



Case study 5: Whitstable Pilot Project - led by Whitstable Biennale

Expanding audiences to attract cultural tourists to Whitstable Biennale

Whitstable Biennale is a 16-day festival of performance, film and sound, which has been taking place every two years since 2000. The aim of the Whitstable Pilot Project was to grow the numbers coming to the festival via more engagement with the visitor economy. Opening up new access points, through joint working with The Beaneys House of Art and Knowledge (a venue with a loyal local audience), establishing a new visitor hub (Horsebridge) to curate a broader destination experience and a new target marketing campaign were central to expanding visitor numbers. Focusing on three specific market segments - (1) highly engaged cultural tourists from London; (2) Kent residents with a strong interest in culture and the arts; (3) less strongly motivated local residents- allowed them to balance the remit to be both inclusive, working to inspire the harder to reach groups and more 'market-oriented' to enhance the festival offer to more engaged cultural tourists. Furthermore, by cross-checking the data used in the promotional campaigns with information collected from people attending the events, the project was able to test the effectiveness of their approach, and reach a more nuanced understanding of the motivations and behaviours of different categories of festival visitor.

Key Outcomes

- 1 The festival hub in the Horsebridge Centre was a popular innovation, offering a welcoming space with artist-led café, cinema and crèche, where visitors could rest, recharge and get information about festival events and places to visit - enabling an enhanced curation of the festival and destination experience.
- 2 The new public programme at The Beaneys in Canterbury and at the festival in Whitstable (attracting 10,000 and 1,300 people respectively) created new local access points into the Biennale, with a focus on local audiences new to contemporary art - extending the reach of the festival.
- 3 Data generated through the targeted marketing approaches, piloted by the project, offer valuable new insights into Kent's cultural tourism market, and will be a powerful resource for evaluating the effectiveness of programming and events.

Culture Kent - a 3 year project funded by Arts Council England and VisitEngland, as part of the Cultural Destinations Programme.

Led by **Turner Contemporary** the aims of Culture Kent were to showcase Kent's cultural assets; extend reach by attracting new audiences; create new strategic relationships and develop the information and knowledge core required to strengthen the Kent cultural tourism offer.

Culture Kent developed 6 pilot projects to test new initiatives and cultural offers and 6 case studies have been developed to disseminate lessons learnt.



Issues & opportunities

Cultural tourism - a fresh way of thinking about festival audiences.

In addition to programming great arts and events, the Biennale has a remit to be inclusive – engaging the ‘hard to reach’ audiences – and to have a beneficial impact on the local economy. The Culture Kent Project provided the impetus and the resources to think holistically about the entire audience, with the project’s cultural tourism focus prompting a fresh approach to exploring the different categories of festival visitor, and what they want. A series of conversations initiated with local organisations in Whitstable – including shops, creative businesses/spaces, accommodation providers, restaurants and pubs – saw the emergence of a network of local partners willing to collaborate over their shared interest in Whitstable’s cultural tourism. Working with this group also enabled the Biennale to trial some of their festival marketing, and corrected a number of their working assumptions about the kind of promotional material required to reach some of their target groups.

The extensive preparatory period, combined with the thorough evaluation of the initiatives trialled in the pilot project, have provided important learning opportunities for Whitstable Biennale. The project was successful in exceeding its headline objectives – increasing visitor numbers and length of stay in key target markets. Additionally, using Audience Finder postcode data to cross-tabulate participation in particular events enabled the festival organisation to evaluate the effectiveness of their programming and promotional strategies in a much more nuanced way. Learning from this experience will enable them to continue to segment their audience even more effectively in the future, and use it to tailor their programming.

“This project has enabled us to integrate our marketing and programming approaches, and to directly test the impact on audience development.”

Catherine Herbert, Deputy Director, Whitstable Biennale



Key learnings

The Culture Kent Project has enabled the Whitstable Biennale to fill a number of knowledge gaps and to gain a deeper understanding of their audiences. The additional focus on cultural tourists, as festival visitors, allowed a more holistic view of their audiences and how an enhanced destination offer could support the role of the Biennale in Whitstable. Involvement with Culture Kent has initiated a change in perspective and a realisation that authentically curated art and target marketing can work side by side – ‘we definitely learned that you can still be completely authentically focused, AND tailor your offer to the audience’ (Catherine Herbert). They also learnt that embedding themselves more within the locality and curating a broader festival experience could be an important part in maintaining their resilience and sense of purpose.

Legacy and ways forward

Catherine Herbert, Biennale Deputy Director, endorses the benefits of the project, reflecting that “the Culture Kent Pilot has enabled us to see our contribution to cultural tourism more clearly, offering us a new way to think about our audiences.” For the future, this will include development of the Biennale’s public programme and targeted marketing plans, and a stronger role in supporting and shaping the local cultural tourism offer. Secondly, the Biennale is determined to maintain a central Festival ‘Hub’ space, which proved so effective in 2016 in curating both the festival experience, and the wider cultural destination.



Written by - **Tourism and Events Research Hub**, Canterbury Christ Church University, as part of the Culture Kent Research Programme – delivered in partnership with **Visit Kent**



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