors. These actions require close working between town partners and local businesses.</i>			
Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
Develop local markets and fairs – food (including a farmer’s market), arts & crafts etc: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Review existing provision • Develop and deliver new markets in different town centre locations and develop a calendar of markets throughout the year • Use County Town Market Charter and history as part of the positioning for street markets • Introduce street food • Develop local market management plan – litter/cleaning, selection of stall traders, access 	Maidstone Borough Council Maidstone Town Team Land Securities (Fremlin Walk) Produced in Kent (food events and link to Kent programming and promotion) National Association of British Markets Stall holders Town Centre Management	S-M-ongoing	Kent Business Rates Pool, Town Team, Private Sector

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Use themed trails and quarters to help make the town more legible for visitors and encourage exploration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify trail themes and quarters • Develop a programme of animation and interpretation including: • Making use of green spaces • Pavement trails/digital trails using app • Distinctive lighting • Mark the quarters e.g. with sculpture, distinctive street sign branding, lighting etc. 	<p>Maidstone Borough Council – planning department Local businesses Town Teams Town centre Management</p>	<p>S-M</p>	<p>Section 106 planning</p>
<p>Shopfront improvements including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shop front design and window displays (produce toolkit) • Maintenance to frontages e.g. redecoration, brand signs 	<p>Maidstone Borough Council – including Planning Department Building owners</p>	<p>S-M</p>	<p>Building owners, shops and eating places, Matched funding for shopfront upgrades from Kent Business Rates Pool and Section 106</p>
<p>Strengthen town’s association with the countryside through celebrating and promoting local food</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage local restaurants to source local produce and promote it • Explore potential for a new local produce centre 	<p>Produced in Kent Local restaurants and cafes Maidstone Borough Council</p>	<p>S-M L – for local produce centre</p>	<p>To be explored</p>

ACCESS AND VISITOR MANAGEMENT

There is work to do to make it easier for visitors arriving by car, coach and train to find their way into the town. This means providing information and orientation at the main arrival points and then ensuring consistent and continuous signing and information across the town. It means integrating existing signing and information with planned investment in new quarters and on the river. The new traffic-flow management planned for the bypass creates an opportunity to improve signing for visitors.

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Agree a strategy for improved access by car and coach into the town centre and support with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear uncluttered road signing • Signing to car parks/coach park • Visitor orientation in the car/coach parks • Pedestrian signing from car parks to the town centre and main attractions. 	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Highways Department Car park companies Coach operators</p>	<p>M-L</p>	<p>Kent Business Rates Pool</p>
<p>Review coach parking provision – volume, location and facilities – to reflect needs of international coach parties for shopping, and take account of potential growth</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Coach operators Businesses welcoming coach groups e.g. House of Fraser, Museum</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>To be explored</p>
<p>Improve welcome and visitor facilities at the rail stations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Welcome sign and town map on board • Clear signing to drop-off/pick-up points <p>Longer term, a need to deliver new development at Maidstone East station to improve first impressions and provide additional welcome & visitor facilities.</p>	<p>Southeastern Trains Maidstone Borough Council Network Rail</p>	<p>S-M-L</p>	<p>Redevelopment proposals exist for Maidstone East Station and these improvements could be incorporated. £1m of Single Local Growth Fund is available in 2016/17 for the redevelopment of the Ticket Office buildings.</p>

ACTION PLAN 2: EVENTS

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescale	Potential funding sources
Create an Events Experts Group that brings together senior decision makers from the main venues & MBC to “join the dots” when it comes to planning & infrastructure, programming & marketing	Main venues Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Safety Advisory Group	S	Members of the group
Carry out an Audit & Gap Analysis – looking at infrastructure & resources (physical & people), including venue capacities, transport links, traffic management, parking, signing, policing & crowd management. Must take into account potential negative impact on local communities & environment. Should include analysis of processes (licensing, highways, planning etc) too. Gap Analysis will then identify if new infrastructure/processes needed - & specific actions should then be developed.	Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Emergency services Venues Event organisers	M	To be explored
Develop an Event Organisers’ Toolkit – to make it easier to hold an event in the borough. (We understand this is already under way – but it will need to be updated once the above Audit & Gap Analysis is completed)	Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Venues, Event organisers Emergency services, Safety Advisory Group	S	Maidstone Borough Council
Set up a “No Clash Diary” – for venues to enter information on provisional as well as firm bookings. This is an “internal” tool for venues, organisers, accommodation providers and public agencies within the Borough (and neighbouring areas) to use – to help them avoid clashes, to spread events across the year, and also facilitate identification of potential “clusters” for joint development & marketing (see next action).	Main venues Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Visit Kent Culture Kent	S	Venues Maidstone Borough Council

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Develop themed seasons/festivals, inspired by the Shared Story and by major events. May need a DMP Group sub-group – an “Events Development Taskforce”. Members of the Taskforce to be selected for their specific skills (marketing, events management, programming, fundraising).</p>	<p>Venues Locally-based organisers Maidstone Borough Council</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>Taskforce members Sponsors</p>
<p>Develop a consumer-facing “Events for Visitors Calendar” – comprising an online realtime database of confirmed events for consumer marketing (website content, emarketing, social media & traditional media relations work), linked to the Culture Kent data pool. Evolution of current online events calendar on Visit Maidstone. Related to “No Clash Diary” – but serves different purpose. Drives events information on Visit Maidstone & Visit Kent websites, but also for tourism industry’s own marketing (could incorporate a “widget” for tourism providers to use on their own websites, providing a live feed). Will need to be promoted to visitor-facing businesses as well as consumers. Needs tight criteria & market focus so only features events with clear visitor-appeal, and presents them in a way that motivates visits (e.g. clustering them, using Shared Story themes etc).</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council - Visit Maidstone Venues Event organisers Visit Kent Culture Kent Kent County Council</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>Visit Maidstone Venues Event organisers</p>

ACTION PLAN 3: COUNTRYSIDE

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Product audit – map & gap current provision of trails, walks and countryside & river experiences</p>	<p>Explore Kent AONB Maidstone Borough Council Visit Kent Produced in Kent Parishes Rural stakeholders e.g. Young Farmers, WI, CPRE, National Trust, RSPB, Kent Wildlife Trust, Hadlow Pilgrims’ Way Company – Walk Awhile</p>	<p>S</p>	<p>Partner time Commission co-ordinator</p>
<p>Marketing audit – understand who currently markets the countryside experiences, where and how. Find best digital solution to make sure that online information for visitors from various sources is easily found. Consider how best to use/work with existing brands and sub-brands e.g. Garden of England, Heart of Kent, Our Land</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Explore Kent Kent Downs AONB Unit Kent Wildlife Trust Visit Kent</p>	<p>S</p>	<p>Partner time</p>

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
<p>Develop themed experiences and trails that use Shared Story for inspiration, include key attractions, pubs etc along trail to drive more spend</p> <p>Develop marketing collateral – digital and offline. Rich online content.</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Visit Kent Key visitor attractions Other tourism businesses – including pubs and accommodation Transport operators (to enable circular walks/cycle + rail/bus routes) AONB Explore Kent Parishes</p>	<p>S-M</p>	<p>Leader funding</p>
<p>Audit walks and trails selected for promotion to visitors to ensure they are easy to use and attractive – safe and easy to find car parks at start points, good facilities along the way, e.g. picnic sites, interpretation, benches, viewpoints etc. Ensure the routes are consistently signed and that refreshment stops and attractions along the route provide appropriate facilities for walkers and cyclists, e.g. cycle lock ups . Develop a plan for investment to plug gaps in provision.</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Kent County Council Environment Agency AONB Parish Councils Southeastern Farmers Fishing Clubs</p>	<p>M</p>	
<p>Develop rural Visitor Information Points – “i” branded.</p>	<p>Maidstone Borough Council Tourism South East Local rural tourism businesses Parish Councils Kent County Council, Highways</p>	<p>M</p>	<p>Leader funding</p>

Actions	Who needs to be involved	Timescales	Potential funding sources
Develop Riverside Walking and Cycling Path from Allington to East Farleigh with connections to the wider Maidstone area. Potential to expand this up to Aylesford Bridge	Kent County Council Maidstone Borough Council	M-L	£2m of Single Local Growth Funding has been allocated to create a cycle path along the river from Allington to East Farleigh. MBC £500,000. Funding from Tunbridge and Malling is in doubt and the project may need re-scoping as a result.
Work towards becoming Kent’s first “Walker Friendly” destination using the Cyclist Welcome and Walkers Welcome <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify key towns/villages and support Walkers Welcome accreditation (prioritise villages with direct train links into Maidstone) • Promotional activity 	Visit Kent Explore Kent Maidstone Borough Council Tourism South East	M	Leader funding, participant fees

9 APPENDIX: MARKET TRENDS

Key market trends for leisure tourism that the DMP Group needs to bear in mind:

- ▶ **Higher socio-economic groups are continuing to spend:** Post-recession, people in the lower socio-economic groups continue to curb their spending, but higher socio-economic groups have protected their leisure spend, including spend on leisure breaks, which are seen as an ‘antidote’ to the stresses of life. They are looking for inspiration as well as information.
 - So ... Successful destinations are clear about what makes them different from the rest.
- ▶ **Boomers are taking more leisure short breaks:** The Boomer generation (born 1946-64) are a really important market. They are affluent (approx. 20% of the population owning 80% of the wealth) and take 40% of UK short breaks. There is a growing trend for some Boomers to take multiple breaks (some very short) each year. There have been an extra 5 million domestic short breaks since 2006, and 4 million of those have been by people aged 55+. But it’s really important to recognise that Boomers are different from previous generations – in attitude as well as behaviour.
 - So ... Successful destinations understand what makes Boomers tick.
- ▶ **Demographic and social changes are changing leisure trip-taking:** The ageing population, with people staying active for longer; the changing shape of the family – more families with a single child and/or single parent, more families where both parents work, more divorced and step families, and more grandparents actively supporting their children and grandchildren, including planning and purchasing multi-generational trips.
 - So ... Successful destinations recognise and plan for these changes.
- ▶ **People are looking for “live” experiences:** People are looking to their trips to deliver ‘experiences’ – whether physical wellbeing, emotional, spiritual or intellectual fulfilment, to learn new skills, or to take part in events and new activities. In contrast to increasingly screen-centric daily life, shared experiences with colleagues, loved ones, friends and family are important reasons to travel. Live events and festivals have grown exponentially and can give people a strong reason to travel, as well as raising awareness of a destination.
 - So ... Successful destinations develop and market “experiences” rather than purely physical assets.

Disclaimer: All information and analysis supplied by Blue Sail Consulting Ltd and our sub-contractors is delivered in good faith and represents our professional judgement based on the information obtained from the client and elsewhere. The achievement of recommendations, forecasts and valuations depend on factors beyond our control. Any projections, financial or otherwise, in this report are only intended to illustrate particular points of argument and do not constitute forecasts of actual performance