

# TRAVEL TRADE TESTING T4.2.1

KENT PILOT REGION REPORT 2023 T4.2.1



# INTRODUCTION

The Kent Regional Best Practice Guide presents findings on the effectiveness of the delivery for off-season experiential tourism, marketing and distribution (T4.1.3) for the Interreg EXPERIENCE project.

EXPERIENCE is a €24.5m project co-funded by the Interreg France (Channel) England Programme, which committed €17m from the European Regional Development Fund. It is led by Norfolk County Council (NCC) and ran from September 2019 to June 2023. EXPERIENCE is a major project to boost visitor numbers in the off-peak season through an innovative tourism strategy. New autumn and winter experiences will attract 11,309,368 new visitors to the six project pilot areas across England and France: Norfolk, Kent, Cornwall, Pas-de-Calais, Compiègne and Brittany (Baie de Morlaix and Côtes d'Armor).

Marketing and distribution within the Kent Pilot region was delivered in the following priority areas

1. Market testing with trade and distribution channels (T4.2.1)
2. Consumer testing campaigns (T4.2.2)
3. Consumer perception study (T4.2.2)
4. Digital Lab testing (T4.2.3)
5. Targeted consumer campaigns (T4.3.1)
6. Destination and business photography (T4.3.1)
7. Online pre-visit inspirational and trip-planning platforms (T4.3.2)
8. Travel trade and B2B distribution (T4.3.3)





# MARKET TESTING WITH TRADE AND DISTRIBUTION CHANNELS

Visit Kent (PP3) conducted market testing with business events and travel trade contacts and buyers, to provide much needed guidance for local Kent businesses, surrounding the potential interest and demand for off-season product themes and experiences.

These sessions aimed to offer a valuable insight into demand, packaging, and bundle options, and understanding audiences and key challenges when working with these markets. Essentially, these insights will help to inform experiential tourism product development and help to create collaborative ventures between partners.

This research will also be key in allowing businesses to gain a more in depth understanding around working with the travel trade and business events market to offer products that are suitable for contracting and distribution.

Data for B2B market testing was conducted through the following methods;

- Travel Trade & Mice Survey
- Focus Groups
- Virtual Fam Trip\*

\* Traditionally familiarisation trips take place in person and this would have been our preferred method, however due to restrictions in place through the Covid-19 pandemic this was not possible.

Throughout these methodologies the following product concepts were tested;

- Food, drink and artisan experiences
- Nature and wellbeing
- Photography/Arts/Craft experiences





# METHODOLOGY

## B2B PRODUCT TESTING

The following pages outline the methodology used for data collection, including details of targeted activity for both the travel trade and business events product testing



# Data Collection



01

## Travel Trade & MICE Survey

Initially, a survey was sent out to travel trade and MICE operators, to gain a general understanding into broad topics and interest into various product development themes.

Following this, a separate report was compiled and respondents were then invited to take part in the next two phases of data collection. Survey findings will also be cross-referenced where appropriate, to further enrich findings.



02

## Focus Groups

The second stage of data collection involved conducting focus groups with key travel trade and business events buyers and operators, to introduce a selection of product themes and gather feedback.



03

## Virtual Fam Trips

The third phase included the facilitation of virtual fam trips with buyers and operators, to showcase a number of new products and experiences developed as part of the project, to drive awareness and gather any additional feedback.



# Methodology & Sample

The following outlines the methodology and samples used for both travel trade and business events operators. In the case of both markets, an initial more in-depth stage was undertaken with participants, which included either an online focus group or individual interviews with operators. As part of this initial stage, several product concepts were selected that captured the range of experiences being developed as part of the wider project. The following also presents an overview of the two consultants who facilitated data collection, who were successful as part of the procurement process for the project.



## 01 Travel Trade

- Data collection was carried out by [b2me Tourism Marketing](#) led by Mike Newman, who has over 20 years' travel trade experience; of which 17 years has been spent as a consultant working with a wide range of attraction, museum and destination clients across the UK. Mike has worked on multiple GREAT Challenge Fund and Discover England Fund Projects, running stakeholder workshops, product audits, itinerary planning and concept testing with the UK and international travel trade.
- Interviews were conducted with seven trade operators including, E-Voyages, Johnsons, Musement, Norfolk Pheasant, Tiqets, Tours International and TripAdvisor Experiences, with the use of a discussion guide.
- Following this, a virtual fam trip was hosted via Zoom for 11 trade organisations, in which six Kent businesses showcased their offering. As part of this, attendees were presented with a series of polling questions to answer and give any additional feedback.
- In terms of the kind of activity participants would be looking to book, trade operators will be looking for experiences that are suitable for their frequent independent traveller clients (FIT), as well as leisure groups and coach parties.



## 02 Business Events

- Data collection was carried out by [Excelerate Consulting](#) led by Emily Lockwood, who has been working in sales and marketing within the tourism and hospitality sector for 20 years. Emily has in depth knowledge of Kent's business events product offering and an extensive range of contacts across business event planners and DMCs.
- A focus group was conducted via Zoom with four business events buyers, including HelmsBriscoe Germany, We are Meat, GoodCause Travel and Venue Seekers.
- Following this, a virtual fam trip was hosted via Zoom for ten business events buyers, in which five Kent businesses showcased their offering to attendees. After these sessions, organisations were then sent a feedback form to fill in based on the sessions they attended.
- For business events planners, participants will be looking to organise incentive trips for corporate clients who are looking to treat their staff or top clients, as well as planning conferences or meetings with experiences added on to the itinerary.



# The Product Concepts

The following product concepts were created to give an overview of the 125 businesses involved in the EXPERIENCE development programme, to form these three core groups, which were presented to participants as part of the focus groups and interview stage. These aimed to introduce core themes to organisations and gain feedback around demand, alongside their appeal to particular markets and any potential barriers. As shown below, information was presented to participants around core products for each theme, in addition to examples of add on experiences and geographical areas they cover.



## Food, Drink and Artisan Experiences

<p>Perfect for those wanting to experience locally produced food, wine and spirits representative of the area. Opportunities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tour and tasting experiences including cider, gin, wine and beer</li> <li>Foraging, cookery courses</li> <li>Experiential activities suitable from very small groups to max 50 pax</li> </ul>	<p>Add on Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Private tours</li> <li>Fine dining</li> </ul>
	<p>Areas covered:</p> <p>Tunbridge Wells, Dover, Deal, Ashford, Canterbury</p>
	<p>Special touches / surprise and delight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Highly experiential</li> <li>Unique to area</li> <li>Meet the makers</li> </ul>



## Nature and Wellbeing

<p>A series of unique experiences that make the best of the scenic locations away from other people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Horse experiences including grooming, and carriage riding</li> <li>Woodland camping and glamping experiences</li> <li>Wildlife experiences</li> <li>Yoga retreats</li> <li>Walking and cycling tours</li> <li>Off season availability</li> </ul>	<p>Add on Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Overnight wildlife spotting</li> <li>Bushcraft</li> <li>Multi day walking trips</li> </ul>
	<p>Areas covered:</p> <p>Gravesham, West Malling, Maidstone, Folkestone, Canterbury, Ashford, Tunbridge Wells, Thanet</p>
	<p>Special touches / surprise and delight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Experiential</li> <li>Away from it all</li> <li>Ideal for families</li> </ul>



## Photography/Arts/Craft Experiences

<p>Targeting both amateurs and professionals, these activities offer both insight and teaching for individuals and small groups with special interest:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Landscape and building photography courses</li> <li>Sewing and dressmaking</li> <li>Victorian era re-enactments</li> <li>Steam railway tours</li> </ul>	<p>Add on Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Lunches/dinners</li> <li>Expert tuition</li> </ul>
	<p>Areas covered:</p> <p>Medway, Folkstone, Lyminge, Romney Marsh</p>
	<p>Special touches / surprise and delight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with local artists/artisans</li> <li>Make and keep opportunities</li> <li>Have a meal prepared by Julie Friend (Master Chef winner 2009)</li> </ul>

# LEARNINGS

## B2B PRODUCT TESTING

An overview of key findings from the B2B product testing can be found on the next page, a full report is available on the Visit Kent Business website.

### **The following learnings can be taken from our approach:**

- Visit Kent received great insights from a variety of operators who we had not previously worked with
- Because Visit Kent engaged with operators early in the process we learnt how they built itineraries, providing us with insights into how to best meet the needs of operators in the future
- Operators valued being involved in the product development stage, however this has not culminated in increased engagement moving forward
- The virtual familiarisation trips were a necessity due to covid restrictions, however we would not look to replicate this approach if avoidable. The reason for this is due to the success of the virtual fam trip being too reliant on the presenting skills of the business's representative rather than the quality of the actual product itself
- The product testing delivery was delivered pre/during Covid, in a time when operators were unclear on how the market would develop. Since Covid the market has changed once again so much of the insights gained are already outdated, it would be prudent to conduct this activity again post-Covid.
- For both MICE and Trade products it was challenging to narrow down the specific product to test, as, due to match funding relationships we were required to ensure there was even spread of product across the county and match funding regions as well as consider the quality of the product and offering a succinct offer to the distributors.



# KEY FINDINGS

This product concept testing, aimed to provide guidance for Kent businesses on potential demand for off-season product themes and experiences, giving an insight into areas such as packaging options, key challenges and how providers can best cater for these two markets. The following product concepts were selected to give an overview of the 125 businesses involved in the EXPERIENCE development programme.

1

Food, Drink and  
Artisan Experiences



2

Nature & Wellbeing  
Experiences



3

Photography/Arts/Craft  
Experiences



## Data Collection

1

Trade & MICE  
Surveys



2

Focus Groups  
& 121 Interviews



3

Virtual FAM Trips



## BUSINESS EVENTS

### Improvements to make products more competitive

BUILD RESIDENTIAL & CONFERENCE PACKAGES WITH LOCAL HOTELS AND VENUES



GOOD VISUALS SPECIFIC TO THE CORPORATE MARKET, TO SHOWCASE OFFERING TO CLIENTS



CLEAR AND COHESIVE DESTINATION MESSAGING & CLEAR MARKETING STRATEGY FOR CORPORATE CLIENTS



CAPITALISE ON DEMAND FOR RETREATS AND MINDFULNESS



### Providers should emphasise

**01** EXPERIENCES THAT ARE IMMERSIVE & CAPTURE LOCAL AUTHENTICITY IN RURAL LOCATIONS

**02** KENT IS WELL-CONNECTED TO THE CAPITAL FOR EVENTS, AWAY DAY ACTIVITIES, & AS ADD-ONS TO BUSINESS TRIPS

**03** ABILITY TO CATER FOR BOTH LARGER & SMALLER GROUP SIZES

**04** PACKAGING OPTIONS WITH OTHER PROVIDERS & MORE WELL-KNOWN BRANDS

**05** QUALITY HOTEL PROVISION WITH A HIGH LEVEL OF SERVICE

RESPOND TO ENQUIRES WITHIN 24-HOURS WITH INFORMATION ON RATES, AVAILABILITY AND QUALITY CONTENT



OFFER PACKAGING OPTIONS INCLUDING WINE TASTING & DINING, COMBINED WITH LUXURY ACCOMMODATION & ACTIVE PURSUITS

### Improvements to make products more competitive

ACCOMMODATE FOR CHANGING GROUP DYNAMICS & EFFECTIVELY COMMUNICATE THIS ABILITY TO OPERATORS



DEMONSTRATE VALUE TO OPERATORS SUCH AS COST SAVINGS OR END PRODUCTS TO TAKEAWAY



GOOD VISUALS AND DIGITAL CONTENT TO SHOWCASE OFFERING TO CLIENTS AND UNDERSTAND CUSTOMER PATH



OFFER INFORMATION ON POSSIBLE ALTERNATIVES IF THE WEATHER TURNS



## TRAVEL TRADE

### Providers should emphasise

- LOCAL & AUTHENTIC ASPECTS

- EXPERIENCES THAT ARE OUT OF THE ORDINARY & CAPTURE A SENSE OF STORYTELLING

- OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN A NEW SKILLS OR 'CREATE YOUR OWN' EXPERIENCES

- EXPERIENCES THAT ARE CLOSE TO NATURE

- ANY INTERACTION WITH EXPERTS OR SPECIALISTS & GUIDED TOURS

Businesses should look at offering add-on options to core experiences & packaging options with existing well-known sites



### To address potential barriers

**01** EXPERIENCE PROVIDERS NEED TO RAISE AWARENESS OF PRODUCTS AND SHARE INFORMATION ON SEASONAL AVAILABILITY

**02** ENSURE THAT EXPERIENCES CAN CATER FOR LARGER GROUPS

**03** SHARE INFORMATION WITH OPERATORS ABOUT LOCAL TRANSPORT OPTIONS

**04** CATER FOR ANY LANGUAGE REQUIREMENTS WITH THE NEED FOR FOREIGN SPEAKING GUIDES

# 89%

AGREED THAT THESE TYPES OF PRODUCTS WILL ALLOW THEM TO HELP DELIVER MORE BUSINESS TO KENT



[HTTPS://WWW.TOURISMEXPERIENCE.ORG/](https://www.tourismexperience.org/)

