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To: Growth, Economic Development and Communities Cabinet Committee – 9 May 2019

Subject: The EXPERIENCE project

Key Decision No

Classification: Unrestricted

Past Pathway of Paper: None

Future Pathway of Paper: None

Electoral Division: Countywide

Summary

The EXPERIENCE project involves 14 partners across the UK and France, including Visit Kent and the Kent Downs AONB Partnership, and provides the opportunity to drive prosperity and create jobs in the Kent and Medway visitor economy.

Recommendation: The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the report.

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The visitor economy creates jobs and drives prosperity, and in 2017 it was worth some £3.87bn to the Kent and Medway economy and supported over 76,000 jobs¹. However, while the county continues to be one of the most popular visitor destinations in the UK, as with many other parts of the country it experiences concentrations of visitor flows to a limited number of destinations over a restricted summer season. This is commonly known as tourism seasonality.
- 1.2 'Experiential tourism' is a relatively recent and growing trend in the modern tourism industry, where there is increasing demand for high-quality and personalised ways to enjoy destinations. There is substantial evidence that tourists increasingly want active participation in daily life and involvement in host cultures and environments,

¹ Economic Impact of Tourism in Kent – 2017; Report commissioned by Visit Kent and produced by Destination Research (November 2018).

experiencing local foods, social events and arts to create vivid and lasting memories².

2. What is the EXPERIENCE project?

2.1 The EXPERIENCE project aims to provide the tools and infrastructure that project partners need to capitalise on the emerging trend for personalised and local tourism experiences which provide the all-important reasons to visit at any time of the year – this is described as “experiential tourism” and is seen by many tourism promotion and destination management organisations in the UK as an effective means of addressing the problems of seasonality in the visitor economy. Therefore, the EXPERIENCE project aims to:

- Extend the tourism season and increase visitor spend by focusing growth on overnight stays and high value tourism, increasing jobs and economic impact; and
- Improve local tourism transport and links to improve the sustainability of tourism and reduce the social and environmental impacts by better managing the dispersal of visitors.

2.2 EXPERIENCE will be a four-year project (1 September 2019 to 30 August 2023), potentially worth some €23.3 million and involving 14 partners across the UK and northern France. The project, the application for which was formally submitted to the INTERREG Channel Programme during the first week of April, is being led by Norfolk County Council as the accountable body. In Kent, Visit Kent and the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) Partnership are core partners. In northern France, partners include tourism agencies in Pas de Calais, Somme and Seine Maritime, all of whom already have close working relationships with Visit Kent.

2.3 The table below shows which partners are involved, with their respective project costs and funding:

Partner	INTERREG contribution (€)	Partner contribution (€)	Total funding (€)
Norfolk County Council (UK)	3,994,040	1,794,424	5,788,463
Kent Downs AONB (UK)	2,140,653	961,743	3,102,396
Visit Kent (UK)	1,160,453	521,363	1,681,816
Pas de Calais Tourisme (FR)	541,633	243,342	784,975
Department du Pas de Calais (FR)	1,390,782	624,844	2,015,626
ARC Compiègne (FR)	1,253,647	563,233	1,816,880
Cotes d’Armor Destination (FR)	503,514	226,216	729,730
Baie de Morlaix Tourisme	126,339	56,761	183,100

² Trekksoft Travel Trend Report, 2018.

(FR)			
University of Surrey (UK)	367,966	165,318	533,283
Cornwall Council (UK)	1,923,060	863,983	2,787,043
Cycling UK (UK)	740,381	332,635	1,073,016
Office National Des Forets	446,759	200,718	647,477
(FR)			
Morlaix Communauté (FR)	701,730	315,270	1,017,000
Brittany Ferries (FR)	776,512	348,868	1,125,380
	16,067,469	7,218,718	23,286,186

2.4 As project lead for the EXPERIENCE project, Norfolk County Council will be submitting a large-scale project application for the final round of European funding under the INTERREG Channel Programme. Although the Programme will close in December 2020, projects approved before that date will be able to draw down INTERREG funding (at a rate of 69%) until early 2023.

3. How will the EXPERIENCE project benefit Kent?

3.1 With two Kent partners, Visit Kent and Kent Downs AONB, having been directly involved in shaping the project, at the countywide level it is expected that EXPERIENCE will:

- Support continued cross Channel partnership working post-Brexit;
- Be the final opportunity to benefit from European funding and provide a transition period into potentially new funding frameworks that will be made available through the UK government;
- Provide opportunities for collaborative working between Visit Kent and the Kent Downs AONB Partnership to deliver shared objectives for the county;
- Provide the resources and training to help small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) in the visitor economy build capacity to become more competitive;
- Create and develop stronger links between tourism, cultural and heritage attractions;
- Spread and increase the economic benefits of tourism across the year by developing new products and targeted activities; and
- Deliver a more even distribution of tourists to create more year-round jobs, reduce demands on infrastructure, improve residents' quality of life, and limit overcrowding, pollution and environmental impact.

3.2 The Kent Downs AONB unit will be working closely with the North Downs Way National Trail, KCC's Public Rights of Way team, Explore Kent, Country Parks and Countryside Management Partnerships to deliver rural tourism improvements across Kent and Medway. The AONB unit will also work with Visit Kent to coordinate the delivery of walking, cycling and equine itineraries, route improvements, infrastructure improvements, business development, international and European targeted tourism products, rail to trail itineraries and smart wi-fi tourism infrastructure, as well as events, festivals and promotional campaigns.

3.3 There are five core work packages for the project, which will deliver the following target outcomes in Kent and Medway over a four-year period between September

2019 and August 2023:

Work Package 1: Networks and New Skills

This will involve increasing collaboration and learning through digital and physical SME networks, business support and skills programmes:

- Connect 100+ SMEs with experiential tourism industry leaders in learning and delivery networks;
- 1 detailed skills audit based on the needs of tourism businesses;
- 30 Sector specific training materials and resources covering skills gaps;
- 1 bilingual digital boot-camp providing online access to capacity-building training materials; and
- Train 200+ SMEs to develop off-season marketing and new products to meet visitor expectations.

Work Package 2: New Products and Services

This aims to develop high quality experiential products, new events and content to target specific high-value markets and business events across the county:

- 120+ new off-season tourism products and services developed;
- Products curated into 25+ new thematic and market/audience specific packages;
- 20+ products adapted for the business events market;
- 1 new welcome/ambassador pilot scheme developed for local businesses and frontline staff (to support Open 2020 delivery with wider roll-out);
- 1 business hub developed to encourage the development of 30+ events and themed activity around major anniversaries and events in 2020 at partner businesses to spread the benefit throughout the year; and
- Event delivery for enhanced destination presence at the Open 2020.

Work Package 3: Missing Links – Infrastructure and Information

This will deliver improvements to remove the barriers to experiential tourism in the off-season. The Kent Downs AONB Unit will coordinate this work package and focus delivery on:

- Improved physical infrastructure – signage, bicycle racks, wi-fi, interpretation, sculpture, visitor furniture;
- Off season adaptation – shelters, surface upgrades for walking, cycling and equine trails for winter use, disability access and changing spaces; and
- Enhanced visitor services from businesses – welcome walkers, baggage transfer services, improved and diversified accommodation provision, business active tourism networks.

Work Package 4: Digital Innovation – Technology and Marketing

This will deliver targeted trade and consumer campaigns to increase visits from high-value audiences during off-peak periods, building on existing digital platforms and a visitor first strategy:

- 25+ curated products market-tested with travel trade and consumer focus

groups;

- New photography and video content of 120+ new experiential products;
- 1 hub developed for businesses to access shared content;
- 3 targeted consumer campaigns developed featuring new experiential products;
- 6 specific trade events attended and 50+ key buyer relationships formed;
- 1 consumer-facing inspirational platform developed, containing a range of different curated content for each of the partners;
- 27 travel trade events attended and new experiential products distributed for sale in key markets; and
- Training tools developed and 40+ key travel trade contacts trained.

Work Package 5: Economy, Efficiency and Effectiveness

This will involve developing forecasting and monitoring tools to measure the economic, social and environmental impact of the project to ensure maximum contribution to sustainable growth, job creation and competitiveness.

4. Financial implications

- 4.1 The expected total cost of the EXPERIENCE project is some €23.3 million of which, if it is approved by the INTERREG Channel Joint Secretariat (a decision is expected in the summer), 69% would be funded by INTERREG and the remainder (31%) by the 14 UK and French partners involved. The table in paragraph 2.3 above sets out the respective contributions by partners and the INTERREG Channel Programme.
- 4.2 The budget for the Kent Downs AONB involvement in the four-year project is €3.1 million. This comprises €961,743 in cash and in-kind contributions from local Kent partners, AONB-led projects and financial contributions from Kent district councils (Ashford, Canterbury, Dover and Gravesham), and €2,140,653 from the INTERREG Channel Programme. Medway Council will decide whether to provide financial support for this element of the project should the INTERREG project be approved.
- 4.3 In addition to providing in-kind match funding through its ongoing support for local Kent partners involved in the project (including Kent Downs AONB, Explore Kent, Kent Country Parks and North Downs Way), the KCC Environment, Planning and Enforcement (EPE) Division will provide a revenue contribution of €32,729. This will be subject to approval of the INTERREG bid, and a Member decision in July 2019.
- 4.4 Visit Kent has confirmed that its budget for its involvement in the four-year project will be €1.68 million. This includes cash match funding of €521,363 from Kent and Medway partners. This comprises €224,750 from KCC (Economic Development), €124,000 from Medway Council and €24,659 from each of seven Kent district councils (Gravesham, Tunbridge Wells, Thanet, Folkestone and Hythe, Dover, Ashford and Canterbury). The remaining funding of €1,160,453 will be from the INTERREG Channel Programme.
- 4.5 The table below summarises the range of cash and in-kind support for the Kent

Downs AONB and Visit Kent elements of the EXPERIENCE project:

Match funding source	Kent Downs AONB	Visit Kent	Total (€)
Ashford BC	32,727 ¹	24,659 ¹	57,386
Canterbury CC	32,727 ¹	24,659 ¹	57,386
Dover DC	32,727 ¹	24,659 ¹	57,386
Folkestone and Hythe DC		24,659 ¹	24,659
Gravesham BC	32,727 ¹	24,659 ¹	57,386
Thanet DC		24,659 ¹	24,659
Tunbridge Wells BC		24,659 ¹	24,659
Medway Council		124,000 ¹	124,000
KCC (ED)		224,750 ¹	224,000
KCC (EPE)	32,727 ¹		32,727
Kent Downs AONB	252,041 ²		
North Downs Way	267,424 ²		
Other local partners ³	278,643 ²		
	<u>961,743</u>	<u>521,363</u>	<u>1,483,106</u>
INTERREG	<u>2,140,653¹</u>	<u>1,160,453¹</u>	<u>3,301,106</u>
Total	3,102,396	1,681,816	2,784,212

(1) Cash match funding; (2) In-kind support; (3) Includes Explore Kent, Public Rights of Way Team, Kent Country Parks

4.6 The €3.1m budget for the Kent AONB Partnership's involvement in the project will be managed by KCC and claimed from the INTERREG Channel Programme retrospectively every six months according to the project spending plan. Norfolk County Council, as lead partner and accountable body for the EXPERIENCE project, is responsible for ensuring that expenditure is in accordance with the spending plan. KCC will be responsible for ensuring that spend by the Kent Downs AONB Partnership is in accordance with the spending plan and with EU procurement rules.

4.7 The €1.68m budget for Visit Kent's involvement in the project will be managed by Visit Kent, which will be responsible both for ensuring that spend is in accordance with the spending plan and with EU procurement and for submitting claims to the INTERREG Channel Programme.

5. Legal implications

5.1 It is not expected that there would be any legal implications for the County Council arising from its financial and in-kind support for Visit Kent and Kent Downs AONB Partnership as core partners in the project.

6. Equalities implications

6.1 If the EXPERIENCE project application is approved by the INTERREG Channel Programme, the grant funding agreement that would be drawn up between Norfolk County Council, as lead partner, and the INTERREG Programme Joint Secretariat would contain provisions for ensuring that EU equalities and diversity regulations

are adhered to my partner organisations. This would include Visit Kent and the Kent Downs AONB Partnership, both of whom have their own equalities and diversity standards which are consistent with EU regulations and those of the County Council.

- 6.2 To date, neither Visit Kent nor Kent Downs AONB Partnership have undertaken a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) relating to their participation in the EXPERIENCE project. Both organisations would be expected to provide DPIAs as a condition of County Council in-kind and financial support, subject to the project being approved for INTERREG funding.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The EXPERIENCE project provides an exciting opportunity to drive prosperity and create employment in the county's visitor economy. It is intended to report annually on project progress to this Cabinet Committee.

8. Recommendation

The Cabinet Committee is asked to note the report.

Background Documents - None

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