

Expression of Interest: Dorset Town of Culture 2026

Culture for all!

Town: Swanage and Purbeck

What is the existing culture of your town(s) and/or village(s)?

Swanage is a seaside town on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset, known for its award winning beach, rich history, friendly community and stunning geology. It has a rich and diverse history, heritage and culture. Its early history was based on Purbeck stone, farming and fishing. With the arrival of the steam railway in the 19th century, Swanage became a premier tourist resort with classic Victorian charm. While Swanage has grown and developed over the years, that classic charm has remained, and we are proud to host the Swanage Steam Railway and Pier along with numerous other artefacts from Swanage's early days as a resort. For visitors and residents alike, the town holds a special place in their hearts. We love hearing stories about how generation after generation return to Swanage each year.

Swanage has an incredibly strong and close-knit community with a passion for getting involved in cultural events of all types. We are an unusual town, with 10,000 residents, but we can easily see this grow to 30,000 in the summer. On busy days this can be significantly more than that. Our visitor statistics show that the tourism industry brings £74m to the Swanage economy and directly employs over 1,000 people. Swanage hosts a large number of cultural festivals throughout the season, including two Blues Festivals, Swanage Railway events, Fairy Festival, Jazz Festival, Folk Festivals, Reggae Festival, Pirate Festival and SISATA, Purbeck Film Festival and the Purbeck and Dorset Arts Weeks. And of course, the Swanage Carnival, the biggest carnival in the South which takes over the town for a week during July/August. Other events include the Lifeboat Week, the Fish and Food Festival and Wild Swimming Festival all help create a buzz in the town almost every weekend during the summer and include live music and other cultural activities. We also can't forget about the amazing, refurbished town Bandstand which hosts a large number of bands and other activities throughout the year. At Christmas, the town's beach huts are opened to crafters who offer individual, handmade craft for sale.

What really makes Swanage special though is its people. Most of the events and activities are run by community groups through volunteers. Very few of the activities are operated by businesses and the majority of the events mentioned above are free! A list of the main events across the year can be [found here](#).

We are also very proud of the [Swanage Sculpture Trail](#) and Arts Trail which showcases how the area has inspired artists across the years. And bang up to date, in 2023 and 2024 we worked with local artists to develop street art called '[Flooding Swanage with art](#)' to improve the appearance of the grey concrete seafront flood defence works, which led to a national commendation.

Many of the above events are hosted at a number of venues across the town with the Mowlem Theatre as the centrepiece of the towns culture. The Mowlem Theatre has

undergone many positive changes over the last few years and is looking forward to the future with ambition and confidence with a packed programme of films and performances throughout the year.

Purbeck and Dorset Arts Week include a strong cultural offering across the rural area along with the Boiler House Gallery, made up of a wide range of diverse artists. Corfe Castle is an incredibly important heritage asset and the stone trade and clay mining heritage remains present across the area, and continues today to some extent.

What is the change that you'd like to see?

Ultimately, we feel that culture is strong in the area and that particularly in the summer, it would be challenging to develop more events and activities. We acknowledge that there are some cultural gaps, however, the most significant gap is around inclusion.

Our vision is that cultural activities and events across the area should be accessible to all, hence the theme of the event as 'Culture for all!'.

- We know that one in five people have a disability and many are unable to access the current cultural activities that take place, so the focus for us is to do what we do..... but better!
- We know that young people have less access to many cultural activities....so lets find ways to engage them better!
- We know that more than 25% of children in the town don't visit the beach or the local countryside (which, by the way, Purbeck is the most bio-diverse area in the UK).....so lets use culture to get local children outside!
- We know that a quarter of the population of Purbeck is over 65 years old and that chronic loneliness can dramatically increase illness ... so let's join up the cultural provision to enable the older person to remain engaged!
- We know that being physically active is key to our mental health and research shows that being active can reduce the risk of depression by up to 30% ... so let's embed mental health awareness into cultural events for the benefit of all.

We would like to see a more collaborative approach between cultural providers and the Councils and landowners to enable increased inclusion in events and activities. Inclusion takes many forms ranging from clear and effective communication in the form of [accessibility guides](#), training for event staff/volunteers and to providing facilities that enable people to attend, when they might not have been able to do previously. Some events may benefit from different marketing methods to attract new audiences and/or small changes to programmes to access those audiences in a different way.

Legacy is really important to us. Embedding inclusion into events and activities is crucial to meeting the needs of the future. Many of the festivals that take place in Swanage are held on Swanage Town Council operated facilities so there exists an opportunity to influence the behaviour of event organisers. The implementation of an inclusive 'culture' across events

and activities in the area will have a trickle down effect on businesses and other activities in the area, to the benefit of all.

In addition, we would like to develop an identity which incorporates inclusion and culture that is embedded in the community and visitor perceptions to support the town and the local economy into the future, with a particular focus on out of season activities to attract people during the quieter months.

Across the area there is a very wide range of cultural groups. We would like to see increased collaboration between these groups to enhance the cultural impact on the area.

How you'll know if you've been successful.

We will:

- Carry out a community survey based on the defined goals that we have identified in our changes. This will give us a starting point so that we can analyse and measure the impact and success of our work.
- Carry out a gap analysis.
- Ensure that our goals are achievable and most importantly relevant. These can be determined by the [Swanage Town Council Corporate Plan](#), the Dorset Council Cultural Policy and local residents.
- We will establish KPIs to measure success. This will enable us to monitor success over time. These may include use of budget, stakeholder satisfaction, team satisfaction and quality of events.
- In conjunction with the above, use subjective questionnaires to measure the success of individual projects.

Who you'd like to work with and your approach to collaboration.

Initially we will:

- Identify all key cultural stakeholders across the area
- Hold a workshop in December 2024 to identify opportunities for 2026
- Form a steering group that will include a small number of stakeholders to lead the project
- Carry out a Community Survey and Gap Analysis to establish a baseline and find out about the residents perception of Swanage and where they feel there is a need.
- Encourage a range of alliances between similar stakeholders so they can develop a common view and look at sharing mutually beneficial assets and develop a shared purpose.

We are proud to have already engaged with the following who are keen to be involved in this project:

- Langton Matravers Parish Council
- Corfe Castle Parish Council
- The National Trust, Purbeck Estate are the largest landowner in the area and a major cultural provider in their own right with Corfe Castle and numerous heritage assets.

They are considering a financial contribution. Their historical success in obtaining grants from a range of sources should be of immense benefit to this bid.

- Planet Purbeck, a local environmental charity, are keen to be involved through their '[Purbeck goes Wild](#)' project, which is focused on connecting children to nature.
- Claire Hodgson of [Diverse Cities](#) has offered support to the project in terms of time
- [Accessible Swanage](#), a local advocacy group supported by the Town Council
- Mowlem Theatre
- Purbeck Arts Week
- Swanage Museum
- Swanage Pier

Your commitment to inclusion.

Inclusion is embedded deeply within this bid as the key theme.

How your activity will align with Dorset's Cultural Strategy.

	Overarching priority	Response
1.	Community: we want everyone in Dorset's communities to have more opportunities to participate in and benefit from arts, heritage and culture	Our bid will attract a wider audience to cultural activity through greater access and inclusion and including hard to reach groups
2.	Cultural County: we will continue to build a strong, sustainable, and diverse cultural infrastructure	Our bid will enhance the current cultural offer in the area and enable it to meet the future in a more sustainable way
3.	Environment: we envisage a green future for our county; using arts, heritage and culture to celebrate the environment and inspire action to tackle the climate and ecological emergency	We are the most bio-diverse area in the UK, yet many local people are not connected to nature and thus not aware of its crucial importance. Much of the cultural activity in the area has arisen due to the unique geology and environment of the area. This will be celebrated as part of this bid to engage with hard-to-reach groups.
4.	Economy: we will position arts, heritage and culture as part of Dorset's sustainable economic growth, ensuring all communities across Dorset benefit	Culture is a key driver for the local economy, particularly events and the heritage offer. Developing new audiences and markets outside the peak tourist season will strengthen the local economy.

What theme, if any, you'll focus on.

We have demonstrated that the area has a diverse history, heritage and culture.

We wish to build on this as a strength and focus on inclusion, accessibility and diversity to ensure that the originality and distinctiveness of the area is enhanced.

The lead/accountable partner.

We are pleased to say that the Mowlem Theatre will be the host partner for the project. We understand that Swanage Town Council is required to be the accountable partner.

That you'll be able to match-fund the investment from Dorset Council.

The £30,000 will be matched funded by a range of partners, with the key share provided by Swanage Town Council.

That you have, or will undertake to secure, the necessary legal arrangements (liability insurance, events licences, safeguarding policies, etc.).

Yes. Any activity on Swanage Town Council land will be required to follow the standard [event management process](#). It is anticipated that activities on other land or property will follow similar procedures. Where the event is outside an established built venue, the Dorset Safety Advisory Group will be consulted.

That you will pay everyone, particularly artists, at the appropriate level (for more information, please consult union guidelines including Equity, the Musicians Union, Artists' Union England).

Yes, this would be undertaken through the Mowlem Theatre as the host partner.

For more information please contact:

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