



DORCHESTER TOWN COUNCIL

DORCHESTER HERITAGE JOINT COMMITTEE

Dorchester - Draft Heritage Tourism Strategy

January 2020

Context - What is the document for

From 2015, Dorchester Town Council has had intent in its Corporate Plan to “Develop & Implement a Tourism strategy, with strong Heritage focus”. In 2018 it started work to identify and form a steering group, secure funds and devise a project plan that would be able to take this forward and in early 2019 secured sufficient funds to provide the resources to do so. The Town Council has asked the Dorchester Heritage Joint Committee to take this work forward.

This strategy sets out why Heritage is relevant, what we know about tourism and visitors to Dorchester, the role of others in developing and delivering tourism, and why we are doing this now.

It looks to set priority actions that will create the right environment and structures for the Council, the local tourism industry, town centre businesses and relevant partners to benefit from the opportunities that exist for the growth in the value of tourism through the heritage and culture in our town, and to be able to take those forward.

Heritage – Why does it matter

While the value and volume across other tourism areas have fluctuated in recent years, the value of heritage tourism is reported to have seen annual growth in recent years. It is also an area which has wide appeal with over 75% of the population visiting a heritage site at least once in the past year, and over 66% reporting that the opportunity to make a heritage visit was a key influencer in deciding on a short break or holiday in the UK.

It is also clear that visitors, together more generally with town centre users, are seeking an active experience of a place as opposed to a passive experience.

Dorchester, with over 3000 years of history, fantastic heritage old and new, factual and fictional characters of international renown, and unique and exceptional examples of former lives, is well placed to grow its tourism visitor to the town offer through heritage.

With a number of recently or soon to be completed major investments in heritage assets in the town there is a particular opportunity to raise the local national and international reputation and awareness of the town’s visitor offer and heritage experience.

What do we know about Tourism in our Town?

While there is no data captured in Dorchester to enable a true picture of the volume, value and seasonality of tourism in the town, there are statistically robust analyses from national surveys that give an indication of the volume, value and seasonality of tourism in the town, and allow comparison with other destinations.

The sector locally follows the typical UK pattern, with peak occupancy close to capacity in the mid-summer months, and with year on year fluctuations resulting from many factors including political uncertainty, global unrest, recession and staycation, Brexit and the exceptional weather in recent years.

The weather plays an important part for indoor attractions and experiences, particularly given the recent exceptional summers.

Dorchester staying visitors are coming from a 2.5-3 hr. journey time predominantly from the Midlands, London and SE England. Foreign visitors are mostly from the Netherlands, Germany Belgium and France, and particularly during the Thomas Hardy Festival from Japan and USA.

Anecdotally, local businesses confirm the seasonality of tourism locally, and the home locations of staying visitors.

Most attractions visitors are either resident or staying visitors from across the county, but visitors will travel much further for a “unique” experience or event. This presents a real opportunity to promote the Dorchester offer across Dorset and particularly to staying visitors in the BH postcodes.

Dorchester has much to offer the Heritage visitor, but the offer is not well defined or well known amongst its target market and target geography. There is an opportunity to build on the visitor experiences throughout the town for the wider benefit of the town centre.

The town has the opportunity to grow its short break visitor appeal, using its cultural and heritage offer as an attractor.

Opportunities exist to increase the value of tourism locally by:

- Defining what the Dorchester offer is, and establishing an aspirational vision for the town that is relevant to the attractions, accommodation providers and town centre businesses
- Creating a brand and some USPs, subsequently used to raise the awareness of the Dorchester offer generally
- Promoting and developing the offer, particularly short breaks to ABC¹ groups
- Growth of existing and new events,
- Increasing visitor numbers for both staying and day visitors away from the peak season and maximising the existing asset utilisation.

Who does what?

From the national tourism bodies promoting the UK nationally and internationally, through the Dorset LEP and Dorset Tourism Association strategies and sector representation, to Dorset Councils county wide promotion of Dorset through its visit-Dorset channels, and individual businesses promotion of their own enterprises, the promotion and development of tourism is a complex picture.

Each has a role to play:

- international and national promotion,
- national and local product development,
- setting strategic direction
- sector representation and lobbying,
- grant fund prioritisation, application assessment and administration
- industry data gathering and analysis,
- Grant support to local organisations such as cultural organisations which are a key part of the local offer to visitors

However, for these myriad organisations, “local” does not go below County level.

At local destination or town level, and apart from local business own promotional activity, the only visitor promotion or support currently provided is through:

- Dorchester BID’s current programme of activity encouraging and supporting visitors to and within the town, and is just part of a wider remit within the BID business plan 2018-2023
- Dorchester TIC ‘s information and event booking services.

There is however no one plan for coordinating or delivering the promotion and development of Dorchester as a visitor destination.

Why Heritage, Why Tourism, Why Now?

Dorchester is built on and can tell the story of over 3000 years of history.

During 2020/21, the town will see the reopening of:

- the Dorset County Museum, with new galleries, library and visitor offer after nearly two years closed and multi-million-pound redevelopment,
- the reopening of the Kings Arms Hotel under new ownership, and
- in 2021 improved and restored facilities at the Roman Town House.

All three follow on from the development and recent opening of the Shire Hall Court House Museum.

Meanwhile we have the continuing “new heritage” offer at both Brewery Square and Poundbury attracting interested public and development professionals alike.

Heritage tourism has seen value growth in recent years, bucking an otherwise fluctuating trend in visitor spend and visitor numbers. For a town such as Dorchester, with a wealth of history at its feet, growing our tourism offer and benefitting from our history and heritage provides an opportunity to benefit our town centre and businesses.

The new and re-development of the “old”, and new developments of the “new” give us reason to celebrate and promote not only these attractions, but also the many other physical attractions people and events in the town.

The successes of the Thomas Hardy Victorian Fair, and Heritage Open Dorchester in 2019, and particularly Dippy on Tour in 2018 showed what can be achieved when the town comes together to celebrate.

Our challenges however remain:

Having a common vision and identity for the town that embraces the full extent of our 6000+ years of history and heritage,

Creating a new awareness of the towns offer to new potential visitors and places us on par with others such as Bath, York & Chester, and

Developing our local product offer and visitor experience to be an exemplar

Dorchester has a rare opportunity to maximise the benefits of tourism for the town from the new experiences currently offered or about to become available in the northern area of the town.

What do we need to do - The opportunity

Priority One – Creating The Right Structures and Purpose

Investigate and evaluate best practice models for delivery of local tourism from elsewhere, assess and bring forward options for the creation of a suitable tourism delivery structure to support and enable the growth and development the towns tourism offer for the benefit of the industry and town centre.

Enhance membership of the Joint Heritage Committees stakeholder group to include representatives from all sectors of the towns visitor economy.

Establish a common and aspirational vision that works for accommodation providers, attractions and town centre businesses critical to the visitor experience.

Priority Two – Defining the marketing opportunities

Carry out an audit of current marketing of Dorchester at National Regional and local levels other than by individual businesses/attractions/events and determine how to enhance the content and /or do more to promote visitors to Dorchester.

Commission Brand development – to develop some common brand principles and an identity(ies) to support the selling of the Dorchester visitor experience by all (accommodation/ attraction/ events/ town centre businesses).

Carry out an audit opportunities to raise Dorchester's profile as a visitor destination with specialist groups and tour operators; identify ways to attract the cruise ship opportunities at Poole and Portland.

Priority Three – Refining the marketing approach

Using vision and brand, explore opportunities to grow awareness of Dorchester as visitor destination through

- Investigating and costing use of a PR agency to develop and deliver Dorchester stories into the regional national and international media
- Seeking opportunities for press familiarisation visits to include Dorchester
- Evaluate the need for and resource implications a dedicated on lune marketing programme for the town, including social media activity and dedicated website options

- Consider the need for specialist “virtual” sub groups of the stakeholder group to look at and advise on:
 - Product development and the “product” offer
 - Coordinated marketing and effectiveness monitoring
 - Local data gathering and analysis
 - The environmental issues and impact of tourism in the town