

Green Pilgrimage

North Downs Way & Via Francigena Investment Evaluation

Pilot Action Test and Trial Report

December 2021



The Via Francigena Pilgrim Route and the North Downs Way National Trail



The Via Francigena pilgrim route starts at Canterbury Cathedral and follows the North Downs Way to Dover and continues to Rome following an ancient pilgrim route. The Green Pilgrimage Project, funded by Interreg Europe European Regional Development has co-financed investments on the Via Francigena section of the North Downs Way National Trail including three artworks, 4 information panels and new route signage. These are all designed to enrich this pilgrim route for visitors, make the area more attractive for longer

stays and to raise awareness of Kent as a pilgrim and long-distance walking destination. Interreg Europe has funded these as part of a Pilot Action funding programme 2020-2021 to trial initiatives designed through interregional learning as part of the main Green Pilgrimage Project 2017-2019.

This report will assess the following in relation of the Green Pilgrimage Investments in Kent

1. Consultation on design concept and use throughout 2020 and 2021 with stakeholders, districts, and consumers.
2. Other district interest and consultation on VF art installations with a view to supporting similar on their sections of the trail e.g., Ashford particularly, Dover and Canterbury non-VF sections, and other districts on trial too.
3. The artworks and investments will have an impact on increased visitor numbers to the trail and thus a positive economic impact on the area

Our research shows that visitors stay longer where there are more attractions and spend more in local accommodation, shops and restaurants. Kent Downs AONB Unit ran a series of consultations against these investments to test the concept, the design and the impact. The results of these test and trial consultations are detailed in this report.

Meetings with districts and stakeholders we held throughout 2020 and 2021 to consult on investment design and to advise on progress. Discussions re replication of activities in other districts were discussed and encouraged subject to the successful installation of the Via Francigena section of the North Downs Way. Via Francigena investment progress was discuss at District Stakeholder Meetings, external EXPERIENCE project partnership meetings, Kent Downs AONB Joint Advisory Committee Meetings, and North Downs Way Trail Partnership Meetings during Feb, Mar, May, June, Aug, Sep and Nov 2020 and Jan, Mar, May, Jun, Sep and Dec 2021. Consumer research was also conducted in June 2021 and the Green Pilgrimage offer and investments were taken to the British Tourism Fair in September 2021 to assess trade interest in the pilgrimage offer being developed. Finally, a post installation survey was conducted In December 2021 to consult stakeholders and consumers on the quality, installation, and impact of the investments.

The consultations were primarily concerned with assessing if other districts on the North Downs Way would welcome similar investments in their districts with a view to attracting more visitors to spend more and stay longer and thus strengthening support for local economies.

Stakeholder, District and Partner Meetings

There are 13 districts within the Kent Downs AONB and 9 districts covered by the North Downs Way National Trail. All districts welcomed the investments during meetings and consultations. Districts were surprised by the popularity of the Pilgrimage theme and welcomed proposals to include more information along the trail. All North Downs Way districts approved the proposal to include pilgrim and trail information along each section of the North Downs Way trail. It was agreed that Via Francigena information panels once finalised and installed would form the basis for consultation for 15 North Downs Way gateway information panels at each stage of the North Downs Way National Trail from Surrey to the Via Francigena section at Dover and Canterbury. Art installations were agreed in the Surrey section of the trail. Installations in Ashford were also agreed once the Via Francigena ones were installed and are programmed for 2022. Other districts are also interested, and funding sources are being discussed.

British Tourism Fair 2021 Pilgrimage Stand

On the 21st and 22nd September the work of the Green Pilgrimage including the Pilot Actions was brought to the Travel Trade. Over 70 travel trade contacts were made showing an interest in pilgrimage products and the North Downs National Trail and investments.

The Green Pilgrimage stand at the British Tourism and Travel Show was strategically placed in a key location opposite the keynote stage, where footfall was high. The stand stood out and enticed visitors as well as other stand holders to come and speak to us. The show provided the opportunity for the team to talk to the travel trade about the Green Pilgrimage project, pilgrimage as a product theme and sustainable tourism. This is a brand-new concept for the trade, which was well received. A German publication by the name of British Travel published a piece on pilgrimage in Kent because of a contact made at the show.

The trade was particularly interested in the development of artworks as well as the development of alternative, sustainable accommodation for walkers.

Consumer Research on Pilgrimage

The research was conducted in June 2021 and reached 9.9million impressions. The Research assessed theme interest amongst consumers interested in visiting the countryside within a 2.5 hr drive time of the Kent Downs AONB and by association the North Downs Way National Trail which runs through the Kent Downs protected landscape. Pilgrimage had the one of the highest performing CRR (click through rate) amongst the 9 themes tested.

Creative – overall CTR

FABBRICA

The best performing thematic creative was **Sports & Fitness Location Led** at over 0.1% followed by **Pilgrimage Informational** at just above 0.1% CTR. **Sports & Fitness** was generally the best performing.



1 Sports & Fitness Location Led

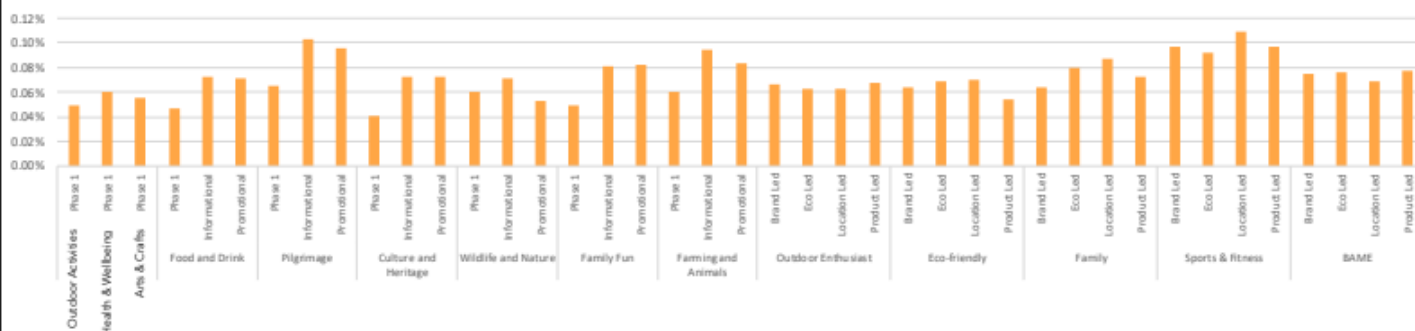


2 Pilgrimage Informational



3 Sports & Fitness Brand Led

CTR



Source: MIQ

Overall Pilgrimage featured in all 3 of the top performing indicators showing a strong visitor interest in the theme. The popularity of the pilgrimage theme is encouraging for its continued growth within the tourism sector; perhaps reflecting increasing interest in themes of wellbeing and sustainability that pilgrimage incorporates.

Key research takeaways are shown in the graphic below.

Key takeaways

1

Sports & Fitness and Pilgrimage achieved the highest CTRs at 0.1% and 0.09% respectively, followed by Farming & Animals at 0.08%.

2

The best performing thematic creative was Sports & Fitness Location Led at above 0.1% followed by Pilgrimage Informational and Sports & Fitness was generally the best performing.

3

970x250 was the best performing Ad Format across most themes. 300x250 performed best on Pilgrimage. 320x50 performed best on Sports & Fitness but generally performed less well than desktop formats.

Green Pilgrimage Survey

This post installation survey assessed if people thought the Pilot Action investments individually and collectively would achieve their stated objectives of attracting more people to the trail, having a positive economic impact, if there should be more of these kinds of investments and if they would specifically support these kinds of investments in their districts.

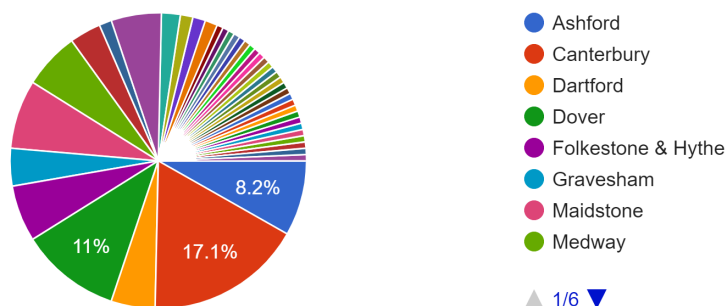
Kent District Representation

All districts were represented in the consultation providing information across all sections of the North Downs Way in Kent.

Which District do you live in?

2) Which district/locality do you live in?

146 responses

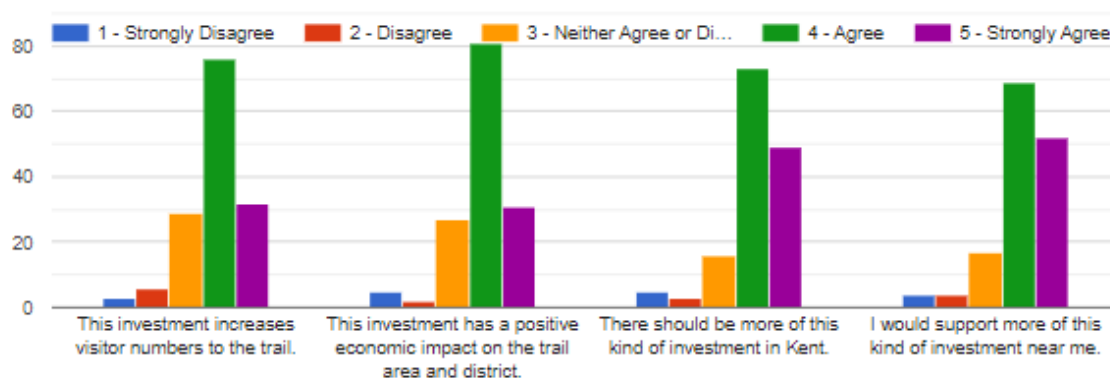


Via Francigena Information Panels

The survey showed support for all questions in relation to the Via Francigena Information Panels

Investment 1 - Information Panels

4) On a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree) please rate the Via Francigena on the North Downs Way information panels above against the following criteria:



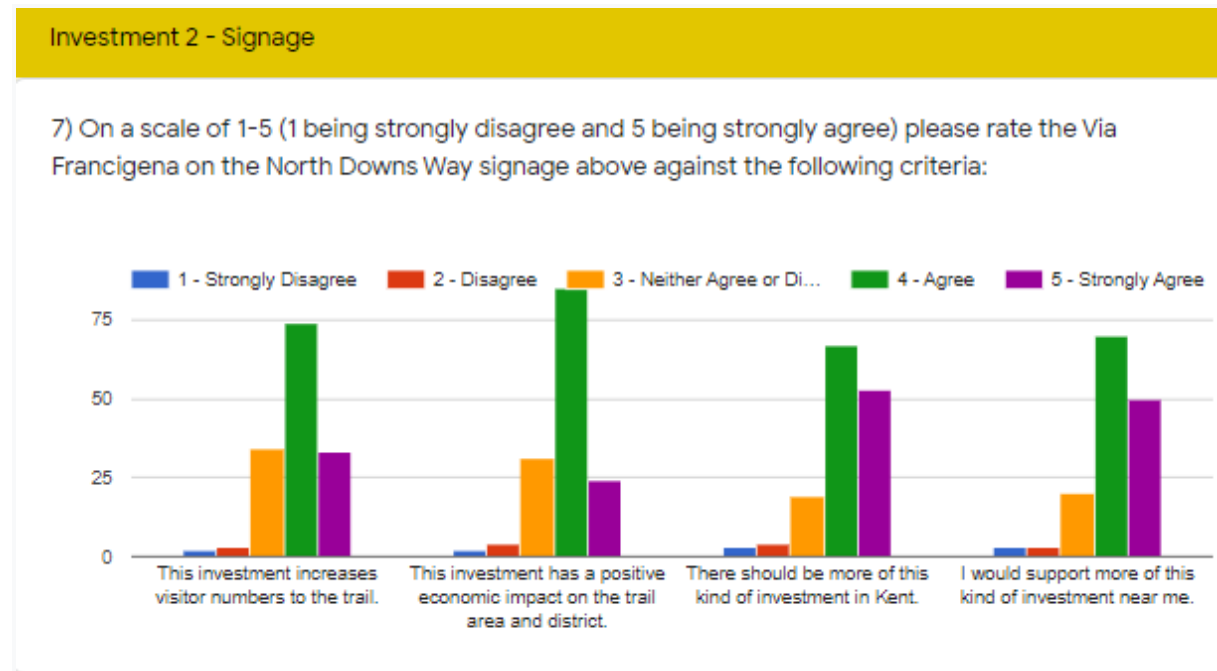
Some suggested improvements to the panels included:

- Use of QR codes so visitors can download info easily and take that with them as they walk away and/or offer them further sources of information.
-

- Adding digital information, audio for the deaf and braille for the blind.

Via Francigena Signage

The survey showed strong support for all questions in relation to branded signage of the Via Francigena section of the North Downs Way National Trail. There was particular support for more similar investments throughout Kent.



Some specific comments on the signage included:

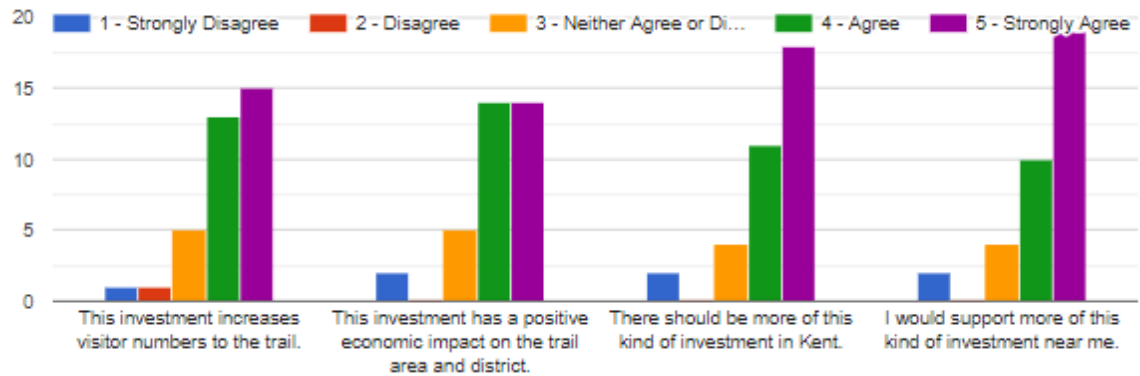
- Signage is simple and clear - maybe some information panels need to be distributed along the route to explain what the Via Francigena is and where it goes.
-
- More signage would give greater confidence for walkers
-
- It is good to have plenty of signage along the route

Art Installations

There was particularly strong support for the art installations, particularly supporting more similar investments throughout the North Downs Way National Trail.

Investment 3 - Art Installations

10) On a scale of 1-5 (1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree) please rate the Via Francigena on the North Downs Way Art Installations above against the following criteria:



Some specific comments in relation to the Art Installations included:

- Variety of designs is great. More please!
-
- I think the pieces in place are fantastic, true art work. More of the same if you are going to invest in the future.
-
- More of them along the route and provide information leaflets on the Via Francigena at Tourist offices etc. with pictures of the art works
-
- Please add more seating along the trail, if only a picnic bench or fallen tree / carved log.

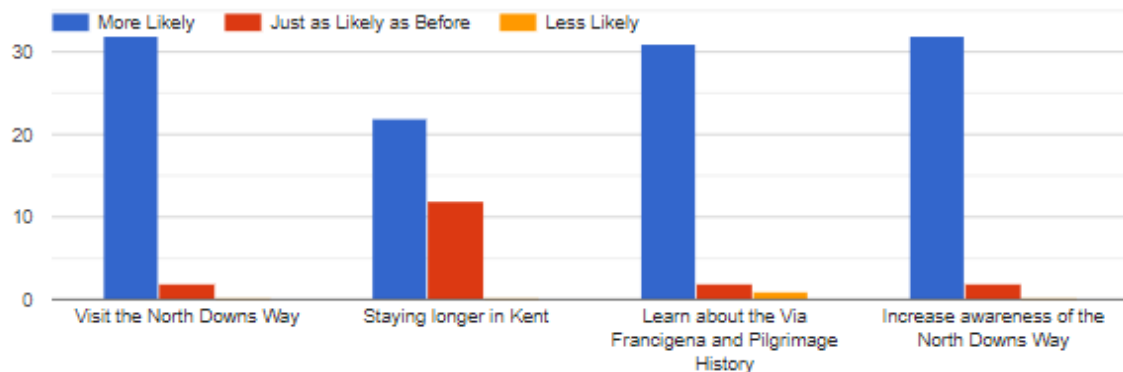
All Investments

Finally the survey asked questions regarding the overall impact of all the investments, if they will encourage more visitors, if Kent districts would welcome similar investments, and if they will generate a positive economic impact in the area.

The vast majority of respondents said more visitors would visit the trail as a result of the investments.

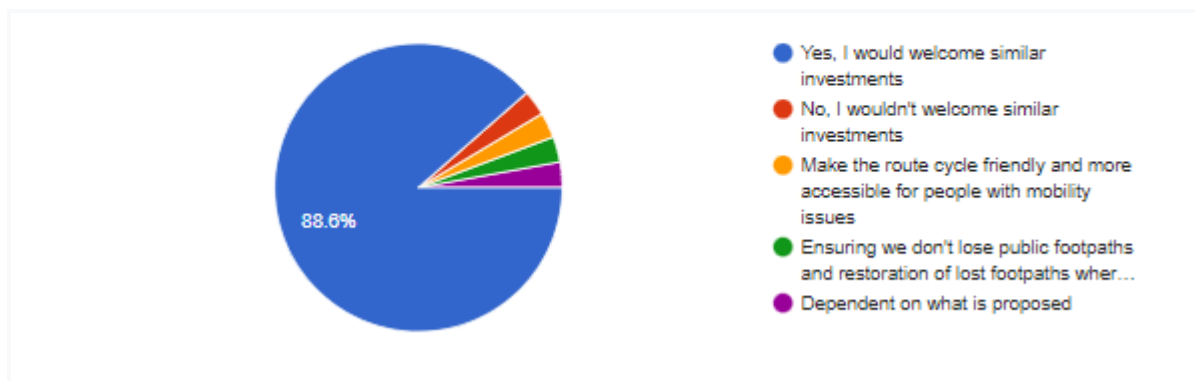
All Via Francigena on the North Downs Way National Trail Investments

13) Please let us know if you think these investments are more or less likely to encourage you or visitors to do the following...



Would you welcome similar investments in your district?

More than 86% of respondents said they would welcome similar investments in their districts.



Some specific comments related to these questions included:

- *I would like to see them in accessible and beautiful locations that will enable more people to experience the beauty of the trail. For example looking out from Blue Bell Hill or along Medway valley Looking across to the Darnley estate.*
-
- *Art pieces, info boards and more signage on the NDW between Hollingbourne and Charing please.*
-

- *More signage, information panels and art works along the rest of the North Downs Way in Kent. More could be done to promote other routes that connect with the North Downs Way like the Stour Valley Way*
-
- *The route lacks budget accommodation the type of which you would find on Pilgrim Trail across Europe - hostels, bunk houses and other modest accommodations. The South East of England compared to other destinations is very expensive and not easy to plan your route on a budget.*

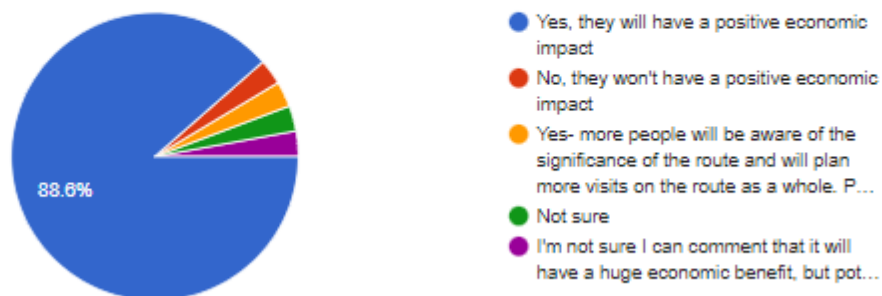
Do you think these Via Francigena and North Downs Way investments will have a positive economic impact in the area?

Over 88% of people said that the investments will have a positive economic impact on the area.

17) Do you think these Via Francigena and North Downs Way investments will have a positive economic impact in the area?



35 responses



Some specific comments related to this question included:

- *I think they form a talking point so that visitors will discuss with or share photos with others and that will encourage them to visit. If the investments inform people about the route then they take away more than just a lovely walk.*
-
- *Properly promoted they will bring visitors to the trail. Those visitors will need food and rest which they can obtain from businesses in the area.*
-
- *Encouraging the use and enjoyment of long-distance trails is important for appreciation of the countryside and nature, physical fitness and mental well-being, understanding of heritage and increasing tourism. National /local government should do more to promote these trails as they do on the continent. We have walked similar trails whilst on holiday in*

France. They have always been well promoted with signs and information and tourist literature.

Conclusions and Summary

Consultation shows that the Green Pilgrimage Pilot Action investments on the Via Francigena section of the North Downs Way National Trail have been successful. Stakeholders and partners have been interested in exploring options to fund similar investments in their districts. The Travel Trade interest in the investments shows their economic impact despite the COVID-19 pandemic, and the survey shows overwhelming support for the initiatives and their replication within Kent Districts.

The Kent Downs AONB will be replicating the investments in Surrey and Ashford districts in 2022 and are exploring funding options for the same in other districts.



Monumenta Romana by Charles Holland, Waldershare, Kent



After the Black Gold by Channel, Woolage



Sedile Francigena by Christopher Daniels, Barham



Information Boards, Sheperdswell



North Downs Way / Via Francigena Signage

Prepared by Catherine Bradley
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Kent County Council