

Interreg EXPERIENCE Travel Trade & Business Events Insights: Product Concept Testing

May 2021



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Introduction & Overview

This report is part of the Interreg EXPERIENCE project, which centres on the development of off-season bookable experiences, with a focus on overnight stays, with the aim to extend the tourism season. The growing demand for experiential tourism, fuelled by the consumer's desire to immerse themselves in new cultures and activities, presents a strong opportunity for businesses and destinations to not only increase visitation in the shoulder months, but to also strengthen the resilience of the sector in the county.

As a destination, Kent boasts a wealth of authentic and quality tourism products and as part of the project, businesses are working to develop experiences that can attract visitors in the off-season. In doing this, it will not only help to build the resilience of the tourism sector in the county, but it will also attract key markets from both the trade and business events sectors. However, to fully tap into these markets and utilise the range of experiential product in Kent, tourism businesses will need to ensure that their offering caters to these markets and ensure that they are able to fulfil certain criteria and expectations around product information, commission rates and product visuals.

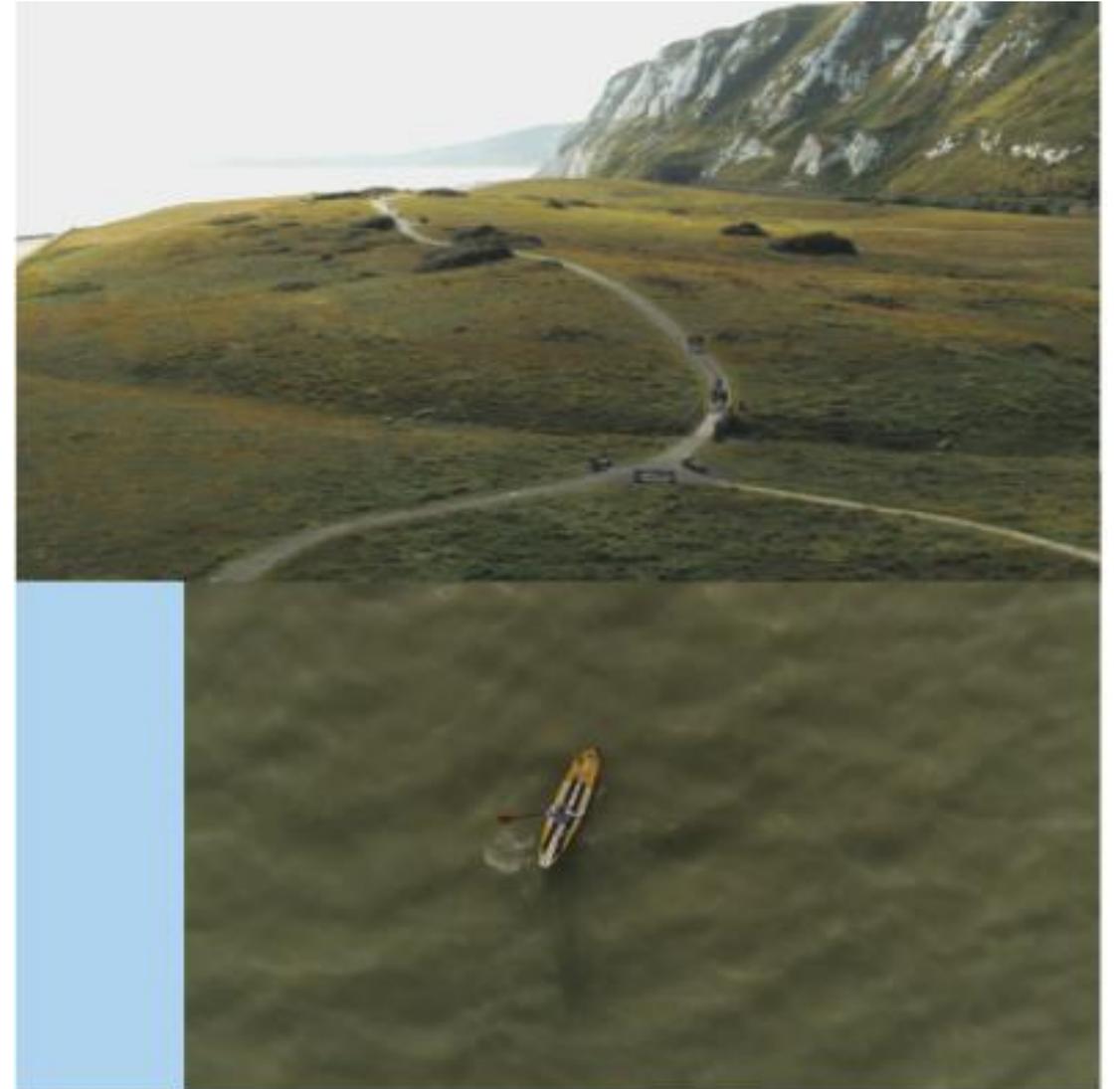
This stage of the project looked to conduct B2B product testing with business events and travel trade contacts and buyers, to provide much needed guidance for local Kent businesses, surrounding the potential interest and demand for off-season product themes and experiences. These sessions aimed to offer 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.



The product testing sessions also helped to raise the awareness of the proposed themes and new products among the travel trade contacts and business events planners who are looking for new experiences to add to their itineraries. Moreover, given the unprecedented situation and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding the impact this has had on the trade and business events sector will inform future activity to support them to provide new experiences to drive future interest and demand.

This report will present findings from various stages of data collection, conducted through a mix of both focus groups and virtual familiarisation trips. These consisted of presenting participants with a selection of product concepts and examples of experiences, developed as part of the EXPERINENCE project. Following this, the report will then look to outline key takeaways and recommendations, to provide guidance to businesses on how they can adapt their current offering to work with the travel trade and business events sector. Lastly, the findings from this piece of research will also be key in supporting future project activity and wider project deliverables.

Tourism businesses will need to
ensure that their offering **caters**
to these markets





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 elements of this piece of research.

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 a 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"> • Tour and tasting experiences including cider, gin, wine and beer • Foraging, cookery courses • Experiential activities suitable from very small groups to max 50 pax 	<p>Add on Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private tours • Fine dining
	<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"> • Highly experiential • Unique to area • Meet the makers



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"> • Horse experiences including grooming, and carriage riding • Woodland camping and glamping experiences • Wildlife experiences • Yoga retreats • Walking and cycling tours • Off season availability 	<p>Add on Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overnight wildlife spotting • Bushcraft • Multi day walking trips
	<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"> • Experiential • Away from it all • Ideal for families



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"> • Landscape and building photography courses • Sewing and dressmaking • Victorian era re-enactments • Steam railway tours 	<p>Add on Experiences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lunches/dinners • Expert tuition
	<p>Areas covered:</p> <p>Medway, Folkstone, Lynginge, Romney Marsh</p>
	<p>Special touches / surprise and delight:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with local artists/artisans • Make and keep opportunities • Have a meal prepared by Julie Friend (Master Chef winner 2009)

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.



Food, Drink and Artisan Experiences



Nature & Wellbeing Experiences



Photography/Arts/Craft Experiences



Data Collection



Trade & MICE Surveys



Focus Groups & 121 Interviews



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

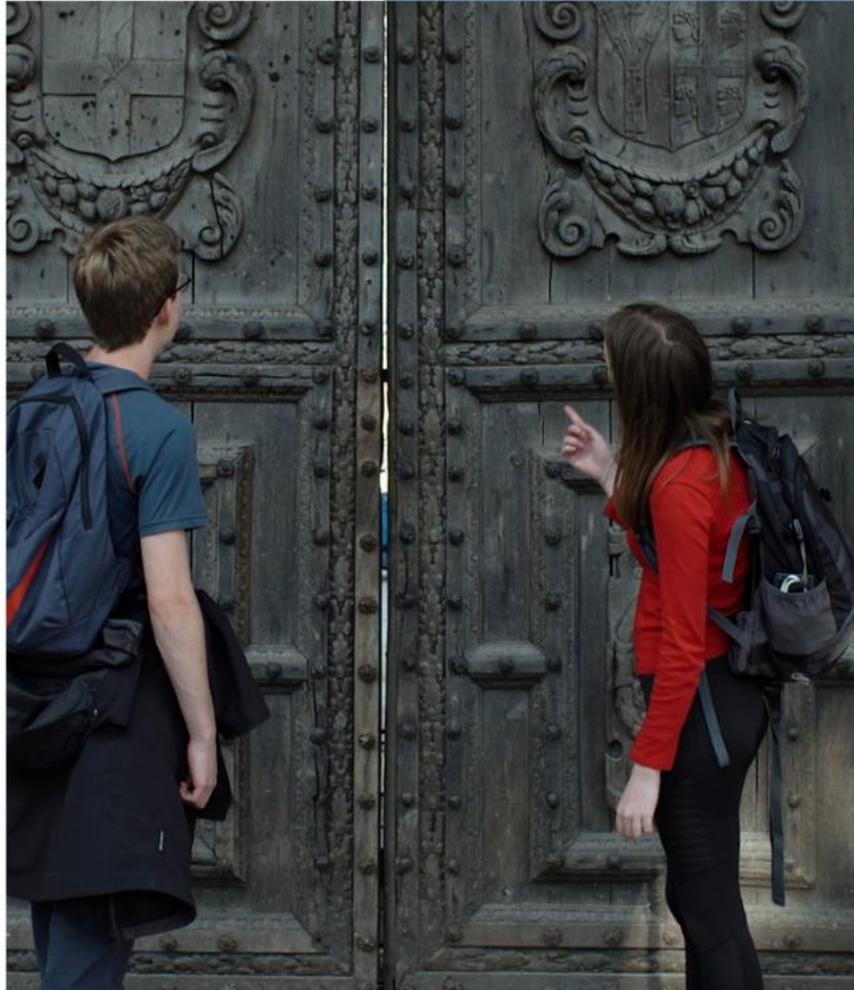


To address potential barriers

- 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



Travel Trade: Key Findings



01

The following section presents key findings from both a series of interviews conducted with travel trade operators, alongside an overview of the virtual fam trip. Following this, a series of key takeaways and business recommendations will be compiled, to provide guidance to tourism businesses on how they can best work with this market and utilise feedback on key product concepts.

Stage 1: Interviews

The initial research phase involved conducting 121 interviews with travel trade operators and buyers, centred around the product themes. When analysing and presenting data, responses specific to each product theme will be outlined, alongside feedback obtained based on all the product themes collectively. Initially, interviewees were asked to specify what they found appealing about each product concept, including any USP's or competitive strengths. In support of this, findings from the EXPERIENCE travel trade survey, highlighted the need for products and destinations to ensure they stand out from competitors.

What is appealing about this product? What do you see as its USPs / competitive strengths?



Food & Drink

- ✓ Findings show that product concepts around the theme of food and drink were received most positively among operators, particularly experiences that capture local traditions and produce, which clients are willing to pay more for. Operators also highlighted the appeal of utilising local people, such as meet the makers, to give a more authentic and expert viewpoint. This demand for food and drink experiences also emerged strongly in previous research conducted with trade operators.
- ✓ Results also show that now, operators are looking for products and experiences that are unique and out of the ordinary, with even experiences that once may have been classed as niche appealing strongly to clients looking to experience something different. These findings were also raised by operators who completed the EXPERIENCE travel trade survey, who highlighted the demand for new and interesting experiences, that allow visitors to be truly immersed in the local area.
- ✓ Operators also cited that there is an increasing demand for more private and personalised experiences, and that those that can offer this would highly appeal to potential clients. Findings also show that operators responded well to experiences that are hands-on and that allowed clients to learn a new skill. When looking at previous research, enquiries for private tours and one-off experiences such as behind the scenes or after hours experiences were gaining interest prior to the pandemic, which is set to continue.



- ✓ In particular, several operators interviewed felt that foraging and cooking experiences would highly appeal, and that the idea of sourcing your own food combined with a cooking class would be popular. One operator also used Scotland as an example of best practice, with foraging experiences already performing well in this destination. In addition, alcohol-based experiences and tastings such as gin distillery experiences hold strong appeal, and those that involve all the senses.
- ✓ The appeal of experiences that are close to nature were also highlighted, with mentions of clients increasingly looking to more rural areas, away from cities following COVID-19.

Nature & Wellbeing

- ✓ The growing demand for nature-based experiences and rural destinations was highlighted as a key strength for nature and wellbeing based experiences, and that as a concept these types of experiences are growing in popularity, with some operators having already seen enquires for this type of offering.
- ✓ Interview findings also highlighted the appeal of experiences that allow clients to escape and get away from busy day-to-day life, including messaging around going off the grid and taking a break from technology. This idea taps into the trend around wilderness tourism and experiences that are off the beaten track, which are gaining popularity due to the pandemic.
- ✓ Operators responded well to walking and cycling based experiences, including the appeal of cycling tours or coach trips combined with a day walking excursion. In support of this demand, one operator stated that there is certainly an opportunity to capitalise on the increased interest in walking over lockdown.
- ✓ Findings also show that there is a demand for sustainability-based experiences, alongside those centred around wildlife and mindfulness such as yoga retreats.
- ✓ One operator also expressed that there is a demand for off-season availability around this concept, in particular.

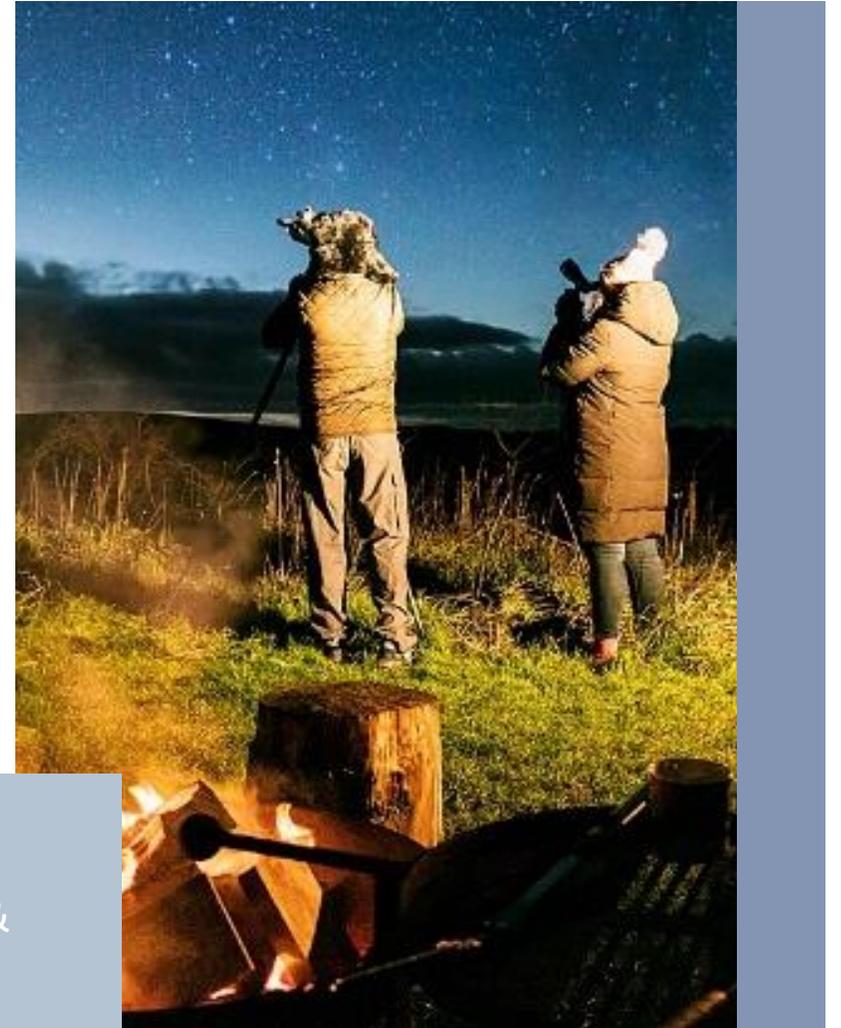




Photography, Arts & Craft Experiences

- ✓ Several operators felt that experiences around photography, arts and crafts may be too niche for their client base, however overall operators did respond positively.
- ✓ Operators responded well to the option of guided tours around this concept, with specific mentions of art-based tours.
- ✓ In terms of photography experiences, one operator felt that this could work well for their clientele, on the basis that these could cater for the younger iPhone generation, as digitalisation is being increasing more important, including destinations and spots that are instagrammable.
- ✓ Findings also show that operators felt that interaction with experts and specialists for experiences within this concept is key in order to appeal to clients.
- ✓ Again, operators highlighted the appeal this concept has in terms of authenticity, whilst also providing opportunities to learn new skills and create lasting memories.

“The interaction with specialists & experts is key, they want the talent to teach the client” – Norfolk Pheasant (Photography, Art & Crafts Experiences)



What barriers do you see to taking it market?

The following points are based on all three concepts as opposed to themes individually.

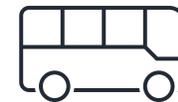
- ✓ Findings show that there is a need to ensure that experiences can cater for larger groups, with some operators feeling that scalability may be a challenge, with smaller suppliers not having the required capacity. Consequently, there will be a need for businesses to share information with operators on capacity, including minimum and maximum group sizes that they are able to accommodate.
- ✓ Operators also felt that there may be a barrier around language requirements, with the need for foreign speaking guides particularly for the German, Italian and French market. In addition, one operator also felt that there may even be a demand for guides from the US market.
- ✓ Transport was another area that could be a potential barrier, with a need for operators to know about transport options on how clients can reach experiences, or any other options such as walking or cycling that can be incorporated into this journey. Feedback on this also demonstrated that this would be more of an issue for the international market, as opposed to domestic audiences who may have access to their own car or be more familiar with local transport systems, and so there may be a need for ground handlers to aid with inbound visitor requirements.
- ✓ Findings also show that there is a need to ensure that experience providers share information on how active the experience is, for example how much walking is involved and specific locations it covers, so that they can offer this to the correct market.
- ✓ Finally, operators felt that in order to take products to market, there is a need to increase the awareness of products and seasonal availability. This sentiment was also mirrored in the trade survey, whereby results also highlighted the need for availability of off-season products.



Experience providers need to raise awareness of products and share information on seasonal availability



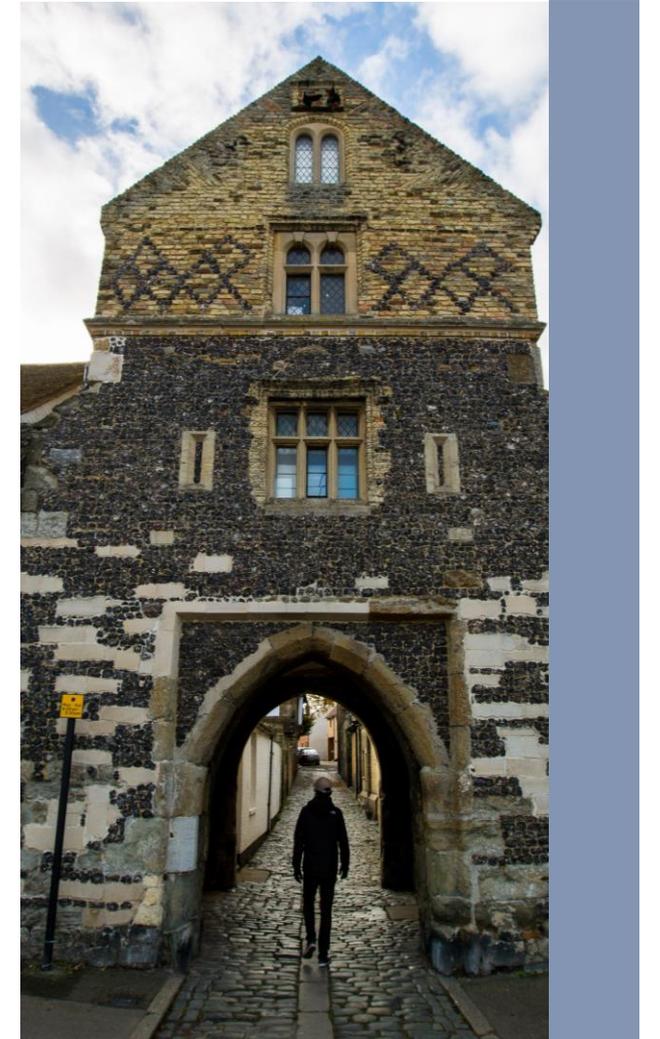
Ensure that experiences can cater for larger groups



Need for operators to know about local transport options



Barrier around a language requirements with the need for foreign speaking guides



What improvements could make this product more competitive?

Interviewees were then asked if any improvements could be made to make products more competitive. The following suggestions were raised by trade operators for each product concept, and although some of these are already integrated into concepts, for businesses looking to develop food and drink experiences these present areas of interest.



Food & Drink

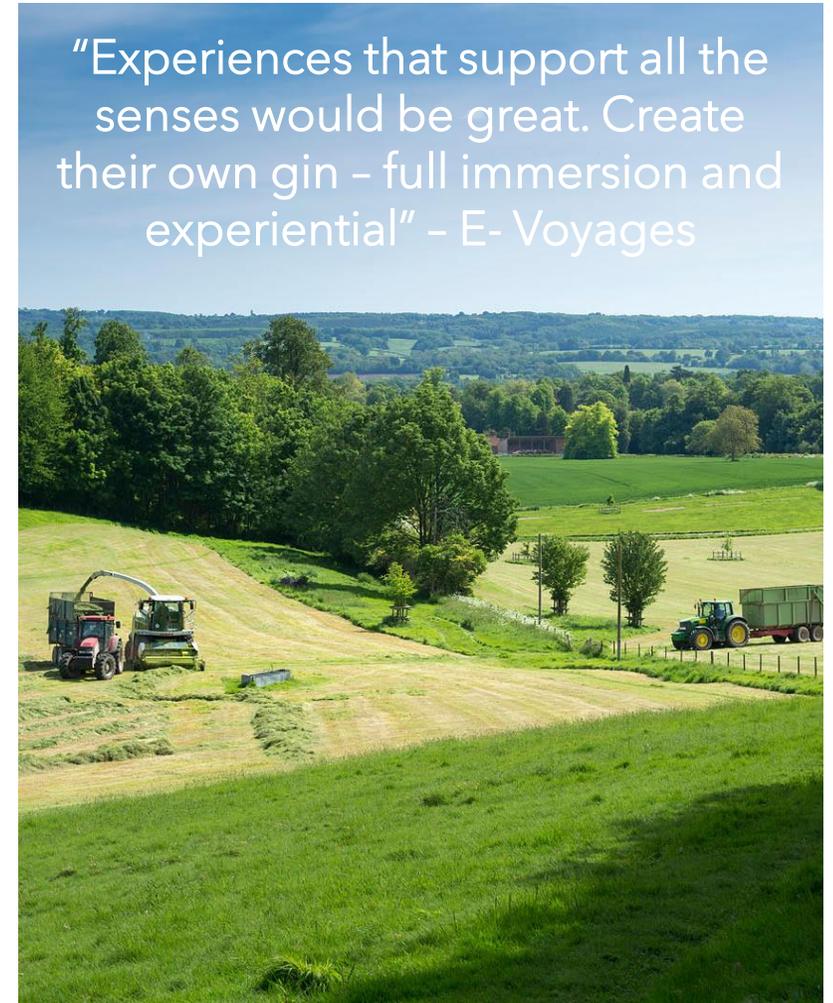
- ✓ Experiences that support all the senses and are immersive as possible
- ✓ "Create your own" food and drink experiences
- ✓ Fine dining
- ✓ A railway tour could be a good add-on if the weather turns
- ✓ Meet the locals and the artisans
- ✓ Local guides
- ✓ Comment on awards won for taste



Nature & Wellbeing

- ✓ Need to highlight reasons to visit and what makes the area special
- ✓ Educate visitors through marketing and content
- ✓ Ensure businesses are presenting a streamlined offering
- ✓ Tours would need to be hands-on and personalised
- ✓ Clients want to be guided
- ✓ Experiences that involve walking and cycling trips- although there is a need to be clear on the level of difficulty, alongside information on routes and group sizes that can be accommodated

"Experiences that support all the senses would be great. Create their own gin – full immersion and experiential" – E- Voyages





Photography, Arts & Craft Experiences

- ✓ Feedback shows that operators felt that photography and arts and crafts experiences would be more sellable if they are **packaged** with other products, for example walking with a photography experience.
- ✓ However, a number of operators also felt this concept may be too niche for their clientele, although this could be aided by ensuring that they are able to **cater for larger groups**.

Alongside the above, operators also raised some additional points relating to concepts overall.

- ✓ Again, operators stated that it is important that experience providers can **cater for larger groups**, an area that was also raised in the EXPERIENCE travel trade survey, which recommended that businesses ensure they can accommodate varied group dynamics. In addition, also as part of the survey, findings showed that the most common type of new enquiry received by operators post COVID-19 was for larger groups (55%).
- ✓ Collectively, these findings demonstrate the importance of this requirement, and for providers to ensure they have the capacity and resources to accommodate the travel trade, but to also ensure this is being effectively communicated to them. However, with changing group dynamics, operators will be dealing with both larger and smaller groups, therefore accommodating this variety will be key.

Providers need to ensure that they have the capacity and resources to accommodate changing groups dynamics, and that this ability is effectively communicated to travel trade operators.



- ✓ The need for experience providers to **demonstrate value** was also raised, including offering operators cost savings if a certain number of bookings could be guaranteed, or added value aspects such as end products they can takeaway.
- ✓ Several operators mentioned the importance of **digital content** such as imagery and virtual/video content, to be shared by providers to ensure that experiences can be effectively showcased to their client base. Feedback on this also included the added benefits this collateral can bring to fully understanding the customer path and experience timeline.
- ✓ Other areas raised included the need to ensure that there are alternatives to certain aspects of experiences **if the weather turns**, which may also be more relevant when looking at off-season visits.

1



Accommodate for changing group dynamics, and effectively communicate this ability to operators.

2



Demonstrate value to operators such as cost savings or end products to takeaway

3



Good visuals and digital content to showcase offering to clients and understand customer path

4



Offer information on possible alternatives if the weather turns



Key Market Segments

What market segments do you think it would appeal to?

Operators were also asked what markets they thought the three product concepts would appeal to, for example by life-stage, FIT's or small groups, to give an insight into existing and potential new markets.



Food, Drink and Artisan Experiences

- ✓ Mid 30's and above - particularly alcohol experiences
 - ✓ Cooking classes for small groups and couples
 - ✓ Groups
- ✓ Foraging and cookery classes for small groups would be ideal of around 20pax
- ✓ For the older demographic cookery and fine dining would appeal more so as opposed to foraging
- ✓ Popular with Europeans and the French market especially



Nature and Wellbeing

- ✓ Appeals more to families
- ✓ Would also cater well for the FIT market
- ✓ Cycling tours would appeal to groups
- ✓ Products and experiences close to nature and getting off the grid appeals highly to FIT's
- ✓ Demand for sustainability, particularly from the US and domestic market
- ✓ Interest in carriage riding for families



Photography/Arts/Craft Experiences

- ✓ These types of experiences would appeal to the FIT market
- ✓ Would appeal to niche markets and special interest groups
 - ✓ Although these could also appeal to groups if they can be accommodated

Packaging Options

Operators were then asked what other activities within the themes could they see working well together, to form an itinerary for example pairing a wine tasting or foraging experience with a woodland glamping experience or including an experience alongside a more well-known attraction in Kent to act as a hook.

- ✓ Feedback from operators indicate that there is scope for these to work as standalone experiences for the day trip market, as long as they last for a few hours. But for clients staying longer, these would need to be packaged alongside other activities and quality accommodation options.
- ✓ Operators also responded well to the option of experience providers offering add-ons to core experiences, such as fine dining, tastings, or golf. In doing this, it allows operators to customise the experience according to their clients requirements, whilst extending length of stay, spend and time within the destination. As part of this approach, experiences can be offered as a standalone offer with the option to add extra elements or work collaboratively with other businesses to provide a destination offering. In terms of concept specific packaging options, the following options were mentioned by individual operators.



Operators responded well to the option of experience providers offering add-ons to core experiences, such as fine dining, tastings, or golf.

How likely are you to feature this product?

- ✓ Overall, feedback indicates that operators are highly likely to feature experiences in each of the concepts, but most notably experiences within the food and drink and nature and wellbeing themes.
- ✓ At the time of data collection, there was some frustration and uncertainty around travel restrictions, but operators were keen to source new products and update itineraries.
- ✓ One operator felt that for their client base, shorter breaks would appeal more so in the next few months, with the aim to build up to longer itineraries once consumer confidence has returned. Alongside this, another operator cited that lead times are becoming shorter as their sales team can be a lot more reactive, with another stating that their marketing team are able to run various client webinars to promote products and experiences.
- ✓ Lastly, feedback also illustrated that for some operators curation is still very much at the top level, and that they are looking for lesser-known products to work alongside more major attractions, which act as the initial hook for visiting a destination.
- ✓ Feedback from operators demonstrates that the demand is there for new and experiential products, that offer something different and can enrich the visitor journey.

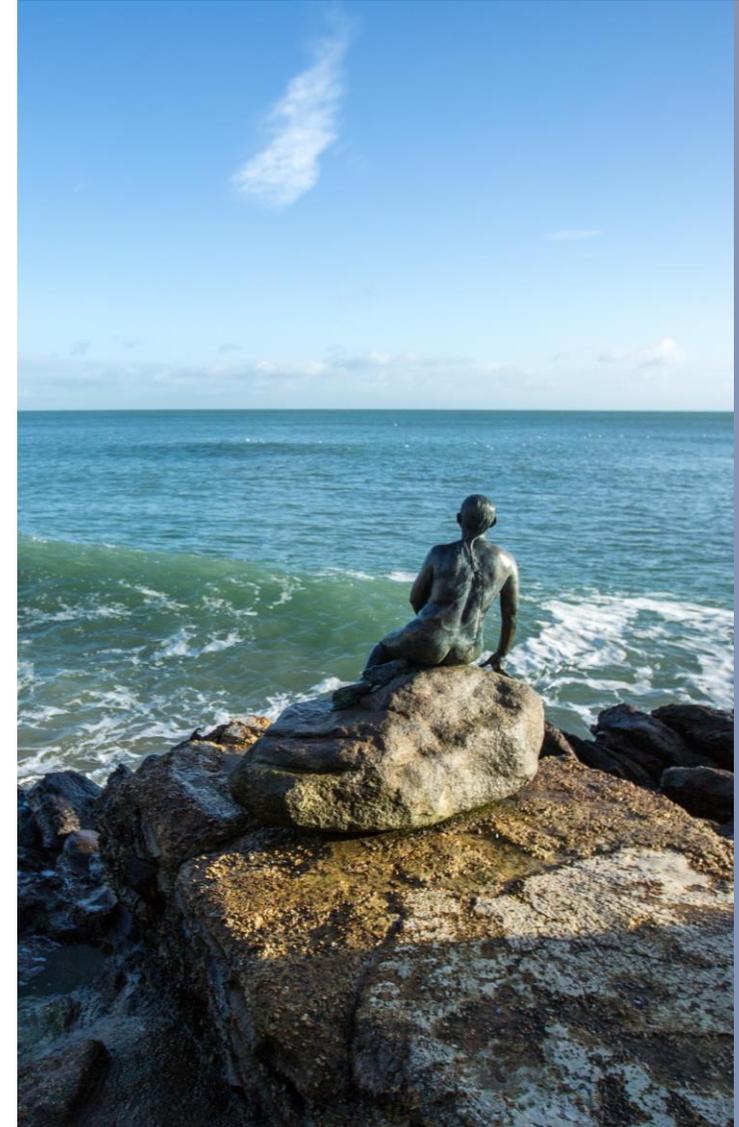
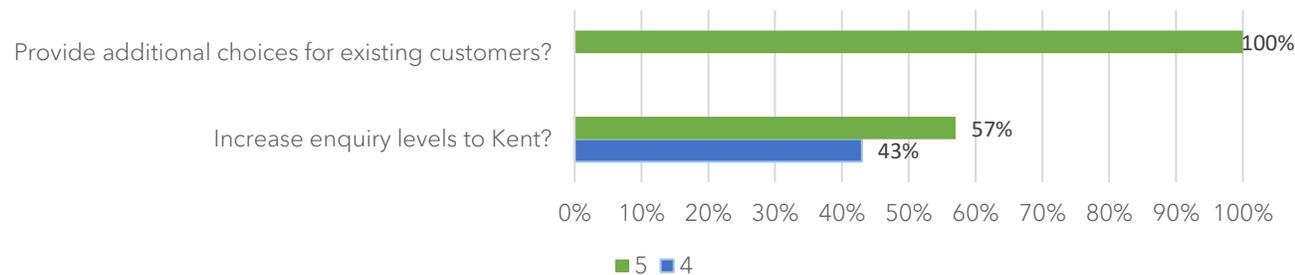
“Good products to have, as there isn’t much like this in the UK” – TripAdvisor (Food & Drink Experiences)



Off-Season Appeal

Do you think these concepts would appeal in low/shoulder seasons?

- ✓ In general, operators expressed that there is certainly an increasing demand for off-season product, particularly in the spring and autumn. This interest was also mirrored in the EXPERIENCE travel trade survey, with spring and autumn being the two seasons generating the most interest.
- ✓ Operators felt that food and drink experiences would work particularly well in the off-season, and particularly visits to vineyards and foraging in the spring and autumn season. Here, one operator also flagged that these would need to be contracted in the February or March prior, and therefore experience providers would need to work to these timeframes.
- ✓ In terms of nature and wellbeing experiences, some operators felt that these are more weather dependant and therefore off-season experiences may need to consider this more so.
- ✓ Operators also felt that experiences involving accommodation such as log cabins and lodges would have high appeal in the off-season, as long as they could be adequately heated.
- ✓ Operators were then asked an additional two questions relating to interest in the three product concepts as a whole, being asked to rate their level of agreement from 1 to 5, with 5 being the strongest level of agreement. As illustrated in the graph below, 100% agreed that these concepts would provide additional choices for existing customers (5 out of 5). Alongside this, 100% agreed that experiences as part of these concepts will increase enquiry levels to Kent (57% 5 out of 5 & 43% 4 out of 5).





Stage 2: Virtual Familiarisation (FAM) Trip

The next stage of product concept testing consisted of hosting a virtual fam trip via Zoom, in which **11 trade operators** attended. The fam trip aimed to introduce some of the new experiences being developed as part of the project, to gain **additional feedback** from operators, and consequently raise awareness of the wealth of new experiential product offering in Kent for the leisure trade market. The session consisted of live **presentations from four experience providers**, predominantly around food and drink, as this was a concept which came out strongly in the initial interviews with trade operators. The fam trip was also attended by businesses that can facilitate language guides and transport services, due to both aspects emerging as potential barriers to taking products to market.

Prior to the fam trip, operators were also sent a **hamper courtesy of Macknade Fine Foods**, containing some of the quality Kentish food and drink the county has to offer, for operators to sample and get a taste of the flavours of Kent. Below are details of each of the experience providers that took part in the virtual fam trip, which are examples of best practice of how experiences can be developed and cater to the leisure trade market.



Macknade Fine Foods based in Faversham, is the South-East's leading food hall, built on a 170 year history of food, farming and retailing, with the aim to share their passion for food and drink. They offer a bespoke concierge service delivering curated exclusive experiences with food suppliers, such as autumnal vineyard picnics with private tastings, which can be delivered in-house or at supplier sites. They are able to cater for a range of group sizes, depending on the experience booked (2 people and above).

[Visit website](#)



Based in the City of Canterbury, Canterbury Brewers and Distillers based at the Foundry Brew Pub, offers an award-winning unique craft brewery, distillery, restaurant and bar. As part of their experience offering, they run a series of tastings and tour packages of the brewery, including beer, gin and whiskey. Tours and tastings can also cater for group sizes of up to 50 people.

[Visit website](#)



Vine + Country Food and Wine Tours specialise in curating experiences which allow visitors to immerse themselves with a range of bespoke English wine tasting and vineyard experiences, at some of the UK's best vineyards, cider makers and brewers, in the picturesque Kent & Sussex countryside. Experiences give visitors the chance to sample some award-winning wines hosted by the winemakers alongside chefs table experiences, serving local produce and wine pairings.

[Visit website](#)



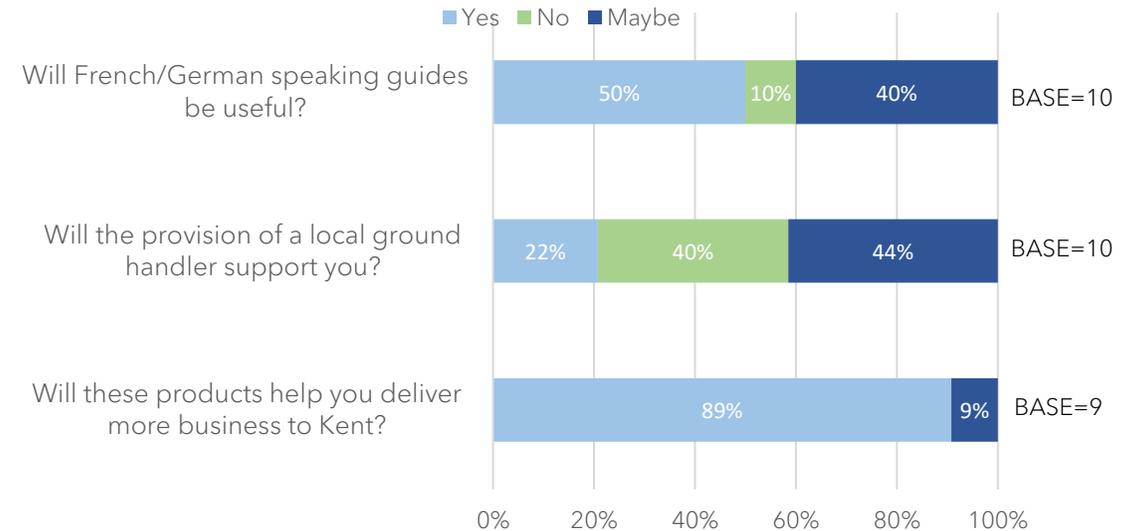
Canterbury Historic River Tours have now developed winter walking tours, which will operate all year round. These walking tours will allow visitors to walk along the riverside, take in some of the city sites and learn all about the historic and heritage stories of the destination, catering for group sizes of up to 50pax.

[Visit website](#)

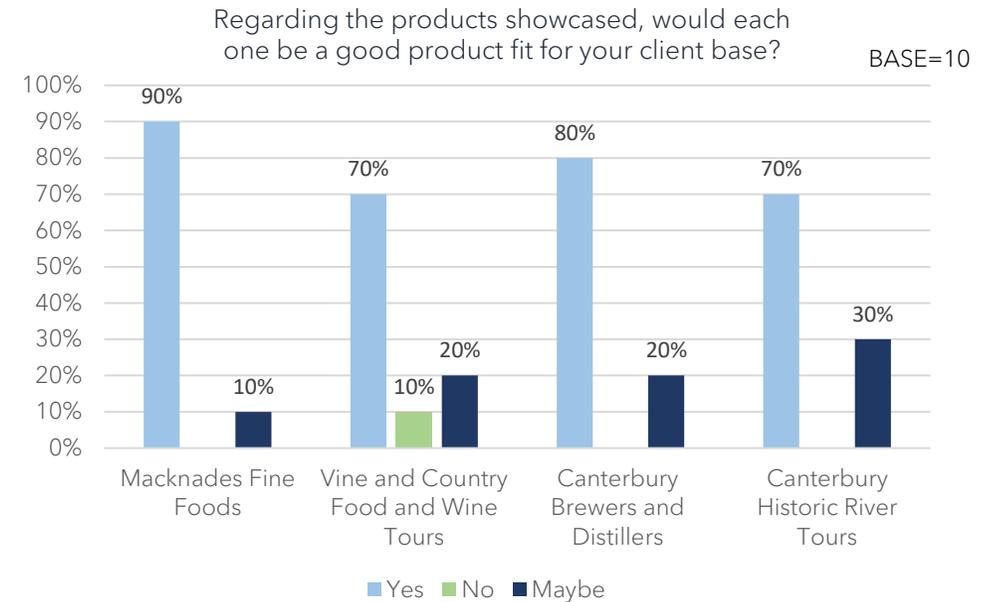
Fam Trip Feedback

At the end of the session, attendees were presented with a series of polling questions, to gain additional insights from operators.

- ✓ **89%** of operators agreed that these types of products will allow them to help deliver more business to Kent
- ✓ **66%** of operators either needed or were potentially interested in the provision of a local ground handler to support their activity, however this was followed by 40% feeling this was not needed.
- ✓ **90%** of operators either needed or were potentially interested in having access to French or German speaking guides as part of the experience.



- ✓ Lastly, operators were then asked - **Regarding the products showcased, would each one be a good product fit for your client base?** As illustrated in the graph, each product showcased in the fam trip received considerable interest from trade operators, highlighting the demand for these types of experiences, which centred on local and authentic produce and storytelling. Of course some experiences received a higher level of interest, although only marginally. However, this shortfall was not due to lack of interest, as some operators selected 'maybe', due to the nature of their business being an OTA.
- ✓ Overall, feedback from attendees during and post fam trip really highlight the interest and growth in demand for these experiences. Several operators expressed that although the session was not delivered face-to-face, it was a great opportunity to learn about some of the new and emerging experiential tourism products being developed in the county, and how suppliers are looking to implement this in the region. Feedback also highlighted that operators are receiving enquiries from their clients to include these types of activities in itineraries and were very keen to receive more information and begin to work with suppliers.
- ✓ Looking at market specific interest, one operator cited that clients from key markets such as Germany, Switzerland, Holland and the US are keen for these types of experiences, that capture local aspects, such as sampling produce, meeting with local people and walking and cycling. Feedback really demonstrates the growing desire for new and fresh experiences to maintain interest with the trade market, for small groups, FIT and larger groups, with one operators saying that the 'usual' sights are not as unique anymore.
- ✓ In terms of the wider project, of course these are only 4 of the 125 experiences being developed, and operators expressed that they would be interested to learn more about the others being developed.

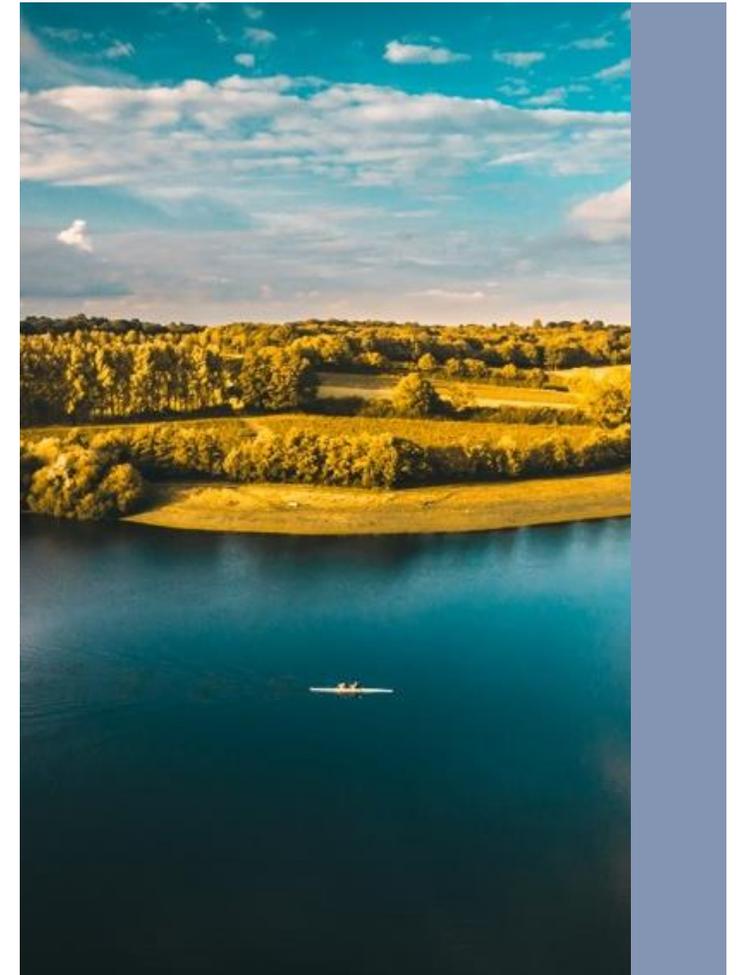


"I have really enjoyed the virtual fam trip and of course, it has been a pleasure to receive the amazing local products to taste. I have already contacted the suppliers we met yesterday to have some information and rates of their experiences. I'll contact you as soon as I have some request from our sales team" - JacTravel

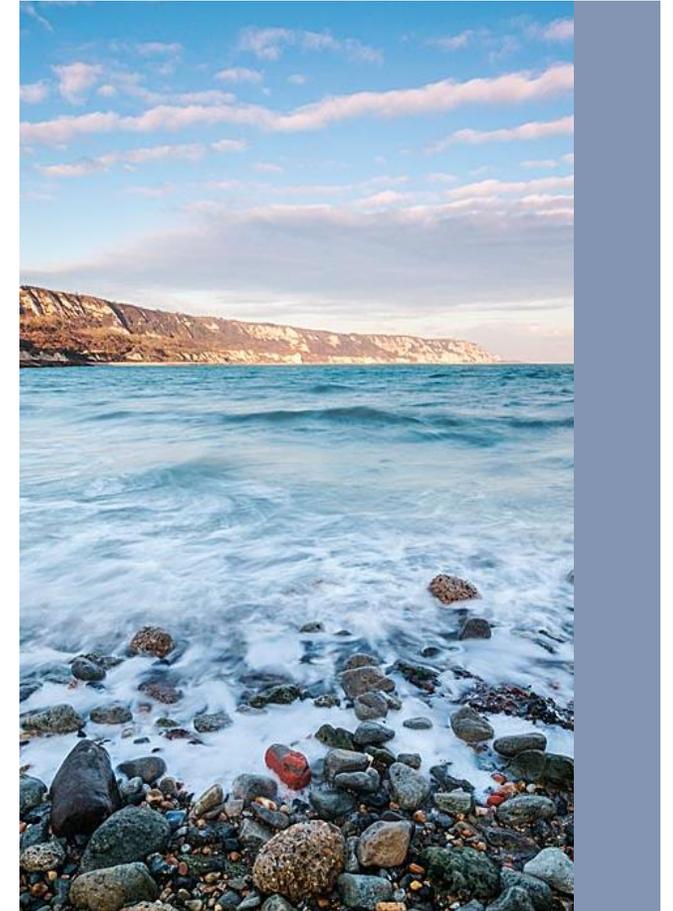


Travel Trade: Key Findings & Recommendations

- ✓ Experience providers should highlight the local and authentic aspects of their offering and any USP's, as operators are looking for experiences that are unique, out of the ordinary and capture local traditions, produce and a sense of storytelling.
- ✓ Experiences that can offer private and more personalised experiences will appeal, such as behind the scenes and one-off experiences.
- ✓ Providers should look to incorporate hands-on activities, giving visitors an opportunity to learn a new skill.
- ✓ Foraging, cooking and 'create your own' experiences emerged strongly, with Scotland being cited as an example of best practice for these types of activities both in the interviews and travel trade survey.
- ✓ Experiences that are close to nature also emerged strongly, with operators highlighting opportunities to tap into the demand for more rural destinations and activities that allow visitors to escape busy life.
- ✓ Operators responded well to walking and cycling-based experiences, including the appeal of cycling tours or coach trips combined with day walking excursions.
- ✓ Findings also show that there is a demand for sustainability-based experiences, alongside those centred around wildlife and mindfulness such as yoga retreats.
- ✓ Experience providers should look to highlight elements of the experiences that involve interaction with experts or specialists, with guided tours and sessions appealing strongly.
- ✓ Business should highlight if they are able to cater for larger groups, and always ensure they inform operators about minimum and maximum numbers they can accommodate.



- ✓ Additional services such as local ground handlers and foreign language guides should be explored, as these were both raised as potential challenges to taking products to market.
- ✓ Providers should also ensure that they are using the correct channels to promote their offering to the travel trade, to raise awareness among this market, including seasonal availability. This could include inclusion in annual travel trade brochures, trade shows and other platforms such as TXGB.
- ✓ Experience providers should ensure they are able to demonstrate value to trade operators, including cost savings through booking targets and activities where visitors are able to take something tangible away with them at the end of the experience.
- ✓ Experience providers should also ensure that they invest in digital content such as imagery and virtual and video content, and that this is shared with operators so that experiences can be effectively showcased to their client base, allowing them to understand the customer path.
- ✓ There is scope for experiences to work as standalone activities, although these would need to last for a few hours in order to cater for the day trip market. Although, for visitors staying for longer this would need to be packaged alongside other activities and quality accommodation.
- ✓ Businesses should look at the option of offering add-on options to core experiences, as operators responded positively to this. However, it will also be important for some experiences to be packaged with existing experiences and sites that are well-known, in order to drive demand and act as a hook for clients to book, for example Canterbury Cathedral or Hever Castle.
- ✓ Small accommodation providers such as glamping, lodges and shepherd huts were also popular, especially when combined with food and drink experiences.
- ✓ Spring and Autumn seasons gained the most interest in terms of demand for off-season tourism. Although, providers should ensure these are bookable around 12 months prior and ensure their processing can cater to online OTA's, so that they can automatically confirm bookings.
- ✓ Overall, feedback from this research really highlights the interest and growth in demand for experiential activities and the importance this plays for the leisure travel trade market. Operators emphasised that they are already receiving enquiries from their clients to include these types of activities in itineraries and were very keen to receive more information about other bookable experiences and begin to work with suppliers.





Business Events: Key Findings



02

The following section presents key findings from both focus groups conducted with business event operators and buyers and an overview of the virtual fam trip delivered. Following this, a series of key takeaways and business recommendations will be compiled, to provide guidance to tourism businesses on how they can best work with this market and utilise feedback on key product concepts.

Focus Group & Virtual Fam Trip

For business events planners, product concept testing was completed using both a focus group completed via Zoom with **four buyers**, where participants were introduced to the three product concepts selected- Food and Drink, Nature and Wellbeing and Photography, Arts and Crafts.

Following this, a virtual fam trip was hosted via Zoom, in which **ten business events buyers** attended. The fam trip aimed to present a number of new experiences being developed as part of the project, to gain **additional feedback**, and consequently raise awareness of the experiential product offering in Kent for the business events and incentive market.

The session consisted of **presentations from five experience providers**, bringing together a mix of food and drink providers, art and culture and wellbeing experiences. The session aimed to create a virtual journey, giving operators the opportunity to immerse themselves in brand-new experiences and learn more about some of the examples of the exciting experiences being developed. The session looked to present Kent as a destination that is innovative, offering a range of local and authentic experiences, providing some all-important reasons to consider proposing Kent as a destination for their clients. Prior to the fam trip, buyers were also sent a **hamper courtesy of Macknade Fine Foods**, containing some of the quality Kentish food and drink the county has to offer. Below are details of each of the experience providers that took part in the virtual fam trip.



Macknade Fine Foods based in Faversham, is the South-East's leading food hall, built on a 170 year history of food, farming and retailing, with the aim to share their passion for food and drink. They offer bespoke concierge delivering and curated exclusive experiences with food suppliers, such as autumnal vineyard picnics with private tastings, which can be delivered in-house or at supplier sites. They are able to cater for a range of group sizes, depending on the experience booked (2 people and above).

[Visit website](#)



The Wild Kitchen offers foraging experiences to get those taste buds dancing including the Tour de Forage, which starts with a cycle ride to the Kent Coast to gather wild mussels, oyster and edible seaweed. Based in Deal, they specialises in cooking with British plants & seaweed that grow in the wild and directly link the landscape to the table, hosting gourmet foraging adventures in Kent. This offering is due to be ready in July 2021 and will be able to cater for groups of up to 20 people.

[Visit website](#)



Primal Roots offer fitness and wellbeing days and programmes, allowing participants to immerse themselves in nature and embrace the elements, centred on wellbeing and reconnecting mind with soul and body. As a social enterprise, their mission is to help give back to those who have experienced homelessness, addiction or ex-offenders to help them turn their lives around. Working with The White Cliffs Hotel, they have developed a boot camp retreat for both corporate and leisure groups as well as individual visitors, catering to different levels of fitness and goals. The product is available now and also has an offer designed for corporate groups, and can cater for various group sizes as they have a number of vehicles, wellness tutors and an accommodation partner on hand.

[Visit website](#)



Based in Appledore, Ashford, Gusbourne offer visitors a chance to explore the vineyards and enjoy some of their award-winning English Sparkling Wines. Gusbourne are developing a dedicated package for corporate groups including inspiring space for board-room style meetings, followed by a hosted tour of the vineyard, giving groups an insight into what it takes to make world-class English Sparkling Wine. Tours take visitors through the vineyard and winery and end with a tutored wine tasting session.

[Visit website](#)



Mrs Baker's Medway Theatre Company, offers heritage arts tours for small groups delivered by guides dressed as characters with local historical connections, such as Charles Dickens. Tours involve guided visits to various Medway locations and bespoke experiences such as a Medway Sound musical performance at 'The Command House', printmaking at Chatham Intra or Nucleus Arts Centre, puppetry at The Guildhall Museum in Rochester or a trip to the 'smallest art gallery' in Bowen Motors. This offering is available to book now and can cater for groups with a minimum of 4pax.

[Visit website](#)

What is appealing about this product? What do you see as its USPs / competitive strengths?

Following both sessions with business events buyers, participants were sent a feedback form to complete, with the following results based on six sets of feedback.

- ✓ In terms of what they found appealing about the products and any USP's, several buyers emphasised the benefit that Kent has in terms of location and proximity and connectivity to London and the continent.
- ✓ Feedback also highlighted that buyers felt that now more than ever, Kent has a competitive strength in the sense that people are increasingly becoming wary of city centres and public transport, and as a result destinations that offer more rural locations can capitalise on this trend.
- ✓ Alongside this, concepts and products around sustainability including environmentally friendly options came across strongly, indicating that this is an area that business events buyers are keen to see from experience providers and will appeal to their clientele. This interest was also mirrored by respondents who completed the MICE EXPERIENCE survey, whereby 77% stated that they consider sustainability and carbon-footprint when contracting a supplier.
- ✓ There was a positive response to product concepts and experiences that embraced local elements and people, alongside experiences being truly immersive that would appeal to both corporate and private clients.
- ✓ The concept of collaboration and businesses willingness to do this was also highlighted, with buyers favouring the idea of bringing together small local businesses with more well-known brands.



"I think Kent as a location has a chance to really take advantage of the current situation, when things come back people will be a bit wary initially of city centres and public transport so more rural/out of town locations can really sell themselves on this" - Complete Event Solutions

What barriers do you see to taking it market?

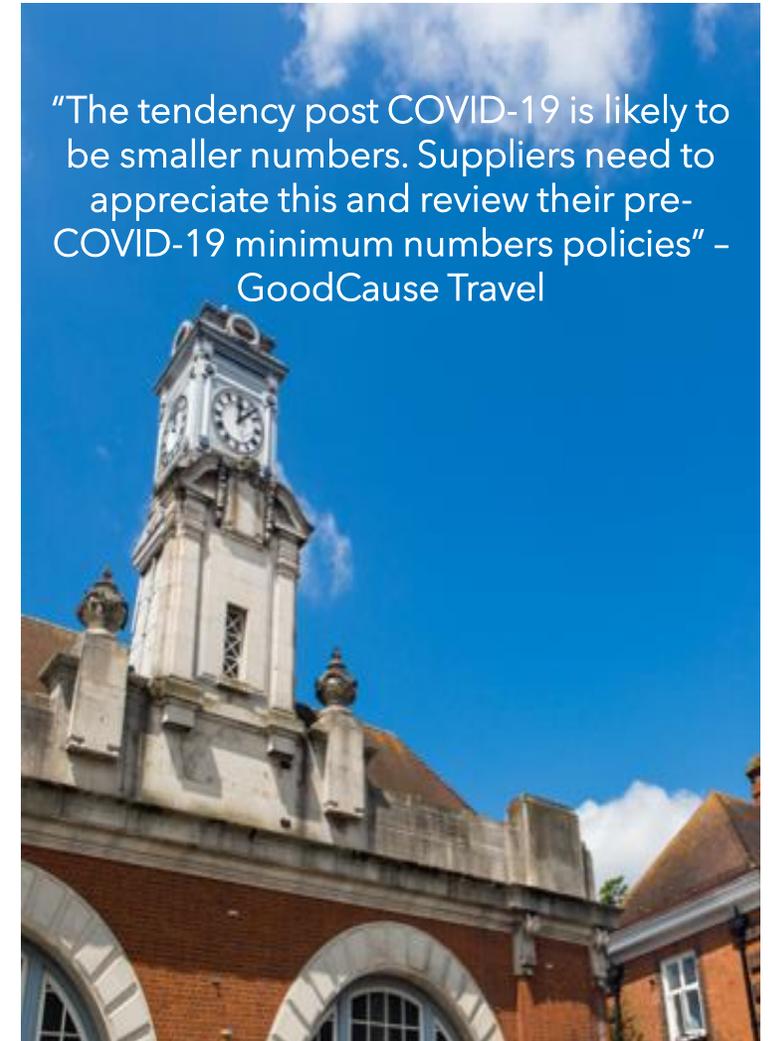
Buyers were then asked if they felt there would be any barriers taking these concepts or experience to market, alongside any other weaknesses or concerns they might have.

- ✓ Feedback shows that several buyers felt that Kent, as a destination for business events is not as well promoted as other destinations and may lack a clearer sense of identity from other destinations. However, this activity will help to aid raise their awareness of Kent as a potential destination to buyers.
- ✓ Particular buyers expressed concerns regarding accessibility, in terms of getting to the destination from other parts of the UK, in addition to traffic issues getting into the county itself.
- ✓ Barriers around bed stock, hotel provision and level of service in local venues for corporate clients were also raised, with the need for suppliers to ensure this meets London standards.
- ✓ Several buyers also raised potential challenges surrounding concerns that some suppliers may lack the operational experience needed to target and cater for the high end international business events clients as well as a willingness to work with agents.
- ✓ Some buyers flagged that their minimum group size would be 20 people, and therefore some of the unique activities wouldn't be suitable.
- ✓ Buyers stressed the need for varied and exciting suppliers, that can work collectively to offer a 3-4 day programme.

What flexibility do you require with minimum numbers when booking a product or experience?

In terms of flexibility required with minimum numbers for an experience, due to the varied nature of events and clientele, responses on this ranged.

- ✓ For some, they felt that some experiences presented in the fam trip only catered for smaller groups, with the need to have the option to cater for larger groups if needed.
- ✓ Another buyer then expressed that keeping flexibility at the forefront is key and to keep minimum number as low as possible to facilitate this. With another stating that due to COVID-19, the tendency for their client base is likely to be smaller numbers and therefore suppliers will need to ensure that their pre-COVID minimum numbers are reviewed.
- ✓ One particular buyer also felt that cancellation policies should also be carefully considered by providers, as signing contracts of late has been difficult due to ongoing changes and uncertainty around restrictions.



“The tendency post COVID-19 is likely to be smaller numbers. Suppliers need to appreciate this and review their pre-COVID-19 minimum numbers policies” – GoodCause Travel

What improvements could make this product more competitive?

The following areas emerged from feedback regarding how experience providers can improve their offering to ensure they remain competitive.

1



Build residential & conference packages with local hotels and venues

2



Clear marketing strategy for corporate clients

3



Good visuals specific to the corporate market, to showcase offering to clients

4



Clear and cohesive destination messaging

5



Capitalise on demand for retreats and mindfulness

Enquiry handling - How important is this stage when sending a proposal to a client and what timeframe would you expect and need from a product or experience to be included?

In order ensure experience providers remain competitive and attractive to the business events market, it is vital that businesses work in partnership with buyers and provide them with the information and collateral needed to be included in a proposal being sent to clients.

- ✓ A clear identity and visuals from experience providers are key at the stage of proposal creation as opposed to details. This should include good quality imagery, video content, timing of itinerary and options available to upgrade the experience.
- ✓ Overall, feedback shows that efficiency is essential, with many working to a 24-hour turnaround for client enquiries and would therefore require timely responses and information from providers to meet this demand.
- ✓ Buyers would also require information on rates and availability from suppliers.



Packaging Options

What other activities within the themes could you see working well together to form an itinerary, for example – would you pair a wine tasting experience with a creative/craft experience such as photography or an active experience like golf?

Feedback demonstrates that buyers did feel that various activities within the themes could work well together to form an itinerary. It was also highlighted that pairing experiences may be dependant on client needs and therefore for some buyers packaging options would be something that they would look to curate themselves. As seen below, overall wine tasting and dining options emerged most strongly, with the option to combine these with luxury accommodation options and active pursuits.



Active experiences + Indoor activities such as wine tasting or comedy




Wine tasting and Foraging + Accommodation




Golf + Creative experiences + Unusual dinner venues




Wine tasting + Luxury Glamping experiences or retreats




Fine dining & wine tasting at vineyards + Immersive theatre experiences




Foraging + Bike tours



Attracting Business to Kent

Lastly, buyers were asked a series of questions relating to the likelihood of these product concepts and experiences increasing business to Kent, in addition to providing viable choices for existing events planners and provoke interest from clients.

Do you think these products will help you to:

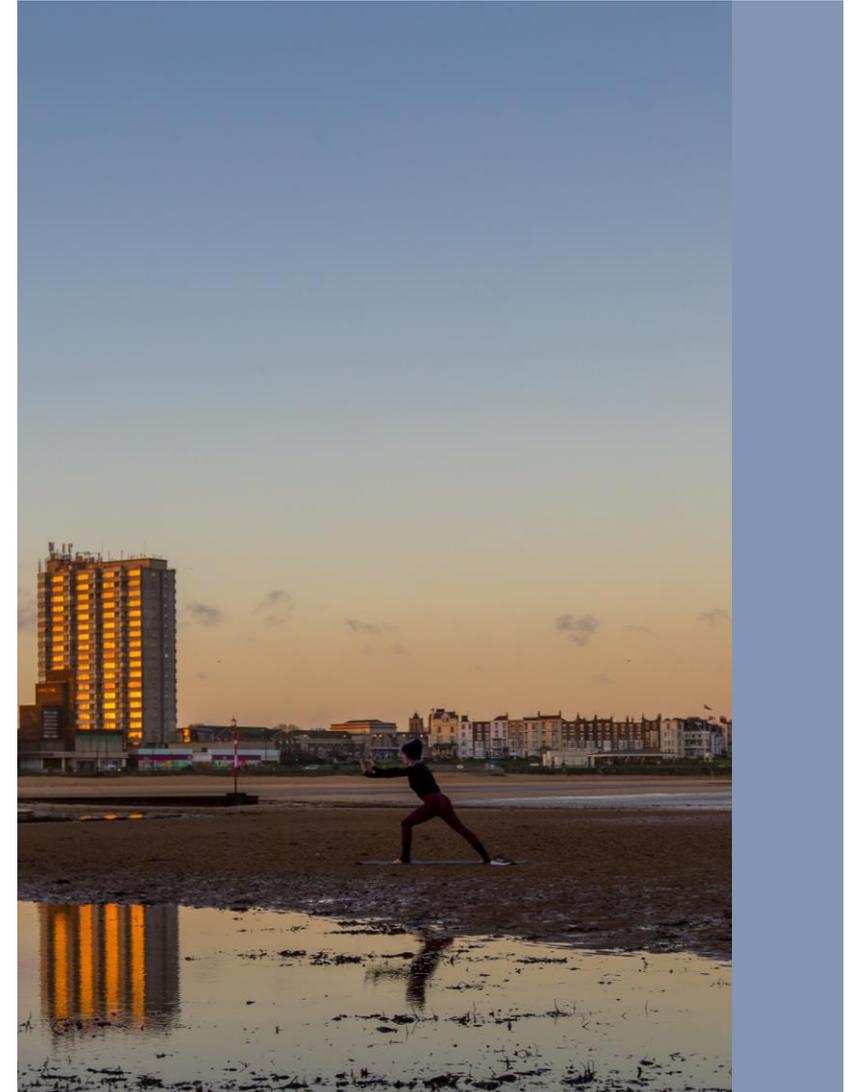
- Increase enquiry levels to Kent?
 - Attract event business to Kent over London?
 - Provide additional choices for existing event planners?
- ✓ Overall, the majority did agree with each of the above questions, indicating that there is certainly an opportunity for Kent providers to tap into this market. However, they will need to ensure that experiences can meet the requirements needed in order to work effectively with the corporate and business incentive market. Feedback also shows that it will provide additional choices for existing event planners and allow the county to become more competitive and attract event business to Kent over the capital.
- ✓ Previous findings from the MICE EXPERIENCE survey, found that only 27% of organisations had previously included a Kent product or experience in itineraries or programmes. Consequently, event buyers were then asked if they can see this percentage increasing now that they have more product knowledge and if they feel their clients will be interested in Kent.
- ✓ All in all, findings show that buyers did feel that Kent would hold appeal to their clientele and that experiential products and concepts will certainly help to increase the number of Kent based providers being included in itineraries. The county's proximity to London also emerged strongly here once again, as an easy to reach destination from London for events or as away day activities and add-ons to business trips to London from abroad.



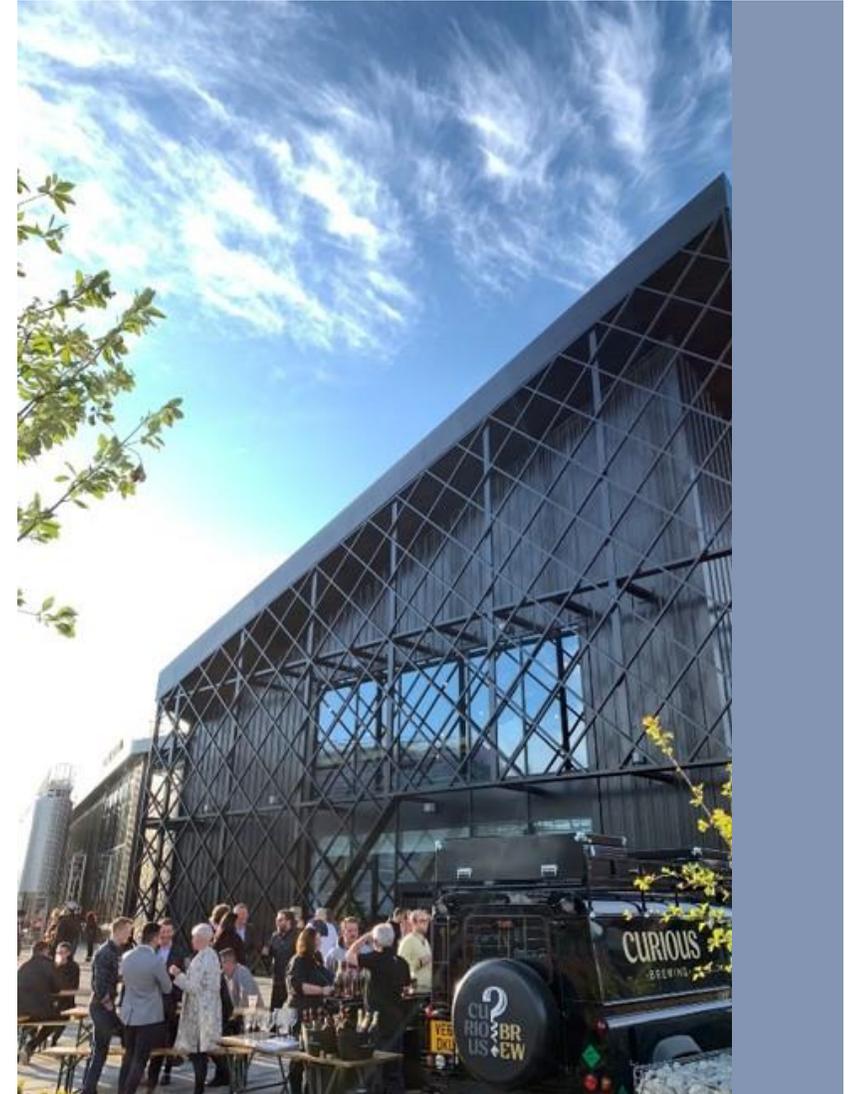


Business Events: Key Findings & Recommendations

- ✓ Providers should emphasise the competitive strengths Kent has in terms of rural locations and its proximity and connectivity to London and the continent, as people are increasingly moving away from urban destinations following the pandemic.
- ✓ Buyers felt that experiences should capture local authenticity and local people, while being immersive. Although providers need to ensure that they have a clear sense of identity and message.
- ✓ Businesses should also look to collaborate with other providers, as buyers favoured the idea of bringing together smaller local businesses with more well-known brands.
- ✓ Certain barriers highlighted included concerns around accessibility from other parts of the UK, demonstrating that there is a need to highlight ways in which visitors can reach the county with ease, such as information on travel times and modes of transport that can be used.
- ✓ The need for quality hotel provision and a high level of service were also raised as a potential barriers, with corporate clients desiring venues that meet London standards.
- ✓ In terms of flexibility, feedback shows that this should be at the forefront of experiences, with some expressing the need for larger groups, while others stated that due to COVID-19, demand may move more towards smaller groups, and therefore suppliers should ensure they review their pre-COVID minimum numbers policy.
- ✓ Experience providers should also ensure they have a clear marketing strategy and offering specifically for corporate clients, alongside using a clear and cohesive destination message.



- ✓ To appeal to the business events market, providers can also build relationships with local hotels and venues to build residential and conference packages.
- ✓ Many businesses plan their incentive trips to support the wellbeing of their staff and clients, and they may also have corporate social responsibility (CSR) targets to achieve. In support of this, feedback also highlighted the opportunity to capitalise on the demand for wellbeing and mindfulness, therefore this can be used as a focal point to promote experiences to this market
- ✓ Overall, feedback indicates that there is a real need for experience providers to be efficient and timely with their responses to enquiries, with the majority of buyers working to a 24-hour turn around for proposals to be sent to the client. To ensure this is adequately fulfilled, experience providers should share information on rates and availability, alongside good quality imagery and video content and upgrade options available.
- ✓ Looking at packaging options with other activities, buyers felt that various themes would work well together to form an itinerary, although this would be heavily dependent on client needs. Packing experiences such as wine tasting and dining options, with luxury accommodation and active pursuits such as bike tours, emerged strongly.
- ✓ Kent's proximity to London offers providers an opportunity to utilise this and promote themselves as an easy to reach destination from the capital for events or away day activities, or perhaps as an add-on to business trips to London from abroad and other parts of the UK.
- ✓ Overall, buyers felt that development of these types of experiential products and concepts will certainly help to increase the number of Kent-based providers that are included in itineraries. However, it will be essential that providers can meet the requirements needed in order to work effectively with the corporate and business incentive market, and ensure that their offering remains competitive and attractive.



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