

Cultural Purbeck workshop: 7th November 2025



Introduction

Between December 2024 – February 2025, Swanage and its surrounding areas undertook a community consultation to apply to the Dorset Town of Culture bid 2026. Although subsequently unsuccessful, the consultation galvanised a community desire for greater collaboration and impact in Purbeck’s cultural and heritage sectors.

‘The year of culture steering group would continue beyond 2026, leaving a legacy of collaboration, working together to continually improve our cultural offerings and build up Swanage’s profile as a welcoming and inclusive events town that really promotes the arts in all its wonderful and diverse forms’ (Questionnaire response, December 2024).

Cultural Purbeck, established in March 2025, unites councils, charities, and cultural groups to strengthen Purbeck’s cultural identity. The group builds on the momentum of the Dorset Town of Culture bid 2026 with the original steering group formed by enthusiastic individuals that represent key local organisations. Cultural Purbeck’s vision

is to ‘unite, support, and inspire arts and culture in Purbeck’ with the tagline ‘Inspiring Community Through Creativity’.

On November 7th, 2025, Cultural Purbeck hosted a workshop with 48 participants from 29 local organisations to clarify Cultural Purbeck’s role, identify collaborative opportunities beyond individual capacity and agree on initial themes for joint action. The attending organisations were divided between seven tables and their experience mixed where possible. The workshop was facilitated by David Lockwood, CEO of the Arts Development Company.

The key achievements of Cultural Purbeck to date:

1. Defined vision and terms of reference
2. Consulted with the Arts Development Company and Arts Council England.
3. Convened stakeholders to shape priorities.

Strategic Priorities for Year 1 were presented at the workshop:

1. Governance: Formalise structure and shared values.
2. Audience Development: Engage diverse communities and strengthen tourism links.
3. Collaboration: Build partnerships and volunteer networks.
4. Marketing: Establish branding and promotional tools.
5. Fundraising: Pursue joint grants and funding strategies.
6. Delivery: Launch workshops and shared cultural activities.
7. Business Development: Introduce annual cultural theme and appoint a development organiser.

This report compiles insights and outcomes from the workshop to guide the next steps for Cultural Purbeck. It serves as a foundation for shaping future plans, fostering cultural engagement, and encouraging collaboration and creativity to enrich community life across Purbeck.

Recognition of Purbeck’s cultural and heritage traditions

Many table groups started the workshop by asserting the importance and uniqueness of Purbeck’s culture and heritage. ‘Purbeck, one of the great centres of culture’, a place of ‘cultural distinction’ that has a ‘vibrant cultural scene’. ‘Culture’, itself was questioned by some groups but, for the purposes of the workshop, was generally accepted as an umbrella term to describe the multiplicity of arts and heritage activity that occurs within Purbeck.

Purbeck provides a wide variety of cultural offering – ‘poetry, music, arts’ - and a broad portfolio of festivals some of which, such as the Swanage Folk Festival, have been an established part of Purbeck’s culture for 33 years.

Purbeck’s breathtaking natural beauty, the ‘nature capital of England with the Jurassic Coast, biodiversity, and World Heritage Site’, its location, variety of event spaces and supportive council were all named as factors that have contributed to the embedding of the strong cultural and heritage traditions into the locality.

Workshop activities

The tables of attendees were given two activities to work through together; what collaborative work could they do and how they can successfully work together under the auspices of Cultural Purbeck.

Activity one: What collaborative work could we do?

For activity one, attendees on each table were tasked with identifying themes or projects that could provide a focus for Cultural Purbeck.

1. Young people (and children)

The primary concern of groups was that of ‘encouraging engagement’ and ‘collectively need[ing] a youth focus’ for cultural activity in Purbeck. It was felt that ‘better representation’ was needed as it was ‘a struggle to get youth attendance’ and that ‘we need different messages for the community, especially for young people’.

Although successful work was identified in this sector, there were further suggestions on how young people could be reached and work better curated together. These included a ‘Cultural Purbeck youth panel to build up a youth strategy’, ‘identifying a youth offer in every organisation’ and working more closely with schools, colleges, universities and providers.

More specifically, a festival organised by youth, was seen as a route to empowerment ‘strengthen[ing] the youth voice’ with additional financial incentives that would encourage the wider family to attend. Street art was a further idea suggested.

2. ‘Engagement, employment, training ... jobs in arts and culture’.

The closer liaison between youth and organisations had the potential to build volunteering ‘in areas that people want to get involved in’ and where the experience and skills of organisations could be transferred to the youth volunteers. This in turn would enrich both young people’s CVs and their employability skills.

Following the successful introduction of a week of work experience for 16–18-year-olds at The Mowlem, there was the potential to extend this to longer and more varied work experience with other organisations. Working with interested partners, such as placements at Swanage School and Swanage library's Duke of Edinburgh experience, a portfolio of work experience in the arts could be created across organisations focusing on young people in Purbeck who are interested in careers in the arts sector.

3. Inclusion and diversity

The area of inclusion and diversity was taken from multiple viewpoints. Firstly, Purbeck should aspire to being a 'disability destination' where 'accessibility was standard'. This built on the expertise of All Sort'd, Diverse City and Accessible Swanage and their lived experience within Purbeck.

Inclusion also included 'diversifying the population' who accessed the arts and mitigating barriers such as age or lack of resource. 'Knowing how to connect with the whole community better by offering a wider appeal' was seen as paramount, by, for example, having reduced cost tickets or designing events where family support was more likely, e.g. the existing Purbeck Art Weeks school exhibition or 'participating in intergenerational events e.g. mass flash mobs'.

A greater cultural diversity could be offered by encouraging 'cross cultural and community' themes such as 'Reggae on the Bay'.

4. Building creative opportunities

Groups demonstrated a desire to create new, creative opportunities in Purbeck that were 'edgy', 'stormy' and challenged perceptions. Due to Purbeck's rich biodiversity, there were suggestions on an annual theme that linked culture strongly to the environment. 'Water' and 'Creating a storm' were put forward, 'enabling people to start working on a common theme' that the whole community could 'get behind an event'. A 'Rising Stars' event was suggested for competitive arts projects.

A greater knowledge of other organisations' activities could lead to a greater join up of events, 'one event finishes ... another starting after' and with common underlying foci, such as sustainability. Filling gaps in the cultural calendar, particularly during the winter months, was countered by the suggestion of a Winter Festival, a family-friendly event that stretched into the nighttime and finished with a projected light installation on the side of The Mowlem. This would attract tourists out of season but also families with careful alignment to school holidays.

Activities in new and novel spaces and places, such as the setup of a Black Box on Swanage beach, presented as an opportunity to access different sized spaces that may have greater flexibility and accessibility for use by the arts.

Activity two: How can we successfully work together as partners?

The attendees provided many examples of partnership working within our own cultural community. The challenges of partnership working – different personalities, dominant organisations, ‘stuck in old ways’ – were discussed before the groups focused on the characteristics of the partnership working of Cultural Purbeck.

In relation to working with organisations within the same local arts and heritage sector, any natural rivalry and protection of individual interests needed to be countered by a ‘complement not competition’ ethos. Attendees talked of ‘a partnership of equals with a shared goal’, and ‘the power of the collective’ where organisations, as members of a partnership, could enjoy increased status with external bodies. At the time of the workshop, many attending and non-attending organisations had already forged working arrangements together with one or multiple partners.

Overall, attendees shared a momentum for change that had ‘relevance and reinvention’ whilst recognising the necessity to ‘mak[e] time to step into partnership,’ ‘achieving a rising tide that achieves in many areas’.

There were particular issues and many opportunities raised in relation to the partnership of Cultural Purbeck:

- a. **A common ‘clarity of vision’ for Cultural Purbeck**, ‘recognising Purbeck as a cultural hub’, with ‘clear advanced plans’ for the year was the priority for groups. Shared goals were requested so Cultural Purbeck could ‘think big’ ‘truly doing something extended’ that ‘[worked] beyond the standard restrictive’. Questions focused on the target audience (locals versus visitors) and how we can further Purbeck culture as open for all. Although ‘a mix of diverse inputs’ of ‘unlikely alliances’ was seen positively ‘full buy in was required from everyone ... in a united storytelling vision’. The sharing of ideals, challenges, knowledge and vision would in turn support trust and provide ‘a safe space to express ideas’ while working towards similar goals.
- b. **An understanding of what organisations can bring to joint working** was firstly supported by an understanding of organisation’s individual needs, ‘sharing knowledge of each other’s experience and what they do’. Interdependence and equality of partners come with clear expectations of ‘knowing what they offer and what they are looking for’. Overall, there was a requirement to share and solve problems. Working together requires honesty and transparency about individual commitment and accountability.

- c. **Asset mapping across organisations** was recommended so there is an awareness of the location of free space, transport, equipment, sponsorship and skills. An understanding of organisations' 'skill mix' and 'the different pool of skills' came across strongly, for example, in marketing, funding and administration. This could be facilitated through a 'Skills exchange event'. It was felt that better use could be made of established expertise and assets e.g. Ranger School of Dance, the art collection at Swanage Museum.

Asset mapping would enable best practice learning from each other and the greater possibility of consistency and the lifting of standards through joint training. It was felt that 'small organisations could reduce costs' and areas beyond their reach made more accessible by working with larger organisations and businesses.

- d. **Networking** at accessible times was recommended to promote excellent and key communication within Cultural Purbeck organisations. Attendees suggested 'regular [network] meetings through the year', a 'sustainable database' and a WhatsApp group so the practicalities of the Purbeck cultural calendar were apparent.
- e. **The effectiveness of co-promotion, marketing and publicity** through joint, cross promotion of activity would 'help ... people access what we do and offer'. Overall, 'a one stop shop for events, knowing what's on offer' 'a joint publicity outlet' 'a single portal of events e.g. Visit Dorset' was required that was both 'accessible and interesting'. Suggestions included a 'town message board', 'newsletter', 'database of local organisations and contacts' and 'digital links and leaflets'. It was felt that tourists could be better accessed by 'opportunities for accommodation providers to better promote events' and the use of loyalty cards for Cultural Purbeck events.
- f. **Access to data and evaluations**, 'all can benefit from more data [on] local demographics [or] visitor demographics' so, for example, there is 'an understanding [of] why certain audiences are not being reached'.

Evaluation of Cultural Purbeck activity was important for development; 'measuring success through the strengths of connections and hence the ability to grow and develop through participation and experience, coming back for more, the feelings and emotions of the experience and what does value really mean [through] the various lenses of the individual, economic and health and wellbeing'.

- g. **Financial issues** were raised as to how joint financing may work between organisations for funding applications and affiliated membership. Would there be an ‘income generation model to support activity’ and could emergency funds exist to support organisations in crisis.
- h. **The practical opportunities for volunteering** are acute for all organisations as they fight for volunteers within the same pool. Suggestions included a loyalty card for volunteers, a volunteer ‘bank’ and common training across organisations. An awareness of ‘volunteering opportunities across all organisations’ and for particular events, would be helpful.
- i. **The question of the governance of Cultural Purbeck** was raised e.g. working groups, steering committees, the leadership or project management of Cultural Purbeck – possibly a funded post - and the options of participation. A lack of clear coordination would be a disadvantage, and leadership should be ‘well organised and well led’.

Evaluation of the workshop

The workshop was warmly received, ‘a great gathering of cultural and heritage organisation ... there was a very positive buzz and a desire to better work together including to raise awareness of the great strengths of the area’. Evaluations spoke of being ‘genuinely collaborative’ and ‘a spirit of generosity and openness. People were positive, focused on opportunities over challenges, even when directed. Civic pride is considerable and infectious’.

Next steps

1. Continue prioritising collaborative processes to enable activity and creativity across Purbeck’s cultural sector with an emphasis on networking and communication.
2. Engage with local councils to secure their support for ongoing and future initiatives.
3. Prioritise projects and funding bids, leveraging support from funders and stakeholders.
4. Accelerate the development of governance arrangements and advance the themes identified during the workshop.
5. Maintain the momentum of positivity, openness, and civic pride demonstrated at the workshop to drive future progress.

Our thanks to those organisations who attended:

Accessible Swanage
Activate Performing Arts
Allsort'd
Arts Consultant
Arts Development Company
Artsreach
Bovington Tank Museum
Burngate Stone Carving Centre
Corfe Castle Parish Council
Diverse City
Isle of Purbeck Arts Trust
National Trust
Planet Purbeck
Purbeck Art Weeks
Purbeck Arts Choir
Purbeck Arts Club
Purbeck Film Festival
Purbeck Sounds
Purbeck Youth Music
Sandy Hill Arts
Swanage and Purbeck Development Trust
Swanage and Purbeck Rotary
Swanage Folk Festival
Swanage Jazz Festival
Swanage Library
Swanage Museum
Swanage Musical Theatre Company
Swanage Painting Club
Swanage Regatta and Carnival
Swanage Town Council
The Mowlem

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Cultural Purbeck Steering Group 26/11/25