

5.1a. District Dashboard Ashford

Ashford brings together a number of contradictory trends. Although Ashford district is in the top 30% of the county for business tourism bed-nights, it is surprisingly very low in terms of MICE and group capacity, having the lowest number of establishments with MICE provision in the county, as well as in terms of establishments with group capacity. At the same time, Ashford district is in the top 30% of the county for 3* capacity, and in the top 50% for 4*. Airbnb provision is moderate, with a predominance of entire home rentals widely distributed across the district, with the majority being located below the M20 corridor. The **rental demand** metric is the 2nd highest across the 13 districts in Kent.

4/13 for **BUSINESS NIGHTS**: 209,000 bed-nights = 8.4% of total for Kent

8/13 for **HOLIDAY NIGHTS**: 507,000 bed-nights = 6.3% of total for Kent

2 **MICE-ready** accommodation establishments = 1.9% of county total

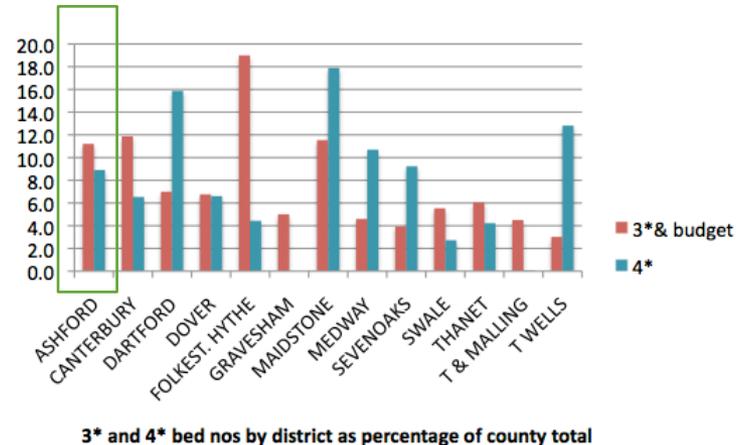
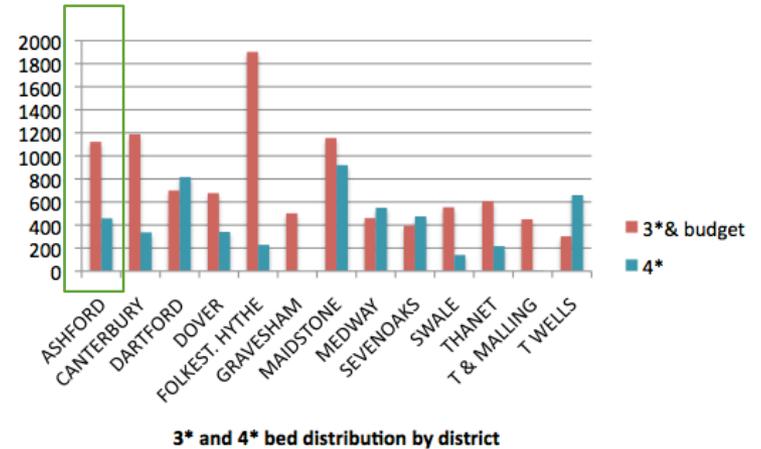
Total **MICE capacity**: 1183 = 7.3% of county capacity within accommodation establishments

Largest single MICE venue capacity: 400



Group tour-ready establishments: 1 = 1.1% of Kent total

Airbnb: 629 **ACTIVE RENTALS** with a **rental growth** of **433%** between 2016 (Q2) and 2019 (Q2). **Rental demand** 88 (2/13)



Sources of data for district dashboards: Extrapolated from Destination Research 2018, Visit Kent Business Barometers, CCCU Accommodation Database audit and Airdna webpages (subscription to district level data).

5.1b. Ashford (interview findings)



Visitor Offer

Ashford district has a significant leisure tourism offer, including heritage sites and gardens, its 'Garden of England' setting containing two AONBs (Kent Downs and High Weald), museums and listed buildings, a growing wine tourism offer, and the tourist 'honeypot' of Tenterden. Ashford town is home to the McArthur Glen Designer Outlet, and the newly opened Curious Brewery operated by Chapel Down, and has plans for an International Model Railway Exhibition Centre. In addition to these attractions within the Borough, Ashford benefits from easy access to attractions elsewhere in the county, making it a convenient centre for visitors to Canterbury, Rochester, and the coast, as well as the planned London Resort, close to Ebbsfleet International on the line to Ashford.

Key Drivers for the Visitor Economy

Ashford's mid-Kent location and transport connectivity to London and the continent are important in shaping demand for the Borough's visitor economy, and driving business night stays in particular, attracted by the convenient access to infrastructure, business and industrial sites across the county (such as Dungeness, and the lorry parks currently under construction). Its position and good transport connections have brought businesses to the town, from larger employers, such as Brakes Bros and Premier Foods, to smaller concerns, and have stimulated the development of Newtown Works as a significant centre for TV and film production. The visitor economy is a key plank in the Borough's wider economic development strategy.

Drivers



Main:

Connectivity– Ashford International offers fast train service to London and Ebbsfleet, and direct connection to the continent.

Location - mid-Kent location provides easy access to attractions, businesses and industry across Kent.

Supplementary:

Visitor offer – growing and diversifying offer, including heritage and countryside, wine tourism and retail.

Policy – Visitor economy a key plank in the Borough's economic development strategy.

Potential:

Visitor offer – planned London Resort development, and Domaine Evremond Winery at Chilham.

5.1b. Ashford (interview findings)



Gaps in Provision

Whilst the Borough Council supports the development of a wide range of new tourist accommodation, the emphasis is on a targeted approach in keeping with the location and the needs of the local offer, rather than on achieving high levels of growth. Growing MICE and group tour accommodation is not a priority for the Borough, particularly given the level of uncertainty surrounding the impact of COVID on the business market. MICE capacity currently exists at the Borough's main conference hotels, Ashford International and the two Holiday Inns (Central and North), and on a smaller scale at other establishments such as Eastwell Manor. Whilst the towns of Ashford and Tenterden have been earmarked as the main focus for larger hotel developments (linked most recently to the film and TV studio development at Newtown Works), scope exists for larger leisure developments catering to the health, spa and wellbeing offer in rural locations, as well as smaller-scale boutique and independent accommodation serving the growing wine and food tourism market.

Links to Key Planning and Policy Documents

Local Plan 2030 (adopted 2019) <https://www.ashford.gov.uk/planning-and-development/planning-policy/adopted-development-plan-documents/adopted-local-plan-to-2030>

Ashford Borough Council Recovery Plan (July 2020) – strategy for the next 18 months.

Work on the new **Corporate Plan** – which will support the development of the new **Economic Development Strategy** – has been temporarily suspended in favour of work on the post-COVID **Recovery Plan**. This will cover an 18 month period, and will include provision around place making, regeneration, and the visitor experience economy.

Priority gaps

Spa/wellness accommodation
(rural location)

Larger hotel developments in
Tenterden and Ashford (linked to
film and TV studio development
at Newtown Works)

Smaller-scale boutique and
independent accommodation
serving wine and food tourism
market.

Support for inward investment:



Joint ventures:

The Council has successfully worked with the accommodation sector supporting investment in mixed use town centre developments, and is open to considering joint venture partnerships on a case by case basis.