

**Agenda Item No:** 11  
**Report To:** Cabinet  
**Date of Meeting:** 24 June 2021  
**Report Title:** Digital Transformation of Visitor Information Services at the Ashford Gateway  
**Report Author & Job Title:** Sarah Barber, Tourism and Heritage Manager  
**Portfolio Holder** Cllr. Matthew Forest  
**Portfolio Holder for:**



**Summary:**

To explain how visitor information is effectively using the digital transformation agenda, allowing resources to be moved away from needing an officer located at the Visitor Information Centre (VIC) in Ashford Gateway to support other visitor economy marketing and development opportunities.  
Council officers will work with KCC to agree future alternative use of the space and possible early release of the Partnership Agreement which expires in 2026.

**Key Decision:** YES

**Significantly Affected Wards:** All

**Recommendations:** **The Cabinet is recommended to:-**

- I. To endorse the digital transformation of the visitor information service and impact on requiring a staffed visitor information centre (VIC) at the Ashford Gateway.**
- II. Delegate the Head of Corporate Property to agree future alternative use of the space and where possible early release of the Partnership Agreement which expires in 2026.**

**Policy Overview:** The importance of the visitor economy in supporting future economic growth and development in the borough is highlighted in the Council's 'Recovery Plan', the 'Ashford Vision' and most recently in the emerging 'Corporate Plan'. The digital transformation agenda underpins and cuts across all three areas of the Corporate Plan – Green Pioneer, Caring Ashford and Targeted Growth.

**Financial Implications:** The Council contributes towards the shared costs of the Gateway building in accordance with the Partnership Agreement with KCC from June 2011. This agreement runs

until 2026 and the Council's favoured position would be to be released from this agreement with minimum or no financial penalties. Negotiating and gaining favourable release from the current Partnership Agreement would support the Medium Term Financial Plan in terms of efficiency savings.

**Legal Implications:** Under the Partnership Agreement KCC grants to ABC licence to use the Gateway Area for a minimum period of 15 years from Practical Completion (17 July 2011) – subject to a termination clause in the agreement.

**Equalities Impact Assessment:** See Attached

**Data Protection Impact Assessment:** None -There are not believed to be any data protection impacts.

**Risk Assessment (Risk Appetite Statement):** There is little or no risk in closing face to face visitor services at the Ashford Gateway as visitor information services can still be delivered to a high level, but in a digital way, which currently meets the increasing need and trend for consumers to receive information digitally post Covid. The risk comes from a financial perspective if KCC were not to agree to favourable terms for early termination of the Partnership Agreement. There are no staffing implications.

**Sustainability Implications:** Minimal – The digital transformation of the tourist information service would support the sustainable agenda in that fewer customer journeys to the Gateway would be made and tourism guides and brochures would be available on line rather than in printed format.

**Other Material Implications:** None

**Exempt from Publication:** **NO**

**Background Papers:** **None**

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## Report Title: Digital Transformation of Visitor Information Services at the Ashford Gateway

### Introduction and Background

1. The Visitor Information Centre (VIC) at the Ashford Gateway has seen a steady decline in visitor numbers and in particular a decline in face to face visitors using the service over the past couple of years. Customer Services moved back to the Civic Centre in 2016 meaning the only significant generator of footfall in the Gateway is the library service (which also closes half days on Wednesdays) and adult education services.
2. However, the reduction in face to face interactions is mostly due to more and more visitors wishing to receive information for planning visits, and finding information while they are in their destination, from tourism websites and social media platforms. Given this digital engagement, the Council rebranded tourism information as 'Experience Ashford and Tenterden', including its website and social media channels.
3. Although Covid has delayed certain trends, digital consumption has increased dramatically in the past year with consumers turning to digital alternatives as opposed to physical experiences to access information (research conducted by Mintel published by City/Nation/Place 2020). The current tourism staff have been able to respond and embrace the shift to digital delivery and have a robust, yet inspirational website and social media platforms already in place.
4. It has also become increasingly evident that the Gateway location attracts residents with non-related tourism enquiries, rather than visitors with tourism enquiries, and that a VIC is better suited to a location that attracts a high footfall of visitors such as a visitor attraction or similar.
5. In 2012 - 2013 local and UK tourism and non- tourism related face to face enquiries at the VIC totalled 7,458, this reduced to 6,622 in 2014 - 2015. After ABC customer services left the Gateway in 2016, this figure had reduced further to 3,968 enquiries in 2017- 2018. There was a substantial one off increase in 2018 - 2019 due to the Fields of Battle, Lands of Peace exhibition in adjacent Memorial Gardens and the Snowdogs Trail when the VIC was the location for the public to redeem their Snowdog rewards and purchase merchandise. The number of enquiries in 2019-2020 reduced further to 3,303.
6. At the same time social media activity and engagement on the Experience Ashford and Tenterden platforms has increased significantly with Facebook seeing a 109% increase in followers from April 2019 to April 2021, Instagram a 90% increase and Twitter a 5.6% increase over the same period.
7. Since 2014 web users, sessions and page views have been increasing steadily, reaching 40,107 users in 2017, but a change in web provider and a migration to a new platform meant that the figures reduced in 2018, but they

are now recovering and from April 2019 to March 2020, there was a 5.6% increase in web users, although during the period April 2020 to March 2021, this figure fell by a similar amount due to the effects of the Covid pandemic as tourism and hospitality businesses and event venues were forced to close during three lengthy lockdowns and visitors and residents had fewer reasons to visit the website. Historically the site also benefits from a low bounce rate which means visitors are staying and looking at content on various pages once they are on the website.

8. Given this digital shift and the lack of in person tourism visits to the Ashford Gateway, it is proposed that the VIC be closed allowing existing resources to focus on delivering visitor information services digitally and supporting new tourism marketing, business and development opportunities such as further embedding the Experience Ashford and Tenterden branding and the Visit Kent and Kent Downs AONB Interreg Experience Programme. Enquiries, of course, will still be managed by phone and email as required.

### **Partnership Agreement**

9. The Council currently contributes towards the shared costs of the Gateway building in accordance with the Partnership Agreement with Kent County Council from June 2011. Initially, this related to the large area on the ground floor occupied by ABC customer services and the very small space on the top floor occupied by the VIC, However, when Customer Services relocated back to the Civic Centre in 2016, the Council was still required to contribute costs as per the Partnership Agreement and so ABC moved the VIC in the larger and more high profile ground floor space in 2018.
10. Officers have engaged with KCC and will continue to work with them either to gain release from the current Partnership Agreement and /or agree a better future use of the space until the Agreement expires in 2026.
11. Other ABC uses for the space up until 2026 could be an unstaffed visitor or general Council information point, use as a public consultation area (for instance town centre consultations) or use by another service or like-minded partner or community group. An idea to locate a community/social 'loan library' has also been mooted, where for instance members of the public could borrow items like a sewing machine.

### **Equalities Impact Assessment**

12. Members are referred to the attached Assessment which reveals that no likely adverse impact on the community from closing the VIC is anticipated. In addition when the VIC ceased opening on Saturdays and Wednesdays there was no negative public feedback. While the face to face service will close, visitors and residents will still be able to contact the tourism service by phone, email and letter.

## **Consultation Planned or Undertaken**

13. The Leader of the Council, The Portfolio Holder and Deputy for Culture, Tourism and Leisure and the Chief Executive have been consulted and are in agreement with the proposal.
14. Members of the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association have also been engaged on this proposal and understand the digital shift and refocus of existing resources is beneficial to ensure customer information is relevant, dynamic and up to date.

## **Other Options Considered**

15. At some point in the future, a case could be made to create a new VIC in a new location linked to a new development, attraction or project that has the benefit of significant visitor footfall. If this were to be the case, then the provision of a staffed, physical VIC could be revisited.

## **Reasons for Supporting Option Recommended**

16. To ensure that the visitor information service is able to align itself with current and anticipated future trends for providing information digitally for visitors planning visits and for those finding information whilst they are at their destination.
17. To enable officers to work with KCC to find the best solution and outcome for the Council regarding the Partnership Agreement and /or use of the space at the Gateway.

## **Next Steps in Process**

18. Once Cabinet has agreed the way forward to:
  - a) Permanently close the face to face VIC service and to focus work on the digital transformation and delivery of the tourism information service to further promote and develop Ashford's visitor economy.
  - b) Work with KCC on gaining release from the Partnership Agreement and /or better use of the space at the VIC.

## **Portfolio Holder's Views**

19. Cllr Matthew Forest - "The tourism industry has been quick to recognise the value of digital promotion and modern engagement platforms. In line with the other significant digital transformations taking place across the Council, it's right that we follow the industry's lead and embrace these methods of promoting our vital tourism sector."

## **Contact and Email**

20. Sarah Barber - [sarah.barber@ashford.gov.uk](mailto:sarah.barber@ashford.gov.uk)

# Equality Impact Assessment

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1. An Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is a document that summarises how the council has had due regard to the public sector equality duty (Equality Act 2010) in its decision-making. Although there is no legal duty to produce an EIA, the Council must have **due regard** to the equality duty and an EIA is recognised as the best method of fulfilling that duty. It can assist the Council in making a judgment as to whether a policy or other decision will have unintended negative consequences for certain people and help maximise the positive impacts of policy change. An EIA can lead to one of four consequences:
  - (a) No major change – the policy or other decision is robust with no potential for discrimination or adverse impact. Opportunities to promote equality have been taken;
  - (b) Adjust the policy or decision to remove barriers or better promote equality as identified in the EIA;
  - (c) Continue the policy – if the EIA identifies potential for adverse impact, set out compelling justification for continuing;
  - (d) Stop and remove the policy where actual or potential unlawful discrimination is identified.

## Public sector equality duty

2. The Equality Act 2010 places a duty on the council, when exercising public functions, to have due regard to the need to:
  - (a) Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation;
  - (b) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
  - (c) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it (ie tackling prejudice and promoting understanding between people from different groups).
3. These are known as the three aims of the general equality duty.

## Protected characteristics

4. The Equality Act 2010 sets out nine protected characteristics for the purpose of the equality duty:
  - Age
  - Disability
  - Gender reassignment
  - Marriage and civil partnership\*
  - Pregnancy and maternity
  - Race
  - Religion or belief
  - Sex
  - Sexual orientation

\*For marriage and civil partnership, only the first aim of the duty applies in relation to employment.

## Due regard

5. Having 'due regard' is about using good equality information and analysis at the right time as part of decision-making procedures.
6. To 'have due regard' means that in making decisions and in its other day-to-day activities the council must consciously consider the need to do the things set out in the general equality duty: eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. This can involve:
  - removing or minimising disadvantages suffered by people due to their protected characteristics.
  - taking steps to meet the needs of people with certain protected characteristics when these are different from the needs of other people.
  - encouraging people with certain protected characteristics to participate in public life or in other activities where it is disproportionately low.
7. How much regard is 'due' will depend on the circumstances The greater the potential impact, the higher the regard required by the duty. Examples of functions and decisions likely to engage the duty include: policy decisions, budget decisions, public appointments, service provision, statutory discretion, decisions on individuals, employing staff and procurement of goods and services.
8. In terms of timing:
  - Having 'due regard' should be considered at the inception of any decision or proposed policy or service development or change.
  - Due regard should be considered throughout development of a decision. Notes shall be taken and kept on file as to how due regard has been had to the equality duty in research, meetings, project teams, consultations etc.
  - The completion of the EIA is a way of effectively summarising this and it should inform final decision-making.

### **Armed Forces Community**

9. As part of the council's commitment to the Armed Forces Community made through the signing of the Armed Forces Covenant the council's Cabinet agreed in November 2017 that potential impacts on the Armed Forces Community should be considered as part of the Equality Impact Assessment process.
10. Accordingly, due regard should also be had throughout the decision making process to potential impacts on the groups covered by the Armed Forces Covenant:
  - Current serving members of the Armed Forces (both Regular and Reserve)
  - Former serving members of the Armed Forces (both Regular and Reserve)
  - The families of current and former Armed Forces personnel.

### **Case law principles**

11. A number of principles have been established by the courts in relation to the equality duty and due regard:
  - Decision-makers in public authorities must be aware of their duty to have 'due regard' to the equality duty and so EIA's must be attached to any relevant committee reports.
  - Due regard is fulfilled before and at the time a particular policy is under consideration as well as at the time a decision is taken. Due regard involves a conscious approach and state of mind.

- A public authority cannot satisfy the duty by justifying a decision after it has been taken.
- The duty must be exercised in substance, with rigour and with an open mind in such a way that it influences the final decision.
- The duty is a non-delegable one. The duty will always remain the responsibility of the public authority.
- The duty is a continuing one so that it needs to be considered not only when a policy, for example, is being developed and agreed but also when it is implemented.
- It is good practice for those exercising public functions to keep an accurate record showing that they have actually considered the general duty and pondered relevant questions. Proper record keeping encourages transparency and will discipline those carrying out the relevant function to undertake the duty conscientiously.
- A public authority will need to consider whether it has sufficient information to assess the effects of the policy, or the way a function is being carried out, on the aims set out in the general equality duty.
- A public authority cannot avoid complying with the duty by claiming that it does not have enough resources to do so.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced helpful guidance on “Meeting the Equality Duty in Policy and Decision-Making” (October 2014). It is available on the following link and report authors should read and follow this when developing or reporting on proposals for policy or service development or change and other decisions likely to engage the equality duty. [Equality Duty in decision-making](#)

<b>Lead officer:</b>	Christina Fuller, Head of Culture, Tourism & Leisure Sarah Barber, Tourism & Heritage Manager
<b>Decision maker:</b>	Cabinet
<b>Decision:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy, project, service, contract</li> <li>• Review, change, new, stop</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service - Digital transformation of the Visitor Information Service which supports the Council’s Recovery Plan, the Ashford Vision and emerging Corporate Plan and underpins the Council’s digital transformation agenda.</li> <li>• Proposal to stop the face to face service and move to a digital delivery</li> </ul>
<b>Date of decision:</b> The date when the final decision is made. The EIA must be complete before this point and inform the final decision.	24 June 2021



<p><b>Summary of the proposed decision:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Aims and objectives</li> <li>• Key actions</li> <li>• Expected outcomes</li> <li>• Who will be affected and how?</li> <li>• How many people will be affected?</li> </ul>	<p>Move the delivery of the Ashford visitor information services online and close the face to face service provided at the Ashford Gateway.</p> <p>The digital visitor information service will freely be available to all visitors, residents and tourism and hospitality businesses in the Borough.</p>
<p><b>Information and research:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outline the information and research that has informed the decision.</li> <li>• Include sources and key findings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Over the past couple of years, the VIC at the Ashford Gateway has seen a steady decline in visitor numbers and in particular a decline in face to face visitors as more visitors wish to receive information for planning visits (&amp; find information when they are in their destination) from tourism websites and social media. At the same time the opening times of the Visitor Information Centre has reduced from 6 to 4 days a week.</li> <li>• While tourism face to face interactions have reduced, digital engagement visits to the tourism website, and social media have increased significantly.</li> <li>• The current staff have been able to respond and embrace the shift to digital delivery and have a robust, yet inspirational website and social media platforms already in place</li> <li>• Although Covid 19 has delayed certain trends, it has increased others. Research conducted by Mintel (published by City/Nation /Place, 2020) shows that digital consumption has increased dramatically in the past year, with consumers turning to digital alternatives as opposed to physical experiences. It raises the importance of staying in touch with digital trends and for organisations to have the ability to adapt and keep in contact with consumers and this move to digital delivery ensures this is the case.</li> <li>• The above is equally pertinent to tourism businesses as it is to visitors and residents</li> </ul>
<p><b>Consultation:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What specific consultation has occurred on this decision?</li> <li>• What were the results of the consultation?</li> <li>• Did the consultation analysis reveal any difference in views across the protected characteristics?</li> <li>• What conclusions can be drawn from the analysis on</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consultation has taken place with the Leader of the Council Cllr Gerry Clarkson, the Portfolio Cllr Matthew Forest and Deputy Cllr Jenny Webb for Culture, Tourism and Leisure and also with the Chief Executive Tracey Kerly who were all supportive.</li> <li>• Members of the Ashford and Tenterden Tourism Association have also been engaged on this proposal and understand the digital shift and refocus of existing resources is beneficial to ensure customer information is relevant, dynamic and up to date.</li> <li>• It was felt the move to a digital service would enable all people across all characteristics the ability to access the service as opposed to the current face to face service</li> </ul>

<p>how the decision will affect people with different protected characteristics?</p>	<p>where some service recipients may have struggled from <u>physically</u> accessing the service. All website /social media activity will adhere to current accessibility guidelines</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource can now be put towards a 24/7 digital service (still maintaining email and tel calls during working days) as opposed to the limited, four day per week, part time face to face service.</li> <li>• The service has always been and will remain open to all protected characteristics – it is simply the delivery mechanism that is being changed to respond to changing customer needs and expectations which is the same across all these protected characteristic groups.</li> </ul>
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**Assess the relevance of the decision to people with different protected characteristics and assess the impact of the decision on people with different protected characteristics.**

When assessing relevance and impact, make it clear who the assessment applies to within the protected characteristic category. For example, a decision may have high relevance for young people but low relevance for older people; it may have a positive impact on women but a neutral impact on men.

<b>Protected characteristic</b>	<b>Relevance to Decision</b> High/Medium/Low/None	<b>Impact of Decision</b> <b>Positive</b> (Major/Minor) <b>Negative</b> (Major/Minor) <b>Neutral</b>
<u>AGE</u> Elderly	Low	Neutral
Middle age	None	Positive
Young adult	None	Positive
Children	None	Neutral
<u>DISABILITY</u> Physical	None	Positive
Mental	None	Positive
Sensory	Low	Neutral
<u>GENDER RE-ASSIGNMENT</u>	None	Neutral
<u>MARRIAGE/CIVIL PARTNERSHIP</u>	None	Neutral
<u>PREGNANCY/MATERNITY</u>	None	Neutral
<u>RACE</u>	None	Neutral
<u>RELIGION OR BELIEF</u>	None	Neutral

<u>SEX</u> Men	None	Neutral
Women	None	Neutral
<u>SEXUAL ORIENTATION</u>	None	Neutral
<u>ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY</u> Regular/Reserve personnel	None	Neutral
Former service personnel	None	Neutral
Service families	None	Neutral

<b>Mitigating negative impact:</b> Where any negative impact has been identified, outline the measures taken to mitigate against it.	N/A
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<b>Is the decision relevant to the aims of the equality duty?</b>	
Guidance on the aims can be found in the EHRC's <a href="#">Essential Guide</a> , alongside fuller <a href="#">PSED Technical Guidance</a> .	
<b>Aim</b>	<b>Yes / No / N/A</b>
1) Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation	Yes
2) Advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it	Yes
3) Foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it	Yes

<b>Conclusion:</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider how due regard has been had to the equality duty, from start to finish.</li> <li>There should be no unlawful discrimination arising from the decision (see guidance above).</li> <li>Advise on whether the proposal meets the aims of</li> </ul>	<p>Due regard will be made to the equality duty throughout the continued development and delivery of the digital visitor information service.</p> <p>There will be no unlawful discrimination arising from the decision</p>

<p>the equality duty or whether adjustments have been made or need to be made or whether any residual impacts are justified.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How will monitoring of the policy, procedure or decision and its implementation be undertaken and reported?</li> </ul>	<p>The proposal meets the aims of the equality duty as all sections of the community – visitors and residents – including those with protected characteristics will benefit from the digital delivery of the service</p> <p>Monitoring of the digital delivery of the service and of visitors/customer feedback will be undertaken and amendments made if required.</p>
<p><b>EIA completion date:</b></p>	<p>1 June 2021</p>