

KENT GARDEN *of* ENGLAND

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ANNUAL REVIEW

2021

A MESSAGE FROM BILL FERRIS OBE, CHAIRMAN VISIT KENT



It gives me great pleasure to welcome you to Visit Kent's Annual Review for 2021.

The last 12 months have been challenging times for us all once again but with the worst of the pandemic now appearing to be over - it is my hope that this year will see normal life resume fully for us all again, at least regarding COVID-19.

At the time of going to press unfortunately - yet more unpredictable events are currently taking place in our world that could potentially impact our way of life and our visitor economy, but one advantage of the pandemic has meant that adapting, pivoting and resilience are by now second nature for many of us, and I am in full of admiration for the way that many businesses have coped and continue to 'build back better'.

Amongst the turbulence and unpredictable times last year, we were so fortunate that the 149th Open Championship was able to proceed last July, reminding us all of the ability of our county to stage major international (and domestic) events. The team were also able to successfully use the event to really showcase the hugely varied tourism offer in Kent.

It is true that many aspects of our world have changed forever, from the increase in hybrid working and 'workations' to the desire for more sustainable activities and experiences and the increasing need to ensure the wellbeing of both employees and family members. Fortunately, our visitor economy in Kent is very well-placed to support many of these changes. The roll-out of our Experience programme has been particularly timely, and it has been truly inspiring to hear about the incredible number of new local, immersive and sustainable experiences that this programme has created in our county.

Furthermore, although international travel has for the most part resumed, many people in the UK have re-discovered (or discovered for the first time), the joys of visiting and staying in our beautiful county and our research shows that this trend is set to continue even once outbound travel returns.

Our sector also needs to support and adapt to the big issues of the day and our commitment to sustainability - in its widest sense - is the right thing to do. We need to meet the needs of a growing market looking to travel in a way which supports the environment and communities, but we also need to ensure that growth in the visitor economy is well managed and distributed so that it does not place an undue burden on residents, businesses and the very places that visitors come to experience.

As a part of this commitment, I am keen to ensure that our destination is as welcoming and inclusive as possible - that everyone, no matter what their background or access needs can enjoy our wonderful county. Our new partnership with AccessAble will support our sector in delivering world-class experiences for our visitors and make Kent one of the UK's leading accessible destinations.

Throughout 2021, we have continued to be relentless in our lobbying of Government at a national, regional and local level to support our partners and to unlock urgently-needed funding and policy changes relating to the pandemic. At a local and regional level, we intend to step up this lobbying in 2022 by holding a reception at Parliament in the Spring with key decision makers in Kent to both raise awareness of the substantial economic benefits that our visitor economy provides and of course the huge potential of the Lonely Planet accolade that we secured at the end of 2021 for Kent's Heritage Coast.

It goes without saying that as always, the Visit Kent team are continuing full steam ahead with our commitment to support and assist the rebooting and rebuilding of Kent's visitor economy in 2022 and beyond. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank the team and of course our partners for your unwavering support and constructive engagement over the last 12 months which has been critical in helping us to continue to deliver an exciting and ambitious programme of activity and to drive footfall throughout our county.

We are also very grateful to our long term strategic and funding partner, Kent County Council and the South East Local Enterprise Partnership both of whom have helped us to ensure that being a part of Visit Kent is affordable for investors.

Finally, my thanks to my fellow board members. I am very grateful for their professionalism, experience and their support to me. It is to their credit that Visit Kent has managed to make it through an extremely turbulent period of history relatively unscathed. This is due in part to the entrepreneurial and diverse nature of our activity and income streams and our close working relationships with key stakeholders at national, regional and local level that really is the key to success for our organisation that ultimately only exists to see all of its partners thrive and prosper.

On behalf of my fellow Board Directors, and all the team at Visit Kent, I would like to wish you and your colleagues a safe and successful year ahead.

A MESSAGE FROM DEIRDRE WELLS OBE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE VISIT KENT

As our industry emerges from an extremely challenging two years and the world begins to learn to live with Covid, the words that I am hearing most often are “cautiously optimistic”.

There is no doubt that there is strong demand for our destination. In the brief window between the Spring 2021 lockdown and the phoney lockdown of Christmas, visitor numbers were strong. Forward bookings for 2022 look positive – despite the return of outbound travel – and our pubs, bars, restaurants and attractions continue to provide the much-needed opportunity for families and friends to reconnect post pandemic.

Our success in staging the 149th Open highlighted our ability to host major international events and showcase the fantastic tourism offer to both domestic and international audiences.

But the disturbing situation in Ukraine provides a stark reminder that we continue to live in an uncertain world. The fragile recovery of our industry was already beset by concerns about staffing and supply chain costs. Concerns about security and the cost of living may be replacing concerns about Covid among our customers, but they are a reminder that we will need to work harder and smarter as an industry to attract and retain our visitors and we will continue to need local and national Government support to ensure that our journey to recovery is not stalled.

But we have learned much over the past two challenging years. Not least, that our desire as a society to reconnect is strong – to reconnect with friends and family, with our location, with nature and with ourselves. I am so proud of the role which our industry has played in supporting these reconnections – providing the places and landscapes which have been the solace and respite for our communities.

There is no doubt that our society has been transformed by the pandemic. The world of work has changed forever, providing opportunities for our towns and villages to benefit from mid-week footfall and hosting those all important business meetings, previously the preserve of our major cities. We have the opportunity to rebuild our communities in a way that works for what we want now – sustainable landscapes, opportunities to enhance our well-being, innovative spaces which support collaboration and entrepreneurship, and places to learn, relax and reconnect.

We also have the opportunity to lead the way in a different and more sustainable way of travelling. We are blessed in the county with stunning landscapes which have provided solace and wonder to both communities and visitors alike for centuries. The pandemic has encouraged many to rediscover what’s on their doorstep and to become more mindful of how and why we travel. The recognition of Kent’s Heritage Coast by Lonely Planet as one of the top regions in the world to visit in 2022 not only provides a unique opportunity to shine a spotlight on our amazing county, and to turbo charge our industry’s recovery, but to showcase a different way of travelling – based on sustainable and accessible travel, immersive experiences and outstanding local produce.

But if the succession of recent crises has taught us anything, is that we will only maximise our opportunities and survive our challenges with the support of others. The collaboration and partnership which the industry has shown in recent years provides a strong foundation for our recovery. We are extremely grateful to all Kent investors for their support which has enabled us to help thousands of businesses across the county. We look forward to working with you during the months ahead to maximise the opportunity which the Lonely Planet award provides.

My thanks to our Chairman, Bill Ferris CBE, and our Board of Directors for all their wise counsel and to my wonderful Visit Kent team for their enthusiasm and tireless support for our vital sector.

With this support, and a rich and diverse tourism offer, there is every reason indeed to be “cautiously optimistic”.



DEIRDRE WELLS OBE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE



VISITOR ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY

Following the unprecedented challenges of 2020, a supplementary Cambridge Economic Impact Study was published in 2021, highlighting the impact from the COVID-19 pandemic on the county's visitor economy.

These latest findings, based on 2020 data show that Kent's visitor economy performed above the national average across several areas, but also demonstrates why our industry continues to need long-term investment and support to enable a sustainable destination recovery.

As a result of the pandemic, there was a **50% decrease** in visitors during 2020, and a **61% decline** in value compared to 2019.

£106 million was spent on average in the local economy each month in 2020, (compared to £278 million on average in 2019).

The number of tourism jobs across the Garden of England also showed a **decrease of 39%** between 2019 and 2020, to **50,026**, accounting for 7% of total employment in Kent last year.



INDUSTRY RECOVERY

As the UK continued to emerge from the worst of the pandemic and consumers looked to reconnect with family and friends, Visit Kent successfully secured funding by KCC from the Government's Contain Outbreak management Fund (COMF) to help businesses demonstrate Covid-safe operations and customer reassurance.

Visit Kent also worked with the South East Local Enterprise Partnership (SELEP) and visitor economy partners across the region on the Revi-VE grant programme, providing grants to businesses adapting their offering as a result of Covid-19 and changed market conditions.

VISIT KENT

COMF

2,104 businesses engaged

237 additional businesses signed up to "We're Good to Go" accreditation

57 businesses received 1-2-1 specialist support

2m campaign reach

Revi-VE

139 grants awarded to Kent businesses

£360k worth of grants awarded

(further activity to be delivered in 2022+)



BUILDING VALUE THROUGH OUR NETWORKS

Visit Kent brings together businesses to create collaborative opportunities for our partners as well as provide a strong sector voice. We support businesses to develop new products, promote and distribute them under a strong destination brand.

This level of collaboration continues to be critical in delivering a strong recovery for the sector. Everything we do is lead by insights and intelligence to ensure we are tapping into emerging industry trends and delivering activity that will have a positive impact on your business.

VISIT KENT

700+ meetings with partners

21 partnerships and forums facilitated

Attendance at Kent Business Summit

79 renewed partners

5 new partners secured



LOBBYING

With a seat at the table on many national and international industry forums, our lobbying efforts continue to be critical.

Our CEO Deirdre Wells OBE has represented the Kent tourism and hospitality industry at high-level, industry-leading groups such as the Government's Tourism Industry Emergency Response Group (TIER) and Tourism Alliance meetings.

Deirdre's media appearances across TV, radio and print provided a valuable platform for raising awareness of the impact of the long-term effects from the pandemic on, and the support needed for our industry to continue to rebuild.

VISIT KENT

14 speaking opportunities at high profile events

34 media appearances

22 meetings related to lobbying

8 Tourism Society meetings

7 Tourism Alliance meetings

6 TIER Meetings

11 VisitBritain DMO Forums



BUSINESS SUPPORT AND COMMUNICATIONS

Our B2B communications strategy has dramatically evolved since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, ensuring that critical information on funding and guidance for the sector has been disseminated quickly and clearly.

We added a whole new section dedicated to the Covid-19 support and recovery on the Visit Kent Business website and have continued to update partners through a variety of channels.

B2B website:

- Over **27,000** page views
- Over **2,500** page views of research and insights pages

Visit Kent Business Twitter:

- **5,027** followers
- **8k** impressions average a month

Dedicated Newsletters:

- **90** newsletters
- **2,247** contacts

Visit Kent LinkedIn:

- **355** new followers in 2021
- **36,230** impressions



BUSINESS TRAINING & EVENTS

As restrictions continued in 2021, we delivered virtual webinars and industry meetings and events to continue to provide critical support at a time when businesses needed it the most.

We were delighted to finally start to host in-person events, and it was great to reunite and meet with so many partners in many of our county's finest venues.

371 attendees attended 2 virtual and 2 in-person networking events

9 Kent EXPERIENCE peer networking sessions with a total of 176 attendees

3 Kent EXPERIENCE launch events

- PR & Trade - **61 attendees**
- Political bodies / MPs - **47 attendees**
- Partners - **227 attendees**

4 South East LEP workshops with 131 attendees

1 AirBnB Experiences virtual webinar with 105 attendees

1 Kent Art Homes virtual webinar with 43 attendees



MICE

Visit Kent represents the county as a destination for MICE travel (meetings, incentive trips, conferences and events), building awareness of our unique experiences and developing relationships with key stakeholders including DMCs and business events planners from both corporate and association markets.

MeetEngland (February 2021):
19 appointments with business events planner from the UK, Europe, USA and China.



TRAVEL TRADE

Throughout 2021, our team has continued to maintain contact and provide support for leisure operators and trade partners.

Our ongoing delivery of the Interreg Experience project, in partnership with the Kent Downs AONB, has ensured contact and Kent messaging was maintained with major operators and ground handlers throughout the year.

Looking ahead, the team are excited to be working with a number of major inbound operators on dedicated distribution activity, and to maximise our Lonely Planet accolade with international trade buyers and distributors.

Over 170 1:1 engagements with travel trade contacts including cruise ground handlers, coach operators, UK group organisers and international DMCs

Visit Kent attended **5 trade events, with 2 virtual and 3 in-person**, including a return to face-to-face meetings at **World Travel Market**

10+ staff members hosted at dinner for US operator, **Avanti Destinations**

15 + virtual sales calls

2 distributor webinars for partners with Airbnb and Unmissable England

7 dedicated travel trade newsletters sent to over **400 trade contacts**, with an **average open rate of 30%**



RESEARCH

As our industry emerges from the pandemic and begins to rebuild, access to timely insights and research is vital to support our businesses and a key requirement for our lobbying efforts. Regular surveys and studies have captured the performance and challenges that our visitor economy has faced as well as opportunities which will shape our recovery.

6 Business Barometer Reports

2 waves of Kent Resident research with 2,511 responses total

2 Visitor Perception Studies, looking at both domestic and international audiences research with **over 4,500 responses**

2020 data examined in **Cambridge Economic Impact Model study** for benchmarking

8 Social Listening reports were produced, looking at online conversations in Kent about tourism, visitor behaviour and perceptions of Kent



BUILDING VALUE THROUGH MARKETING

Throughout 2021, we balanced the delivery of the destination message to drive recovery with fluctuating restrictions and guidance.

Specific recovery and project funding, in partnership with our own organic channels provided us with a broad platform from which to share our creative and targeted content.

As always, we sought to inspire our audience, encouraging them to travel and visit safely whilst maintaining their connection to our businesses.



WELCOME BACK TO KENT

To deliver Welcome Back to Kent we carefully aligned our targeted activity to build upon the Respect, Protect, Enjoy messaging and the Good to Go initiative.

Running from July to the end of October, we curated a suite of activity including editorially-rich content, influencer activity, a video, and a dedicated competition.

127k clicks through to the landing page on the website.

11m impressions generated through paid search and social activity.

12.7k competition entries with an outstanding opt-in rate of 54%.

12 content partnerships, with **49** pieces of content created featuring **28** Kent partners / venues

32% open rate and **14%** click-through rate on dedicated newsletter (*above industry average*)



#YOUR KENT EXPERIENCE

Supporting the Interreg EXPERIENCE project, #YourKentExperience campaign ran at the end of 2021 and into 2022.

The campaign explored a new creative direction marrying influencer activity with an audience-led approach.

The focus was brought to a range of experiential businesses from upcycling to gin tasting, tai chi to rambling, and covered all Experience match-funder destinations.

VISIT KENT

The campaign featured The Travel Project – UK adventurers Charlie and Jess (@the.travel.project) and In My Sunday Best – Travel and lifestyle blogger Sade (@inmysundaybest), with a combined Instagram following of over **64K**.

Social media activity achieved over **860,400** impressions, **505,344** reach and over **21,000** page views





THE 149TH OPEN

Kent came alive from 11-18 July 2021 when The Open returned to Royal St George's Golf Club, Sandwich.

As the first major event planned in Kent for 2021, the 149th Open played a key role in the rebuilding of our visitor economy following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Visit Kent delivered county-wide marketing and promotional activity in the run-up and during the event to capitalise on the exposure, highlighting not only our world-class golf, but the wide range of unique experiences available across the county.

Over **200,000** spectators

Dedicated **Experience Kent pop-up stand** at St Pancras train station, London

10,000 copies of a bespoke **Golf in Kent magazine** delivered in partnership with Sideways media

Brand-new destination video shared across Visit Kent social media channels with over 1,000 views on Instagram

Dedicated press event at Prince's Golf Club with 12 media contacts including Golf Monthly and Esquire

Dedicated press activity with a reach of over **3.3million**

Over **3,300** competition entries



COMPETITIONS

Competitions continue to be a great way to work with and support our partners, in addition to being an excellent source of opt-in data. For 2022, competitions will form a key part of all campaign activity, focusing on high-quality accommodation prizes to drive overnight stays.

Our 2021 Christmas competition was Visit Kent's second best performing competition over, with just under 16,000 entries

5 competitions during 2021

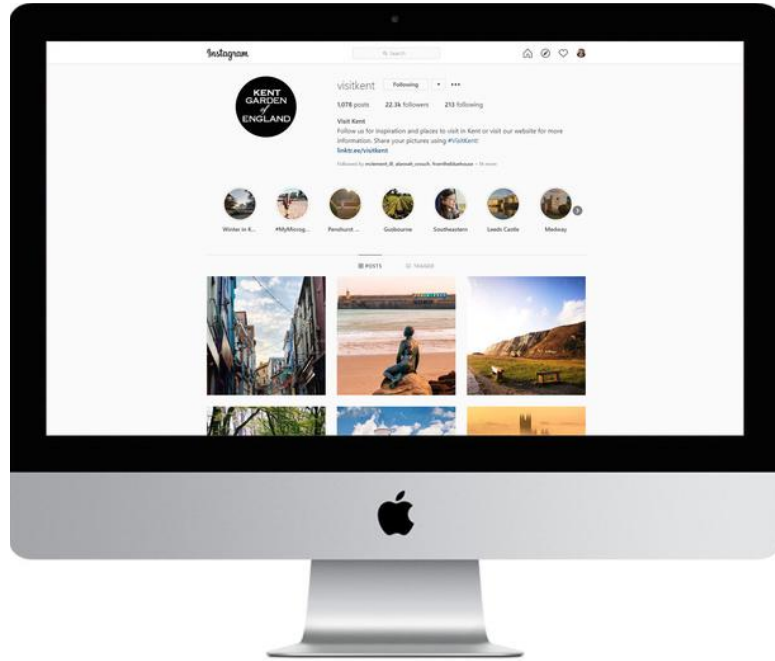
Win a break in Romney Marsh
(collaboration with Kent Crisps)
8,995 entries

Camping and Caravanning summer adventure:
3,944 entries

Golf in Kent
3,301 entries

Welcome back to Kent staycation
12,728 entries

12 Days of Christmas
15,900 entries



WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA

2021 saw strong growth for our consumer social media channels, with exceptional follower growth on Instagram in particular. This was primarily driven by a number of targeted campaigns, with paid social activity helping to drive growth across our channels at a time when consumers were actively seeking out days out and holiday inspiration once more.

The website also saw some excellent growth, indicated by website visits almost doubling vs 2020, again driven by a range of campaign activity and a gradual lifting of restrictions which once again encouraged consumers to actively search for ways to explore Kent.

750,000 website users
89 inspirational features created
2,000 organic social media posts

Instagram:
33,500 followers
7,300,000 impressions
209,000 engagements



Twitter:
 Total of **731** posts
2,666,120 impressions
87,140 engagements



Facebook:
24,800 followers
4,313,931 impressions
215,687 engagements





PRESS

Reactive and proactive PR activity remains a key strength at Visit Kent. Nurturing both new and existing media relations throughout 2021 remained of particular importance.

The Visit Kent PR team also optimized the opportunity afforded to them to start re-hosting press and influencer contacts once more, as the industry re-opened and restrictions allowed them to do so.



VISIT KENT

In 2021, press coverage generated by Visit Kent **reached 74.6 million people, with the coverage generated had a monthly average advertising value of over £3,000,000**

Visit Kent participated in **34 broadcast interviews**

41 press and influencer trips were hosted throughout 2021, with the Visit Kent team also assisting over **122 media contacts with suggestions, images and general assistance**

*Press coverage for Lonely Planet Best in Travel 2022 announcement saw **over £2,000,000** in PR value, **519.9 million** people reached, **18** broadcast pieces and **over 1,200** pieces of coverage across the UK and Europe*



INTERREG EXPERIENCE

Visit Kent is part of Interreg EXPERIENCE, a €23.3 million European funded project which aims to extend the tourism season through the development of off-season bookable experiences with an emphasis on overnight stays and sustainability.

This year, Visit Kent ran several campaigns promoting immersive experiences that tell the county's natural and cultural stories.

3 virtual project launch events with over 220 local stakeholders, 61 press, influencers and travel trade contacts, and 47 national tourism industry and political contacts

9 influencer trips with 8 new Insta itineraries for Kent

4 training workshops delivered with 4 brand-new training materials

3 peer-to-peer networking events with 176 attendees

2 focus groups and 2 virtual fam trips for leisure trade and MICE buyers presented with **11 new products**

10.7m impressions from A/B consumer testing campaign

4,000 respondents on YouGov Brand Study

1 new partnership with AccessAble



PROJECTS CONNECTIONS

Connections is a Discover England Funded tourism project consisting of 10 England destinations including Visit Kent who have been working together to develop product for the US market, focussed on bringing the cultural and historical connections between our nations to life.

In response to the pandemic, new funding allowed for the adaption of the existing Connections themes and products to fit within the domestic landscape and strengthen the authentic experiences. The project focused on “Re-Connecting” family, history, and heritage and emphasised connectivity between destinations.

VISIT KENT

Brand-new itinerary featuring Kent from Kensington Tours in conjunction with Ancestry.com

32 tour operators attended a **UKinbound virtual fam trip** delivered in conjunction with AncestryProGeneologists: Our Travel Trade Manager, Alanna Kite, was a key presenter and Kent content featured in the session.

Major domestic campaign launched “Take Time to Reconnect” with local history, places and stories. Kent creative featured across social media, local radio and press / media

10 travel trade events attended with Kent represented at each

1 virtual press visit for Kent with US media

CONNECTIONS
Explore your England connections with authentic cultural, ancestral and heritage tours.



PROJECTS

GOURMET GARDEN TRAILS

Funded by VisitEngland's Escape the Everyday and SELEP's Sector Support Fund to kickstart post-Covid recovery, Gourmet Garden Trails ran campaigns throughout the year including coverage of new partners and destinations including the RHS and East and West Sussex, inspiring domestic visitors to experience each partner regions' outstanding gardens and superb local restaurants, cafes, vineyards and breweries

2 new itineraries created featuring Kent products

2 new partnerships with Royal Horticultural Society (RHS) and Produced in Kent

2 digital campaigns throughout 2021 with key Kent partners as flagship products

18.9m impressions from digital campaign activity

Brand-new photography bank for ongoing promotion





FUNDING

Throughout the year Visit Kent have been proactively identifying and applying for funding which allows us to deliver more support to businesses and will help fund activity that will continue to deliver a strong recovery in 2021 and beyond.

The success we have achieved in securing this funding, both individually and in collaboration with other UK destinations, will mean that we can provide even more benefit to investor partners in 2022 through inclusion in large-scale confidence building and destination and place-marketing campaigns.

£59,000 from the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (COMF), supporting Kent's tourism, leisure and hospitality businesses to become Covid Secure

£1,050,000 from South East LEP Revi-VE support fund, including grants to over 150 businesses and place marketing campaigns

£49,860 from Reconnect Kent Education fund, re-connecting Kent partners and attractions together to support teacher and pupils with curriculum-rich content and activity



LOOKING FORWARD

Our new strategy sets out a three-year plan which focuses on close alignment with local and national strategies by placing the visitor economy firmly at the heart of our destinations to enable the wider recovery.

As Kent's Heritage Coast is named by Lonely Planet as the 4th best region to visit in the world, we have a huge opportunity in 2022 to raise awareness of our incredible county, attracting new markets and encouraging our returning visitors to explore further. We're excited to deliver a year-long programme of activity that will maximise exposure for our investor partners across the county, not only spreading the benefits wider but also providing our visitors with a wider offering.

Your support will help us leverage external funding, create engaging campaigns that drive footfall to Kent and rebuild back to better, together.

Speak to your account manager about how to make the most of your partnership with Visit Kent.

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Manche) England

EXPERIENCE

European Regional Development Fund