

The Future of Ashford

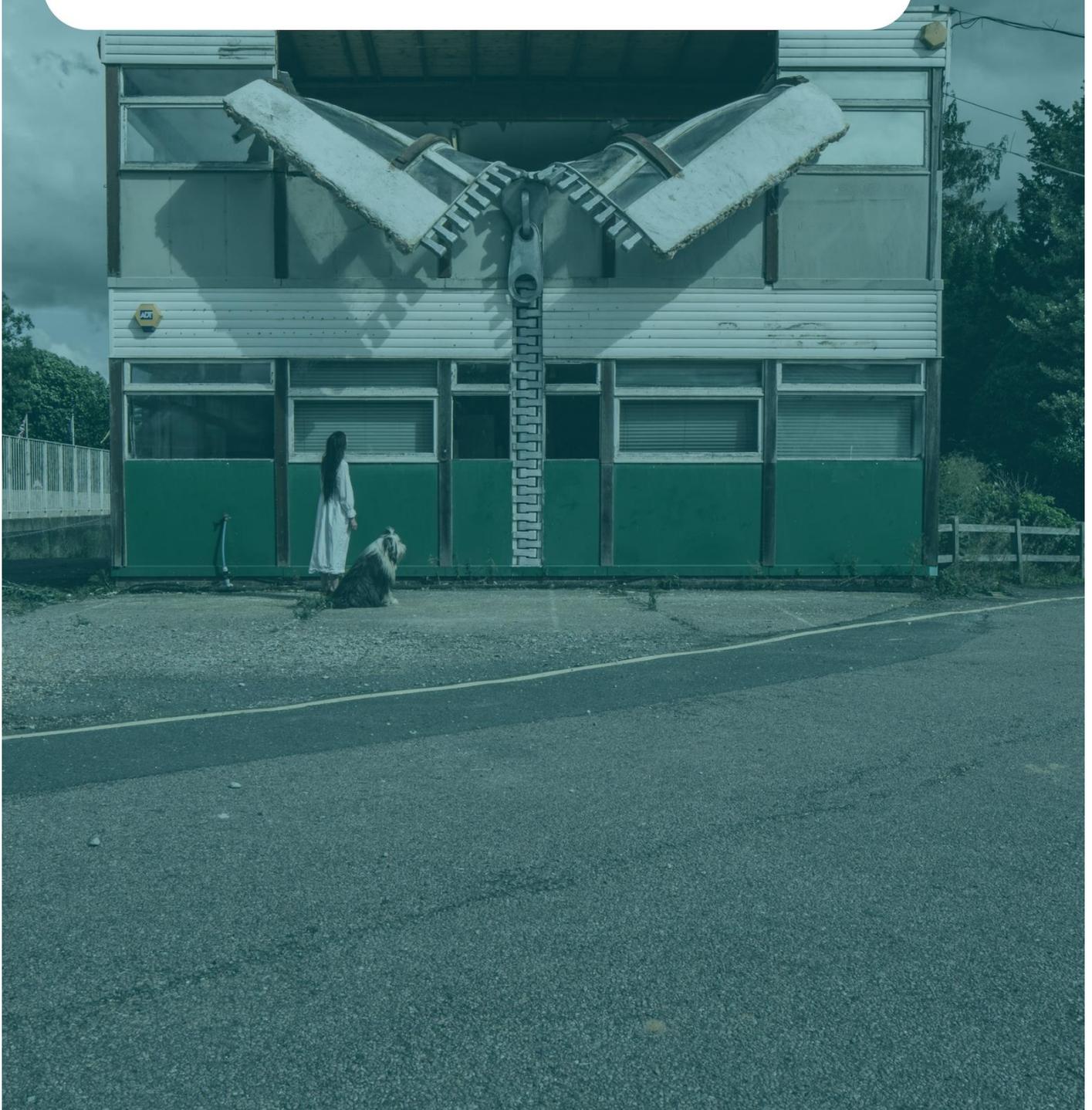
A report of findings from the Town
Centre Consultation



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Executive Summary, background and methodology



1.0 Executive Summary

From July to October 2018, Ashford Borough Council ran a consultation which sought the views of local people, businesses and visitors on how to improve Ashford town centre to ensure it is fit for the future. The consultation asked 4 open-ended questions:

- How do we create a buzz about Ashford and make it stand out from the crowd?
- How do we create a thriving, fun place to go in the daytime and at night?
- How do we create a place that is welcoming and accessible to all?
- How can we make Ashford a place we are proud to call home?

In response to these questions, respondents focused on topics such as the offer of the town (including entertainment, leisure and retail), potential areas for improvements (for example accessibility) and creating a community and town centre to be proud of.

1523 comments were left via the various response routes provided - online and paper questionnaires and an online consultation tool. Respondents were residents, visitors, workers, students and business representatives. Comments received were grouped into themes (e.g. entertainment and leisure, business, accessibility etc.) and the number of comments related to a particular theme were counted to show the prevalence of the theme.

The most predominant theme was entertainment, leisure and culture. Accessibility, creating experiences, general improvement, business, perceptions about the town and targeting certain groups were also major themes. These topics are explored in detail in this report.

Below are some of the frequently occurring ideas that were commented in response to the questions asked in the consultation:

1.1 How do we create a buzz about Ashford and make it stand out from the crowd?

- Bring in something unique, and celebrate our unique points too
- Be different from other towns in Kent
- Create reasons for residents and visitors to come to the town
- A variety of entertainment, leisure and cultural facilities to be enjoyed by all, as well as an increased number of entertainment facilities and events
- Ensure everyone can be involved in new events, including children, families and older people
- Encourage independent shops to open in the town, as well as bigger name brands
- Greater promotion what is going on in Ashford

1.2 How do we create a thriving, fun place to go in the daytime and at night?

- Ensure a variety of entertainment, particularly at night
- Increase the number of events going on, round the clock
- Remove barriers for having fun – tackle perceptions of crime and create a safer environment

1.3 How do we create a place that is welcoming and accessible to all?

- Accessibility is a barrier – it needs improvement!
- Free or cheaper parking should be enforced so that people can come for events and entertainment
- Improve public transport – bring back old routes and run services later
- Ensure there is access for disabled residents and visitors, particularly regarding provision in shops, car parks, and the cobbles in the lower high street
- Ensure safety for pedestrians – make the town more pedestrian friendly!
- Make navigation easier, make sure the signage is clearer

1.4 How can we make Ashford a place we are proud to call home?

- The council has the right idea with some of the projects – particularly the Snowdogs and Coachworks projects
- Promote community – create opportunities to meet and socialise with others
- Celebrate our heritage as a market and railway town and promote the history of Ashford
- Keep the town centre clean and the buildings looking smart
- Put the needs of locals first; but still try to bring in visitors
- Be more green – protect green spaces from too much housing development and install more planters

2.0 Background

Town centres all across the country are undergoing change, following prominent changes to population and consumption, convenience and the internet. Many town centres primarily focus on retail, but now face unique challenges that accompany this offer.

Ashford town centre is also changing rapidly, with many large-scale projects such as Elwick Place (cinema and restaurant complex), the Designer Outlet expansion and a new Commercial Quarter (brand new business spaces) all either planned in the coming years or already underway, which will provide local residents and visitors with an expanded offer.

A major consultation regarding the future of Ashford Town ran from July to October 2018. While mainly local residents responded, there were also responses from students, people who work in Ashford, visitors and local businesses. The results show the priorities, ideas and concerns of local people and visitors.

3.0 Methodology

The Town Centre consultation ran from July to October 2018. The consultation utilised a number of different consultation techniques, including face-to-face contact, and online systems. The consultation sought responses in order to answer four main questions about Ashford Town Centre:

1. How do we create a buzz about Ashford? How do we make it stand out from the crowd?
2. How do we sustain a thriving, fun destination in the daytime and night?
3. How do we create a place that is welcoming and accessible to all?
4. How can we make Ashford a place we are proud to call home?

The consultation also aimed to increase awareness of the council's current projects, and projects that are planned. Feedback on the projects and ideas for future projects was encouraged.

3.1 Questionnaire

One of the main ways of getting involved was by completing a questionnaire. The questions were open-ended, so respondents could write their views fully. The questionnaire also asked for additional information about the respondent, including whether they were answering as an individual or business, their age and postcode, and whether they were a resident/worker/visitor of Ashford Town. This allowed the analysis to be broken down into groups, e.g. what do certain age groups want, which ward responded most frequently, etc. The questionnaire was available to respondents online via web-link and a physical copy of the same questionnaire was available at face-to-face sessions, and also available in the council reception area and at the Gateway. See appendix 1 for a copy of the questionnaire

3.2 Online Consultation Tool

An online consultation tool was used alongside the questionnaire. This tool operated in a similar way to a forum, where respondents were presented with information and could leave comments and discuss topics with other respondents. Respondents could click through pages that have maps of the town centre (see diagram 1) and interactive buttons that detail the project that is happening or set to happen in the location they have clicked on (see appendix 2 for town centre maps in more detail).

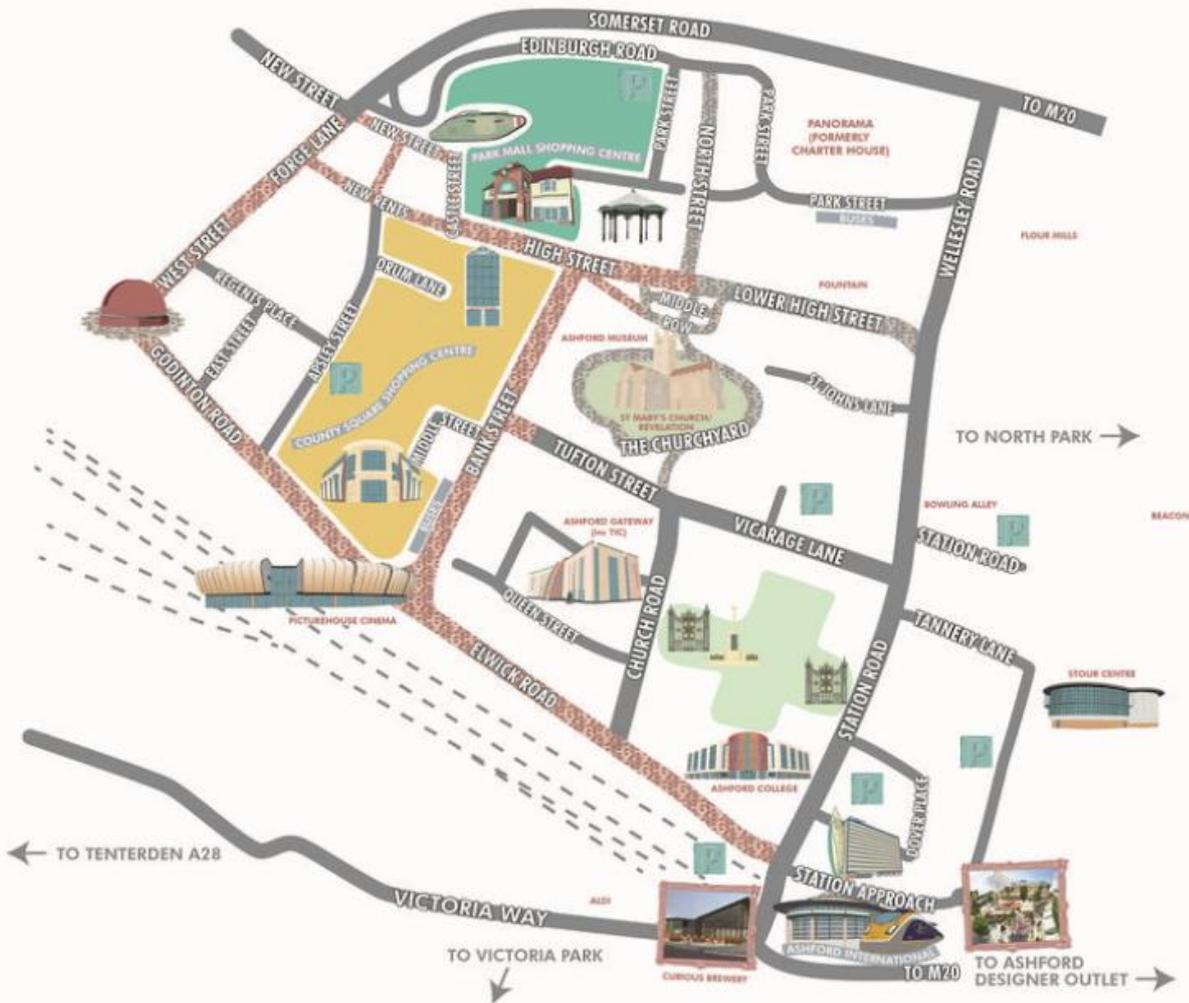


Diagram 1: The Stickyworld Map, showing notable roads and council projects. Participants could place virtual post-it-notes onto the image to comment on a particular project.

3.3 Face to Face

Face-to-face consultation was used on 3 separate occasions:

- Over a two day period on the weekend of Create Festival, during which a booth was set up on the festival grounds;
- Over a two day period in County Square shopping centre, and;
- At the Ashford College Fresher's Fayre, to gain opinions from younger age groups

3 boards were set up detailing current and future projects as well as potential ideas for projects, along with banners with the 4 key questions from the questionnaire written on them. Respondents had the opportunity to talk through the boards with staff and ask questions. Respondents were encouraged to describe their views on projects and ideas for future projects on a post-it note and stick it to the relevant boards. Alternatively, staff asked permission to transcribe their views following discussions and post on the boards on their behalf.

The notes from the face-to-face consultations were then posted by council staff to Stickyworld usernames 'Create Visitor' and 'Visitors from County Square,' in order to keep track of where the comments came from.



Image 1 (Above): A board set up during face-to-face consulting with respondents. Comments were written on post-it notes.

Image 2 (Above): Respondents at the face-to-face consultation could also complete paper questionnaires in order to leave feedback.

3.4 Respondents

Over 1500 comments were made in total but due to the mixed methodology used, it is impossible to know exactly how many people took part in the consultation. 258 individuals and 3 business representatives submitted responses to the online survey. However, the comments on the online consultation tool were submitted anonymously so multiple comments cannot be traced to a single individual. For face-to-face consultation, the number of people council representatives engaged with was not counted.

Respondents were asked for their age and postcode, though not all gave these details. Of the 258 who gave their age most were from the aged group 35-44, with 25% of respondents being from this age group. The percentage respondents for the rest of the age groups are:

- Under 18s – 8% of respondents
- Aged 18-25 – 8% of respondents
- Aged 26-34 – 19% of respondents
- Aged 35-44 – 25% of respondents
- Aged 45-54 – 17% of respondents
- Aged 55-64 – 11% of respondents
- Aged 65+ - 9% of respondents
- No age given – 4% of respondents

Age did not significantly affect the subjects discussed by respondents, however, older respondents are more concerned about accessibility than about entertainment and leisure, which was valued by younger age groups.

There was a far greater proportion of respondents from wards closer to the town than rural wards. Of respondents who gave their postcode, 80 were from the Ashford Hinterlands, 57 from Central Ashford areas and 42 from Rural Ashford areas.

4.0 Analysis

The comments were analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and content analysis. Comments were given an initial read-through to establish the 16 over-arching themes (see table 1 in section 5.0). Once the themes of each comment were established they were given a second read through to establish the content. For example, if a comment that fell under the theme “Entertainment and Leisure” mentions a “Theatre”, theatre is counted as the content of that comment. The number of mentions of each content topic were counted to assess their frequency. A large number of comments on a particular topic was considered to indicate importance of the topic to respondents.

Key Themes



5.0 Results

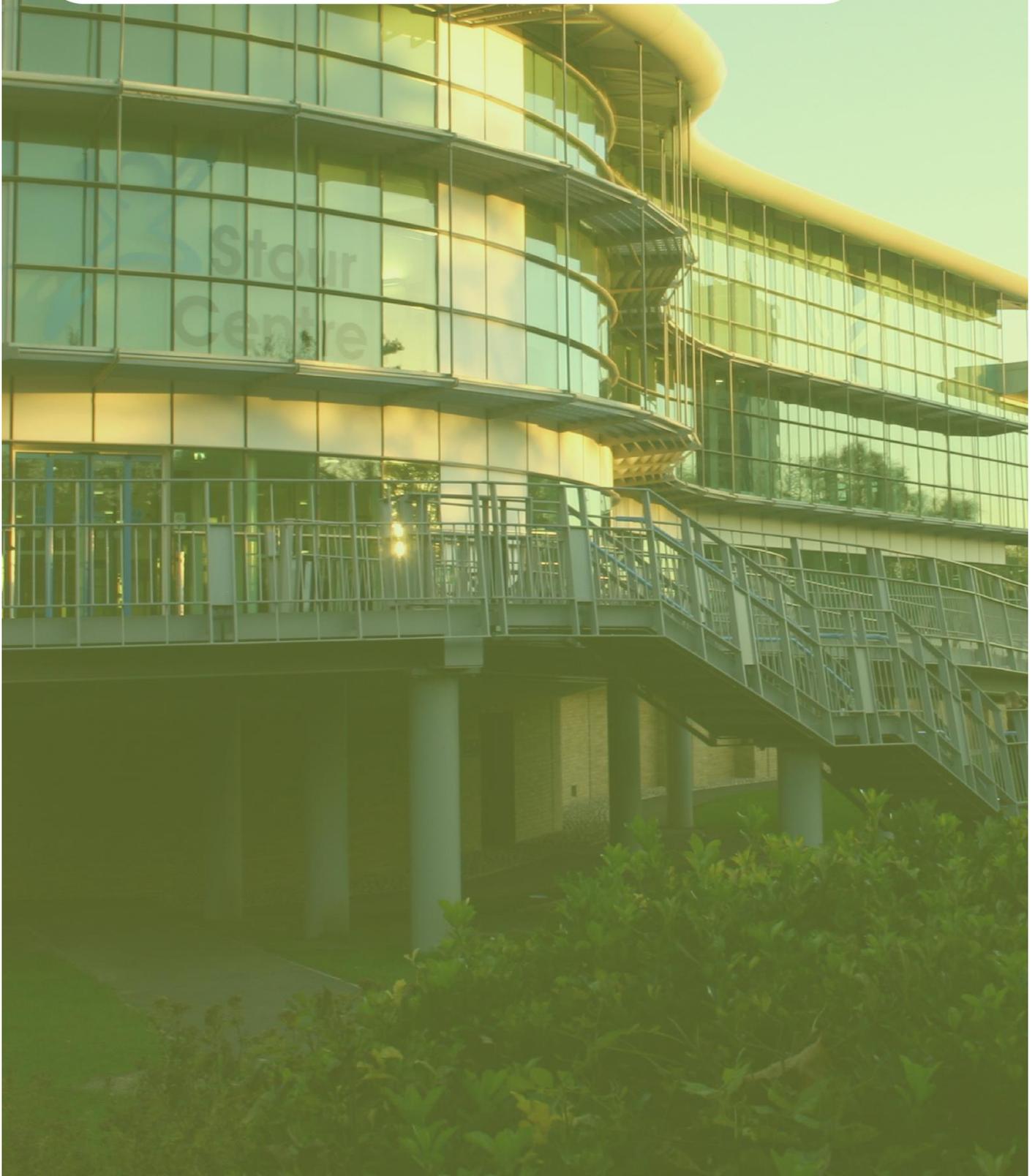
5.1 Key Themes

| Theme | Total no. of mentions |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Entertainment, Leisure and Culture | 912 |
| Accessibility | 472 |
| Perceptions about Ashford town | 336 |
| General Improvements | 309 |
| Business and Retail | 276 |
| Target Groups | 264 |
| Experiences | 178 |
| Comparisons to Neighbours | 155 |
| Heritage | 134 |
| Unique Selling Point | 94 |
| Housing | 89 |
| Satisfaction | 86 |
| Community and Socialising | 84 |
| Environmental Issues | 82 |
| Communication with the Council | 56 |

Table 1: The main themes of resident responses to the consultation.

The most frequently occurring theme in the consultation was entertainment, leisure and culture, with 912 of all comments (25%) mentioning an activity or facility which falls into this category. The least frequently occurring theme was communication with the council, mentioned in 56 comments (2% of the total comments). Full analysis tables with each theme explored can be found in Appendix 3.

What the town has to offer



5.2 What the town has to offer



One of the most frequently occurring themes in the consultation was regarding entertainment, leisure and the cultural offer of Ashford town. Further, respondents discussed the retail offer of the town, which contributes to the town centre's offer. Such facilities are suggested as they could potentially increase footfall of not only local people but also visitors from further afield.

Throughout the consultation, respondents emphasised the offer of the town should not only be different, it should have variety. Some respondents stated a greater range of things to do, including: shopping, leisure, entertainment and cultural activities would improve the offer of the town (30 comments). Respondents perceived the offer to be solely focused on retail and pubs (11 comments). Further, quality of activities and facilities were also important to respondents (20 comments). Respondents stated that any new facilities should be high quality, even if it means that they are more "expensive" for the council to implement. However, quantity of activities was also valued by respondents (19 comments), as some feel there is currently not enough to do during the day and particularly at night.

5.2.1 Retail

Respondents discussed the current retail offer of the town and how well it suits their shopping needs. 48 comments left by respondents indicate a dissatisfaction with the current shopping offer; many of the comments stated the offer is "cheap" or that there are too many shops offering the same thing; for example; hairdressers and barbers, cafés, vaping/e-cigarette shops and pound shops. Various suggestions were made to improve the retail offer, most frequently mentioned (46 comments) was the introduction of independent shops, however 23 comments indicated a desire for more "big-name" brands such as Zara and Dorothy Perkins, but particularly Primark (29 comments). Suggestions of brands were often accompanied by comments indicating that respondents don't want to have to travel to competitor towns (for example, Whitefriars in Canterbury, and Fremlins Walk in Maidstone) in order to access these brands. In contrast,

independent shops were desired for their unique offer Respondents suggested that a different offer to some of the aforementioned locations is desirable for a unique town identity, as well as to support local businesses and to draw in visitors.

However, some respondents stated that the retail offer of the town was not the only aspect that requires improvement, but also the shops themselves. 23 comments suggested there are a number of vacant shops on the high street. The perceived number of vacancies is thought to be due to “expensive” rents, which in turn leads to shops closing (23 comments), and some respondents believe the rates should be lowered to prevent this. A few respondents also stated that more needs to be done to make these empty units look ‘attractive’ (10 comments). Suggestions were been made as to what can be put in the units, including a children’s play centre and indoor markets.

For the full analysis table on Business and Retail, please go to Appendix 3.

5.2.2 Entertainment and Leisure

Aside from suggestions about improving the retail offer of the town; 912 comments within the consultation mentioned improving the entertainment, leisure and retail offer of the town, in order to diversify the experiences had by visitors.

Some respondents made general comments about wanting more entertainment in the town (44 comments). These respondents were keen to suggest why more entertainment would improve the appeal of the town centre. This includes bringing in tourists and visitors who will spend money in Ashford, as well as having a positive impact on residents as it would provide reasons to come to the town centre, instead of travelling to other towns for entertainment.

Of all the entertainment facilities mentioned, a theatre was the most frequent, commented a total of 159 times. This was by far the most popular suggestion across all consultation platforms, as respondents feel it would vastly improve the entertainment offer in the town, particularly at night. Alternative live entertainment options were also explored by those involved in the consultation. Live music and performances, such as comedy performances, were a favourable option (66 comments), for similar reasons that respondents gave for introducing a theatre to the entertainment offer of Ashford. Street performances and entertainers were also favoured (17 comments). Respondents often suggested these performances occur at the bandstand, as it is a central outdoor performance space.

| Ideas for use of the Mecca Bingo hall: | No. of mentions |
|--|-----------------|
| Theatre | 28 |
| Flexible space | 5 |
| For retail | 1 |
| Art centre | 3 |
| For heritage | 1 |
| "Entertainment Venue" | 6 |
| Indoor market | 1 |
| Homeless Shelter | 2 |
| Open to have a look around | 1 |
| Ice rink | 1 |
| Total | 49 |

Table 1: The table shows the various suggestions for the currently vacant Mecca Bingo Hall/Odeon Cinema site. Some respondents gave several ideas for use of the Mecca site.

Many respondents explain that they believe the Mecca Bingo/Former Odeon site is suitable for a theatre and was one of the most common suggestions for the use of the building. An alternative site that respondents identified as being potentially suitable is the Flour Mills site. 41 respondents suggested that the bingo hall should be kept (in contrast to 2 comments stating it should be demolished) and there were a number of ideas of what it could be used for as set out below. It should be noted that some people gave more than one idea.

As well as general comments about bringing more entertainment to be enjoyed by residents and tourists, respondents were keen to have most events and activities occur in and around the town centre (58 comments). “Events and activities” often included festivals, fairs and carnivals. Some respondents also wanted to see more community events, either run by the community or for them, to create socialising opportunities.

Respondents suggested that the council should introduce and support more festivals and fairs (22 comments). Food and drinks festivals were the most common suggestion, such as a gin/prosecco festival and cultural food fair. A railway festival was also mentioned in order to celebrate some of Ashford’s heritage, along with film, comedy and gaming festivals, and craft fairs.

Most of the “entertainment” comments referred to daytime entertainment, but there were 11 comments regarding more entertainment at night. Some respondents feel there is a limited night-time offer (19 comments), or say they avoid the town centre at night due to perceptions that safe to go into town at night, and that more police and security enforcement is required during this time (6 comments). A few respondents also noted the closure of past night clubs has resulted in the loss of some socialising opportunities for adults.

There were 71 comments relating to restaurants in the town centre. Respondents mentioned named brands such as Nandos and Prezzo, but were also favourable of smaller businesses and a few were open to the idea of ‘pop-up’ places to eat (9 comments).

As well as more restaurants to improve the nightlife, there was a large demand for more:

- Bars (52 comments);
- Clubs (17 comments);
- Pubs (13 comments)

Whilst there were 21 comments supporting more cafés in the town centre, there were many comments indicating the already extensive café offer in the town. As a result, some respondents were opposed to more cafes opening in town.

One of the most commonly requested facility was an ice rink – mentioned a total of 31 times. There was a strong view that an ice rink would appeal to families and young children more so than any other specific groups. Respondents also stated that an ice rink would serve as a destination attraction.

There were a number of comments about improved facilities for young children, such as: A fairly common idea was to have softplays or more play areas in the town, with 19 comments relating to these facilities. Comments regarding bringing softplays to the town, or investing in more parks were almost always accompanied by comments identifying children and families as the target users of these facilities. Some other facilities suggested for children were:

- Softplays (19 comments) – this was the most popular suggestion for children’s facilities
- Splashparks (13 comments) – this was commented mainly during July and August;
- A waterpark (6 comments) – respondents regard this as a potentially unique facility to Ashford

- An outdoor pool (1 comments)

| Facilities and Activities Suggested | No. of mentions | Quotes from respondents: |
|---|-----------------|--|
| Theatre | 159 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Add a theatre and give Ashford the much needed culture and creative space that many people have been wanting for over 20 years.” Resident, aged 30, from Aylesford Green • “Theatre/conference hall is a must - there is nowhere in central Ashford to hear visiting speakers in public...Do not get stuck on "Marlowe" size theatres and associated costs, but think about "Gulbenkian" sized facilities which are more appropriate/flexible.” Resident, aged 61, from Kennington |
| Restaurants | 71 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Make sure that entertainment and food outlets are of high standard well maintained and variety, look at start-ups such as pop up restaurants that provide value for money and can be accessed by everyone. Don't just add the boring not good value for money national food chains.” Resident, aged 59 • “Get some decent restaurants in the high street that offer a variety of eating cultures ... get micro-breweries to open in the empty units” Resident, aged 37, from Park Farm North |
| Live music and performances | 66 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “At night a place that stages live music especially as the Create festival is always well received” Resident, aged 39, from Washford • “By providing a range of entertainment choices...music and the arts are important too” Resident, aged 46 |
| Events/activities | 58 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Introduce new, inclusive events such as LGBT events/pride, a ‘Notting hill’ Style carnival, country/folk festival. Winter events could include indoor crafts/sewing, poetry& creative writing etc. - a focus should be on creativity and fun.” Resident, aged 32, Washford |
| Bars | 52 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Ashford needs more bars and restaurants to make people want to stay for a night out instead of travelling to other towns.” Resident, aged 33 |
| Entertainment | 44 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “By providing a range of entertainment choices” Resident, aged 46 |
| Art (galleries, museums, exhibitions, investment) | 39 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “There could be day and evening - art /poetry/theatre classes in the building - children's holiday groups, disabled art groups. The old bingo hall could be made into artist studios to rent (affordable) and a gallery.” Resident, aged 60, from Wye • “Create a platform for young and upcoming artists. Art and culture are extremely important in creating experiences.” Resident, aged 40, from Beaver |
| Ice Rink | 31 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...an ice skating rink would be brilliant the closest one to Ashford is Gillingham so think how many people from the |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----|--|
| | | surrounding areas would come to visit the rink.” – Resident, aged 30 |
| Activities/spaces for young people | 31 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Re-launch the library with new activities for young people. Ask young people what they want to see rather than guess!” Resident, aged 38 |
| Community hub/flexible space | 28 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “A multi-use theatre would be amazing, it doesn't have to be fixed as just a theatre, but it could be a multi-purpose entertainment or indoor market venue. If a small town like Cheriton can do it, why not Ashford?” Resident, aged 44, from Stour “Having a flexible space for music events, theatre, comedians, boxing events, darts events, ballroom dancing” Works in Ashford |

Table 2: This table shows the top 10 most requested entertainment, leisure and cultural facilities suggested by respondents. The full table can be found in appendix 3.

Despite more comments relating to wanting more entertainment and leisure facilities and retail, some respondents were pleased with the progress that's currently being made. 38 respondents report they are satisfied with current projects such as Elwick Place and Curious Brewery and particularly the Snowdog art trail. Some respondents encourage the council to continue with its current workstreams due to satisfaction with the current progress (22 comments).

Suggestions of entertainment and leisure were often accompanied by stating that specific groups in the borough should be targeted. Some respondents feel as though there is not enough provision for their group, or that their group is not included in events. The main groups suggested were children (44 comments) and families (34 comments). Respondents who suggested including more facilities for children were often of age groups that could have young children. A few respondents also believe that school-age respondents should be included more in the council's development of projects and events (10 comments).

Respondents indicated they want more provision for:

- “Young people” (22 comments);
- Teenagers (14 comments);
- Adults (10 comments);
- Everyone (10 comments);
- Older people (5 comments)

5.2.3 Creating a Unique Offer

Respondents mainly drew comparisons to the offer available in other towns, usually as they want to see similar facilities become available in Ashford. It is perhaps unsurprising that Ashford is most commonly compared against one of its closest neighbours, Canterbury (43 comments). Other nearby locations, such as Maidstone (23 comments), Folkestone (21 comments) are also compared. The respondents who mentioned these locations perceived them to have a more varied leisure, entertainment and retail offer than Ashford.

There was a prominent theme that additional effort is required to attract visitors; they need a reason to come to Ashford as opposed to travelling elsewhere (24 comments). As a result, respondents discussed introducing a different entertainment and leisure offer to other towns, and

in particular to have a 'unique selling point' (USP). Some respondents suggested that Ashford already has a USP; the two main suggestions were:

- The Designer Outlet Centre (10 comments) for its shopping offer, or;
- The International railway station (4 comments) due to the travel links into London

However, respondents identified a potential challenge; both these facilities don't necessarily entice people into the very centre of the town, as they are located nearer the outskirts. Respondents stated that there must be a reason for visitors and tourists to want to come to the centre of the town, as at the moment they are mainly attracted to the Outlet but not into town (11 comments). It was suggested that greater accessibility from the Outlet by bus or on foot (3 comments) would encourage more people into the town centre.

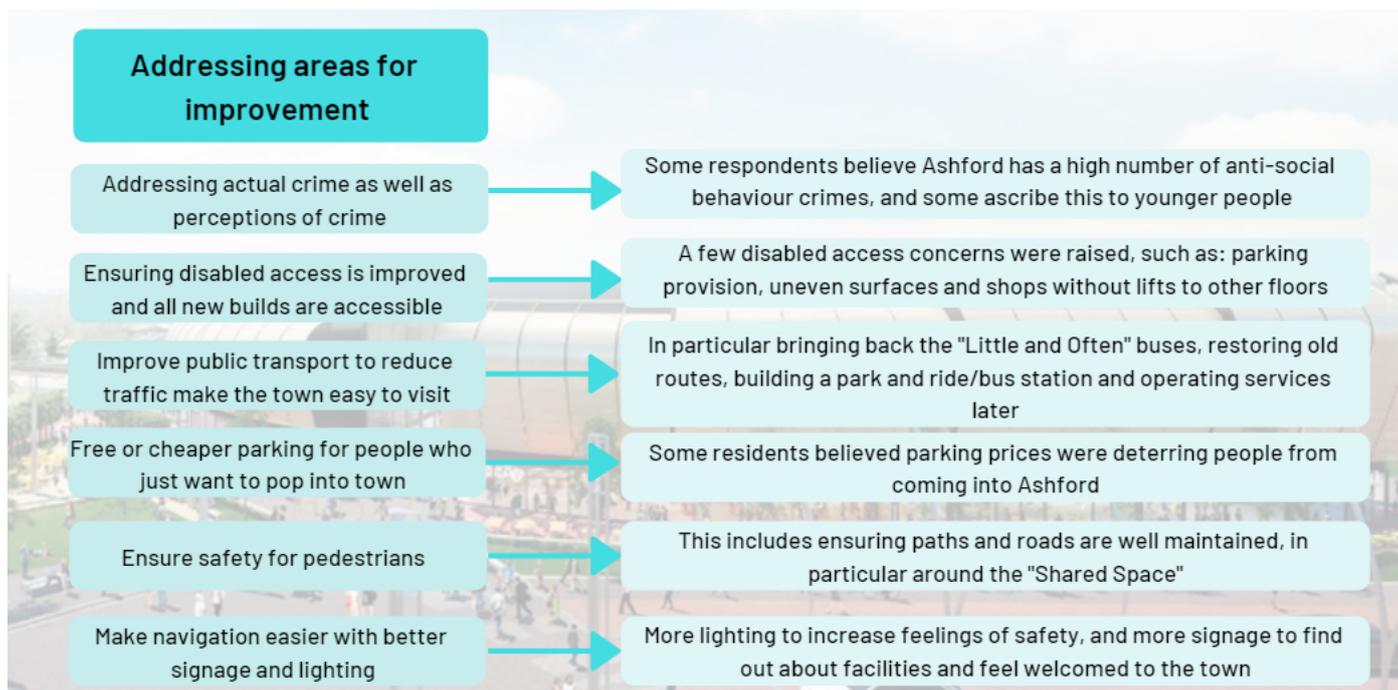
Some respondents felt that Ashford does not have a USP at the moment (3 comments). The desire to have a USP was prominent, as respondents stated they want more 'unique' places to go to and activities to do that aren't available anywhere else, as well as 'more to do' in general (19 comments). This was suggested to entice not only locals to visit, but also tourists. There were suggestions about what this USP might be, including:

- An ice rink (with 4 respondents mentioning that the closest rink is in Gillingham);
- A water park, and;
- A theme park

Potential areas for improvement



5.3 Potential areas for improvement



During the consultation, respondents identified potential areas for improvement. These ranged, simple changes to the appearance of the town centre to much larger projects involving refurbishment of buildings. One of the biggest barriers identified by respondents was accessibility to the town. A variety of accessibility challenges were identified, including congestion, roadworks, parking and disabled access.

5.3.1 Accessibility

Accessibility to the town was commonly mentioned in the consultation, with some respondents stating they are dissatisfied with the current levels of accessibility to the town (28 comments). Respondents had different views on what constituted "accessibility" with some feeling as though it is more associated with getting into and about the town, whereas others focused more on disabled access.

Parking was the most frequently occurring accessibility concern among respondents. Respondents felt that multiple parking-related factors prevent those travelling by car from accessing the town centre easily, particularly due to the price. The most frequent comments discussed parking prices. Respondents wanted free parking (40 comments) or cheaper pricing (29 comments) implemented, as the parking is too "expensive" (12 comments).

Some respondents suggest less extreme measures than making all parking free, such as introducing limited time free parking (12 comments). There was also an association between limited time free parking and wanting to be in town a short amount of time, thus avoiding "expensive" charges.

Parking quantity was mentioned on a few occasions (15 comments). Any comments about parking quantity seemed to be involved in another theme regarding overall provision for a perceived growing population in Ashford. A few respondents stated that due to an increase in the number of residents (4 comments) in the borough, local infrastructure (schools, roads, hospitals) cannot accommodate this increase (10 comments), and parking was sometimes counted under this infrastructure. However, some felt extra parking provision should not be prioritised over improvement of other infrastructure, in particular disabled parking provision (6 comments).

Aside from parking, respondents said they have experienced accessibility difficulties when using bus services around the borough. Some respondents were dissatisfied with public transport due to changes to bus routes and times, and the abolishment of the ‘Little and Often’ buses.

Respondents stated they want bus services ‘improved,’ particularly with regards to the restoration of old routes (11 comments) and the ‘Little and Often’ buses being brought back (7 comments). 33 comments were left to request improvements to public transport as a whole.

The bus services were suggested to be hindering connectivity between villages and the town centre, because of the difficulty in accessing public transport as a result of changes to times, routes and schemes. A few respondents perceived Ashford as being “too spread out (11 comments),” meaning public transport is essential for rural communities. As a result, some respondents particularly those further from the town who cannot drive, may find it challenging to come into town.

Ensuring access for the disabled was prioritised by some respondents (26 comments). For example, several respondents mentioned that the cobbles on the lower high street are an issue for anyone with physical disabilities or children in pushchairs as these are painful to traverse (7 comments). Similarly, wheelchair-users face difficulty in some shops due to the lack of suitable facilities to help them get onto different floors. A suggested solution to this was to have more ramps, or ramps in the place of stairs for all buildings.

A number of comments about accessibility mentioned the roadworks (2 comments) and the number of traffic lights, stating that they need to be changed or taken away entirely (8 comments). Respondents feel that accessibility to the town requires improvement, with particular regards to congestion and traffic, suggesting it is a major barrier to accessing the town (21 comments), whether it’s for visitors, shoppers or people going to work.

| Accessibility Issues raised | No. of mentions | Quotes from Respondents: |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Free parking | 40 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Free parking in the afternoons & at weekends to encourage people to come into town plus promotions from town centre businesses” Resident, aged 48, Downs West • “Free parking. Somewhere you can park free, near town for an hour, so you can pop in if you need to return something or only. Need to pop to one place. Parking fees are extortionate” Resident, aged 38 |
| Improve public transport | 33 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Improve bus services from villages, or have a special bus once a week for people to visit the town at a sensible time. Much like the free buses that supermarkets provide but this would be a paid for.” Works in Ashford, aged 65 |
| Cheaper parking | 29 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Make car parking cheaper to encourage more people into town” Resident, Weald East |
| Dissatisfaction with Accessibility | 28 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...Car parking can be an accessibility issue for everyone. Those from outside the area still say they don’t come to Ashford because they can’t find their way to a car park. Needs to be looked at holistically. Signage needs to be bolder.” Resident, aged 75, Godinton |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|----|--|
| Ensure accessible to disabled | 26 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Ensure there are things for all and paths accessible for all. Not just wheelchairs but others with disabilities such as autism or mental health issues.” |
| Traffic is a problem/barrier | 21 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “By not building villages tacked onto the outskirts, condemning future generations to a life of gridlocked roads, over-stretched GP surgeries and ER waiting times measured in days, not hours” Resident, aged 45, Saxon Shore |
| More parking | 15 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “We do NOT need more housing with inadequate parking provision” Resident, Stour |
| Improve accessibility | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Stop doing roadworks! The place is far from accessible when it takes an hour to get from one side to the other.” Resident, aged 28 |
| Dissatisfaction with parking price | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “At the moment the parking is extortionate and I avoid coming into the town” Resident, aged 48 |
| Improve cycle routes | 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Improve pedestrian and cycling facilities along main accesses.” Works in Ashford, aged 26 “More cycle-paths that actually go in and around the town centre - the current ones are great (a big thumbs up), but they all bypass the town.” Resident, aged 32, Great Chart with Singleton North |
| Pedestrianise the town | 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Safer walk-ways for pedestrians, walking routes that are attractive so to encourage fewer car users” Resident, aged 42, Aylesford Green “There should be a car-free zone, where people can walk freely.” Resident, aged 40, Beaver |

Table 4: The top accessibility topics discussed by respondents, with example quotes. The full table of issues raised can be found in Appendix 3.

5.3.2 General Improvements

General improvements were also suggested by many respondents, with 309 comments, however a large portion (75 comments) related to cleanliness of the town centre. Some respondents were dissatisfied with the current cleanliness of the town centre (10 comments), and a few were satisfied (3 comments), but most comments encouraged upkeep of current cleanliness.

A more simple improvement was the introduction of more seating. 9 comments suggested more seating and benches in the town, and 13 comments suggested outdoor seating at cafés and restaurants. These respondents felt that outdoor seating will appear more social and “European” and improve the general “feel” of the high street.

Another suggestion for simple improvements was to have more lighting (14 comments) and improved signage (7 comments) in the town. Lighting was suggested more for safety reasons due to a perceived high volume of crime, but also for decoration. Respondents sometimes stated that

the signage in and around Ashford is insufficient, and is required to help visitors navigate their way here, and to help with navigation whilst actually in the town.

| Issues raised/suggestions | No. of mentions | Quotes from Respondents |
|--|-----------------|--|
| Cleanliness | 75 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Well managed cleaning service keeping areas clean and tidy” Resident, aged 59 • “Keep the streets clean and tidy!” Resident, aged 43, Downs North |
| Mecca bingo (retain and use it) | 41 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Keeping the Mecca Bingo building and using it for community events, or to hire out (at a reasonable fee), would encourage locals to come into the town centre day and night.” Resident, aged 55, Victoria |
| Better lighting | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Improve the lighting in Bank Street, it is the main route to the centre of town” Resident, aged 59, Beaver • “Introduce better lighting at night and security patrols to make all ages feel safer” Resident, age 61, from Saxon Shore |
| Outdoor seating at cafes and restaurants | 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...pavement cafe seating to create a Parisian feel.” Resident, aged 50, Park Farm |
| Concerns about council services | 13 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Spend council tax payers money wisely (not on fancy street lights or cobbled/block paves streets that then get ripped to pieces by contractors and pasted back together with tarmac)” Residents, aged 75, Godinton |
| Refurbish buildings | 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The houses near the old college need to be refurbished, they are part of history of Ashford as is the market, the original was great” Resident, aged 61 |
| Decorate/maintain shop fronts | 10 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Try to make disused shop fronts appealing. Colourful and not just boarded up” Resident, aged 67, Bockhanger |
| Improved/clearer signage | 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “A large and ornate 'welcome to Ashford' sign at several points on the way into town” Resident, aged 40 • “Accessible - make shops disabled-friendly, have signs in multiple languages” Resident, aged 42, Norman |
| More benches and seating | 9 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “More benches and seating in nice outdoors spaces” Works in Ashford • “I have elderly friends and relatives who often find the benches they used to sit and rest on are occupied, so maybe more outdoor seating is required.” Resident, aged 45 |

Table 4: The table shows the top 10 general improvements suggested by respondents of the survey, along with example quotes from respondents. The full table of issues raised can be found in appendix 3.

5.3.3 Perceptions of crime and anti-social behaviour

Further to the general improvements suggested by respondents, more complicated topics arose in the consultation, particularly to do with crime and safety. One of the most common responses throughout the consultation was regarding levels of crime and anti-social behaviour.

Some respondents stated they feel Ashford is not safe (14 comments). Crimes that respondents listed more commonly fall under anti-social behaviour crimes, such as vandalism and theft (16 comments). Respondents often reported that they do not feel safe in the town, and attribute this feeling of low safety to a number of different factors, most notably the perceived low enforcement from police officers and PCSOs, as well as poor lighting in locations such as Victoria Park and various car parks, and a perceived lack of security cameras.

A few respondents also perceived younger groups to be responsible for crime, in particular attributing ASB crimes to young adults and teenagers. These respondents stated that younger people have not got enough to do in the town. Respondents were favourable of schemes like Sk8side as they feel this gives this age group an opportunity to socialise and reduces potential criminal activity.

As a result of these factors, more enforcement – most commonly suggested in the form of policing – was suggested (43 comments), and more safety (39 comments) was requested by some.

| Issues raised | No. of mentions | Quotes from Respondents |
|---|-----------------|---|
| More enforcement/security/policing needed (general) | 43 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Ensuring everyone feels safe, police or PCSO presence” Resident, aged 32, Stanhope |
| More safety needed | 39 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Work with the police to reduce the town centre’s un-savoury atmosphere at night - most perceived rather than real - of drunks, druggies and violence.” Resident, aged 67, Stour |
| ASB is a problem in Ashford | 16 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Ensure there is adequate policing to discourage anti-social behaviour and make the place feel safe for all” Works in Ashford, age 65 |
| “Ashford is not safe” | 14 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Have police to patrol Ashford at night. Making it feel safer for people.” Resident, aged 70 |
| Council should help the homeless more | 12 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...provide all homeless people with shelter not just in the winter” Resident, aged 51, Godinton “Clean up the streets and help the homeless more than is done now.” Resident, aged 62 |
| Ashford has a problem with drunks/street drinking | 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Crack down on antisocial behaviour, such a littering , drug taking and excessive drinking” Resident, aged 61, Highfield |
| Concern about the number of homeless | 11 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...try and assist with homeless people. I have noticed Ashford have a lot more homeless people now I live and work in the town centre” Resident, aged 22, Godinton |

Table 5: The top issues raised related to perceptions of crime, with example quotes from respondents. The full table of issues raised can be found in appendix 3.

Creating a community and a town to be proud of



5.4 Creating a community and a town to be proud of



5.4.1 Creating a Community

An important aspect of living in Ashford according to some respondents was the sense of community. A number of respondents stated they wanted to have more opportunities to socialise (21 comments), perhaps by having dedicated spaces such as shops, cafes and community centres, and that the council should encourage socialising (17 comments). Also important was the introduction of more “community” events and projects, such as those like Create festival (12 comments). Respondents stated that these events promote a greater sense of belonging, as well as providing opportunities to socialise.

One common suggestion was a community hub or flexible, multi-use space (28 comments), where residents and visitors could gather and engage in a variety of activities. These comments suggested that having a community hub in town would provide more socialising opportunities. The Mecca Bingo site was mentioned as a potential location for the hub (5 comments).

Vitality, community events and spaces to socialise must also be inclusive of all people (31 comments). As well as this, it was often commented that they would like to see certain groups included in events more than they are currently, including:

- “Young” people (3 comments);
- “Old people” (1 comment)
- People with disabilities (5 comments);
- Members of the LGBT+ community (2 comments), and;
- Pet owners (2 comments)

However, in order for these community events and spaces to be utilised effectively by the public, information regarding them must be communicated clearly, and the council plays a vital role in this. Mostly, respondents would like more promotion of events and facilities (23 comments). 11 comments indicated that some respondents also want to see more engagement from the council

with residents and various groups within the borough. Some respondents also want to see a greater use of social media for both advertising and engagement (11 comments).

A few respondents stated that they wanted communities to be connected together. There was a perception that development occurs away from the town centre, and that the rest of the borough’s residential areas are spread out, thus partially contributing to a lower sense of community. These respondents suggested that by connecting the communities together through events and projects, it will create a “stronger, single community.”

5.4.2 Civic Pride

Pride in the local area was also mentioned in the consultation; some respondents said they are already proud of Ashford town centre (6 comments). A notable area of satisfaction was with environmental elements of the town and surrounding area, including green spaces (8 comments) and the planters/flowerbeds in the town centre (9 comments). A few respondents want to see more green spaces (11 comments), planters and flowerbeds (12 comments), and trees planted (7 comments). These respondents stated that green areas create a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere and commented that they are satisfied with current provision as well.

A few respondents also wanted to protect the environment; 4 comments related to decreasing pollution (particularly on the ring-road) and 6 comments state that the council should not build new developments (e.g. houses) on green spaces.

In relation to housing there was some opposition; most were opposed to more being built (23 comments) whereas some were keen to have more housing (12 comments), particularly if it is affordable (5 comments). Further to the opposition for building houses on green spaces (6 comments), some respondents were also opposed to housing development in the town centre (6 comments), due to constraints such as spaces to build, as well as the belief that town centres should be a community space rather than for accommodation.

Respondents also identified potential barriers to civic pride. A few respondents indicated that they believe Ashford has a negative reputation (6 comments), due to a number of factors such as the current look of town centre buildings, and perceived levels of crime. Another barrier was perceptions about the quality of builds around Ashford. 19 comments related to buildings and developments looking “dirty” or “neglected,” with some respondents urging the council to do something to refurbish these builds (11 comments). Similarly, respondents suggested shop fronts be “decorated” and “maintained” in order to improve their appearance, particularly vacant units (10 comments).

Further barriers to pride included concern for the welfare of others; some respondents are concerned about the number of homeless people in the town centre (11 comments), which results in lower pride in the town as well as partially contributing to feelings of low safety. 12 comments related to respondents wanting the council to help the homeless more than is currently done, such as by providing shelter.

| Potential Barriers to Civic Pride | No. of Mentions |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Perceived level of crime | 30 |
| Housing and over-development | 27 |
| Appearance of the town centre | 19 |
| Homelessness | 11 |
| Destruction of green space | 6 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Negative reputation | 6 |
| Lack of heritage/lack of celebrating heritage | 5 |
| Lack of Culture | 2 |

Table 6: Examples of identified barriers to pride in the town, with the number of mentions and example quotes from respondents.

Additionally, a potential barrier to pride is culture. A small number of respondents perceived there to be a lack of culture in the town (2 comments), and suggest ways of introducing more culture into the town, resulting in increased pride in the local area. One idea for cultural activities is to encourage art - 39 comments were left regarding 'arts' or galleries being brought to the town. The comments also clarified what kinds of art they would like to see. This includes art galleries, art installations and spaces for art enthusiasts. There were also comments on promoting locally produced art as opposed to well-known or commissioned artists. Further, respondents suggested encouraging children and young people to be involved in art, as it is believed this will grant some 'ownership' of the town, and will also contribute to the town's identity and local pride.

Celebrating the heritage of Ashford is also mentioned in the consultation. There were comments stating that Ashford's history should be promoted (5 comments), while a few respondents felt that heritage has been lost (5 comments). Respondents had various ideas about what constitutes the heritage of the town, including the markets and the train station. One respondent commented they would like the Mecca Building preserved for heritage purposes. There was a contrast between respondents who wanted to bring in new developments and a modern 'feel' and keeping older buildings and preserving heritage.

Changes to markets were also a common suggestion. Some residents believed Ashford's heritage is as a market town (10 comments) and wanted to see markets brought back to the town (12 comments). A few residents were dissatisfied with the current market (6 comments), but want to see it improved, perhaps through an indoor market (7 comments).

Museums were also a popular suggestion, with 11 comments referring to a desire for more museums in Ashford as well as refurbishing (1 comment), celebrating (1 comment), and expanding (1 comment) the current Ashford Museum.

Conclusion and additional supporting evidence



6.0 Additional supporting evidence

6.1 Residents' Survey

Through March and April 2018, Ashford Borough Council conducted the Residents' Survey 2018. The survey assessed the opinions and priorities of residents on topics such as council services, priorities for the future and the town centre.

Research from the 2018 Residents' Survey provides useful insight into how well regarded the town centre is by local people, what draws different groups to the town centre and how frequently they visit. Overall the survey found middling levels of satisfaction with the town as a place to shop and lower levels of satisfaction with Ashford town centre as a place to visit and as a place to go out. Those living in Ashford town itself generally held the town's offer in higher regard than those living in rural areas.

Residents were asked how satisfied they are with Ashford town centre as a **place to shop** - whilst 40% said that they are very/fairly satisfied, 41% said that they are dissatisfied to some extent. There were lower levels of satisfaction with Ashford town centre as a **place to visit** with 25% being very/fairly satisfied but 50% of residents saying that they are dissatisfied to some extent. There were similar levels of satisfaction with the town as a **place to go out** with 22% of residents being very/fairly satisfied compared with 56% of residents being dissatisfied to some extent.

The residents' survey also asked how frequently residents visit key locations in the town centre. The survey found that over half of residents visit Park Mall shopping centre at least once a month or more often. Those living in Ashford tend to use it the most frequently (a third of Ashford town residents visit once a week or more) this compares with just 8% of rural residents using the town centre as frequently. This is also true of visits to County Square shopping centre where 41% of residents living in Ashford town visit once a week or more, compared with only 9% from rural areas.

When it comes to eating out during the daytime, 11% of Ashford town centre residents eat out at least once a week compared with only 2% of residents from rural areas. The survey also found that only 8% of Ashford town residents and 1% of rural residents eat and socialise in the evenings in the town centre.

The full results of the Residents' Survey can be found here:

<https://ashford.gov.uk/transparency/the-transparency-code/residents-survey-2018/>

6.2 Town Centre Conference

The council hosted a conference on 2 October 2018 as part of the Town Centre Consultation workstream, during which Dr Steve Millington of the Institute of Place Management ran a workshop in which attendees could take part in identifying some of the potential barriers to progress of the town. Many groups identified some similar things to those identified in the consultation. The main barriers identified were *Networks and Partnerships*, which includes relations with the county authority and with the public, *Place Marketing*, related to Ashford's branding, reputation, and how the brand is communicated, *Crime and Safety*, related to issues around perceptions of the aforementioned and finally, *Entertainment and Leisure*, centred on the constraints of the current leisure and entertainment offer.

From the analysis of the results of the workshop, it was recommended that Ashford:

- *Restructuring*: To restructure governance structures and also physical structuring, requiring co-operation with stakeholders and creating strategic networks and public-private relationships
- *Rebranding*: Focus on the application of branding, marketing communications and public relations techniques to establish a consistent place identity
- *Reinventing*: Encourage diverse leisure/recreational activities to improve perception, and monitor changes in footfall
- *Repositioning*: Consider repositioning itself as more than a retail destination, such as by focusing on becoming a “modern market town”.

To read Dr Steve Millington’s research into placemaking, please follow this link:

<http://placemanagement.org/research-projects/>

7.0 Conclusions



The consultation provided residents, visitors and businesses with an opportunity to have their say about how to improve the offer and feel of the town centre, as well as voice their concerns about issues affecting the town. The suggestions made by respondents can be condensed into 3 main headings, as seen in the diagram above. The findings from this consultation will be used to inform future policy and the Town Centre Framework which will set out the future ambitions for Ashford Town Centre.

Appendix



8.0 Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1 – Questionnaire (paper copy)

Q1. How do we create a buzz about Ashford, how we make it stand out from the crowd?

Q2. How do we sustain a thriving, fun, destination in the daytime and at night?

Q3. How do we create a place that is welcoming and accessible to all?

Q4. How can we make Ashford a place we are proud to call home?

Q5. Which one of the following best describes you: Please tick one of the following.

- I am a resident (please provide postcode)..... Age.....
 - I am visiting Ashford (please provide postcode)..... Age.....
 - I study in Ashford Age
 - I work in Ashford Age
 - I am responding on behalf of an organisation/business
- Name of organisation/business

Please tell us your ideas at: www.ashford.gov.uk/towncentre

Or return to the Civic Centre, Tannery Lane, TN23 1PL

Thank you for taking part.

All information that you give us will be treated in the strictest confidence and will be stored securely by Ashford Borough Council (ABC). The information you will provide will only be used for analysis purposes to help us understand the views of people by different locations and demographic groups. ABC is the data controller for the information you provide in this form. Your information will be used to improve the services offered by ABC and for other research purposes, relying upon the public interest legal basis. ABC's Data Protection Officer can be contacted at FOI@ashford.gov.uk should you have any questions about how your data is handled.

Ashford is changing



High streets up and down the country are facing challenging times with the increase in online shopping and the need to offer something beyond just a shopping experience. Here in Ashford we know residents want more from their town centre and the good news is there are many changes taking place or in the pipeline.

Our ambition is to build on Ashford's heritage as a market town, one that makes the most of its unique location, international connections and strong community spirit – a modern market town.

**But it's not just about pretty words
and grand visions – it's about action.**

**We'd like YOUR ideas and views on how we improve
Ashford town centre. Please fill in the form overleaf.**

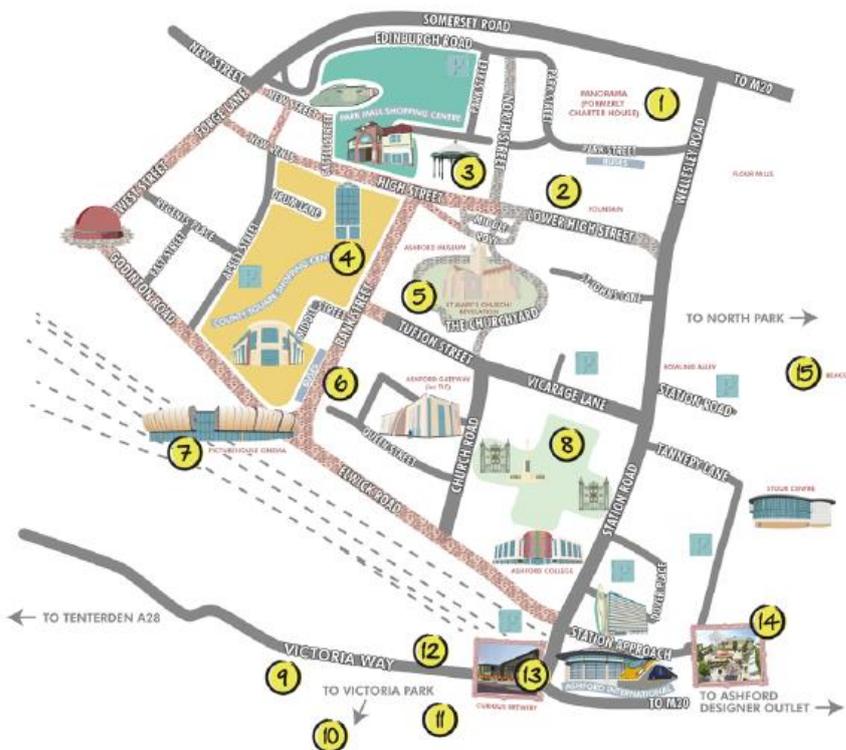
Or tell us your ideas at: www.ashford.gov.uk/towncentre



8.2 Appendix 2 – Town Centre Maps

What's happening now (this year)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>1 Next to Panorama Two additional blocks of apartments - construction underway</p> <p>2 Market (weekly) & Farmers Market (monthly)</p> <p>3 Programme of music on the Bandstand</p> <p>4 Christmas Festival Fire Day 17th November 2018</p> <p>5 Programme of shows and productions at Revolutions St. Mary's</p> <p>6 Snowdays Discover Ashford Autumn 2018</p> <p>7 Picturehouse Cinema 900 seats, 8 screen cinema 7 restaurants, cafes 58 bed Travelodge hotel 280 new parking spaces Queen Mary's Statue Opening 2018</p> <p>8 Fields of Battle Lands of Peace Exhibition throughout time in the Memorial Gardens</p> | <p>9 Riverside Park 660 homes - construction underway</p> <p>10 Create Festival 21st-24th July 2018 - Victoria Park HLF Bid</p> <p>11 Victoria Point 218 apartments, 120 bed hotel, 3 retail units</p> <p>12 Aldi Food Store Opening 2018</p> <p>13 Carriars Brewery Brewing and pub/restaurant Opening 2018</p> <p>14 Designer Outlet Expansion Additional 100,000 sq. ft. 35 new leasing brands, 6 restaurants Opening 2019</p> <p>15 Civic Beacon Lighting of the new civic beacon and party tributes in North Park</p> |
|--|---|



What's coming soon (within the next 3 years)

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>1 Park Mall Dropping refurbishment and management</p> <p>2 Police Station being retained and refurbished</p> <p>3 Elwick Place phase 2 Residential development of up to 200 homes</p> <p>4 Former Mecca building/Vicarage Lane car park We are currently looking at future options for this site</p> <p>5 Ashford College phase 1a 2,500m2 sustainable technology block, providing engineering, motor vehicle and plumbing and electrical courses</p> | <p>6 Station Road multi storey car park We are currently considering the viability of building and operating a multi-storey car park on this site</p> <p>7 The Coachworks A mixed-use business/retail space that could include a new social and cultural meeting place with a performance area, bars and restaurants</p> <p>8 Former Kent Wool Growers site A mixed-use site including new homes, public realm, riverside walkway and to bring Wood House (a Grade II listed building) back into use</p> <p>9 Pedestrian under path between the station and Designer Outlet</p> |
|---|---|



What we would like to see in the future



Here's a few ideas to get you started but we really would like to hear your ideas

- | | |
|--|---|
| Redevelopment of Park Mall shopping centre | Public art piece that becomes a national attraction |
| Children's play space (indoor soft play area) | Pedestrianisation of the lower high street |
| New public realm scheme in the upper high street | Refurbishment or redevelopment of the Stour Centre (dry side) |
| Digital town/Smart City – access info and services via an app | Next phase of the Commercial Quarter office development |
| Cycling and walking routes which start and finish in the town centre | Redevelopment of the station forecourt |
| Lighting to animate buildings and spaces at night | Bring a little bit of Disneyland Paris to the station/town |
| Outdoor flexible performance space | Open up the green spaces and animate them |
| Ashford College – phase 2 (higher education provision) | Venue to host international events and conferences |

Tell us your ideas for the future



8.3 Appendix 3 – Full analysis tables

Entertainment

| Entertainment, Leisure and Culture issues raised | No. of mentions |
|---|-----------------|
| Theatre | 159 |
| Restaurants | 71 |
| Live music and performances | 66 |
| Events/activities | 58 |
| Bars | 52 |
| Entertainment | 44 |
| Art (galleries, museums, exhibitions, investment) | 39 |
| Ice Rink | 31 |
| Activities/spaces for young people | 31 |
| Community hub/flexible space | 28 |
| Festivals/fairs | 22 |
| Cafes | 21 |
| Sports (table tennis, fitness groups etc) | 20 |
| Softplay/children's indoor play areas | 19 |
| Dissatisfaction with nightlife offer | 19 |
| Street performances (e.g. at the Bandstand) | 17 |
| Clubs | 17 |
| Culture | 14 |
| Pubs | 13 |
| Splash park | 13 |
| Dissatisfaction with current projects | 13 |
| Entertainment (night) | 11 |
| Comedy | 11 |
| Christmas | 11 |
| Dissatisfaction with leisure offer | 10 |
| Pop-up stands | 9 |
| Leisure | 7 |
| Water park | 6 |
| Cultural hub | 5 |
| Science (e.g. museums) | 5 |
| Outdoor cinema | 5 |
| Snow centre | 5 |
| Aquarium | 4 |
| Hire bike | 4 |
| New bingo hall/more bingo | 4 |
| Ballroom | 4 |
| Drones | 4 |
| Carnival | 3 |
| Play parks | 2 |
| Casino | 2 |
| Artificial beach | 2 |
| Theme events | 2 |
| Pantomime | 2 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Revelation | 2 |
| No culture | 2 |
| Dissatisfaction with Revelation as a theatre | 2 |
| Parks (general) | 1 |
| Outdoor pool | 1 |
| Lightshows | 1 |
| Star gazing | 1 |
| Cinema | 1 |
| Club (16+) | 1 |
| Crazy golf | 1 |
| Food court | 1 |
| Adult activities (e.g. parks designed for adults) | 1 |
| Bowling | 1 |
| Cinema | 1 |
| Laser tag | 1 |
| Go karting | 1 |
| Boxing events | 1 |
| Conventions | 1 |
| Darts comps | 1 |
| More Snowdogs | 1 |
| Another swimming centre | 1 |
| Outdoor exercise machines | 1 |
| Roller rink | 1 |
| Theme park | 1 |

Accessibility

| Accessibility issues mentioned | No. of mentions |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Free parking | 40 |
| Improve public transport | 33 |
| Cheaper parking | 29 |
| Ensure accessible to disabled | 26 |
| Traffic is a problem/barrier | 21 |
| More parking | 15 |
| Improve accessibility | 14 |
| Improve cycle routes | 13 |
| Pedestrianise the town | 13 |
| Limited time free parking | 12 |
| Parking is too expensive | 12 |
| Less traffic | 11 |
| More bus routes | 11 |
| Park and ride (disfavour for) | 11 |
| Dissatisfaction with shared space | 11 |
| Favour of international rail links | 10 |
| Improve roads | 9 |
| Easier accessibility needed | 9 |
| Better parking | 9 |
| Utilise the train station | 8 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Improve/change the traffic lights | 8 |
| Better paths | 8 |
| More buses | 8 |
| Little and often buses | 7 |
| Cobblestones and LHS paving | 7 |
| Accessible to all | 6 |
| Connect outlet to the town | 6 |
| Bus station | 6 |
| More disabled spaces | 6 |
| Accessibility is good already | 6 |
| Accessibility is a barrier | 5 |
| Park and ride (favour for) | 5 |
| Public transport to operate later | 5 |
| Parking is a barrier | 4 |
| Improve transport links | 4 |
| Keep the roads open | 4 |
| Cheaper public transport | 4 |
| Walking routes | 4 |
| Underground parking | 3 |
| Less parking | 3 |
| Tram system | 3 |
| Parent-child parking | 3 |
| Monorail | 2 |
| Ensure accessibility for pushchairs | 2 |
| More on street parking | 2 |
| Extend/improve shared space | 2 |
| Ensure safety for pedestrians | 2 |
| Wider paths | 2 |
| Link the station to town better | 2 |
| Cycle storage | 2 |
| Too many roadworks | 2 |
| Cheaper parking elsewhere | 2 |
| No pedestrianisation | 1 |
| Parking space size | 1 |
| Build a real ring road | 1 |
| Car parks open later | 1 |
| Ensure accessibility for older people | 1 |
| Easier to park | 1 |
| Bigger taxi rank | 1 |
| Don't build in the ring road | 1 |
| Parking charges enforced for too long | 1 |
| Get rid of NCP | 1 |
| Railway halt | 1 |
| Parking shouldn't be allowed outside Royal mail | 1 |
| East hill pavement | 1 |
| Crossing at Stour centre | 1 |
| No left turn on LHS | 1 |

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Parking policy should change | 1 |
| Too many taxi spaces | 1 |
| More cycle routes | 1 |
| Improve access to parks | 1 |
| Cable car | 1 |

Perceptions about Ashford Town

| Perceptions about Ashford Town | No. of mentions |
|--|-----------------|
| More enforcement/security/policing needed (general) | 43 |
| More safety | 39 |
| High volume of vacant shops | 23 |
| Rents are too high/should be lowered | 22 |
| ASB is a problem in Ashford | 16 |
| Dissatisfaction with ASB and safety | 15 |
| Ashford is not safe | 14 |
| Council should help the homeless more | 12 |
| The town/villages are too spread out | 11 |
| Ashford has a problem with drunks/street drinking | 11 |
| Homeless problem | 11 |
| Decrease crime | 11 |
| CCTV | 10 |
| Limited resources/infrastructure | 10 |
| Young people cause ASB | 7 |
| More enforcement/security/policing needed (at night) | 6 |
| Council doesn't listen | 6 |
| Council wastes money | 6 |
| Ashford has a reputation | 6 |
| "The town is intimidating" | 5 |
| Council is about making money (and that's bad) | 5 |
| Ashford has problems with drugs | 4 |
| Increasing population | 4 |
| Development is not in, but away from, the town | 4 |
| Ashford is too big/busy already | 3 |
| Council doesn't care | 3 |
| Problems with vandalism | 2 |
| Shops are moving/are located out of town | 2 |
| High ASB is just perceived | 2 |
| Council doesn't act | 2 |
| Make men wear shirts in the summer | 2 |
| Housing increasing | 2 |
| Out of town developments undermine town centre | 2 |
| Lower business start-up costs | 2 |
| Increased population means more ASB! | 1 |
| Fine businesses linked to ASB | 1 |
| High street needs to shrink | 1 |
| Too noisy | 1 |
| Crowd funded police | 1 |

| | |
|--|---|
| Truancy officer | 1 |
| Large companies don't care | 1 |
| Council doesn't support local business | 1 |
| Residential areas should be spacious | 1 |
| Youth dominate the town centre | 1 |
| Council has no plan | 1 |
| Council supresses culture | 1 |
| Ashford is a "clone town" | 1 |

General Improvements

| General Improvements | No. of mentions |
|---|-----------------|
| Cleanliness and general maintenance | 75 |
| Mecca bingo (use it) | 28 |
| Refurbish buildings | 19 |
| Better lighting | 14 |
| Outdoor seating at cafes and restaurants | 13 |
| Concerns about council services | 13 |
| Decorate/maintain shop fronts | 11 |
| Refurbish buildings | 10 |
| Improved/clearer signage | 9 |
| More benches and seating | 9 |
| Clear/improved/signage | 7 |
| More lighting | 6 |
| Booklets/information points/leaflets | 6 |
| More signage | 5 |
| Quarters | 5 |
| Public toilets | 5 |
| Dissatisfaction with certain locations | 5 |
| Build a University | 4 |
| Keep shops open later | 4 |
| More bins | 4 |
| Build bigger/taller buildings | 3 |
| "Modernisation" | 3 |
| CCTV | 3 |
| Employment | 3 |
| More infrastructure (hospitals etc) | 3 |
| Clean up grafitti | 3 |
| Build studios | 2 |
| Town maps | 2 |
| General TLC/upgrade | 2 |
| Invest in town | 2 |
| Mecca bingo (demolish it) | 2 |
| Lycee Francais School | 2 |
| Charity events/volunteer events | 2 |
| Hire consultants | 1 |
| Bring services (Uber, Deliveroo, Amazon etc.) | 1 |
| Fibre optic service | 1 |

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|-----------------------------------|---|
| "Reinvigorate" | 1 |
| Convert buildings | 1 |
| Covered walkways | 1 |
| Public Wifi | 1 |
| Move facilities (e.g. care homes) | 1 |
| Smoking areas | 1 |
| Revamp North Park | 1 |
| Digital/maps | 1 |
| Clean river | 1 |
| Schools | 1 |
| New builds should be good quality | 1 |
| Demolish builds (e.g. Park Mall) | 1 |
| No modernisation! | 1 |
| The dome | 1 |
| Improve railings | 1 |
| Showcase the Tank | 1 |
| Improve post office | 1 |
| No Smoking enforced | 1 |
| Rename North Park | 1 |
| "Little town" | 1 |
| Relocate TIC | 1 |
| Extend opening hours of TIC | 1 |
| Digital hub | 1 |

Business and Retail

| Business and Retail topics | No. of mentions |
|---|-----------------|
| Dissatisfaction with current offer | 48 |
| Independent shops | 46 |
| Primark | 29 |
| Quality shops | 25 |
| Big name brands | 23 |
| More shops | 20 |
| Variety shops/leisure | 19 |
| Local business | 14 |
| Reduce rent | 11 |
| Attract business | 8 |
| Tidy fronts | 5 |
| Walk-in health service | 5 |
| Shops open later/on Sundays | 3 |
| Good brands | 2 |
| Outlet | 2 |
| Companies involved in events | 2 |
| More business | 2 |
| Control which shops are allowed to open | 2 |
| More funding | 1 |
| Modern shops | 1 |
| More leisure | 1 |

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Connect shops | 1 |
| New shopping centre | 1 |
| Up to business where they open | 1 |
| No independent shops! | 1 |
| Bring back past business | 1 |
| Business Hub | 1 |
| No more shops! | 1 |

Experiences

| Types of experience suggested | No. of mentions |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Variety | 30 |
| Different/unique | 27 |
| Quality/better experiences | 20 |
| More to do/quantity | 19 |
| Welcoming | 15 |
| Interesting, fun and quirky | 14 |
| Create a positive atmosphere | 13 |
| Identity | 9 |
| Better appearances/more attractive | 8 |
| Stimulating and lively | 6 |
| Exciting | 4 |
| No appeal, negative atmosphere | 4 |
| Busy | 3 |
| Relaxing | 2 |
| Characterful | 2 |
| Cultural experiences | 1 |
| Modern and vibrant | 1 |

Target Groups

| Groups mentioned | No. of mentions |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| More for children | 44 |
| More for families | 34 |
| Inclusive of all | 31 |
| More for "young" | 22 |
| Bring in tourists | 17 |
| More for teens | 14 |
| More for adults | 10 |
| More for all | 10 |
| Involve kids in projects | 10 |
| Inclusive of families | 8 |
| Focus on locals | 7 |
| "enough for families already" | 6 |
| Bring in more families | 6 |
| More for old | 5 |
| Inclusive of the disabled | 5 |
| More for tourists | 4 |

| | |
|--|---|
| More for both young and old | 4 |
| More for the disabled | 3 |
| Inclusive of young | 3 |
| "There's nothing for older people!" | 3 |
| More for creative people | 2 |
| Inclusive of pet owners | 2 |
| Focus on families | 2 |
| Inclusive of old | 1 |
| Good for young and old | 1 |
| Bring in more children | 1 |
| Focus on specific ages | 1 |
| Nothing for teens | 1 |
| "Create a focus group" | 1 |
| Appeal to wealthy people | 1 |
| "Younger people should be on the town council" | 1 |
| Young entrepreneurs | 1 |
| Bring in students | 1 |
| More for women | 1 |
| Can't be everything to everyone | 1 |

Comparisons to Neighbouring Towns

| Towns or locations compared to | No. of mentions |
|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Canterbury | 43 |
| Maidstone | 23 |
| Folkestone | 21 |
| Faversham | 5 |
| Tenterden | 5 |
| London | 5 |
| Gillingham | 4 |
| Europe | 4 |
| Rye | 3 |
| Bluewater | 3 |
| "other towns | 3 |
| Yorkshire | 2 |
| Stratford (London) | 2 |
| Dorset | 2 |
| Broadstairs | 2 |
| Hythe | 2 |
| Bury St Edmunds | 1 |
| Belgium | 1 |
| Bromley | 1 |
| Louth | 1 |
| Hull | 1 |
| Liverpool | 1 |
| Spain | 1 |
| Chatham | 1 |
| Margate | 1 |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Dover | 1 |
| Rochester | 1 |
| Herne bay | 1 |
| Tonbridge Wells | 1 |
| Oxford | 1 |
| Cambridge | 1 |
| Deal | 1 |
| Sandwich | 1 |
| Westward cross | 1 |
| Brighton | 1 |
| Totnes | 1 |
| Lewes | 1 |
| Stroud | 1 |
| West Malling | 1 |
| Tonbridge | 1 |
| Milan | 1 |
| Grantham | 1 |

Heritage

| Heritage issues raised | No. of mentions |
|--|-----------------|
| Bring market back | 12 |
| New/more markets | 12 |
| More museums | 11 |
| Heritage is market town | 10 |
| Better market | 8 |
| Heritage is railway town | 7 |
| Indoor market | 7 |
| Market is low quality | 6 |
| Focus on history | 6 |
| Heritage is lost! | 5 |
| Promote history | 5 |
| Dissatisfaction with the current market (general comments) | 5 |
| Refurbish old builds | 4 |
| Railway museum | 4 |
| Dissatisfaction with tearing down old buildings | 4 |
| People don't know about heritage | 3 |
| Model railway | 2 |
| Invest in markets | 2 |
| Develop rail works | 2 |
| Contrast modern with old (CHECK) | 2 |
| Educate about heritage | 1 |
| Air museum | 1 |
| Festivals for heritage | 1 |
| No museums in ashford | 1 |
| Refurbish museums | 1 |
| Celebrate museums | 1 |
| More heritage | 1 |

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Promote markets | 1 |
| Famous Ashfordians | 1 |
| Permanent market | 1 |
| Market like before | 1 |
| Bigger market | 1 |
| Bigger museum | 1 |
| Evening market | 1 |
| French Brocante | 1 |
| Invest in museum | 1 |
| Market could be a USP | 1 |

Unique Selling Point

| Unique Selling Point | No. of mentions |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|
| Be different/unique | 26 |
| Create reasons to entice visitors | 23 |
| No one is attracted to the town | 11 |
| Designer Outlet is a USP | 10 |
| Designer centre takes custom away | 7 |
| Promote railway | 3 |
| Favour for the Outlet | 3 |
| Connect the town and Outlet | 3 |
| There is no USP | 3 |
| Disfavour for Outlet | 2 |
| Improved facilities offer as a USP | 1 |
| Music venues as a USP | 1 |
| Favour for railway | 1 |

Housing

| Housing issues raised | No. of mentions |
|---|-----------------|
| Dissatisfaction with current level of housing | 27 |
| Less housing/no more housing | 23 |
| More housing | 12 |
| No housing on green spaces | 6 |
| No housing in the town centre | 6 |
| Cheap housing | 5 |
| "There's too much housing" | 3 |
| No housing without new infrastructure | 3 |
| Limit height of builds | 2 |
| "More housing means more crime" | 1 |
| No flats | 1 |

Areas of Satisfaction

| Areas of satisfaction | No. of mentions |
|--|-----------------|
| Current Projects/Developments (Snowdogs, Elwick Place) | 38 |

| | |
|---|----|
| “Carry on with what you are doing” | 22 |
| Current facilities (e.g. library, memorial gardens) | 6 |
| Accessibility | 6 |
| Pride in the town | 6 |
| Environment (e.g. town planters, green space) | 5 |
| Cleanliness | 3 |

Community and Socialising

| Community and Socialising suggestions and issues | No. of mentions |
|--|-----------------|
| More opportunities to socialise | 21 |
| Encourage community | 17 |
| Inclusive | 14 |
| More community events/projects | 12 |
| Connect communities | 4 |
| Pride | 3 |
| Sense of belonging | 3 |
| Feeling of ownership | 2 |
| Community art | 2 |
| Togetherness | 2 |
| No community | 1 |
| No current social opportunities | 1 |
| Happy residents | 1 |
| Look after the community (e.g. by discouraging litter) | 1 |

Environmental Issues

| Environmental issues raised | No. of mentions |
|--|-----------------|
| More planters/flowerbeds | 12 |
| More green spaces | 11 |
| Satisfaction with planters/flowerbeds | 9 |
| Satisfied with green spaces | 8 |
| More trees | 7 |
| Create a green/eco-friendly town | 5 |
| More maintenance (e.g. trim trees/pathways) | 5 |
| Decrease pollution | 4 |
| Use the river more | 4 |
| Dissatisfaction with building on green space | 4 |
| Value the environment | 4 |
| Utilise solar panels/wind power | 2 |
| Protect environment | 2 |
| Get rid of planters/flowerbeds | 1 |
| Parks | 1 |
| Satisfaction with Aspire | 1 |
| Freecycle point | 1 |
| Conservation Advisory Committee | 1 |

Communication with the Council

| Communication Issues | No. of mentions |
|---|------------------------|
| Advertise events/facilities more | 23 |
| Engage more with residents/various groups | 11 |
| Use of social media | 11 |
| Dissatisfaction with current advertisements | 5 |
| Revamping communication | 2 |
| Council should do more | 2 |
| Satisfaction with Love Ashford | 1 |
| No more apps! | 1 |