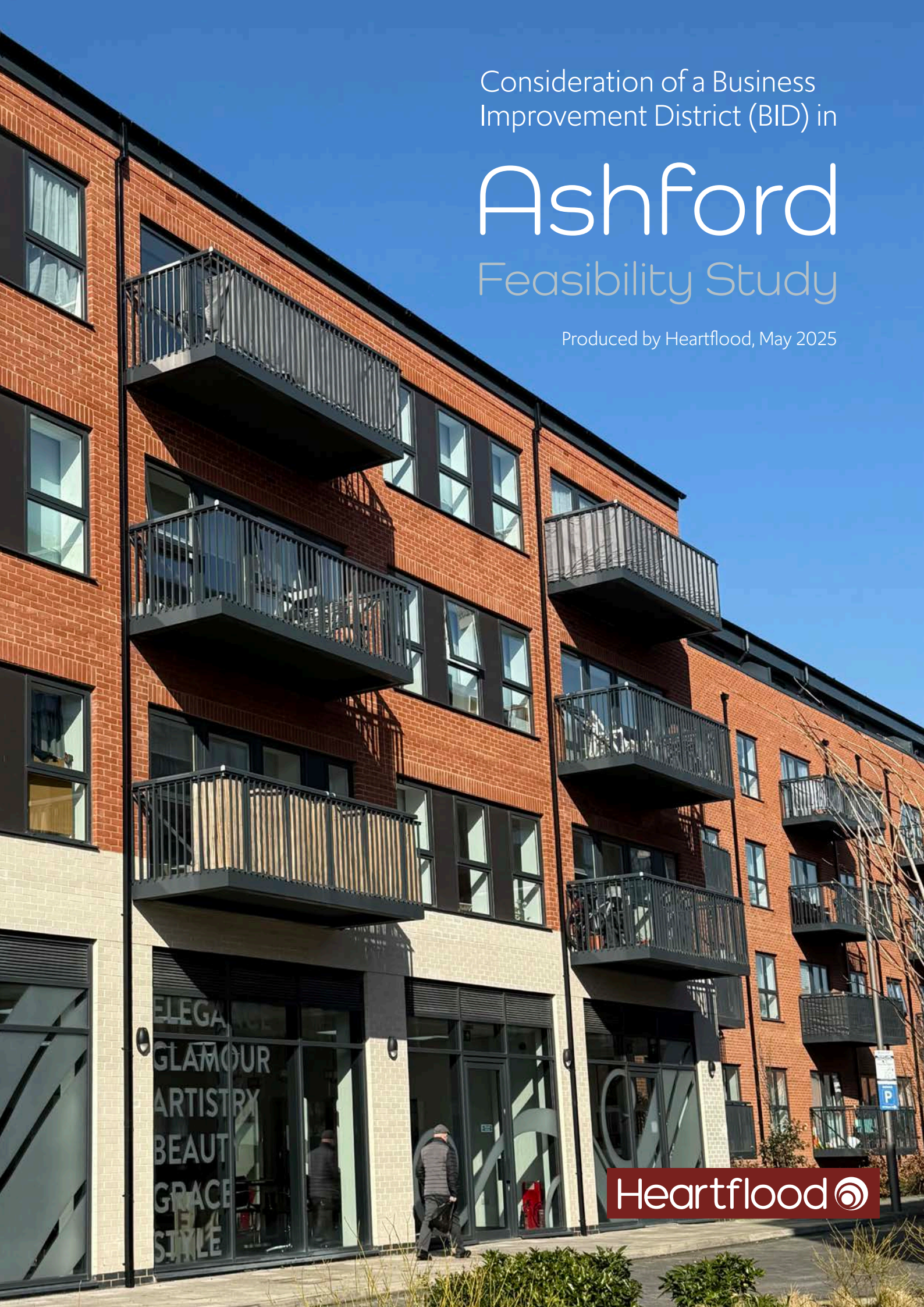


Consideration of a Business
Improvement District (BID) in

Ashford

Feasibility Study

Produced by Heartflood, May 2025



Contents

Executive summary	X
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Section 1

Introduction	X
1.1 Project background and outline	XX
1.2 Business Improvement Districts	XX

Section 2

Study area	XX
2.1 Ashford town centre overview	XX

Section 3

Survey analysis	XX
3.1 Survey overview	XX
3.2 Recent business performance	XX
3.3 Anticipated business performance	XX
3.4 Business perceptions of Ashford	XX
3.4.1 Perceptions of main visitor uses	XX
3.4.2 Economic barriers	XX
3.5 Views regarding a possible Business Improvement District	XX
3.5.1 Possible benefits of a Business Improvement District	XX
3.5.2 Possible Business Improvement District projects	XX
3.5.3 Possible Business Improvement District levy	XX
3.5.4 Possible Business Improvement District boundary	XX
3.5.5 Willingness to support the process of developing a Business Improvement District	XX
3.5.6 Overall support for a Business Improvement District	XX

Section 4

Key considerations	xx
4.1 Possible BID levy options and financial income modelling	xx
4.2 Possible levy exemptions	xx
4.3 Comparison with established BIDs	xx
4.4 Likely voting patterns in Ashford	xx
4.5 The creation of a Development Board	xx
4.6 Next steps and risks	xx

Section 5

Overall study recommendations	xx
--------------------------------------	----

Appendix 1

Further survey feedback	xx
--------------------------------	----

Prepared by Heartflood Ltd for Spelthorne Borough Council 2025.

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Executive summary

Heartflood were recently commissioned to support the consideration of the introduction of a Business Improvement District (BID) in Ashford.

BIDs are now widespread and are considered by most within the industry to be the pre-eminent model of management and operational investment within town and city centres.

A feature of this study has been a survey of a sample of business representatives within central Ashford in order to identify their collective stance on a possible BID proposal for the town centre. Responses were received from 76 businesses, which expressed a good degree of support towards the concept of a BID in Ashford at this stage, with 61% of the respondents agreeing that, subject to a great deal more business consultation, a BID should be tested in a business vote, 31% undecided, and only 8% disagreeing with the concept of a BID for Ashford.

The survey responses therefore suggest that there is ample viability for Ashford to further consider the next phase of BID development, within the town centre area based on the following recommendations:

- Ashford moves towards further detailed consultation and ultimately the production of a draft BID Business Plan
- A timescale is adopted with a view to a BID ballot taking place in May 2026 and a BID operating from August 2026, subject to a positive vote
- Further extensive consultation is carried out with the town centre business community around the following outline proposals:
 - a) The BID boundary to cover the designated area defined on page 25
 - b) A 2.9% BID levy
 - c) A BID term to be proposed to cover the maximum period of five years
 - d) An exemption level of £5,000 Rateable Value to be set, meaning that listings with a Rateable Value of less than £5,000 would not be liable for the BID levy

- e) Priority projects for a draft Business Plan to focus on the following initial themes, although to be subject to far greater business consultation to provide a refined final Business Plan:

1. Improving the appearance of empty shops.

2. Security improvements, possibly to include more Policing.

3. CCTV improvements.

4. Car parking promotions.

5. Schemes to save your business money on overheads.

6. Street markets.

7. Street cleansing & street washing, including chewing gum removal.

8. Physical improvements to paving, landscaping or street furniture.

9. Improvements to problem areas, such as graffiti or fly-tipping removal.

10. Projects to encourage new businesses into the town centre.

The report recommendations would result in the following:

- Approximately 240 eligible business premises being part of a BID
- Annual BID levy income of approximately £80,000
- Total BID income over a five-year term of approximately £396,000

Section 1 Introduction

Section 2 Study area

Section 3 Survey analysis

Section 4 Key considerations

Section 5 Overall study recommendations

Appendix 1 Further survey feedback



↑ Reception
← Car Park
← Dismantling
← Sports Hall
← JCC Pitch

No Unauthorised
Vehicles
Beyond this
Point

Section 1

Introduction

1.1 Project background and outline

Heartflood were recently commissioned by Spelthorne Borough Council, to support a Feasibility Study on the introduction of a Business Improvement District (BID) in central Ashford, to include an initial response from a sample of town centre businesses & organisations.

The study began in January 2025, with this report published in May 2025 and the main requirements of the project were based on the following:

- A summary of what a BID entails and the identification of existing BIDs in the surrounding area
- A profile of Ashford town centre, to include reference to the current business mix
- Identification of the possible scope of work which could be carried out by a BID in addition to any current activities or initiatives
- Detailed financial modelling of a potential BID, including one or more proposals for the possible boundary of a potential BID area, with reference to the number of businesses which might be included and any possible BID levy thresholds
- An outline of any risks associated with the BID process

This report has been produced by Heartflood Ltd and the project team involved can point to over 25 years of combined experience within Place Management, including considerable expertise in the field of BIDs since their introduction in the UK.

1.2 Overview of Business Improvement Districts

Since their introduction in the UK in 2004, over 340 Business Improvement Districts have been created across Britain. BIDs operate through the levy of a small percentage on Business Rates, with the actual levy percentage in most towns and cities tending to lie between 1.5% and 2%, meaning that a business or organisation would pay an annual levy of between 1.5% and 2% of the rateable value of their premises.

All BIDs have a clear and focused role, contained within a Business Plan, which all eligible businesses & organisations are invited to vote upon in a ballot. The development of the plan will almost always have been led by the business community within the area in question and will have involved extensive consultation. In this way, the BID Business Plan should include the priority improvement actions identified by local businesses and also be financially robust.

Under current legislation, any BID needs to be established through a ballot of those eligible businesses and organisations listed on the rating database held by the local Billing Authority, in this case Spelthorne Borough Council, and the vote is conducted entirely by post. For any BID to be successful, there needs to be a majority of positive votes within the total number of votes cast and these positive votes also need to form a majority of the total aggregate rateable value of all the votes cast.

It is important to note that the purpose of a BID is to add projects and activities to a town or city over and above those which are already taking place. A BID is not, therefore, a mechanism for any public or private sector body to cease to provide established activities.

The maximum term covered by a BID Business Plan is 5 years and the continuation of any BID beyond their initial term is reliant on the production of a new Business Plan and a subsequent ballot of those within the BID area. The growth in the number of BIDs continues to rise and those already operating in centres local to Ashford include Staines upon Thames, Twickenham, Slough and Kingston-upon-Thames.

Section 1
Introduction

Section 2
Study area

Section 3
Survey analysis

Section 4
Key considerations

Section 5
Overall study
recommendations

Appendix 1
Further survey feedback



Section 2

Study area

2.1 Ashford town centre overview

Ashford is located approximately 15 miles south of central London, within the Borough of Spelthorne, and lies approximately 8 miles southeast of Slough and 9 miles northeast of Guildford, the County town of Surrey. With a population of approximately 25,000, Ashford is served by a town centre which takes a relatively linear form, predominantly straddling Church Road, and occupies the role of a District Centre, serving the day to day needs of the immediate catchment. The area is an attractive place to live, being situated only 2 miles east of the primary Borough town of Staines-upon-Thames, and also being served by a railway station, which provides good connectivity to central London. The town is served by both national & independent retail, has a reasonable food, drink & leisure offer and contains a range of services, such as banks, a library, a medical centre and a range of professional businesses, such as solicitors and accountants. The emerging local plan for Spelthorne, aimed to cover the next decade or so, identifies a range of measures to maintain the vitality of Ashford, which include bringing unused retail units back into occupation, encouraging expansion of the primary retail area and undertaking improvements to the public realm.

Although Ashford exhibits a range of strengths, it is not currently considered to be meeting its full potential in economic terms, as characterised by car parking pressures, as well as problems with crime & antisocial behaviour. Whilst, as with many areas of the UK, Ashford is still recovering from the recent pandemic, the vitality of the town centre has also experienced challenging times over the past 2 years or so. The recent Borough Council Town Centres Strategy identifies approximately 160 businesses within central Ashford, clustered within seven main streets, comprised of Church Parade, Church Road, Fir Tree Place, New Parade, Station Approach, Station Road and Woodthorpe Road, and the document also highlights the top three recent business concerns as being car parking, cleanliness and a lack of promotion of the town. Having undertaken visits to the town centre, our on-site assessments resulted in the following observations:



CONSIDERABLE SPACE
DEVOTED TO CAR PARKING IN
SERVICE ROADS, WHICH MAKES
PAVEMENTS FEEL NARROW



GOOD BUSINESS MIX,
WITH RELATIVELY
HIGH PROPORTION OF
INDEPENDENT BUSINESSES



ADVERTISING BANNERS ON
SOME LAMP COLUMNS



WELCOME TO
ASHFORD SIGNAGE



RELATIVELY MODERN
ARCHITECTURE



ATTRACTIVE NEW
CENTRAL SQUARE AREA



LIMITED PUBS OR
RESTAURANTS



OVERALL LOW VACANCY
RATE, ALTHOUGH TWO LARGE
LANDMARK VACANT UNITS



LARGE CENTRAL LIBRARY



GOOD NUMBER OF CAR
PARKING SPACES, ALTHOUGH
FEELS UNMANAGED



FEELING OF SECURITY



WAR MEMORIAL SCULPTURE
AND PUBLIC CLOCK FEATURE



EVENTS & VIBRANCY



GOOD TRANSPORT LINKS,
INCLUDING RAILWAY STATION

Section 1
Introduction

Section 2
Study area

Section 3
Survey Analysis

Section 4
Key considerations

Section 5
Overall study
recommendations

Appendix 1
Further survey feedback



Section 3

Survey analysis

3.1 Survey overview

Business feedback was captured in the form of a structured questionnaire, which gathered a number of key pieces of information and which was available to businesses both as a hard-copy questionnaire and as an online form. Responses were also encouraged via links with Ashford Wide.

The survey took place over a 10 week period and ran between 3rd February and 14th April 2025. The survey yielded a total of 76 responses, with the survey responses being considered to form a representative sample of the town centre area, in that they consist of a balance in terms of both the of type of organisation responding to the survey and the geographical spread of the location of responses. The results of the survey are summarised as follows.

3.2 Recent business performance

The survey responses indicated relatively poor business performance over the preceding 12 months, with 42% reporting that turnover had remained static, and almost three times as many businesses reporting reduced, rather than increased turnover.

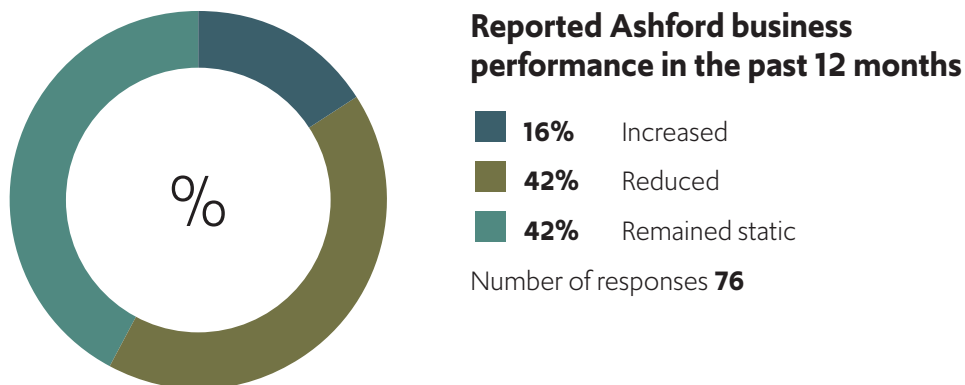


Figure 1 – Reported Ashford business performance in the past 12 months

3.3 Anticipated business performance

The survey responses indicated that the respondents are relatively optimistic regarding business performance for the coming 12 months, with almost a third predicting that turnover will increase, almost a half predicting that turnover will remain static and approximately 20% predicting that turnover will reduce.

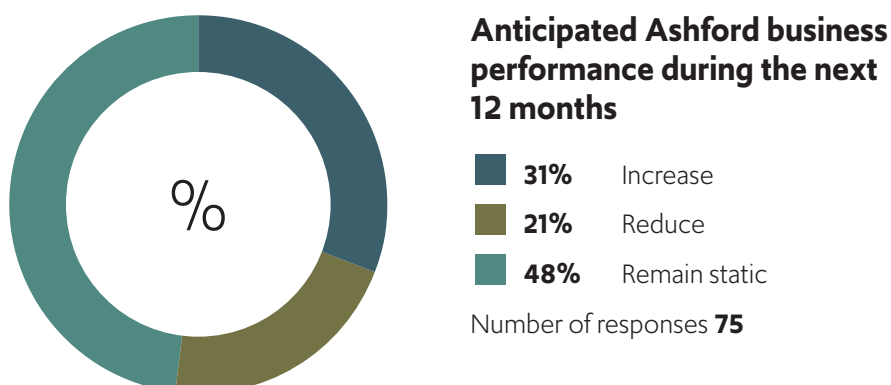


Figure 2 – Anticipated Ashford business performance during the next 12 months

3.4 Business perceptions of Ashford

3.4.1 Perceptions of main visitor uses

In general terms, Ashford is seen by businesses as an average place to dine out and as a relatively poor centre in terms of retail and professional services. It is however considered to be very poor as both a location for leisure and as a destination for a day trip, shown as follows.

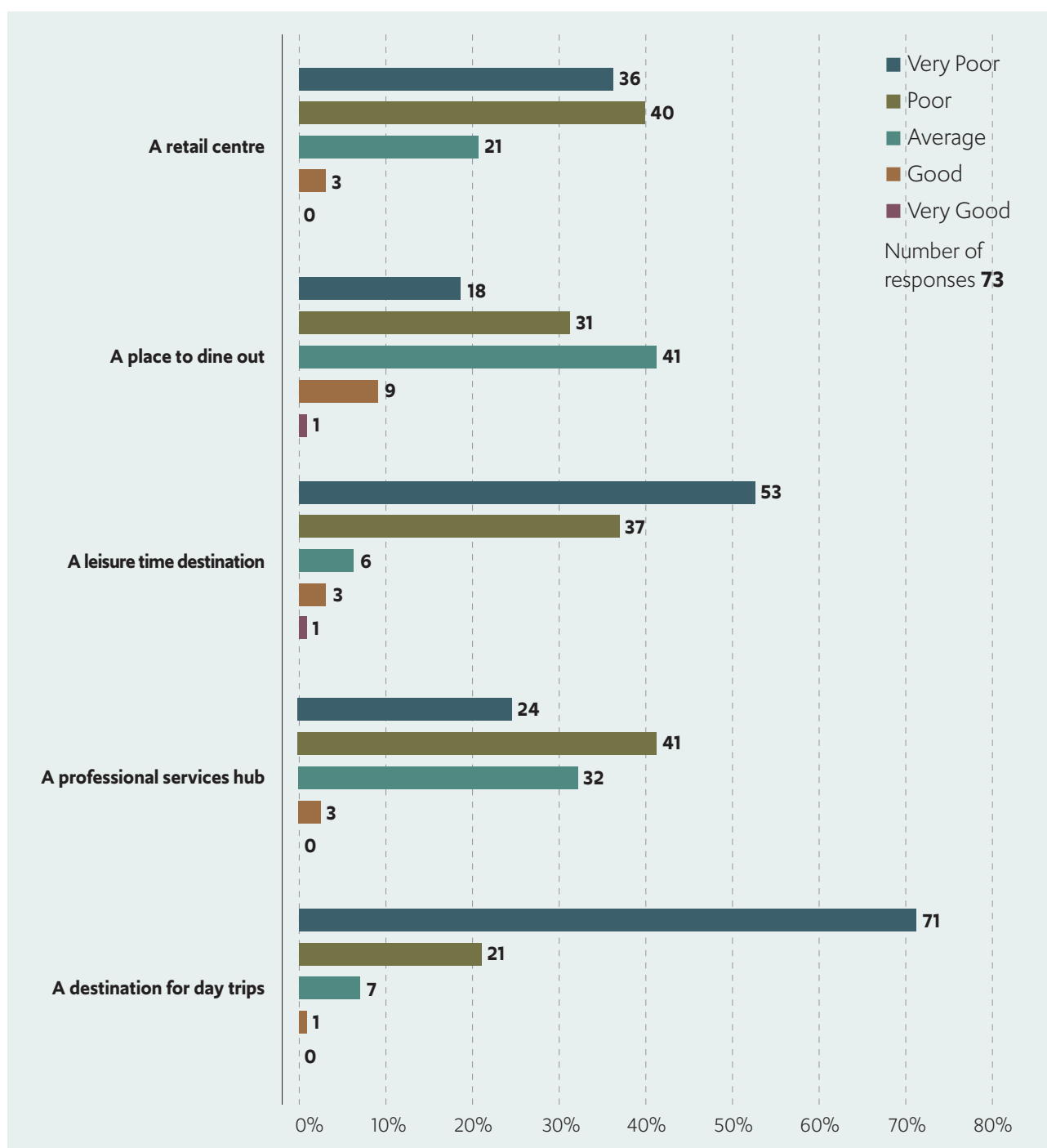


Figure 3 – Business perceptions of Ashford for main visitor uses

3.4.2 Economic barriers

The survey indicates the respondents consider that the factors which are currently preventing Ashford from achieving its full potential are shown in the following table, which indicates the ranked order of the perceived economic barriers:

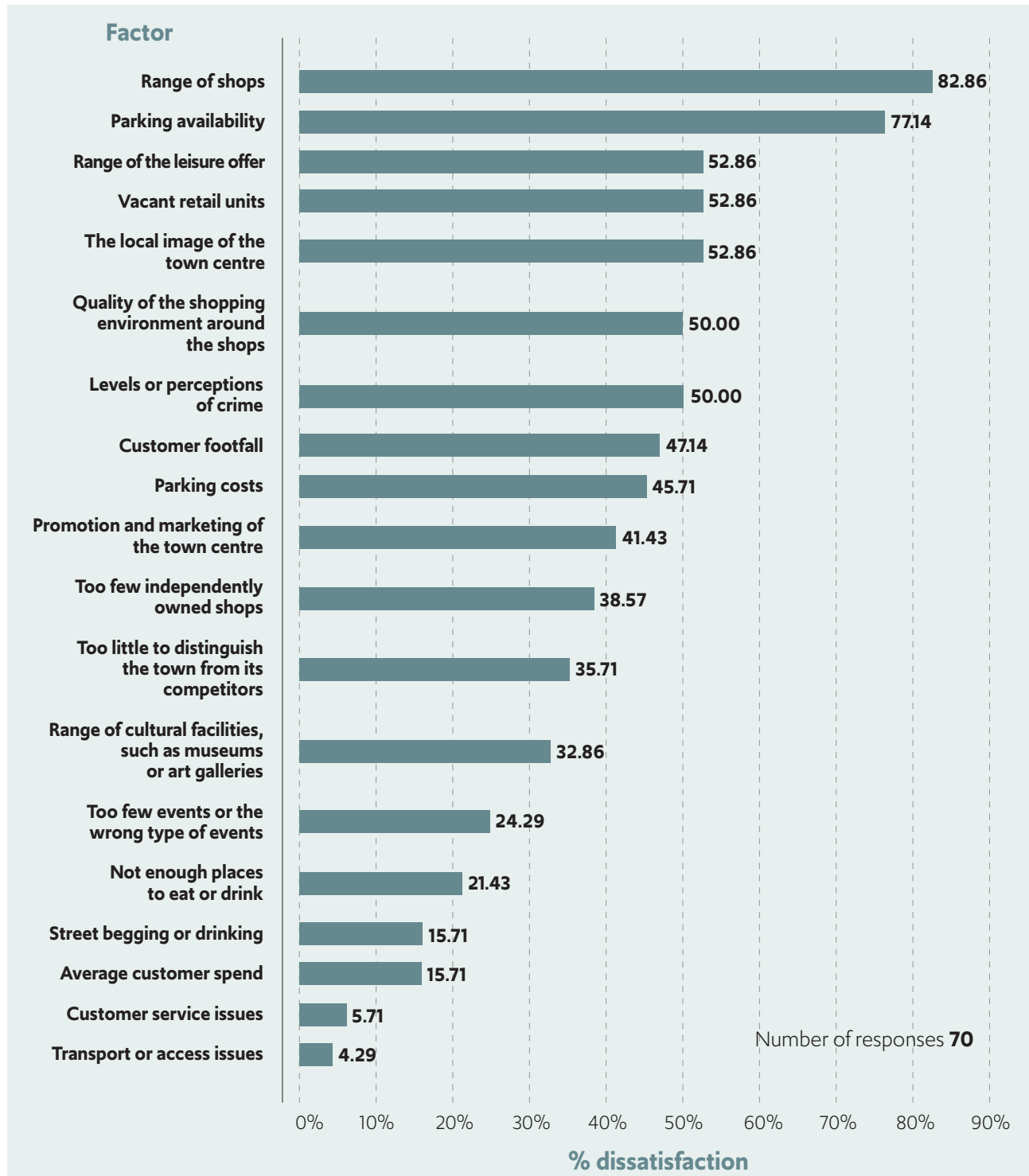


Figure 4 – Ranked factors considered to be preventing Ashford from achieving its full potential

3.5 Views regarding a possible Business Improvement District

3.5.1 Possible benefits of a Business Improvement District

Feelings are very clear on this question, with high support for the concept of a BID, reflected by 92% of respondents considering that Ashford would benefit and only 8% considering that it would not, as demonstrated by the following:

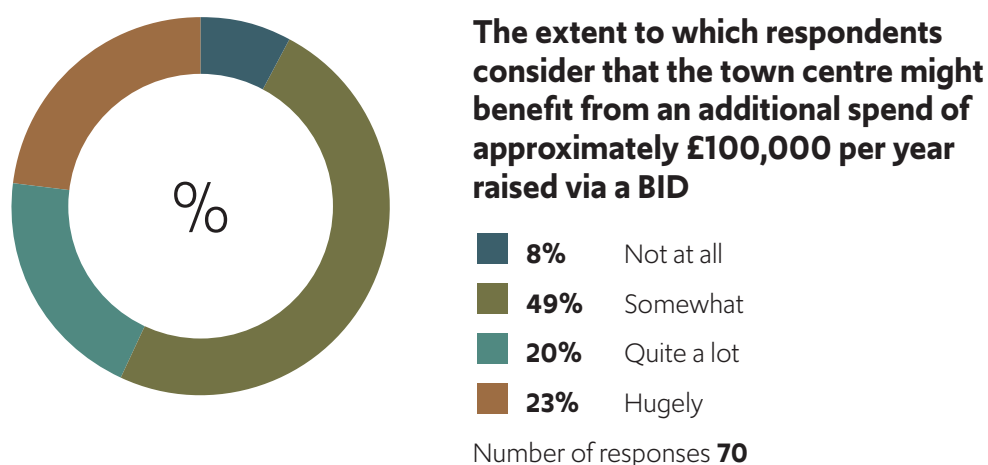


Figure 5 – The extent to which respondents consider that the town centre might benefit from an additional spend of approximately £100,000 per year raised via a BID

3.5.2 Possible Business Improvement District projects

Survey respondents were asked to prioritise the main areas where they felt BID income could be spent by selecting the projects they considered to be most important from a list of options, with the following being ranked in order of perceived priority:



Figure 6 – Ranked priority areas for possible BID income spend

We would also recommend that the further information, as outlined in Appendix 1 of this report should also be considered during any subsequent BID development stage and would emphasise that any subsequent BID development project should include a great deal more business consultation, to ensure that any improvements being proposed reflect business priorities.

3.5.3 Possible Business Improvement District levy

If a BID is established, all eligible businesses within the defined BID boundary pay a levy based on the current rateable value of their property and, in response to the question about the percentage levy which might be considered in Ashford, the following responses were received:

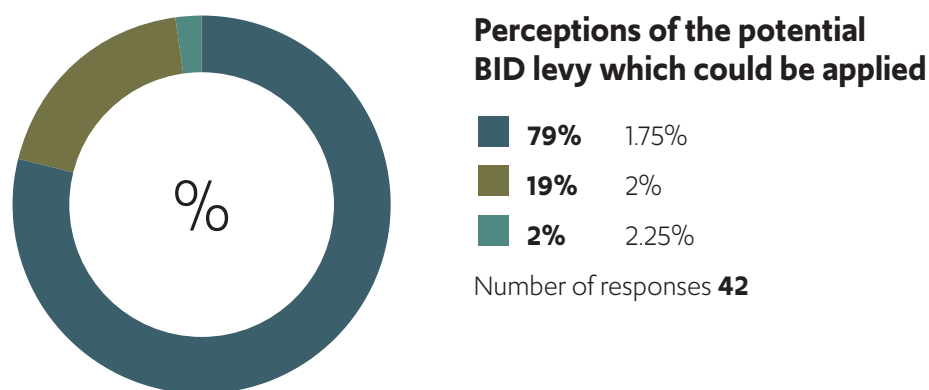


Figure 7 – Perceptions of the potential BID levy which could be applied

3.5.4 Possible Business Improvement District boundary

Following analysis from a variety of sources, including the business survey, and based extensively on our BIDs experience, we have suggested what we consider to be the most appropriate BID boundary for Ashford. This is shown within the red boundary line of the map on page 25 and covers all expected business sectors, from small specialist independent premises to significant national multiple operators.

The proposed boundary covers what we would consider to be the natural core of the town centre, which takes a relatively linear format incorporating the main commercial area of Church Road corridor between approximately the Railway Station and St Matthew's Church, whilst also including the business cluster surrounding Station Road & Woodthorpe Road.

Within this boundary there are approximately 240 rateable business listings with individual rateable values of up to £74,000 and we would always recommend that the consideration of any final BID boundary should be assessed further during any subsequent BID consideration process. In this case, would advise that this would need to be combined with at least the following:

- Extensive business liaison to ensure that significant support for a BID is embedded throughout the area in question
- Detailed work to ensure that any range of possible BID projects would impact sufficiently positively on all eligible voters
- A more refined assessment of likely voting patterns across the boundary area, especially to consider the effect of any very large rateable values on possible voting outcomes

3.5.5 Willingness to support the process of developing a Business Improvement District

The survey included a question regarding whether or not respondents would be willing to attend meetings to become part of the development process, and this highlighted 16 such individuals who would be prepared to do so.

3.5.6 Overall support for a Business Improvement District

Feelings around this key question show a good degree of support towards a BID, with over 60% of respondents agreeing with the concept of a BID, 8% of respondents disagreeing with the concept of a BID and 31% of respondents currently being undecided, as demonstrated by the following:

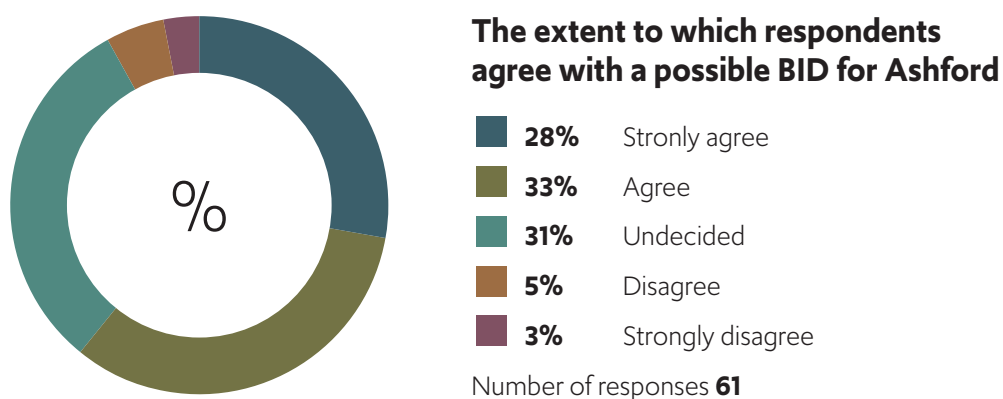


Figure 8 – The extent to which respondents agree with a possible BID for Ashford

Map to be inserted here

Figure 9 - Possible BID boundary for Ashford

Section 1
Introduction

Section 2
Study area

Section 3
Survey analysis

Section 4
Key considerations

Section 5
Overall study
recommendations

Appendix 1
Further survey feedback



Section 4

Key considerations

4.1 Possible BID levy options and financial income modelling

In recent years, given the effects of periods of significant inflation, average BID levies have increased, and it is now increasingly common for levies of up to, or over, 2% to be approved. In Ashford, the total rateable value of commercial premises within the central area is very low and therefore the BID levy would only generate a modest BID income. When modelling the levy options for Ashford, we have therefore chosen to model scenarios in the range of 2.5% to 3% as these are considered to form the most appropriate levy income range. Whilst, therefore, the levy range we have chosen to model, is higher than referenced within the survey, we consider that this is the most appropriate solution for the following main reasons:

- The very low level of total rateable value means that a relatively high percentage would need to be applied in order to generate a meaningful level of annual income to enact improvement projects
- Current industry guidance supports the use of a relatively high percentage level in smaller areas, such as Ashford, which would otherwise not result in sufficient BID income
- The core town centre of Ashford is considered to represent the most appropriate boundary for a BID and attempts to engage businesses and organisations beyond this area were met with only limited interest, implying that the appetite for business participation in a BID diminishes quickly beyond the confines of the proposed BID area shown on page 25

Using the ratings information provided to us, which are based on 2023 valuation figures, the range of possible levies and corresponding incomes are shown as follows:

% Rateable value	Annual levy income	5-year total
2.5%	£68,250	£341,250
2.6%	£70,950	£354,750
2.7%	£73,700	£368,500
2.8%	£76,400	£382,000
2.9%	£79,150	£395,750
3.0%	£81,900	£409,500

Figure 10 – Indicative BID levy incomes

We would emphasise the following with regard to the above table:

- The table assumes a possible exemption level of £5,000
- An estimated levy-collection rate of 95% has been applied
- Further factors would need to be considered further during any BID development stage, which would include but not be limited to 1) The effect of any changes to the proposed boundary area following business feedback 2) The costs which may be applied to any BID, such as any levy collection costs 3) The effects of any Business Rates revaluation, such as that due to apply from April 2026

The range of activities which a BID would usually expect to carry out, including the employment of staff to oversee the activities, means that a BID generally needs a critical mass of income to effectively operate. We therefore consider that a levy of 2.9% would be most appropriate, which would raise approximately £80,000 per year and so provide a platform for an effective BID. We would however always emphasise that further detailed consultation and liaison should take place with businesses regarding the proposed BID levy.

4.2 Possible levy exemptions

There are a number of considerations when establishing a BID levy, including a decision on any exempted listings. It is usual for any rateable value listings below a certain level to be exempted from the BID levy, which has the purpose of removing anomalies such as telecommunications masts and advertising hoardings, as well as providing levy relief for micro businesses, some of which may not gain extensive benefits from BID activities.

The illustrations within this report are based on the assumption of a £5,000 exemption level being adopted, meaning that any business listings with a Rateable Value below £5,000 would not be liable for the BID levy. In this scenario, approximately 50 businesses in the proposed area would fall under the threshold, although their annual income would have only generated approximately an additional £3,000 per year. Furthermore, we would expect a number of these businesses to voluntarily contribute towards any BID and so setting such a threshold does not exclude any business from being part of a subsequent BID.

If the proposal for a £5,000 exemption were adopted, this would therefore create a group of approximately 240 businesses, who would become liable to pay a total BID levy of approximately £80,000 per year. If a decision were taken to proceed with further BID development, any subsequent considerations on levy, boundary and exemptions should however be subject to further testing and refinement through further detailed business consultation.

4.3 Comparison with established BIDs

The following BIDs are considered to represent a good comparable sample range to Ashford in terms of size, geographical spread, BID levy percentage and overall income.

BID	% RV levy	Levy number	Indicative levy income
Billericay	2%	400	£130,000
Horsham	1.5%	330	£301,000
Ilkley	1.5%	330	£133,000
Okehampton	2%	270	£132,000
Penge	2%	244	£138,740
Penzance	2%	400	£161,000
Ashford (subject to decision)	2.9%	240	£80,000
Spalding	2%	400	£170,000
Average of the above	2%	325	£156,000

Figure 11 – Comparison with established BIDs

4.4 Likely voting patterns

Whilst it is difficult to anticipate the voting patterns of all the businesses in the likely BID area, the survey suggests that there is reasonable support for a BID in Ashford although, if a BID is pursued, we would strongly advise that a great deal of further work is undertaken to try to increase the required business engagement and to establish how a number of the premises with higher rateable values are likely to vote in any subsequent ballot.

4.5 The creation of a Development Board

BIDs generally involve the creation of a Company Limited by Guarantee, which limits the financial liability of any Company Director and a Board of between 10-12 Company Directors is usually formed from BID levy paying organisations to create a representative and business-led group of Directors to oversee the financial, managerial and operational

arrangements for the BID. The development of a BID requires the fundamental support of a number of businesses & organisations and, whilst it is common for any BID process to be professionally supported, meaning that the business group are not required to carry out all of the required tasks, there would be a requirement for this group to attend planning meetings and to assist with the required campaigning for a positive BID vote.

4.6 Next steps and risks

We would expect that a BID proposal would create a workload of approximately 85 days over a period of approximately 12 months and an additional budget of approximately £7,500 would need to be established to cover the costs of various & extensive communication activities, as well as designing and printing the BID proposal. It is considered that the following timetable could be adopted in Ashford, assuming that a decision is taken to pursue a BID for the area:

Dates	Component
August 2025	Decision taken to develop a BID proposal
August 2025 to April 2026	Business liaison and consultation on proposed Business Plan, to include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Creation of Shadow Board ■ Business liaison ■ Newsletters ■ Open meetings ■ Digital communications ■ Draft business plan ■ Refinement of business plan ■ Liaison with ballot organisation ■ Liaison with SBC departments ■ Creation of ballot spreadsheet
December 2025	Statutory notification to government
April 2026	Launch of Business Plan
April 2026	Ballot notification and ballot packs dispatched
May 2026	Extensive business voter liaison
May 2026	Ballot Day and announcement of ballot
June 2026 to August 2026	Formation of Board of Directors, appointment of staff and BID begins operation – subject to a successful ballot outcome

The inherent risk in any BID process is that the ballot is rejected – by failing to gain the required majority of votes cast or failing to gain the majority of the aggregate rateable value of votes cast. The majority of BID ballots have been successful, although we would point out that the risk always exists of a BID ballot being unsuccessful, which can result in:

- No return on the significant investment in developing the BID proposal
- Loss of reputation and credibility of the BID proposer
- An informal requirement for a cooling-off period of at least 1-2 years before any attempt is made to repeat the attempt to develop a BID within the town

Given all of the factors which we have examined, we would advise that there is reasonable viability for Ashford to enter the next phase of BID development.

Section 1
Introduction

Section 2
Study area

Section 3
Survey analysis

Section 4
Key considerations

Section 5
Overall study
recommendations

Appendix 1
Further survey feedback

The
**JOLLY
BAKER**

THE JOLLY BAKER



Section 5

Overall study recommendations

In considering all of the information available to us, our key current recommendations for Ashford are as follows:

- Ashford moves towards further detailed consultation regarding a Business Improvement District and ultimately the production of a draft BID Business Plan
- A timescale is adopted with a view to a BID ballot taking place in May 2026 and a BID operating from August 2026, subject to a positive vote
- Extensive consultation is carried out with the town centre business community around the following outline proposals:
 - a) The BID boundary to cover the designated area defined on page 25
 - b) A 2.9% BID levy
 - c) A BID term to be proposed to cover the maximum period of five years
 - d) An exemption level of £5,000 Rateable Value to be set, meaning that listings with a Rateable Value of less than £5,000 would not be liable for the BID levy
 - e) Priority projects for a draft Business Plan to focus on the following initial themes, although to be subject to far greater business consultation to provide a refined final Business Plan:

1. Improving the appearance of empty shops.
 2. Security improvements, possibly to include more Policing.
 3. CCTV improvements.
 4. Car parking promotions.
 5. Schemes to save your business money on overheads.
 6. Street markets.
 7. Street cleansing & street washing, including chewing gum removal.
 8. Physical improvements to paving, landscaping or street furniture.
 9. Improvements to problem areas, such as graffiti or fly-tipping removal.
 10. Projects to encourage new businesses into the town centre.
-

These recommendations would result in the following:

- Approximately 240 eligible business premises being part of a BID
- Annual BID levy income of approximately £80,000
- Total BID income over a five-year term of approximately £396,000

Section 1
Introduction

Section 2
Study area

Section 3
Survey analysis

Section 4
Key considerations

Section 5
Overall study
recommendations

Appendix 1
Further survey feedback



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Appendix 1

Further survey feedback

In addition, the survey asked for any further comments which respondents wished to make and those received were as follows:

Additional comments

1. Council Tax Relief.
2. General improvement to the High Street is needed. Ashford has slipped a long way in the past few years.
3. Get landlords to consider fair rents to encourage new units to open.
4. Bring back banks and multistorey car park and keep free street parking.
5. Businesses should not be expected to pay for the councils shortcomings. Spelthorne Council should be funding improvements not private companies.
6. Control the distribution of industries entering the shops so that the town is not saturated with Takeaways, Convenience shops and Coffee shops.
7. Fix the clock.
8. I don't think Ashford will ever be a purely commercial town center again. It needs to offer retail but also a place for residents to use in the evening.
9. I have my doubts as to how well this could work in Ashford - but on the whole and at a 2% levy I would be happy to give it a go..
10. I'm confused as to how the funding is raised now after reading through this survey! Not so sure anyone will go for it if it increases their costs!

Additional comments

11. If you fix the parking, you will fix the town.

12. Improved parking facilities and reduced charges.

13. In my opinion, the parking situation in Ashford is killing the High Street. Almost every client that comes in mentions the parking.

14. In the past there were offices in the town, by having these, the staff would spend money in the shops. There is very little commercial offices, so maybe attract more office workers.

15. More parking.

16. More parking - there is nowhere for our customers to park, resulting in less trade.

17. Need more variety in trade. Need men's shop shoe shop. Craft shop. No more food / take away shops.

18. Parking!

19. Really difficult to use 100k wisely as it's too little to make a difference. Hard to market & promote a town that has very little to offer. Need to encourage more welcomed businesses/entertainment to the area. Unfortunately that has more to do with the landlords.

20. Shop directory and map. Pop up shops, cultural use of empty shops, youth activities and places to eat drink and socialize.

21. Stop any more nail shops , hairdressers, barbers opening up There are far too many as it is. We need a couple of different shops.

22. The parking in Ashford is killing the high street ,we need more parking so people will continue to come to Ashford.

23. The town needs a car park facility with fair charges.

Additional comments

24. To have the mechanism of guiding and help new small businesses that coming to the area like us with maybe a welcome letter from the council and the support in case there's any after opening on the additional licences or things that the new businesses need to know. In our case we wasn't aware that we needed to notify the council within 4 weeks been here, as we done some licences through third party and also we just find out that to get a discount on our business rate we need to apply for small businesses rate relief but now I'm on it to filling the form and submit to the BR department.
25. Town planners need to keep an eye on who retail units are let to as there are too many of the same type of shops and the town needs to attract diverse businesses.
26. We are the forgotten end of Ashford on Woodlands Parade. Many empty shops owned by one Landlord who is increasing rents above market value. Recycling centre is misused and looks so untidy. Ashford main town on Church Road has so few decent independent shops, it is filling up with ethnic supermarkets. If I were to eat out during the day or evening, I would not consider Ashford town. Parking is a huge problem with overzealous wardens - getting a space on the slip roads is virtually impossible.
27. We need joined up thinking and talking as to what businesses can come into the town. How do we get better restaurants, and cafe's with outside tables and chairs to give a more continental feel, and a traditional English Tea shop as well as a decent Pub! We have enough Salons, too many barber and vape shops and cheap take away's. we need to reduce the amount of Pound shops and charity shops! We need more varied shops e.g ladies dress shop, menswear shop, gift shop. Designer shops. Dunelm or The Range type shops. Craft shops etc.

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