Medway COUNCIL
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# Cabinet

## 22 September 2026

# Continuation of the Grow in Kent - Visitor Economy and Inward Investment Service


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| Portfolio Holder: | Councillor Harinder Mahil, Portfolio Holder for Economic and Social Regeneration and Inward Investment |
| | Councillor Nina Gurung, Portfolio Holder for Heritage, Culture and Leisure |
| Report from: | Adam Bryan, Director of Place |
| Author: | Paul Cowell, Chief Culture Officer<br>Sean Henry, Economic Development Manager |



## Summary

This report seeks Cabinet approval for Medway Council to continue its contribution to the jointly delivered with Kent County Council Grow in Kent service, incorporating the Visit Kent and Invest Kent functions. The service supports visitor economy growth, inward investment, business engagement and place promotion across Kent and Medway.

Continuation of the current model beyond March 2027 will maintain momentum, support economic growth, protect stakeholder relationships and ensure continuity pending local government reorganisation and devolution arrangements.

Performance will be managed through an agreed annual Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework and governance arrangements between Medway Council and Grow in Kent.


## 1. Recommendations

1.1. The Cabinet is requested to approve the continuation of Medway Council participation in the Grow in Kent service.

1.2. The Cabinet is requested to approve the continuation of Medway Council financial contributions under existing arrangements.

1.3. The Cabinet is requested to authorise the Director of Place to implement the decision and oversee ongoing partnership arrangements.

1.4. The Cabinet is requested to approve the KPI framework attached at Appendix 1 to the report and the associated performance monitoring arrangements.

## 2. Suggested reasons for decisions

2.1. The service supports economic growth, attracts investment, promotes Medway as a destination and provides continuity during a period of local government transition.

## 3. Budget and policy framework

3.1. The proposal supports the One Medway Council Plan 2024–2028, particularly the priority of "Benefitting from good education opportunities, quality jobs and a growing economy".

3.2. The continuation of the Grow in Kent service helps to attract inward investment, support business growth, increase visitor spend, strengthen Medway's economy, support business rates generation and create employment opportunities for local residents.

3.3. The service also contributes to the Council's vision of making Medway a place where people are proud to live, work, learn and visit. The decision is considered to be within the Council's policy and budget framework, subject to approved budget provision.

## 4. Background

4.1. Following the closure of Visit Kent and Locate in Kent in 2025, Kent County Council and Medway Council established the Grow in Kent service to deliver visitor economy and inward investment functions. The service has successfully relaunched Visit Kent and Invest Kent, delivered major marketing campaigns, strengthened investor engagement and rebuilt stakeholder networks.

4.2. The visitor economy across Kent and Medway is worth approximately £4.1 billion annually and supports over 82,000 jobs. The service provides coordinated destination management, place marketing and investment promotion activities.

4.3. Medway has one million square meters in allocated employment space in the emerging local plan. Investors and developers are more inclined to approach and work with dedicated teams when looking to locate in a region.

4.4. The Grow in Kent team delivers Kent and Medway's in-house visitor economy (Visit Kent) and inward investment (Invest Kent) functions following the closure of Visit Kent and Locate in Kent in September 2025. These services provide a coordinated approach to destination management, place promotion and inward investment, forming a core part of Kent County Council's approach with Medway Council to economic growth and competitiveness.

4.5. Key decisions were taken by Kent County Council and Medway Council in 2025 to bring the services in house, hosted by KCC with initial arrangements put in place until 31 March 2027. The in-house delivery model has already gained wide support from stakeholders and industry and remains essential for supporting and promoting Kent & Medway's visitor economy offer and investment offer. It is recommended that the current arrangements continue to avoid any disruption in delivery and maintain this strategically important function for the county.

## 5. The Grow in Kent Service

5.1. Services were previously delivered through externally commissioned organisations – Visit Kent and Locate in Kent. Following the closure of both organisations in September 2025, Kent County Council, in partnership with Medway Council, established a new in-house, partnership-led service (Grow in Kent) to ensure continuity of key functions. This transition was delivered at pace to retain specialist capability, protect established networks and relationships, and ensure that the county continued to be represented in competitive national and international markets. It should be noted that the new service has considerably less resource both financial and staffing than the previous organisations with a team of only six officers forming the in-house team compared to more than 25 staff working at Locate in Kent and Visit Kent.

5.2. The Grow in Kent model brings together visitor economy and inward investment functions within a single, integrated service. This approach aligns destination management, place marketing and investment promotion behind a shared strategic narrative, enabling Kent and Medway to present a clearer, more consistent and more competitive offer to investors, businesses and visitors. It also strengthens coordination across local partners and supports delivery at the scale of the functional economic area, in line with national policy expectations and the emerging devolution agenda.

5.3. Since its establishment, the service has focused on stabilising delivery and rebuilding core capability following a period of disruption. This has included re-establishing key communication channels, securing and deploying legacy assets (including digital platforms and brand), rebuilding stakeholder and partner engagement, and restoring a coordinated approach to business support, sector engagement and place promotion. Engagement with district partners, businesses and industry stakeholders has been a key component of this work, ensuring that delivery reflects local priorities and opportunities across Kent and Medway.

5.4. The service has now moved beyond initial stabilisation and has begun to deliver a programme of activity that is re-establishing Kent and Medway's external profile and market presence.

5.5. Within the visitor economy, recent activity has included the relaunch of Visit Kent in May 2026 with industry stakeholders, supported by targeted sector engagement activity, including county-wide partner events bringing together tourism businesses and stakeholders. Three destination campaigns have been delivered including activity with London St Pancras resulting in more than 13m impressions, a place-marketing campaign ("The Kent Coast: More Than You've Heard") has been launched with 1.6m impressions across digital platforms during the first month and a 'Kent Rediscovered' campaign in nearby counties leading to 2.8m impressions. Such campaigns result in increased visitor number and spend and significant benefits for the local economy. The team has also facilitated several journalist and influencer visits and has been working with industry body 'UK Inbound' to raise the profile of the county's tourism offer to a wide range of audiences.

5.6. For inward investment, the Invest Kent function has been re-established with a renewed focus on pipeline development (currently some 200 business leads), investor engagement and the promotion of strategic opportunities across the county. This has included:

- The launch of a new Invest Kent website, providing a single, coherent entry point for investors and bringing together priority sectors, commercial property and development opportunities.
- The re-established Kent's presence at national investment events, including participation in UKREiiF (The UK's Real Estate Investment and Infrastructure Forum), where activity included hosting two drinks events sponsored by existing developers and investors in Kent and engaging with national partners as well as showcasing an investment prospectus. This has supported the generation of new commercial leads and strengthened relationships with key national organisations.
- Attendance at the International Food and Drink event at Excel London supporting a key growing Medway industry.

5.7. An early success is new IWG workspace provision at Chatham Dockside with multiple advanced manufacturing and clean energy leads in development.

5.8. Plans are also underway for a new corporate partnership programme to enhance opportunities to deliver with resources beyond the combined KCC and Medway budgets allocated. 46% of all property enquires received since reestablishing the service were for Medway based growth or relocation.

5.9. Looking ahead, the service will build on this initial delivery phase through a continued programme of marketing campaigns, partner engagement and investment promotion activity. This includes the:

- further development of the Visit Kent destination management approach, ongoing campaign activity to drive visitor numbers and spend;
- continued strengthening of the Invest Kent pipeline through targeted sector engagement and promotion of investible opportunities.

5.10. A key focus on future opportunities for North Kent specifically has been developed into an investor prospectus highlighting major infrastructure opportunities such as the Lower Thames Crossing. Alongside this, the service will continue to develop its partnership and governance arrangements, including the establishment of an oversight board and expansion of commercial partnerships, in order to enhance sustainability and impact.

## 6. Continuing the Service

6.1. The progress achieved to date is contingent on maintaining continuity of delivery, capability and market presence. The services operate in highly competitive national and international environments, where visibility, relationships and pipeline development are built incrementally over time. Any interruption or scaling back of provision at this stage would risk undermining recent progress, including the loss of momentum following the relaunch of Visit Kent and Invest Kent, disruption to campaign activity and stakeholder engagement, and a reduction in Kent and Medway's ability to compete effectively for visitors and investment.

6.2. Ceasing the service at the end of the financial year would negatively impact business and stakeholder confidence, particularly given the recent transition from previous delivery arrangements. The service is reliant on a combination of specialist expertise, established relationships and coordinated activity across partners, all of which would be difficult to re-establish if lost. A reduction in service capacity would diminish the effectiveness of destination marketing and inward investment promotion, weaken the pipeline of opportunities, and reduce the overall economic impact achieved through these functions.

6.3. Maintaining the current model therefore provides stability at a critical point in the service's development, enabling Kent County Council and partners to build on early delivery, embed recent gains and continue strengthening Kent and Medway's position as a competitive location to visit, invest and do business. This is particularly important in the context of evolving national policy, Local Government Reorganisation and devolution, where maintaining a coherent, county-wide approach to economic development remains a key consideration.

## 7. Options

7.1. Option 1: Cease participation in the service. Not recommended due to loss of economic development capacity and reduced competitiveness.

7.2. Option 2: Reduce participation and support. Not recommended as this would reduce impact, weaken stakeholder confidence and limit strategic outcomes.

7.3. Option 3: Continue the current delivery model. Recommended as it provides continuity, value for money and ongoing economic benefits. Ensure that agreed split of service and KPI's as per appendix 1 are monitored, delivered and reviewed.

## 8. Advice and analysis

8.1. This option proposes continuing the current in-house delivery model for the Visitor Economy (Visit Kent) and Inward Investment (Invest Kent) service until such time that the successor local government arrangements are implemented through Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) and devolution arrangements. The service will transfer to the successor authority in accordance with statutory arrangements, thus ensuring continuity of delivery. The detailed future operating model will be determined by the successor body.

8.2. It maintains continuity of delivery, protects recent investment in the service, and supports ongoing economic impact through inward investment and visitor activity. It also ensures stability during a period of structural change and allows time to design a long-term successor model.

8.3. This option provides the best balance of impact, value for money and strategic alignment and is therefore recommended.

8.4. Performance of the Grow in Kent service will be monitored through an agreed annual Key Performance Indicator (KPI) framework between Medway Council and Grow in Kent, attached at Appendix B. The framework includes measures relating to visitor economy promotion, business engagement, inward investment, strategic partnership working and destination marketing activity.

8.5. Progress against the agreed KPIs will be reviewed regularly through officer engagement, attendance by Medway Council officers at quarterly Grow in Kent Board meetings and quarterly briefings for the relevant Cabinet Member(s). An annual priority-setting session involving Grow in Kent representatives, Council officers and Cabinet Members will also be held to review performance and agree priorities for the forthcoming year.

8.6. The KPI framework (Appendix 1) provides a transparent mechanism for assessing the value and impact of the Council's investment in the service and ensuring activity remains aligned with Medway's economic development and visitor economy priorities.

8.7. A Diversity Impact Assessment (Appendix 2) has identified no significant adverse impacts. Continued service delivery is expected to support inclusive economic growth and opportunities for residents and businesses.

## 9. Risk management

| Risk | Description | Action to avoid or mitigate risk | Risk rating |
|---|---|---|---|
| Loss of service continuity | If funding or participation in the Grow in Kent service ceases, Medway would | Continue current arrangements | B2 |

| Risk | Description | Action to avoid or mitigate risk | Risk rating |
|---|---|---|---|
| | lose access to a coordinated visitor economy and inward investment function, resulting in disruption to ongoing programmes, relationships and economic development activity. | | |
| Reduced stakeholder confidence | Businesses, tourism partners and commercial stakeholders may lose confidence in Medway's commitment to economic growth if the service is reduced or discontinued, potentially affecting future partnership investment and engagement. | Maintain investment and engagement activity. | B2 |
| Reduced inward investment and visitor growth | A reduction in promotion and investment attraction activity could lead to fewer business enquiries, lower levels of investment, reduced visitor numbers and decreased economic benefits for Medway. | Continue coordinated promotion and marketing activity | B2 |

For risk rating, please refer to the following table:

| **Likelihood** | **Impact:** |
|---|---|
| A Very likely<br>B Likely<br>C Unlikely<br>D Rare | 1 Critical<br>2 Major<br>3 Moderate<br>4 Minor |

## 10. Consultation

10.1. If the service has been developed and delivered in consultation with local authorities, tourism businesses, investors, business groups and industry stakeholders across Kent and Medway. Feedback has been supportive of continuing the current model.

## 11. Climate change implications

11.1. There are no significant direct climate change implications arising from this decision. Sustainable tourism, economic development, clean energy and digital engagement opportunities will continue to be considered within service delivery.

## 12. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) implications

12.1. The contract extension will expire 31 March 2028. It is a Kent and Medway service provision with KCC currently representing Dartford and Gravesham.

12.2. Following the announcement of the pause on the 7 September 2026 officers will monitor the on-going situation and will consider any relevant impacts as they arise.

## 13. Financial implications

13.1. KCC and Medway Council has supported Visit Kent and (formerly) Locate in Kent services for around 25 years but their contributions have reduced significantly over the years.

13.2. The core, minimal viable service is currently funded through a combination of contributions from Kent County Council (£405,000 per annum) and Medway Council (£71,000 per annum). Alongside this, £140,000 of external income from industry stakeholders is supporting additional activity above the core service to enhance business support and promotional activity. This contribution also reflects industry confidence and support for the core service offer and industry would not invest without the core service being supported.

13.3. The cost of the Grow Kent Contract will be £71,000 in 27/28 and this is currently allowed for in our base budget.

13.4. The continuation of the service represents an extension of the existing funding approach rather than the introduction of a new cost pressure. The core funding supports the minimum viable service, while stakeholder contributions enable enhanced delivery.

## 14. Legal implications

14.1. The Council has powers to promote economic, social and environmental wellbeing within its area. Continuation of the existing partnership arrangements gives rise to no significant additional legal implications, subject to compliance with the Council's constitutional and procurement requirements.

## Lead officer contact

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## Appendices

Appendix 1 – Grow in Kent Partnership Framework KPIs
Appendix 2 – Diversity Impact assessment

## Background papers

Kent & Medway Economic Framework https://www.kent.gov.uk/about-the-council/strategies-and-policies/service-specific-policies/economic-regeneration-and-planning-policies/kent-and-medway-economic-framework

Kent Destination Management Plan https://visitkentbusiness.co.uk/kent-destination-management-plan/