

Dorset Town of Culture 2026 – To consider whether to support a bid for Swanage and Purbeck and commit to provide funding.

Swanage Town Council have been invited to provide an Expression of Interest for Dorset Town of Culture 2026. The scheme provides match funding of £30,000 from Dorset Council to deliver a year's worth of extraordinary cultural activity. The scheme was first run in 2024 with Bridport and for 2025 a collaborative approach is being taken by Weymouth and Portland.

This is an exciting opportunity to really put the area onto the cultural map and support a range of Council priorities including increasing out of season visitors and supporting hard to reach groups through cultural activities. It should be noted that heritage is classed as culture for the purposes of this initiative.

The proposal will help the Council deliver on the following objectives set out in the Corporate Plan 2023-25:

- Develop an enhanced programme of events to attract visitors year-round
- Encourage visitors to the town outside the main summer season
- Encourage participation in sporting and cultural activities
- Preserve and promote knowledge about the town's unique heritage
- Provide grant funding in support of educational, social and cultural activities
- Implement measures to improve accessibility.

At a meeting of a small number of key local cultural organisations on 6th November, there was clear support to submit a bid for Swanage and Purbeck. The deadline for submission is 9am on 18th November. Therefore, whilst it is acknowledged that Council approval has not yet been received to submit a bid, one has been submitted and it is hoped that approval might be sought at the Council meeting on 18th November. Submitting the bid does not commit the Council to continue the bid, which can be withdrawn at any time.

If the Council was inclined to support the bid, there is a requirement for town and parish councils to provide a financial contribution of a total £30,000, although this could be provided over two years, 2025-26 and 2026-27. The views of Langton Matravers, Corfe Castle and Studland Parish Councils have been sought. While there is a caveat that these councils will need to discuss this formally, it is clear that from at least two of these strong support for such a bid does exist, which could include a small financial contribution. It is acknowledged that the majority of the funding will need to come from Swanage Town Council. The National Trust have shown a strong interest in supporting this proposal, both in practical as well as financial terms but the guidelines for the scheme expect the £30,000 to be found from town and parish councils. However, collaboration with other local partners should significantly increase the prospects of delivering a successful application.

At the meeting on 6th November, which the Chair of the Tourism and Local Economy Committee led, it was agreed that the theme of the bid would be focused around 'inclusion

and diversity'. There is a recognition that the area has a wide range of quality cultural events and activities taking place throughout the year. However, many of these are not accessible by a range of people, maybe because of a disability or they come from a hard-to-reach section of society, such as those living in socially deprived areas. The Town Council is working to improve accessibility across the town, therefore this theme would strongly support this Council priority.

In practical terms, much of the funding will be used to procure a project co-ordinator who will seek additional grant funding and collaboration to deliver a range of projects. It is proposed that this is led and hosted by the Mowlem Theatre. If the expression of interest is successful, the council will be advised on 2nd December and a full application will need to be delivered by 15th January 2026. It is assumed that this second stage application will be led by the Mowlem Theatre and that engagement with a wide range of cultural organisations will take place during December to help inform the application.

The submitted bid will be shared with Members on Monday 18th November, in advance of the meeting.

Decision required

To consider supporting the Swanage and Purbeck Town of Culture 2026 Expression of Interest with the Mowlem Theatre acting as the host organisation. In addition, the Town Council to allocate a sum of up to £30,000 from unearmarked reserves to support the bid.

Culvin Milmer
Visitor Services and Business Development Manager

November 2024

Appendix 1: Guidance for the Dorset Town of Culture [Town of Culture](#)