Southend Visitor Accommodation Study

Final Report

Southend-on-Sea City Council

10 September 2026

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 This Visitor Accommodation Study has been prepared by Lichfields on behalf of Southend-on-Sea City Council ('the Council'). It presents an up-to-date review of the visitor accommodation sector in Southend and provides evidence to inform the new Local Plan. The study undertakes an audit of the hotel accommodation in the city and considers existing and future demand for visitor accommodation. It also assesses the development pipeline (where this is known) and considers how recent trends (such as shifts accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic) may shape future demand.

Background

1.2 This study builds on the research undertaken in the previous 2010 Southend-on-Sea Hotel Futures Study[1], providing a longitudinal view of how the city's visitor accommodation market has evolved. The 2010 Study presented a mixed picture of the accommodation sector, and showed that while average annual occupancy and achieved room rates for 3-star hotels were not particularly strong, budget hotels consistently achieved very high rates and frequently turned business away during the week and at weekends, particularly in the summer months. Mid-week demand was also strong across the market, with Tuesday and Wednesday nights often at capacity.

1.3 At the time, the study identified significant potential for growth in hotel demand, linked with Southend's role in the Thames Gateway growth area (promoted by government in the early 2000s), the expansion of Southend Airport (consented in 2010, and completed in time for the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games) and associated business park, in addition to the city's emerging position as a cultural and intellectual hub. At the time, anticipated drivers of demand included the corporate and contractor markets, airport-related activity (incl., activity related to the maintenance, repair and overhaul, or 'MRO' of aircraft), conferences as well as other leisure activities.

1.4 However, in the period since the 2010 Study, the local and national context for visitor accommodation has changed significantly. Structural changes in the tourism and hospitality sector, the rapid growth of short-term letting platforms (such as Airbnb, Booking.com and Vrbo), and wider macroeconomic factors have reshaped both the supply and demand for accommodation. These trends were further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic which brought visitor activity to an abrupt halt in early 2020, and permanently altered visitor behaviour placing new pressures on the visitor accommodation market. Taken together, these shifts mean that the city faces different market realities in the visitor accommodation sector.

Scope and Objectives

1.5 In this context, this study provides an updated baseline of the visitor accommodation sector in Southend-on-Sea, drawing on current performance, quality of supply and occupancy levels, while also considering potential development pipelines. This study analyses how

[1] Hotel Solutions (2010), *Southend-on-Sea Hotel Futures*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://ca1-spp.edcdn.com/documents/Southend-Hotel-Futures-2010.pdf?v=1559310720]).

demand is evolving and to inform the City Council in planning for the next Local Plan period (i.e., to 2045).

1.6 The core objectives of the study are as follows:

a. Establish an up-to-date picture of the supply and demand for visitor accommodation in Southend-on-Sea, covering both commercial and non-commercial provision;
b. Assess how demand is evolving, including the influence of post-Covid behavioural shifts, changing visitor expectations, and wider trends in the UK tourism market;
c. Review developer and operator interest, including the current pipeline of hotel proposals and the appetite for future investment;
d. Consider the impact of the sharing economy, including the growth of short-term lets, and their implications on visitor accommodation in the city; and
e. Review relevant policies within the Southend New Local Plan ('SNLP') to ensure alignment with current market conditions and future needs.

Report Structure

1.7 The report is structured as follows:

- **Section 2.0** provides an overview of national trends in tourism activity and the visitor accommodation sector.
- **Section 3.0** presents a high-level overview of the visitor economy in Southend-on-Sea.
- **Section 4.0** undertakes an audit of the visitor accommodation in Southend-on-Sea, taking account of the accommodation stock, current performance and visitor accommodation pipeline.
- **Section 5.0** sets out local and national drivers influencing the future growth of the visitor accommodation sector.
- **Section 6.0** summarises the key findings and implications for the Local Plan.

2.0 Overview of National Trends

2.1 After a difficult few years, largely impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic, 2024 marked the first year in which national visitor numbers exceeded pre-pandemic levels[2]. However, recovery remains uneven across different markets and geographies, and the tourism sector (incl., the visitor accommodation sector) continues to face both structural changes and sustained economic pressures. This section explores the key trends influencing national tourism trends and the demand for visitor accommodation (i.e., both nationally and locally).

Tourism Activity

2.2 Evidence published by the House of Commons Library[2] shows that domestic tourism activity continues to underpin the UK national tourism sector, accounting for both the majority of visitors and expenditure. During 2024, there were 1.2 billion domestic visits, comprising 105.6 million overnight trips and approximately 1.0 billion day visits. However, analysis of Q3 2025 data[3] suggests that the volume of overnight trips fell slightly (i.e., by around -2%) compared with the same period a year earlier. In contrast, the number of day visits was up (i.e., +12%) year-on-year.

2.3 This reflects a general downward trend in domestic overnight visits (having decreased by 10% between 2023 and 2024), rebalanced by growth in inbound tourism. During 2024, the number of overseas visitors to the UK reached 42.5 million (i.e., up from 38.0 million a year before), representing the highest number of visits recorded in a single year, and the first year visitor numbers exceeded pre-pandemic levels (i.e., since 2019). Inbound tourism is expected to continue rising, with an estimated 43.6 million visitors in 2025 and 45.5 million visitors forecast for 2026[4]. The UK Government has set a long-term ambition for the UK to welcome 50 million inbound visitors per year by 2030, placing the visitor economy at the heart of the Government's plans for growth[5].

2.4 Economic activity linked to tourism activity in the UK is underpinned by visitor spending. Total domestic spend amounted to £87.7 billion (i.e., for both day and overnight visitors), exceeding that by overseas visitors (i.e., £32.5 billion). Once accounting for all direct and multiplier effects, the value of tourism to the UK's economy (i.e., gross domestic product, or 'GDP') in 2024 is estimated to be around £147 billion, equivalent to 5% of the national economy[6]. This is forecast to continue growing and reach £161 billion by 2030. In addition, a further £58 billion in induced impacts is generated through employee wage spending across supported industries.

2.5 Data[3] for domestic visits shows that average spend per trip (i.e., for both overnight and day visits) has increased between 2024 and 2025, with growth in spend per overnight trip (of

[2] House of Commons Library (2026), *Tourism: Statistics and policy.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06022/SN06022.pdf).
[3] Visit Britain (2025), *Domestic overnight and day trips in Q3 2025*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitbritain.org/research-insights/domestic-tourism-latest-results).
[4] Visit Britain (2026), *2026 inbound tourism forecast.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitbritain.org/research-insights/inbound-tourism-forecast).
[5] Gov.uk (2024), *Press release: New ambition for 50 million annual visits to UK announced by Tourism Minister*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-ambition-for-50-million-annual-visits-to-uk-announced-by-tourism-minister).
[6] Visit Britain (2026), *Economic Value of Tourism, January 2026*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitbritain.org/research-insights/economic-value-tourism).

+7.5% year-on-year[7]) being more than twice the growth in spend per day trip (of +3.2% year-on-year[8]). Meanwhile, data[2] on international visits suggests that spend per trip has declined slightly (i.e., from £818.41 per trip in 2023, to £764.71 per trip in 2024), as did length of visit (i.e., from 7.7 nights per trip in 2023 to 7.4 nights per trip in 2024). In other words, this means that during 2024 international visitors took more, albeit shorter trips compared to the year before. It should be noted that the domestic and international visitor spend per trip figures presented above are not directly comparable, as they come from different sources.

2.6 The tourism sector is being shaped by a number of overarching drivers. Economic conditions, including inflation and rising operational costs, continue to impact both businesses and consumers. Labour shortages remain a persistent challenge, particularly within hospitality. At the same time, a relatively weak pound has been supporting inbound tourism by improving the UK's (price) competitiveness at the international level.

2.7 Visitor behaviour is playing an increasingly important role in shaping the visitor economy, both nationally and at the local level. Recent data shows an increase in day trips, especially of solo trips which are increasingly motivated by experiences in larger towns and cities. Within the domestic market, visiting friends and relatives continues to be a strong driver of demand, while holiday trips make up a large (and consistent) share of domestic travel, especially during the third quarter of the year (coinciding with the summer period). In contrast, business travel continues to represent a small proportion of all trips, although this is less seasonal in nature, with demand remaining relatively steady throughout the year.

2.8 According to the 2024 International Passenger Survey[9] ('IPS'), the largest share of inbound visitors to the UK (i.e., accounting for 47% of all trips) were travelling for holiday purposes, with a further 24% visiting friends and relatives. Longer-term trends show that both international holiday and business travel remain below pre-pandemic levels (i.e., having declined by 6% and 22% respectively since 2019). In contrast, the number of trips to visit friends and relatives have grown, increasing by around 6% over the same period.

2.9 These trends reflect changing visitor expectations and consumer priorities as people place greater emphasis on value for money and wating more personalised and experience-driven trips. These evolving preferences are reshaping demand patters (i.e., both nationally and locally) and are explored in more detail in section 6.0.

Visitor Accommodation Sector

2.10 The accommodation sector is central to the visitor economy, both in terms of its economic contribution and its role as a key employment sector. Analysis[6] of the economic impact of tourism shows that the accommodation and food services sector contributes around £36.0 billion to the national economy, and supports just under 978,000 jobs (i.e., either directly or indirectly). This equates to approximately 48% of tourism-related GDP, and supports around 37% of jobs within the sector, with every £69,000 spent in the sector supporting one job. A further £4.4 billion GDP and 101,600 jobs are supported more widely through induced effects enabled via employee wage effects.

[7] from £331 in Q3 2024, to £356 in Q3 2025.
[8] From £52 in Q3 2024, to £54 in Q3 2025.
[9] ONS (2025), *International Passenger Survey 2024.*

2.11 Comprising 45% of overnight trips during 2024, serviced accommodation options (such as hotels/motels/inns, serviced apartments, guest houses, and bed and breakfast accommodation, or 'B&B') were the most sought-after option for domestic overnight trips[10]. Almost a third (i.e., 30%) of overnight trips involved staying at 'someone's private home' (i.e., either a second home/timeshare, or staying with a friend or relative), with a further 11% of trips making use of self-catering property rental (comprising stays in rented flat/apartment, staying in rented house/cottage/lodge or the rental of room in someone else's home on a commercial basis). This means that around one-in-ten overnight trips now makes use of short-term accommodation lets via platforms such as Airbnb and Vrbo.

2.12 International visitors show a slightly different pattern. Hotel accommodation remains the dominant choice, accounting for 47.2% of inbound stays; a trend which has remained consistent since 2004[9]. Stays with friends and relatives represent a further 30.9%, while the use of short-term lets accounts for 7.8% of all international trips.

2.13 An overview of long-term trends points towards a market shift in the accommodation landscape. The use of short-term lets has more than doubled over the past ten years, from just under 1.4 million trips in 2014 to around 3.2 million in 2024[9] (i.e., equivalent to +126.8%). This growth mirrors broader preferences for flexible and self-contained accommodation amongst domestic visitors.

2.14 Spending patterns also vary by accommodation type. Analysis[10] of domestic overnight trips shows that self-catering accommodation generates the highest average spend per trip, of approximately £415 in 2024 which is slightly above the average spend across serviced accommodation (i.e., of £397 per trip). Furthermore, self-catering trips also tend to be longer, averaging 3.7 night compared with 2.4 nights for hotel stays. This points to a clear shift in visitor behaviour and a growing preference for flexible, home-like accommodation that supports longer trips. While this segment represents a particularly valuable market for destinations, and appears to be less price-sensitive, it represents the loss of potential income streams for operators of more traditional visitor accommodation.

2.15 Amongst inbound visitors, hotels capture the largest share of total expenditure. At 57.2%, hotels accommodation account for the largest share of total expenditure by international visitors (£18.1 billion out of £31.6 billion)[11]. Meanwhile, visitors staying with friends and relatives generate 17.8% of total expenditure, while those using short-term lets contribute 10.6%. Hotel guests also record the highest spend per night, with visitors from the USA generating the highest levels of spend, followed by visitors from Germany, France, Australia, and Spain[12].

2.16 Booking behaviour is also evolving. Online booking platforms (such as Expedia, Booking.com, lastminute.com, and TripAdvisor) and accommodation providers (e.g., hotel brand, B&B owner, cottage owner) remain the primary channels, but the use of accommodation-sharing platforms (such as Airbnb and Vrbo) has increased notably, rising from 4% of trips in 2023 to 7% in 2024[10]. Over the same period, the proportion of trips booked directly through hotels has declined slightly, indicating a gradual diversification of

[10] Visit England (2025), *GB Tourist Annual Report 2024*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitbritain.org/sites/ind/files/2025-05/GB%20Tourist%202024%20report%2C%20domestic%20overnight%20trips.pdf).
[11] Office for National Statistics (2024), *International Passenger Survey 2024.*
[12] Visit Britain (2025), *Annual Inbound Update Total GB/UK*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitbritain.org/research-insights/inbound-visits-and-spend-annual-uk).

the accommodation market. Booking.com reportedly offers around 30 different categories of accommodation, ranging from holiday homes and guest houses to less conventional options such as boats and treehouses[13]. With less than 30% of listings for hotels on Booking.com, this reflects a shift away from traditional tourist accommodation to the provision a broader and more diverse offer for visitors[14].

2.17 Despite the positive trends, the accommodation sector continues to face significant challenges. Rising costs remain a constraint, impacting profit margins and limiting operators' ability to invest in staff, training and retention. Consequently, these pressures contribute to ongoing labour shortages as operators struggle to compete for labour (i.e., both between operators, and with other sectors). Although employment in the accommodation sector grew modestly between 2023 and 2024 (i.e., by +1.3%), it remains below pre-pandemic levels.

Summary

2.18 Taken together, these trends highlight several differences between domestic and international visitor preferences. While hotel stays continue to dominate both markets, the evidence suggests that domestic visitors tend to use a broader mix of accommodation options. Meanwhile, the use of short-term lets is expanding across both markets (i.e., domestic and inbound), although growth is more pronounced domestically. This reflects a stronger preference for flexible, and self-contained accommodation. Furthermore, domestic visitors tend to deliver value through longer trips, whereas inbound visitors generate higher spend per night.

2.19 At the same time, it is noted that visitor behaviour is evolving. Trips to friends and relatives remain popular within the domestic market and are accounting for a growing share of international trips. This is accompanied by a trend towards shorter international stays and a growing use of flexible accommodation options, such as short-term lets, alongside the continued dominance of hotels. These trends point to a more diversified and evolving visitor economy shaped by changing consumer preferences, economic conditions, and accommodation choice.

[13] Booking.com (2024), *About Booking.com*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://news.booking.com/fast-facts).
[14] Booking.com (2015), (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://news.booking.com/need-a-bed-why-bookingcom-is-the-most-diverse-and-popular-accommodation-platform-in-the-world).

3.0 The Visitor Economy in Southend-on-Sea

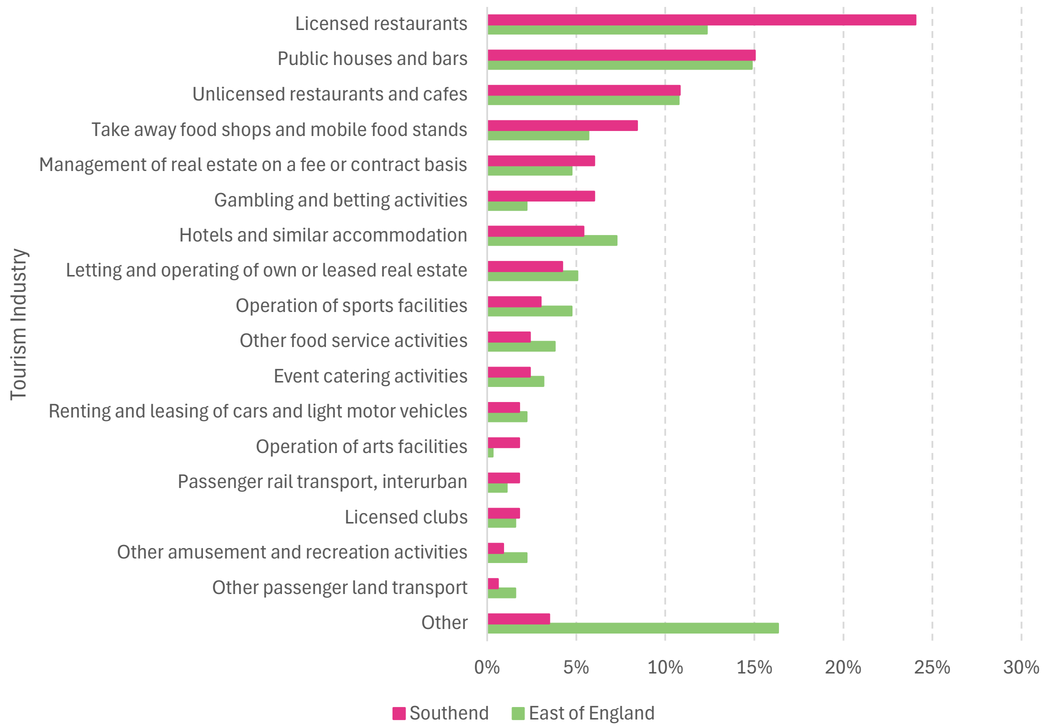
3.1 This section provides an overview of the visitor economy in Southend-on-Sea, highlighting the role it plays in the city's employment base and wider tourism offer.

Employment in the Visitor Economy

3.2 Using the ONS definition of tourism[15], it is estimated that the sector support around 8,300 jobs in Southend-on-Sea, equivalent to 12.9% of all employment locally. This is notably higher than the regional average, where tourism accounts for 10.9% of total employment.

3.3 The largest proportions of tourism-related employment are found in licensed restaurants (24.1%), public houses and bars (15.0%), and unlicensed restaurants and cafés (10.8%), which together account for almost half of all jobs within the sector. The East of England has a more evenly distributed pattern of tourism-related employment across different sub-sectors. Notably, Southend has a lower proportion of jobs in hotels and similar accommodation (5.4%) than the average across the East England (7.3%), suggesting that the city has lower levels of specialisation (with a location quotient[16], or 'LQ' of 0.74).

Figure 31 Number of employees in tourism industries in Southend (2024)



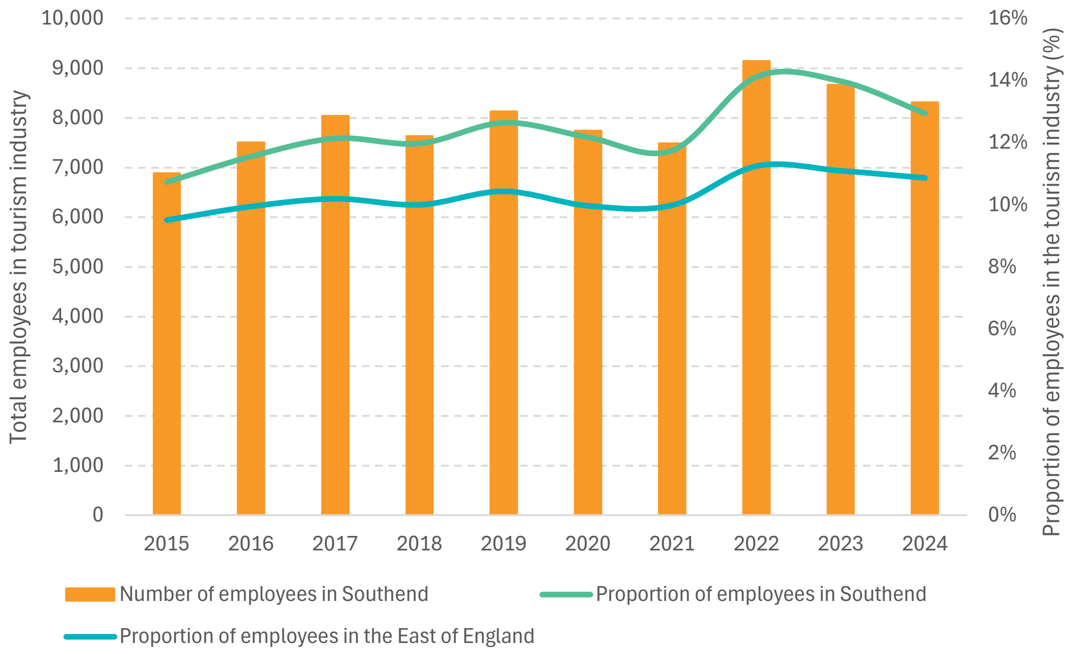
Source: ONS (2025), *Business Register and Employment Survey 2024* / Lichfields analysis

[15] ONS (2012), *Economic value of tourism: Guidance Note 1: Definitions of tourism.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/nationalaccounts/satelliteaccounts/methodologies/economicvalueoftourismguidancenote1definitionsoftourismversion22012).

[16] Location quotient ('LQ') is a measure of a region's (in this case Southend) sectoral specialisation relative to a larger region (i.e., the East of England region). A LQ of 1.0 indicates that both regions have the same level of specialisation, whereas a LQ greater than 1.0 indicates that the smaller region has a higher level of specialisation.

3.4 Between 2015 and 2024 employment in tourism increased by around 1,400 jobs, representing an increase of +20.7%. Figure 3-2 below shows that employment in the tourism industry generally increased over the ten years to 2024, although there was a noticeable dip between 2020 and 2021. More recently, following a peak in 2022, there has been a slight decline in tourism-related employment, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of total employment in Southend. A similar trend is evident across the East of England, although the proportion of tourism-related employment has consistently been lower than in Southend.

Figure 3-2 Employees in the tourism industry in Southend and the East of England, 2015 to 2024



Source: ONS (2025), *Business Register and Employment Survey 2024* / Lichfields analysis

Changing patterns and dynamics

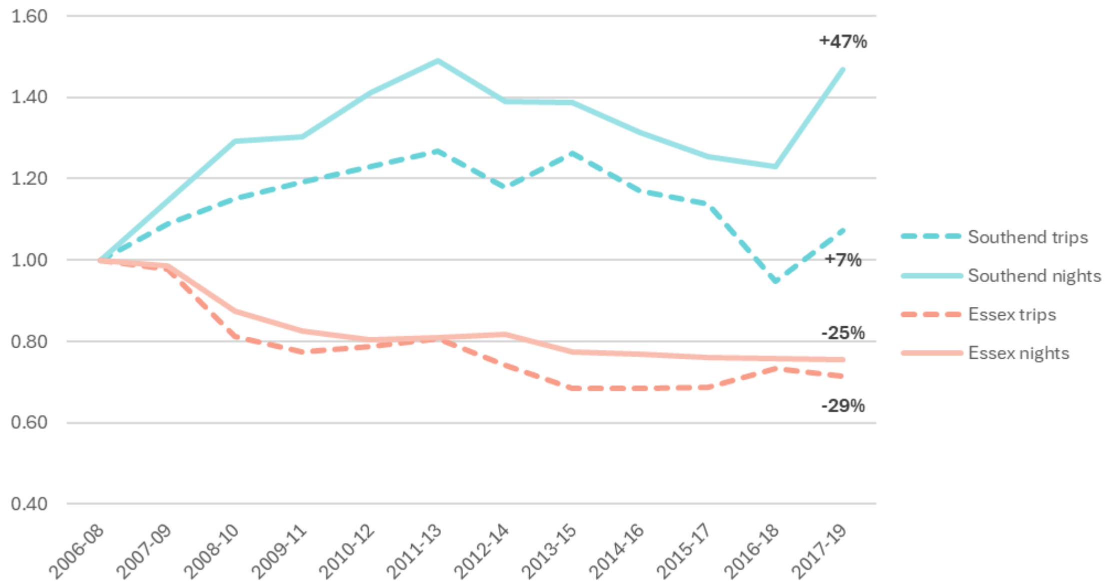
3.5 Research[17] suggests that in 2022, Southend-on-Sea received around 7.0 million trips, almost half of which (i.e., approximately 2.9 million trips or 42%) were holiday visits. Around 3.0 million further visits (equivalent to 43%) were made visiting friends and family, with the remaining trips (i.e., approximately 1.1 million, or 14%) classified as business, study and/or other purposes. Compared with the East of England overall, Southend-on-Sea has a significantly higher proportion of holiday trips (i.e., of 51% compared with 30%)[18,19] underscoring the city's strong position as a leisure destination across the region.

3.6 It is estimated that tourism is worth nearly £487 million to the local economy (i.e., including indirect and induced spend), with day visitors generating over £308 million and overnight visitors contributing a further £65 million.

[17] Destination Research (2024), *Economic Impact of Tourism in Southend, 2024*.).
[18] Visit England (2024), *Domestic Tourism Data Viewer*.
[19] Note that, as these statistics are drawn from different sources and recorded on different dates, they may not be directly comparable.

3.7 Long-term evidence (i.e., dating from 2006 onwards) suggests that while the average number of domestic overnight trips to Southend has increased moderately (i.e., by +7%) between 2006-08 and 2017-19, overall nights (+47%) and length of visit (+0.8 additional nights) increased more strongly. This contrasts markedly with similar evidence for Essex where total nights and domestic overnight trips fell (i.e., by -29% and -25% respectively).

Figure 3-3 Change domestic overnight trips and total nights for Southend and Essex, (3-year moving average for 2006-08 to 2017-19)



Source: Visit Britain, *England domestic tourism: regional and subregional data* / Lichfields analysis

3.8 The latest Economic Impact of Tourism study suggests that as of the end of 2024 visitor numbers were yet to fully recover to pre-pandemic (i.e., 2019[20]) levels (i.e., 7.4 million visitors in 2019 *vs* 7.25 million visitors in 2024[21]). This analysis is further reinforced by an assessment of the total value of tourism. At around £487 million, the total value of tourism in 2024 remained below the equivalent figure in 2019 (i.e., once inflated to 2024 prices) of around £544 million[22]. However, an assessment of total employment (i.e., comprising indirect and induced effects) indicates that between 2019 and 2022 employment in tourism increased by around 850 full-time equivalent ('FTE') jobs (i.e., 6,980 FTE jobs in 2019 *vs* 7,829 FTE jobs in 2024[23]). This analysis suggests that whilst employment numbers have risen, this is likely to reflect weaker productivity growth in tourism, rather than a genuine expansion in overall sector output.

3.9 However, because 2022 represents a period of ongoing post-pandemic recovery, it is too soon to determine whether these changes reflect temporary disruption of a more permanent rebalancing of the city's visitor profile.

[20] Destination Research (2019), *Economic Impact of Tourism in Southend, 2019*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://localplan.southend.gov.uk/sites/localplan.southend/files/supportingdocuments/Topic%20Paper%203_Tourism_SNLP.pdf).
[21] Destination Research (2024), *Economic Impact of Tourism in Southend, 2024.*
[22] The figure for 2019 (i.e., of £438 million) is inflated to 2024 prices using the Bank of England's *Inflation Calculator.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator).
[23] Please note that these employment figures are not comparable to those presented above (see para. 3.2), as figures prepared by Destination Research incorporate direct, indirect and wider induced employment estimates, which are not considered above (see para 3.2).

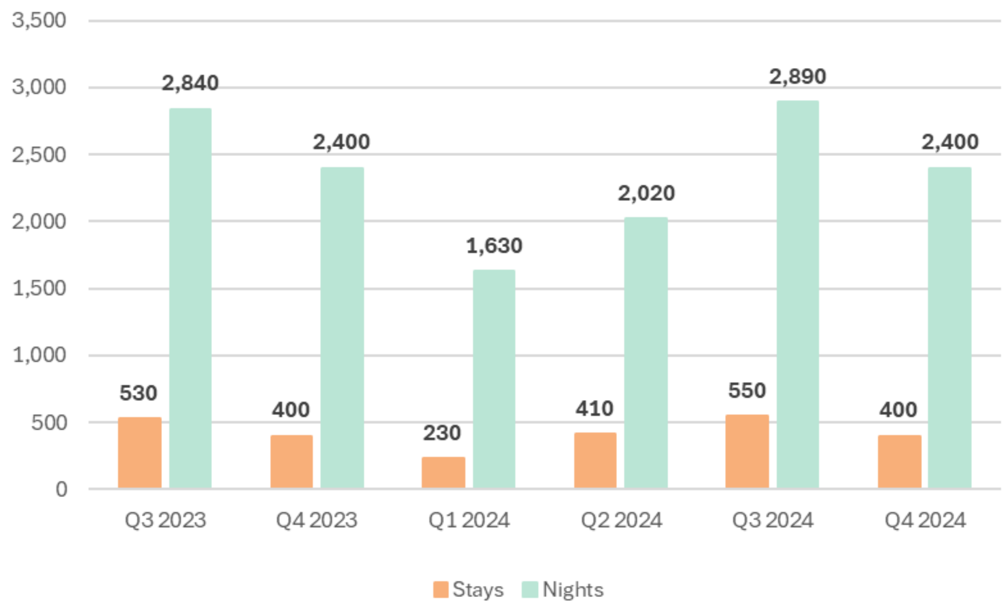
Table 3-1 Comparison of economic impact of tourism in Southend, 2019 and 2024

	2019	2024	Difference
Total visitors (million)	7.4	7.2	-0.2 (-2.7%)
Staying trips	250,000	249,600	-400 (-1.6%)
Staying nights	n/a	923,200	n/a
Staying spend (£ million)	(*£50) £62.1	£65.4	+£3.3 (+5.3%)
Day trips (million)	7.3	7.0	-0.3 (-4.1%)
Day spend (£ million)	(*£280) £347.6	£308.6	-£39.0 (-11.2%)
Total spend (£ million)	n/a	£373.5	n/a
Indirect / induced spend (£ million)	n/a	£113.8	n/a
Total value of tourism (£ million)	(*£438) £543.8	£487.3	-£56.5 (-10.4%)
FTE jobs	6,980	7,829	+849 (+12.2%)
% of all employment	16.0%	17%	+1.0%

Source: Destination Research (2019 and 2024), *Economic Impact of Tourism in Southend, 2019 & 2024.*
*Figures in brackets (*) are in 2019 pricing, inflated to 2024 pricing using the Bank of England's *Inflation calculator*.

3.10 There is currently no dataset that provides a full breakdown (i.e., total stays, nights and/or visitor numbers) for short-term lets. However, quarterly data for international arrivals suggests that during 2024, Southend saw around 1,600 stays in short-term lets, totalling just under 9,000 nights.

Figure 3-4 Number of nights and stays by international visitos to Southend, Q3 2023 to Q4 2024



Source: ONS (2024), Analysis of Airbnb, Booking.com and Expedia Group data

3.11 The visitor economy in Southend-on-Sea is strongly centred around the city's seafront and its coastal offer. With approximately seven miles of coastline, Southend provides a diverse range of beaches and open spaces that cater to both traditional seaside visitors and more active users, including those engaging in water sports[24]. This natural coastal asset underpins Southend's long-standing role as a popular day trip destination, particularly for visitors

[24] Visit Southend (2026) (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitsouthend.co.uk/guide/beaches/).

from London[25]. Key locations such as Three Shells Beach and Lagoon, and Thorpe Bay Beach provide family-oriented amenities, whilst Shoebury East Beach offers a quieter scenic environment and opportunities for activities such as kitesurfing, illustrating the diversity of Southend's coastline. Two beaches within the city (i.e., Thorpe Bay and East Beach, Shoeburyness) have secured Blue Flag status[26], reflecting high environmental and quality standards. These beaches, alongside other beaches in the city (incl., Three Shells Beach, Leigh and Chalkwell) provide a varied and accessible coastal offer that caters to different visitor needs.

3.12 Along the seafront, Leigh Old Town, Southend Pier and Railway, the Adventure Island amusement park and numerous arcades are some of the key local landmarks, drawing tourists into the area[27]. These attractions reinforce Southend's identity as a traditional British seaside resort, appealing particularly to families and visitors seeking accessible and affordable leisure activities. This offer is increasingly complemented by a growing programme of events, including the Lazydays Festival (a multi-day summer event held in Priory Park), but also by a maturing creative and cultural ecology. The festival attracts visitors through a mix of live music, street food, family activities and local independent traders, contributing to Southend's appeal as a broader leisure destination beyond the traditional seaside experience. Meanwhile, facilities such as Focal Point Gallery, The Old Waterworks and music venues like Chinnerys provide year-round, alternative experiences broadening Southend's appeal beyond a traditional seaside resort.

3.13 Southend-on-Sea is also seeking to develop and enhance its tourism offer by broadening its appeal and raising its profile through an increased variety and quality of cultural and leisure activities[28]. These sectors are identified as key areas of growth within the local visitor economy, supporting a shift towards a more diverse and resilient tourism model. This includes the development of a year-round programme of events, alongside the promotion of short activity-based breaks such as water sports, golf, and festivals.

3.14 In addition, there is a focus on creating 'all-weather' or 'rainy day' attractions to reduce reliance on seasonal, weather-dependent tourism. Focal Point Gallery provides a leading contemporary arts programme, while other venues (such as The People's Gallery) offer more informal, participatory opportunities for adult visitors. Meanwhile other creative venues (such as Create98Two and NetPark Digital Park) cater to younger audiences. This is complemented by the Southend Museums service which further enhances the city's cultural offer through a number of sites across Southend Central, Southchurch and Prittlewell. Taken together, these facilities (and others not listed here) contribute to a growing creative ecosystem that broadens the city's appeal, providing a diverse range of experiences for an increasingly wide audience.

3.15 Efforts are also being made to improve awareness and accessibility of local heritage and environmental assets, including Belfairs Wood and Nature Reserve, and Two Tree Island. By diversifying the range of attractions beyond the seafront, Southend aims to encourage longer stays, increase visitor spend, and attract a wider range of visitor groups throughout the year.

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[25] Destination Research (2022), *Economic Impact of Tourism in Essex*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitessex.com/dbimgs/Economic%20Impact%20of%20Tourism%20-%20%20Essex%20Report%202022.pdf).
[26] See: https://www.blueflag.global/site-map.
[27] Southend (2026) (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.visitsouthend.co.uk/guide/attractions/).
[28] Southend Tourism Partnership (2026), *Our Priorities*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.southendtp.co.uk/our-priorities).

4.0 Audit of Visitor Accommodation

4.1 This section provides an overview of the visitor accommodation market in Southend-on-Sea, taking into consideration the existing supply, the degree of market segmentation, and the overall quality and age of the existing stock.

4.2 This section also reviews key performance indicators for the visitor accommodation market, including occupancy and revenue levels, before identifying forthcoming pipeline supply of new rooms.

Stock of Accommodation

4.3 To provide an audit of visitor accommodation stock in Southend-on-Sea, Lichfields triangulated data from CoStar, the Valuation Office Agency ('VOA') and online research. This analysis indicates that there are 84 visitor accommodation properties in Southend-on-Sea.

4.4 The majority of visitor accommodation in Southend-on-Sea (i.e., 61%) is within the serviced sector, comprising hotels, B&Bs/guest houses, pubs/inns and hostels. With 32 establishments, B&Bs/guest houses make up the largest proportion of the serviced accommodation stock (63%) followed by hotels (33%). Despite non-serviced accommodation making up a smaller proportion of total stock, there are an equivalent number of self-catering lets (i.e., 32 establishments) as there are B&B / guest houses. This detail is presented in Table 4-1 below.

Table 4-1 Stock of visitor accommodation in Southend on Sea

Category	Properties	% Total	Subcategory	No. Establishments	% Subcategory
Serviced	51	61%	Hotel	17	33%
			B&B / Guest House	32	63%
			Pub / Inn	-	-
			Hostel	2	4%
			Total	**51**	**61%**
Non-Serviced	33	39%	Serviced Apartment	1	3%
			Self-Catering Lets	32	97%
			Total	**33**	**39%**
Total	**84**			**84**	**-**

Source: CoStar (2026) / VOA (2026) / Lichfields analysis

4.5 Since 2010[29], the number of hotels in the city has increased from nine to 17, representing an overall growth rate of 89%. A similar trend is evident within the guest house sector, where provision has risen from 11 establishments in 2010 to 32 today, equivalent to an increase of 191%.

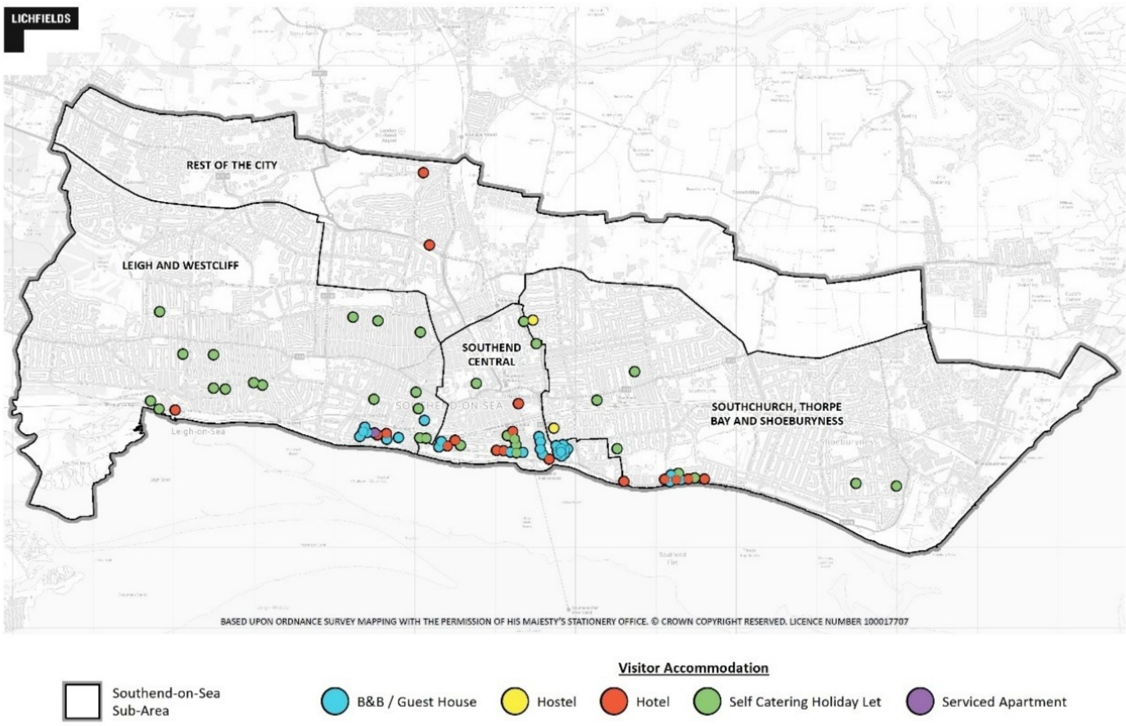
[29] As presented in Hotel Solutions (2010), *Southend-on-Sea Hotel Futures*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://ca1-spp.edcdn.com/documents/Southend-Hotel-Futures-2010.pdf?v=1559310720) – see page 4.

4.6 Historically, the visitor accommodation market in Southend has been dominated by hotels[1]. However, ONS data indicates that the short-term lets sector is growing rapidly, thanks in part to the ease of listing via online platforms (such as Airbnb). ONS data suggests that during 2023 there were an average of 650 monthly listings for short-term lets, comprising around 2,800 monthly bed spaces in Southend[30]. It should be noted that these figures represent the number of listings rather than actively used or consistently available properties. Data is not available on occupancy levels, utilisation or the proportion of listings that operate year-round.

4.7 Visitor accommodation in the city (in particular hotels, B&Bs and guest house accommodation) is concentrated along the seafront and in Southend Central as shown in Figure 4-1 below. Meanwhile, self-catering accommodation is more evenly distributed across the city with 17 properties in Leigh and Westcliff and seven in Southchurch, Thorpe Bay and Shoeburyness.

4.8 Southchurch, Thorpe Bay and Shoeburyness has a total stock of 17 visitor accommodation properties, which are primarily clustered along the Eastern Esplanade and Thorpe Esplanade. As set out, the largest number of properties are located in Southend Central and these are primarily clustered at Pier Hill, Royal Terrace, Clifftown Parade and Westcliff Parade and around the High Street. This indicates visitors' preferences for seaside leisure experiences and highlights the popularity of the City's coastal offering, including Southend Pier.

Figure 4-1 Visitor accommodation in Southend-on-Sea by Sub Area



Source: CoStar (2026) / VOA (2026) / Lichfields analysis

4.9 Table 4-2 presents the visitor accommodation stock by sub area in Southend-on-Sea according to CoStar. The CoStar data comprises the total hotel stock (17 properties) as well

[30] ONS (2024), *Hosts, listings, and bed spaces of short-term lets, UK: 2023.*

as one B&B/Guest House and one serviced apartment.

Table 4-2 Number of establishments by CoStar classification and sub-area in Southend-on-Sea

	Southend Central	Leigh and Westcliff	Southchurch, Thorpe Bay and Shoeburyness	Rest of the City	Total
Economy	2	1	2	1	**6**
Midscale	-	1	-	-	**1**
Upper Midscale	2	2	-	1	**5**
Upscale	2	1	2	-	**5**
Upper Upscale	1	-	1	-	**2**
Luxury	-	-	-	-	**0**
Total	**7**	**5**	**5**	**2**	**17**

Source: CoStar (2026)

4.10 Southend Central contains the highest number of visitor accommodation establishments. However, when looking at room provision, CoStar data shows that despite having only two hotels, the 'Rest of the City' sub-area (which comprises Holiday Inn Southend Airport and Premier Inn Southend Airport) comprises the largest share of rooms in the city (i.e., with 235 rooms accounting for 30.6% of total CoStar stock). This reflects the relatively large scale of properties in this location, likely influenced by proximity to London Southend Airport. Conversely, while Leigh and Westcliff have a greater number of establishments, they account for only 11.6% of total hotel room stock. This indicates that properties in this sub-area are generally smaller in scale.

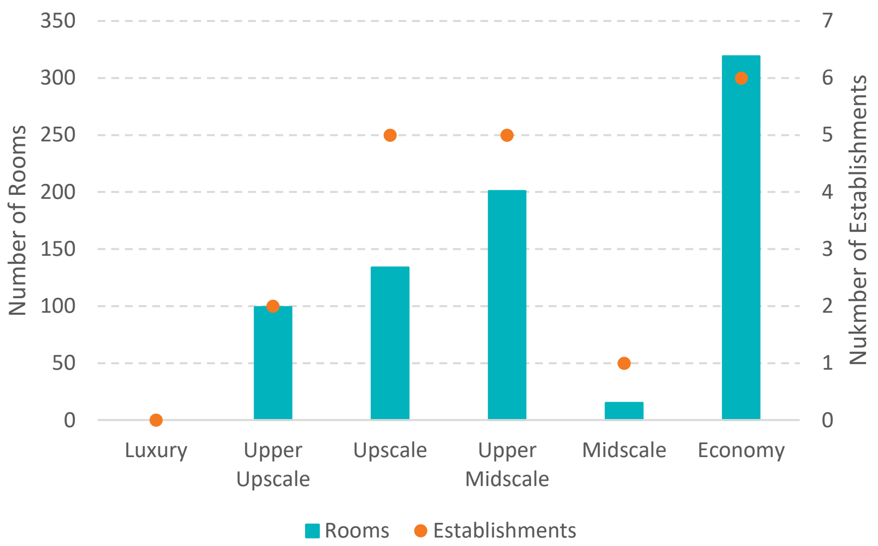
4.11 When considering type of visitor accommodation, CoStar data shows that the largest single category is 'economy', comprising six establishments. This indicates that the area provides a reasonable level of provision for visitors seeking budget accommodation. Provision in this category has increased since 2010, which at the time included three 'budget' hotels, indicating a gradual shift towards more affordable options over the past decade. This may reflect changing visitor preferences, including increased demand for value-led stays. However, it is important to note that this analysis is based on a limited dataset in the context of the total visitor accommodation stock in Southend-on-Sea.

4.12 Ten hotels across the city fall within the 'upper midscale' (five establishments) or 'upscale' (five establishments) classification, suggesting there is a market for higher-end visitors. In terms of the quantity of establishments, 'mid-scale' is the least common type, with only one hotel across the entire city. This suggests a modest shift towards higher-quality provision compared to 2010, which at the time included six 3-star hotels. Notably there are no hotels currently classified within the 'luxury' segment, which remains consistent with the findings from 2010.

4.13 Table 4-2 further indicates that the stock is well distributed and sought after across the city rather than being densely located in one area. 'Upper upscale' and 'upscale' properties are predominately located in Southend Central and Southchurch, Thorpe Bay and Shoeburyness, reflecting a higher-end visitor market in these areas.

4.14 Figure 4-2 below illustrates the stock of hotel accommodation across Southend-on-Sea by class, indicating that of the 768 recorded rooms in the city, over 300 rooms (equivalent to 41.5%) are rated as 'economy'. Together 'upscale' and 'upper upscale' rated accommodation represent a sizeable proportion of rooms (i.e., 233 rooms, equivalent to 30.3% of total stock).

Figure 4-2 Stock of accommodation across Southend on Sea by class

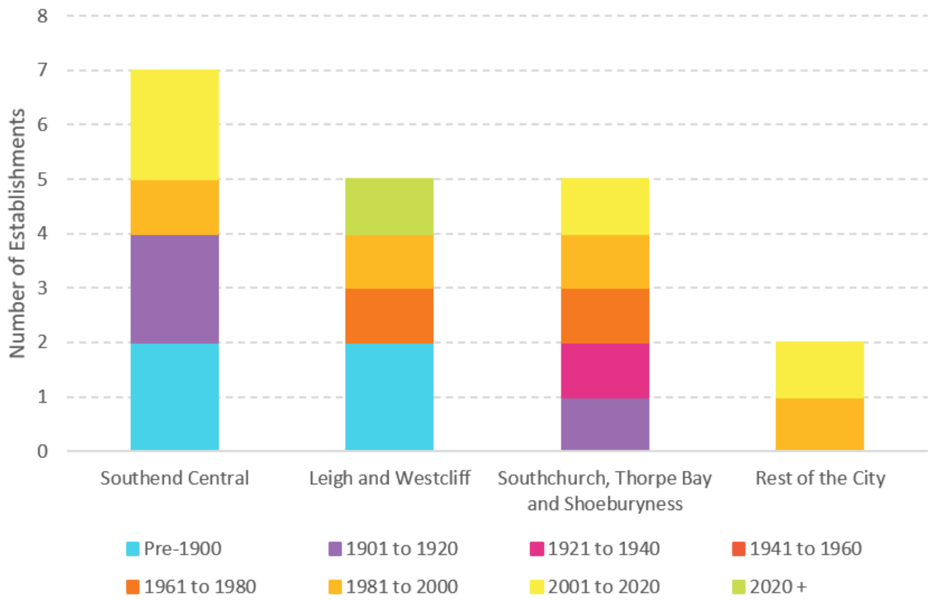


Source: CoStar (2026)

4.15 The age profile of the visitor accommodation stock varies, and provides a key insight into the evolution of the hotel market across the city. In general, the oldest stock is located in Southend Central, with 57% of the sub-area's stock being constructed before 1920, reflecting the city's historic role as a popular Victorian seaside destination within close proximity of London. However, Southend Central also has some more modern stock (i.e., built since 2000), illustrating a diverse age profile across and highlighting the area's sustained appeal as a visitor destination across the region.

4.16 Since 2020, the only sub-area to have new development is Leigh, namely The Ship Hotel in 2025. However, investment into visitor accommodation has also taken the form of redevelopment rather than new provision. The Premier Inn Southend Airport was renovated in 2017 following the expansion of London Southend Airport, suggesting that hotel development has, in part, been influenced by infrastructure improvements.

Figure 4-3 Stock of accommodation by Sub-Area in Southend-on-Sea by age



Source: CoStar (2026)

4.17 Data suggests that the overall supply of visitor accommodation in Southend has remained largely unchanged over the past ten years, with the city recording delivery of 52 rooms during this period. This includes:

- 37 rooms at The Seven Hotel in Southend Central (in February 2018) and
- 15 rooms at The Ship Hotel in Leigh (in July 2025).

4.18 While no hotel rooms were lost between January 2016 and February 2026, this indicates a very limited level of development activity and a largely static accommodation market. This aligns with wider trends outlined in section 2.0, where stronger growth has been observed in day visits rather than overnight tourism, suggesting a shift in visitor preferences towards shorter, more flexible trips.

4.19 In addition, growth in short-term lets and self-catering accommodation may be absorbing a proportion of demand that might otherwise support new hotel development, thereby constraining expansion within the serviced accommodation sector.

4.20 Feedback from operator engagement further points to a relatively challenging trading environment, with operators suggesting that the market has yet to fully recover to pre-pandemic levels. This is compounded by ongoing cost pressures associated with the cost-of-living crisis, which is influencing visitor behaviour through increased sensitivity to prices, shorter lengths of stay, and a stronger focus on value-driven offerings rather than premium upgrades. At the same time, rising operational costs (such as energy, staffing and supplier costs), are placing additional pressure on operators, making it more difficult to maintain margins while remaining competitive, particularly in the context of budget accommodation and competition from short-term letting platforms.

Current Performance

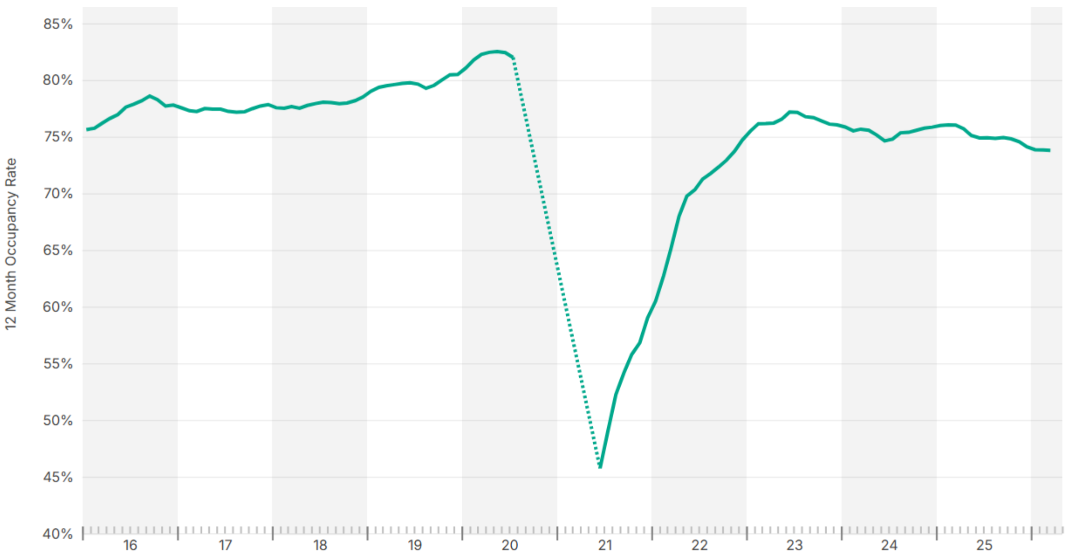
Occupancy rates

4.21 As seen in Figure 4-4 below, the most recent 12-month occupancy rate (March 2025 – February 2026) for existing accommodation across the city was 73.8%. The industry benchmark for when demand exceeds supply is typically around the 70% occupancy level, which is used to ensure a functioning market and to provide consumer choice. Both prior- and post- the pandemic, occupancy figures across Southend-on-Sea have consistently exceeded this level, suggesting that demand has generally been outstripping supply.

4.22 Despite occupancy recovering since the pandemic (when occupancy fell to a low of 45.8% in June 2021) this is yet to return to pre-pandemic levels and appear to be falling from the post-pandemic peak of 77.2% in July 2023. Engagement with a limited number of operators confirms this trend, although this evidence is anecdotal and not necessarily representative of the wider market.

4.23 One operator highlighted clear variations in demand by segment and time of week. Midweek occupancy (Monday to Friday) was reported to be relatively strong, driven primarily by corporate demand, including repeat business from local employers, and in some cases extending into Sundays. In contrast, weekend demand is more leisure-led, with couples, families and short-break visitors attracted to the city's seafront, attractions and events.

Figure 4-4 Occupancy rates across Southend on Sea, 2016-2026



Source: CoStar (2026)

4.24 It is also important to recognise that demand for visitor accommodation in Southend is strongly influenced by seasonality, with peaks during the summer months and lower demand during the off-season, not untypical of coastal resort towns. Engagement with one operator in the city indicated that, while corporate demand typically declines during the festive period (i.e., mid-December to early January), reflecting reduced business activity, leisure demand remains relatively stable throughout the year, peaking during the spring and summer months, particularly in favourable weather and school holiday periods. This provides an indication of how demand in Southend may vary by segment, season and day of the week.

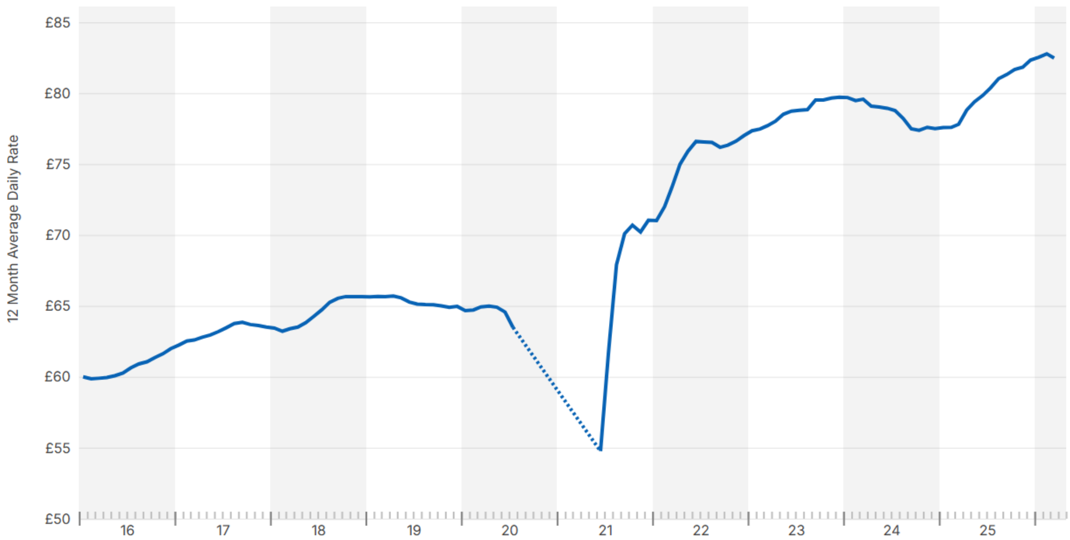
Average daily rate and revenue per available room

4.25 The average daily rate ('ADR') is the measure of the average rate paid for rooms sold in a given time period. The 12-month ADR across visitor accommodation in Southend shows a similar trend to occupancy levels, although it is noted that this has fully recovered and surpassed pre-pandemic levels. This indicates that, despite occupancy levels not fully recovering, demand remains sufficiently robust to support higher room rates. ADR is a direct factor in revenue per available room ('RevPAR') which combines both occupancy and room rates into a single measure of performance.

4.26 The ADR for visitor accommodation in Southend currently stands at £82.48 per night as of February 2026, as seen in Figure 4-5. This is higher than the post-pandemic peak of £79.72 in December 2023. This is likely to reflect strong levels of demand consistency with the occupancy levels noted above, as well as wider inflationary factors.

4.27 Over the last ten years, the ADR for hotel accommodation in Southend has increased by 39% from a 12-month average daily rate of £59.86 per night as of February 2016 to £82.48 today. This pattern reflects a strengthened market, with operators able to sustain higher rates even as occupancy remains below pre-pandemic levels. However, part of the growth is also likely to reflect the reality that rising operating costs are being passed on to visitors.

Figure 4-5 Average daily rates for hotels across Southend, 2016-2026

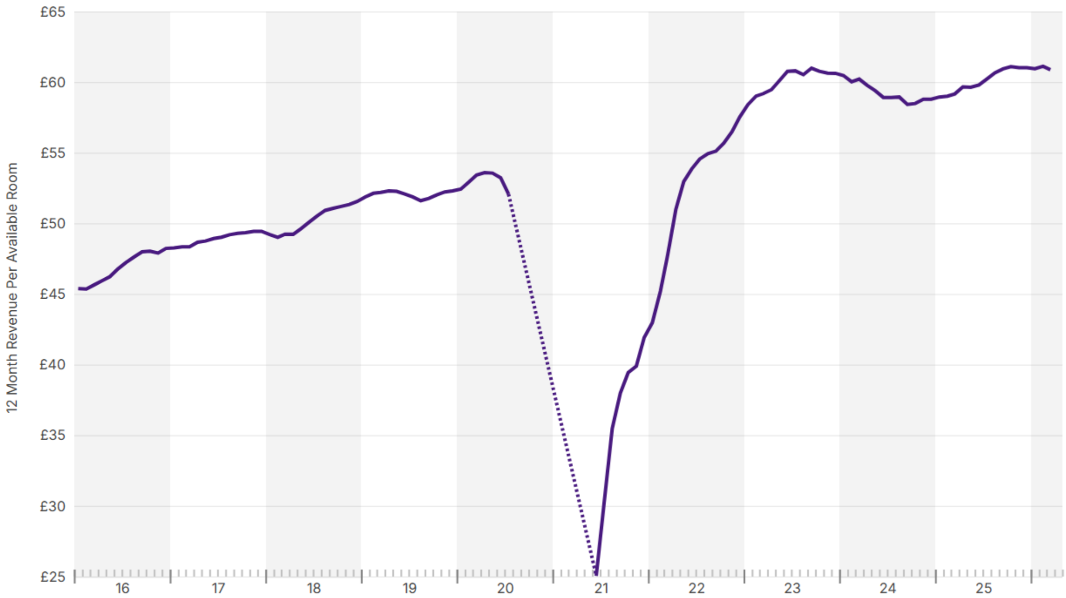


Source: CoStar (2026)

4.28 The 12-month revenue per available room ('RevPAR') is another performance indicator for hotel accommodation, and indicates revenue generated per available room, regardless of whether rooms are occupied. Data on 12-month RevPAR for visitor accommodation across Southend is presented in Figure 4-6 below.

4.29 This indicates that RevPAR stands at £60.88 as of February 2026, having recovered from a low of £25.05 in June 2021. RevPAR now stands well above pre-pandemic levels and is relatively stable with a slight dip in 2024. As with ADR, this trend is likely to indicate a stronger market, while also reflecting higher costs being passed on to visitors.

Figure 4-6 Revenue per available room for visitor accommodation across Southend, 2026-2026



Source: CoStar (2026)

Visitor Accommodation Pipeline

4.30 As of April 2026, there are two schemes with extant planning permission which could expand the city's accommodation offer. In November 2025, the Premier Inn in the Southend Central seafront area received consent (ref: 25/00087/FULM) to deliver a 44-room extension to the existing hotel. In addition, the conversion of 19 Alexandra Street in Southend Central from office use to a hotel was approved (ref: 24/01979/FUL) in August 2025. Together, these schemes if implemented would add a total of 48 rooms to the city's visitor accommodation stock.

4.31 However, this growth is partially offset by a number of potential losses. The conversion of seven executive holiday apartments at 146 Alexandra Road in Southend Central to residential use received consent (ref: 24/00497/FUL) in May 2024. While currently unimplemented, this would result in the loss of seven visitor accommodation units if brought forward.

4.32 There also remains uncertainty around larger-scale additions to supply. A previously approved scheme for an 80-room hotel at Seaway Car Park (ref: 18/02302/BC4M, allowed on appeal in October 2020[31]) has lapsed, and now appears unlikely to proceed. No formal application for hotel development on the site has been submitted to date.

[31] It should be noted that the applicant appealed failure to give notice within the prescribed period of a decision on an application for planning permission. The published Appeal Decision indicates that "*4. The Council have confirmed that, had it been in a position to do so, it would have approved the planning application subject to a suite of planning conditions…*".

4.33 Overall, the visitor accommodation pipeline in Southend reflects modest growth, shaped by a combination of approved developments, potential losses, and uncertain future proposals. Based on extant permissions, the pipeline indicates a net increase of approximately 41 rooms across the city (i.e., excluding the lapsed permission for 80 rooms). This activity is concentrated in Southend Central, driven by the extension to the Premier Inn along the seafront and the permitted loss of holiday apartments closer to the town centre. Nevertheless, the potential for new proposals in the city centre introduces a degree of uncertainty, meaning the medium-term trajectory of supply remains subject to change.

5.0 Future Drivers of Growth

5.1 This section considers the key drivers shaping demand for visitor accommodation in Southend-on-Sea, Together, these factors provide the context for understanding future market potential, investment conditions and the role of visitor accommodation within the wider visitor economy.

Policy Drivers

National and Regional Policy

5.2 The election of a new government in 2024 marked a significant shift in the national approach to tourism planning, with the government now aiming for 50 million international visitors each year by 2030. To support this ambition, the government established a new, Visitor Economy Advisory Council in January 2025. This joint industry and government-led body brings together employers, small businesses and representative organisations to identify opportunities for growth and remove barriers that constrain the sector. A central output of the Council will be a National Visitor Economy Strategy, setting a clear emphasis on growing the visitor economy beyond London, and unlocking the potential of cities and regions that have historically under-delivered against their potential.

5.3 This national direction builds on the objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework[32] ('NPPF') which positions the planning system as a mechanism for unlocking sustainable development. NPPF recognises that this includes an objective to "*build a strong, responsive and competitive economy*". The draft NPPF[33], consulted on in early 2026, strengthens this position further by encouraging local planning authorities to allocate sites that support their economic vision, facilitating expansion and modernising sectors of local importance (such as the leisure and tourism industry).

5.4 At the sub-regional level, Essex has adopted a more strategic and coordinated approach to tourism planning. In 2023, Visit Essex was recognised as the region's Local Visitor Economy Partnership ('LVEP'), tasked with delivering tourism growth and positioning the county as a key partner in the delivery of national growth ambitions. The Essex Destination Management Plan[34] forecasts overall demand to increase a total of 7.8%, with domestic demand forecast to grow by just 6.9%, and sets a target to increase domestic tourism spending by 1.5% each year, with overseas tourism spending growing by 1.75%.

Local Policy

5.5 The national and regional policy landscape creates a strong foundation for Southend to plan proactively for growth of its visitor economy. Locally, there is already a substantial body of planning policy and strategy that recognises the importance of tourism to the city's economy and its long-term ambitions. The emerging SNLP provides an opportunity to

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[32] Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (2024), *National Planning Policy Framework*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67aafe8f3b41f783cca46251/NPPF_December_2024.pdf).

[33] Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government (2025), *Draft National Planning Policy Framework.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/697b71c52ff8d10a830d5d4a/Draft_NPPF_December_2025.pdf).

[34] Essex County Council (2024), *Essex Destination Management Plan, 2024-2030.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.essex.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-11/Essex%20Destination%20Management%20Plan%202024%20to%202030.pdf).

consolidate this direction, respond to new evidence and set an updated framework for the development of future visitor accommodation in the city.

Core Strategy

5.6 Southend's current planning framework, comprising the Core Strategy[35], Development Management Document[36] ('DMD') and the Southend Central Area Action Plan[37] ('SCAAP'), has long acknowledged the city's role as a major coastal resort and visitor destination.

5.7 The Core Strategy commits to strengthening Southend's regional potential as a hotel and conference location, building on its accommodation offer as well as its leisure and tourism facilities, while also reinforcing Southend Pier as a major tourism asset of national and regional significance.

5.8 Building on this, the DMD provides the development management tools to support this ambition. Policy DM12 (Visitor accommodation) directs new visitor accommodation to the Central Area, London Southend Airport and/or other locations with a strong relationship to the city's seafront. It also seeks to retain existing accommodation, while at the same time also discouraging development elsewhere within the city. The DMD also identifies a number of priorities for growing the city's visitor economy, including higher income day visitors/groups, the short break leisure market, business conference tourism, foreign language students and staying visitors (incl., ones visiting London).

5.9 The SCAAP builds on this by positioning the Central Area as the primary focus for tourism, cultural and leisure development. In particularly, Strategic Objective 5 emphasises the need to enhance the tourism offer, expanding visitor accommodation and encouraging more overnight and longer stays. Collectively, these documents establish a long-term commitment to growing the city's visitor economy.

5.10 The city's Destination Management Plan[38] ('DMP') published in 2020 provides a more contemporary and strategic objective for the visitor economy. It sets a long-term aspiration for Southend "*to become the region's first choice coastal tourism destination and to increase the value of the visitor economy*".

5.11 The DMP also highlights the opportunity to grow international markets by making better use of the connections provided through London Southend Airport, and reinforces the importance of improving the quality and breadth of the visitor accommodation offer to support this ambition.

Southend New Local Plan

5.12 The emerging SNLP builds on this strong platform and provides a clearer and future-focused framework for the visitor economy. The SNLP's long-term vision celebrates the

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35 Southend-on-Sea Council (2007), *Core Strategy*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.southend.gov.uk/downloads/file/7023/core-strategy-dpd1-document-2007-).
36 Southend-on-Sea Council (2015), *Development Management Document*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.southend.gov.uk/downloads/file/3737/southend_development_management_document_adopted_version).
37 Southend-on-Sea Council (2018), *Southend Central Area Action Plan.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.southend.gov.uk/downloads/file/5409/southend_central_area_action_plan_-_2018).
38 Southend Tourism Partnership (2020), *Destination Southend, 2020-2050.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.southendtp.co.uk/_files/ugd/ec413d_68bc866f48134c54bea2eb8fe7f62c17.pdf).

city's coastal identity, its heritage and cultural assets, and seeks to position Southend as a place that inspires residents and visitors alike.

5.13 The SNLP sets out several strategic objectives which directly relate to building a stronger visitor economy and supporting accommodation, including:

- **Strategic Objective 7** seeks to establish Southend as a major resort and year round destination, increasing the value of the visitor economy;
- **Strategic Objective 10** positions Southend as the region's first-choice coastal tourism destination with and enhanced seafront and marine environment;
- **Strategic Objective 11** aspires to capitalise on the city's built heritage to promote tourism and regeneration; and
- **Strategic Objective 23** supports the sustainable growth of London Southend Airport, recognising its role as a gateway for more inbound visitors to the city.

5.14 Strategic Policy SP6 (Securing a Thriving Local Economy and Visitor Destination) reinforces this direction of travel by identifying tourism and related sectors (such as good and beverage services, as well as the cultural and creative industries) as priority growth sectors, targeting an additional 9,500 jobs in the city by 2045. The SNLP seeks to achieve this by enhancing the city's role as a cultural and intellectual hub, while also promoting the city's function as a major resort and a year-round visitor destination.

5.15 Draft Policy DM6.6 (Tourism and Visitor Accommodation) provides the rationale for prioritising hotel and visitor accommodation within key areas in the city, particularly the Central Seafront Area and the City Centre, and notes that the loss of visitor accommodation in these areas could undermine the city's "*resort character*" and its wider economy.

5.16 The SNLP also acknowledges the growing presence of short-term lets, noting that high concentrations in coastal destinations can affect housing availability, affordability, neighbourhood character and amenities of established residential areas.

Growth Potential

Employment-based growth

5.17 Experian forecasts indicate that Southend could see an additional 12,300 workforce jobs created between 2025 and 2045. Within this, the accommodation and food services sector is expected to grow by around 800 jobs (i.e., equivalent to +11.6%). Analysis of BRES data suggests that accommodation typically accounts for 7.6% of this overarching sector, and has grown at an average of +1.2% per year since 2014. Applying these trends to the above forecast on a constant share basis implies that the accommodation sector in Southend could expect employment to grow by around 60 to 140 jobs by 2045.

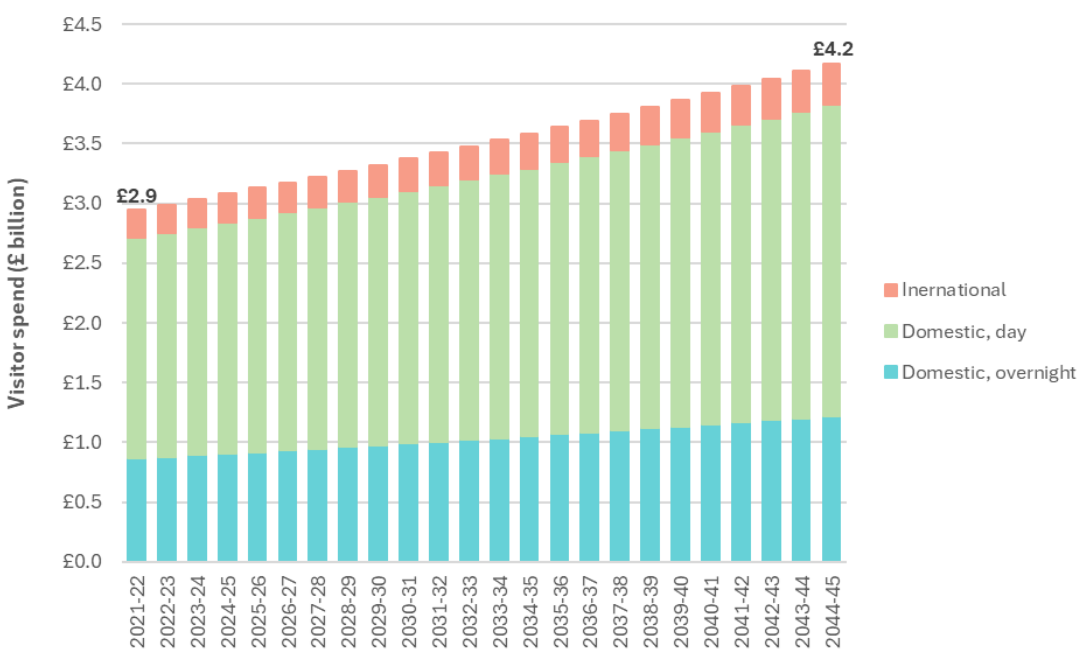
5.18 Using typical employment density ratios for mid-scale hotel accommodation from the Homes and Communities Agency ('HCA') (i.e., of 1 job per 3 beds), the above level of employment growth would imply demand for approximately 180 to 420 additional hotel rooms by 2045.

5.19 As noted earlier, during 2025 a total of 48 visitor rooms were consented in Southend (incl., a 44-room extension to the existing Premier Inn hotel in Southend Central, and four rooms at the converted 19 Alexandra Street, in Southend Central). Meanwhile, despite being allowed on appeal, proposals for an 80-room hotel at Seaways Car Park appear unlikely to proceed, although some renewed interest has recently emerged.

Expenditure-based

5.20 Analysis presented within the 2024-30 Essex Destination Management Plan[34] estimates the value of the visitor economy in Essex during 2021-22 at around £2.9 billion, and sets an annual target of +1.5% growth in domestic spend and +1.75% growth in international spend over the period to 2030. Extending these growth rates to 2045 (i.e., the SNLP period), it is estimated that the visitor economy in Essex could continue growing to reach £4.2 billion per annum. Of this, an estimated £3.8 billion could is likely to be generated by domestic visitors (i.e., day and overnight), with the remaining (i.e., £344 million) generated via international arrivals.

Figure 5-1 Modelled visitor expendiure in Essex to 2045



Source: Based on Essex Destination Management Plan (2024-2030) / Lichfields analysis

5.21 Assuming that Southend's share of domestic visitor expenditure recovers to, and remains in line with pre-pandemic levels (i.e., 12.6% for domestic overnight, and 8.3% for day visitors), it is estimated that by 2045 total visitor expenditure could add up to £489 million per annum (i.e., equivalent to £67 million by domestic overnight trips, £22 million by international visitors, and £422 million by day visitors). In reality, this figure is likely to be higher, as long-term data from 2006-07 to 2017-19 shows that the city's share of total (domestic) nights in Essex has more than doubled (i.e., from 6.8% in 2006-08 to 14%).

5.22 Drawing on spend-per-visit estimates, it is estimated that the overall number of visitors will increase to just over 15 million by 2045, including around 800,000 overnight trips. As highlighted previously, only 45% of all domestic overnight visits nationally make use of visitor accommodation. On this basis, and assuming that the typical length of stay for domestic overnight visits remains unchanged (i.e., at 2.9 nights per trip), it is therefore estimated that by 2045 Southend could see visitor nights within serviced accommodation increase to 1.1 million.

Summary

5.23 Taken together, the growth analysis points towards a steady upward trajectory in demand for visitor accommodation in Southend over the plan period. Employment forecasts indicate scope for 180-420 additional hotel rooms by 2045. Parallel analysis suggests that if the city were to maintain its historic share of the Essex visitor economy, domestic visitor spend in Southend could grow to £489 million each year by 2045, generating an estimated 1.1 million visitor nights in serviced accommodation. While indicative, both sets of estimates point towards a long-term upward trajectory in demand.

5.24 Set against this, engagement with operators highlights a market that remains operationally challenging (i.e., with occupancy yet to recover to pre-pandemic levels, and rising operational costs squeezing margins). Furthermore, operators identify the ongoing cost-of-living squeeze on families as having a significant influence on guest behaviour, resulting in growing price sensitivity, shorter stays and increased demand for value-driven offerings (rather than premium upgrades).

5.25 While there is some optimism for growing demand over the next 12-24 months, the above analysis points towards an evolving market. Engagement suggests that going forward, there may be opportunities for well-positioned, high-quality accommodation to perform strongly, particularly where this aligns with evolving visitor expectations.

Qualitative Factors

5.26 The visitor accommodation sector continues to be shaped by broad structural forces, including demographic change, evolving expectations, technological disruption, and a lasting legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic. These forces are redefining how destinations across the country position themselves and, crucially for this study, what visitors now expect from accommodation.

Growth of Home Sharing and Short-Term Rentals

5.27 As highlighted previously, the use of short-term lets nationally has almost doubled over the past ten years, from just under 1.4 million trips in 2014 to 3.2 million in 2024 (+126.8%). This aligns with wider international trends[39], where the share of short-term lets has grown from 10% of total accommodation booking value in 2017 to 14% in 2023. Similar patterns are evident across the broader London market, where the share of all visitor nights spent in short-term rentals increased from 8.7% in 2019 to 10.2% in 2024[40].

5.28 While not always the most affordable option, the growing demand for short-term lets reflects a growing preference for additional flexibility, making it a permanent and growing part of the accommodation ecosystem. Engagement with operators in Southend establishes growth in short-term lets as a key challenge, particularly during peak season as these compete on pricing without the increased operating cost base. However, operators did

[39] McKinsey (2024), *Six trends shaping new business models in tourism and hospitality*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/travel/our-insights/six-trends-shaping-new-business-models-in-tourism-and-hospitality).

[40] London Datastore (2026), *A Snapshot of Tourist Accommodation in London*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://data.london.gov.uk/blog/a-snapshot-of-tourist-accommodation-in-london/).

highlight risks with the growth in short-term rentals, especially around their quality which can vary significantly, impacting the overall visitor experience. Furthermore, operators also highlighted challenges arising from the potential introduction of a visitor levy[41], further driving greater numbers towards short-term lets.

Generational Shifts in Travel Behaviour

5.29 Additionally, evolving trends in domestic travel (i.e., a key driver of the visitor economy, both nationally and in Southend) suggest a growing shift in preferences between generations. Younger travellers (i.e., particularly Gen Z and Millennials) have adapted to cost pressures by taking shorter and more frequent trips prioritising domestic destinations (or 'staycations') where their money stretches further. For many, travel remains a top savings priority, especially amongst higher-earning Millennials.

5.30 Meanwhile, younger travellers are also more likely to invest in experiences such as events, unique destinations and/or distinctive accommodation. This desire has fuelled rapid growth in demand for "unusual places to say" such as treehouses, shepherd huts, small cabins or yurts, a category that saw a +242% increase in web-traffic in 2024 (i.e., compared to a year previously)[42]. Amongst Gen Z, this trend is even more pronounced, with adventure, wellness and learning taking precedence over traditional sightseeing or relaxation. Analysis of market intelligence[43] suggests that almost 2-in-3 (i.e., 61%) of 16-34-year-olds in the UK now plan holidays with a wellness element. Yet, these groups remain highly budget-conscious, displaying money saving behaviours such as last-minute bookings, identifying early booking discounts and flexible cancellation policies. In contrast, older travellers (i.e., typically Gen X and older) tend to prioritise relaxation and shared experience with family and friends, favouring traditional accommodation options.

5.31 Taken together, these shifts point to a visitor market that is becoming less homogenous and increasingly experience-driven. Therefore, to remain competitive, destinations need to respond by diversifying their mix of accommodation, offering both affordable and value-focused options, in addition to distinctive and experience-led stays.

Covid-Induced Trends

5.32 Beyond the immediate disruption, Covid-19 has had a lasting impact on overall travel behaviours, accelerating and embedding several trends that continue to shape the demand for visitor accommodation.

5.33 In particular, the pandemic has ushered in a new era of hybrid-working, with employees splitting their working hours between their place of work and home. In conjunction with other trends identified above, one facet of the growth in hybrid-working has been the growth in 'workations' whereby employees choose to work remotely from their holiday

[41] It is noted that the government is currently reviewing consultation proposals on the design of a new Mayoral power to create visitor levies on overnight stays in England, as presented here: (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6926e212a245b0985f03409c/overnight-visitor-levy-in-england.pdf).

[42] Savills (2025), *Research Article: Holiday accommodation*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.savills.co.uk/research_articles/229130/374722-0).

[43] Mintel (2026), *From Inflation to Climate Anxiety: Travel Trends by Generation.* (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.mintel.com/insights/travel-and-tourism/generational-travel-trends/).

accommodation, extending their trips. Research[44] indicates that 1-in-8 employers now has a formal policy on 'workations', while travel companies are increasingly responding to this new demand by promoting accommodation with strong amenities (such as reliable Wi-Fi and dedicated workspaces).

5.34 Camping has also experienced a notable resurgence since 2020. Analysis by market intelligence agency Mintel[45] suggests that around 4.5 million people have experienced camping for the first time since the start of the pandemic, perceiving it an affordable and flexible options. The recent cost-of-living crisis has strengthened demand for camping and outdoor accommodation, particularly for campsites which also offer on-site entertainment and/or other similar activities.

5.35 Finally, the demand for pet-friendly travel has also increased over recent years, in part due to the increased levels of dog ownership during the pandemic. This trend has created new expectations for tourism providers, with many travellers now opting for destinations and accommodation specifically based on their ability to bring pets. Unique accommodation website Canopy & Stars reports that around 18% of all bookings in recent years comprise guests with dogs, indicating that these now mark a significant proportion of the UK staycation market[46].

Other Emerging Trends

5.36 Environmental considerations are exerting a growing influence on travel choices, particularly among younger consumers. Around half of Gen Z and Millennials report being motivated to increase rail usage to reduce their carbon footprint. However, rather than adopting a strict "no-fly" approach, many travellers are shifting toward a blended approach whereby they reduce air travel for some journeys but still flying when necessary. This offers opportunity for domestic holiday destinations with strong rail links such as Southend.

5.37 However, despite rising environmental awareness, financial pressures continue to limit the willingness to pay a premium for sustainable options. As a result, sustainability tends to act as a secondary priority, shaping brand preference, transport mode, or accommodation choice once core needs such as cost, comfort, and experience have been met.

5.38 Technology also remains a powerful driver of travel behaviour. Social media platforms and digital tools play a central role in destination discovery, influencing where people choose to go and how they validate their choices. Accommodation providers increasingly need strong digital visibility, seamless booking systems, and compelling experiences to remain competitive.

[44] CMI (2026), *Managers warm to overseas 'Workations' – but only when employers set clear rules*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.managers.org.uk/about-cmi/media-centre/press-releases/managers-warm-to-overseas-workations-but-only-when-employers-set-clear-rules-new-cmi-research-finds/).

[45] Mintel (2026), *Travel Trends Impacting the UK Holiday Market*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.mintel.com/insights/travel-and-tourism/3-travel-trends-impacting-the-uk-holiday-market/).

[46] Canopy and Stars (2026), *The Canopy & Stars Glamping Market Report 2026*. (Accessed 4 June 2026: https://www.canopyandstars.co.uk/market-report/).

6.0 Key Findings and Implications

6.1 This Visitor Accommodation Study, prepared by Lichfields, provides evidence to inform the Southend New Local Plan ('SNLP'). Its core objectives are to:

a Establish an up-to-date picture of the supply and demand for visitor accommodation in Southend-on-Sea, covering both commercial and non-commercial provision;

b Assess how demand is evolving, including the influence of post-Covid behavioural shifts, changing visitor expectations, and wider trends in the UK tourism market;

c Review developer and operator interest, including the current pipeline of hotel proposals and the appetite for future investment;

d Consider the impact of the sharing economy, including the growth of short-term lets, and their implications on visitor accommodation in the city; and

e Review relevant policies within the SNLP to ensure alignment with current market conditions and future needs.

Summary of Key Findings

The visitor economy in Southend-on-Sea

6.2 Southend-on-Sea is a well-established and popular seaside destination, with an extensive coastal offer underpinning its appeal, particularly for families and day visitors from across Essex, London and the wider East of England region. The visitor economy supports an estimated 8,300 jobs (i.e., equivalent to 12.9% of total employment in the city), representing a higher share than the regional average.

6.3 Attracting over 7.2 million trips, the tourism economy is worth nearly £487 million to the local economy, with day visitors generating over £308 million, and overnight trips a further £65 million. However, while the city has a broad tourism base, it has comparatively lower employment in hotels and similar accommodation, indicating relatively lower sectoral specialisation (i.e., with a LQ 0.74).

6.4 Long-term evidence suggests that while the average number of domestic overnight trips has increased moderately (i.e., at +7% between 2006-08 and 2017-19), overall nights and length of visit increased more strongly, contrasting markedly with equivalent figures for Essex as a whole.

The visitor accommodation stock

6.5 An audit of visitor accommodation in the city has identified a total of 84 visitor accommodation establishments, including 17 hotels and 32 B&Bs / guest houses. This demonstrates significant growth since 2010, with hotel numbers increasing by +88.9% (i.e., equivalent to eight new hotels), while guest houses have almost tripled (i.e., by +190.9% and growing from 11 to 32 establishments).

6.6 More recently, the rapid rise of short-term lets booked online (such as via Airbnb or Vrbo) have added further diversity to the market. However, an average of 650 monthly listings and around 2,800 monthly bedspaces (i.e., during 2023), short-term lets have been identified as a key challenge by operators in Southend-on-Sea, especially during peak times when these are able to compete on pricing without increasing their cost base.

6.7 The accommodation stock (i.e., excluding short-term lets) is strongly clustered along the seafront and in Southend Central, with a mix of older (i.e., pre-1920s) buildings and more modern additions illustrating the city's enduring appeal. Despite growth since 2010, investment in visitor accommodation has been limited, with recent changes largely driven by the redevelopment of existing stock, rather than new-build provision. Overall, provision has remained largely unchanged over the past ten years, with the city increasing its stock by 52 rooms (comprising 37 rooms at The Seven Hotel, and 15 rooms at The Ship Hotel).

The visitor accommodation pipeline

6.8 As of April 2026, the development pipeline for visitor accommodation indicates modest growth, comprising two extant permissions with potential to delivery 48 additional rooms to the city's stock. A previously approved scheme for an 80-room hotel at Seaway Car Park is now unlikely to proceed, despite reports of renewed market interest. Overall, the pipeline suggests incremental expansion in room capacity rather than significant new hotel development.

Performance of visitor accommodation

6.9 Analysis of hotel performance and market dynamics indicates that hotel occupancy in Southend is yet to return to pre-pandemic levels, a trend echoed by operator feedback. Despite this both average daily rate ('ADR') and revenue per available room ('RevPAR') have surpassed pre-pandemic levels indicating strengthened pricing power and resilient demand. Operators also report that rising operating costs remain a significant pressure. Consequently, the uplift in room rates suggests that part of this growth reflects the need to pass increasing costs on to visitors, rather than purely market-driven gains.

National and local policy drivers

6.10 National policy signals strong support for growth in tourism, with inbound visitor numbers rising from 38.0 million in 2023 to 43.6 million in 2025. Building on a strong post-Covid recovery, the government has announced a target of 50 million visitors each year by 2030. At the sub-regional level, Visit Essex was recognised as the Local Visitor Economy Partnership ('LVEP') tasked with delivering tourism growth, while also positioning the county as a key partner in the delivery of national growth ambitions.

6.11 Against this backdrop, the local policy context benefits from a well-established foundation, comprising the Core Strategy, the Development Management Document ('DMD') and the Southend Central Area Action Plan ('SCAAP'). While the new Local Plan (i.e., SNLP) will ultimately replace these, they provide a strong platform from which to update and refine the city's approach to supporting growth in the visitor economy and aligning with national and regional priorities.

Future growth trends

6.12 Employment forecasts suggest modest growth in accommodation-related jobs (i.e., of between 60-140 jobs), implying demand for 180-420 additional hotel rooms by 2045. Meanwhile, expenditure-based forecasts indicate that domestic overnight visitor spend in the city could grow to £489 million each year by 2045, generating demand for 1.1 million nights in serviced accommodation (i.e., including hotels, guest houses and B&Bs). While the market remains challenging, operators anticipate growth in opportunities for well-located, high-quality accommodation aligned with evolving visitor expectations.

6.13 Short-term lets continue to grow in popularity and are expected to remain a permanent feature of the market. However, operators highlight concerns around short-term lets' ability to compete on pricing (i.e., without increasing their cost base), quality inconsistency and the potential implications of the introduction of a visitor levy.

6.14 The Covid-19 pandemic has had a lasting impact on overall travel behaviours, accelerating and embedding emerging trends that continue to shape the demand for visitor accommodation. Broader behavioural trends, such as generational shifts in travel preferences, the rise of 'workations', increased demand for pet-friendly travel and renewed interest in camping continue to reshape the accommodation landscape, both locally and nationally.

Implications for the Local Plan

6.15 The evidence presented in this study points to a visitor accommodation market that is now more diverse, more competitive and more sensitive to cost pressures. While demand for traditional forms of visitor accommodation remains strong, the evidence suggests a shift in preferences (i.e., both in terms of accommodation types, as well as types of visits), with occupancy levels yet to return to pre-pandemic levels. Alongside this, short-term lets have become an established part of the market, reinforcing the need for a balanced approach that supports visitor choice, while also managing potential impacts on housing availability and neighbourhood character. There is opportunity for planning policy to be flexible in supporting the delivery of a diverse range of visitor accommodation typologies that meet the varied demand trends identified in Section 5. In doing so, it can contribute to improving the resilience of the local tourism sector and support new business, innovation and growth opportunities for Southend-on-Sea where providers seek to respond to market trends.

6.16 National trends highlight a growing preference for privacy, flexibility and distinctive experiences, suggesting that Southend's future accommodation offer will need to respond to evolving expectations across different market segments. The city's cultural and creative assets, together with an expanding programme of events, provide a strong framework for strengthening year-round and all-weather activity. This represents an important opportunity for operators seeking to drive revenue and occupancy without substantially increasing their cost base.

6.17 Analysis of the growth potential suggests that, despite a challenging market, the long-term outlook for visitor demand is one of modest, but steady expansion. Employment-based forecasts point to a potential demand for up to 420 hotel rooms by 2045, while expenditure-based modelling suggests that domestic visitor spend in Southend could rise to around £489 million domestic visits, generating 1.1 million nights in serviced accommodation. These projections imply that SNLP should plan positively for incremental growth in visitor accommodation, ensuring that new development is well located, high-quality and aligned with the city's ambition to broaden its year-round offer.

6.18 The strong growth in accommodation stock since 2010 provides a solid foundation for the ambitions set out within SNLP, particularly Strategic Policy 6: Securing a Thriving Local Economy and Visitor Destination. There is clearly potential for SNLP to leverage the role of London Southend Airport in supporting inbound visitor growth, while also encouraging investment in high-quality, well-located accommodation that aligns with changing visitor behaviours accelerated since the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise of short-term letting platforms underscores the importance of digital visibility and experience-led tourism, both of which present opportunities for Southend to strengthen its competitive position.

6.19 In this context, the evidence strongly supports the spatial approach set out in Policy DM6.6. Focusing new visitor accommodation within the Central Seafront, other seafront locations and London Southend Airport aligns with both market signals and long-term growth potential. This will ensure that investment is directed to areas with the strongest visitor appeal, transport accessibility and strategic value. Equally, safeguarding existing visitor accommodation within these areas (i.e., subject to viability and feasibility testing as outlined in Local Plan Appendix 5) will help maintain a coherent and resilient accommodation offer. Crucially, this will prevent the erosion of capacity in the city's most important visitor locations.

6.20 Taken together, the SNLP will be a key mechanism for delivering a resilient and high-quality accommodation offer that supports sustainable growth in the visitor economy over the next plan period. Building on long-term trends, the evidence suggests that growth will be incremental, albeit meaningful, requiring a policy framework that enables investment, supports diversification and ensures that accommodation provision keeps pace with demand in the city's most strategically important visitor locations.

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