



**Burns Tourism Partnership**  
**Six-Month SSDA Action Plan: November – May 2023**  
v2: 24<sup>th</sup> November 2023

**Context:**

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> November 2023 a Burns Development Day, supported by Dumfries and Galloway Council, brought together the various key stakeholders engaged in Burns-related tourism and cultural development in Dumfriesshire.

There was a general consensus that more could be done to work collaboratively together in maximising the positive impact Burn's legacy has on the local visitor economy. There was a strong desire to move from discussion to action and the South of Scotland Destination Alliance (SSDA) was encouraged to move very quickly in supporting this.

David Hope-Jones, the CEO of the SSDA, suggested a process and timescales which would allow the adoption of an initial action plan within one week of the meeting. This was unanimously agreed by those attending.

Following this process, the morning after the Development Day, DHJ emailed an online survey inviting everyone's input to three questions:

- 1) What objectives should such an action plan look to achieve?
- 2) What actions should it include?
- 3) Any other comments/input on how best to move this forward, at speed?

Extra time was requested by two stakeholders and, by the 9<sup>th</sup> November, 12 organisations had responded to the survey. The full results are given in the Appendix. **Over 90% of all ideas/priorities received from stakeholders are represented in the objectives and actions proposed for the next six months in this document.**

Since the 2<sup>nd</sup> November it has become apparent that there have been a considerable number of different Burns Tourism reports, ideas and action plans in recent years. It is not immediately obvious who has led with which, how different plans/groups have interacted with each other, and what is currently underway.

This proposed six-month action plan is in response to the clear request to the SSDA to lead and facilitate this development. As the region's destination management and marketing organisation, the SSDA is keen to step up quickly and effectively to this ask, building constructive collaborations. It does not wish to either duplicate or re-invent other activity.

The spirit of this proposed action plan is **what could we achieve in six months if we all worked together, with the resources we already collectively have?** It is informed by: the discussions on the 2<sup>nd</sup> November, the digital input from everyone since, and the various previous reports and recommendations compiled. At the end of six months we will be in a far stronger position to identify and make applications for the funding and investment required to create longer term positive outcomes.

## **Previous work and related strategies:**

There have been a number of previous activities and action plans relating to Burns tourism, as well as wider strategies which any major new Burns work should operate within:

- [Burns Tourism in Nithsdale, D&G Council \(Jan 2021\)](#)
- [Robert Burns and the Scottish Economy, Prof Murray Pittock \(Oct 2019\)](#)
- [In the Footsteps of Burns](#)
- [SSDA/Scotland Starts Here Robert Burns Itinerary](#)
- [Other SSDA/Scotland Starts Here Burns content](#)
- [SSDA 'Stories Start Here'](#) (wider literary tourism work)

### **Wider strategies:**

- [Dumfries and Galloway Cultural Strategy](#)
- [Dumfries and Galloway Events Strategy](#)
- [Dynamically Different Dumfries Action Plan](#)
- [Dumfries and Galloway Council Plan](#)
- [South of Scotland Regional Economic Strategy](#)

## **General principles:**

The SSDA proposes the following general principles to inform next steps:

- We bring together, and build on, existing work rather than risk re-inventing the wheel or duplicating each other's work.
- We quickly agree a series of tangible actions which will achieve measurable objectives.
- We focus for now on what we can achieve in six months with the resources and capacity we already have.
- We have a formal meeting and workshop at the end of six months (end of May '24) in which we present to the heads of the Council, SOSE, SG, etc what we have together achieved and we set out clear asks for the longer term.
- We prioritise supporting existing successes before creating new endeavours.
- We respect, cherish and protect our literary and cultural heritage: allowing more people (local and visitors) to engage with it, maximising the benefits to the local economy and building a sense of pride and identity.

## **SSDA commitment and support from Dumfries and Galloway Council:**

The SSDA is a small team of five individuals, working to support tourism across all of the South of Scotland, with specific responsibilities across more than 25 different projects and major pieces of work, of which the Burns Tourism Partnership is just one. It is important we are honest about these capacity limits and manage expectations accordingly.

However, we see Literary Tourism as a key part of the next chapter in the South of Scotland's Visitor Economy and Burns as an essential and integral part of our region's literary tourism. The SSDA is therefore happy to commit to:

### **1) Strategy:**

Ensuring that Literary Tourism and specifically the Burns Tourism Partnership is included within the draft of the Responsible Tourism Strategy which will be circulated for final consultation within a month. This will be the ten-year tourism strategy and an integral part of the Regional Economic

Strategy's delivery, it will underpin the work of VisitScotland, the SSDA, SOSE, D&G Council and Scottish Borders Council, as well as other public and private agencies. Having the Burns Tourism Partnership included in the Strategy will ensure sustained political support and, most usefully, we can also directly put actions from this Burns Tourism Partnership Action Plan directly into the Responsible Tourism Strategy Delivery Plan which should help ensure delivery.

2) **Staffing:**

Committing not less than one day of staff time, for six months, by a named individual within the SSDA team, specifically to supporting the delivery of agreed actions in the Burns Tourism Partnership. This would likely be Sarah MacDonald, who has decades of experience, genuine passion and proven delivery, working in literary tourism.

3) **Budget:**

We will immediately allocate up to £10,000 of funding for the next six months, specifically to support Burns Tourism Partnership delivery. Sarah MacDonald will work with members of the Burns Tourism Partnership to decide how best this budget should be allocated to have maximum impact in the next six months.

It is important to emphasise that this SSDA capacity investment is to help facilitate collaboration rather than to deliver work in isolation. We can only succeed if we *all* contribute time, energy, ideas and drive. This is a collective effort.

As part of the Burns Tourism Partnership we will review what impact the Plan has had after six months (mid-May 2024) and decide how best to take forward.

This will likely include previous commitments from the Burns Tourism Action Plan to secure funding for a Burns Tourism Officer, on a half time or full time basis, and to secure funding for a programme of seed corn grants for businesses, social enterprises and community organisations to trial and pilot Burns related tourism, heritage and cultural projects

The Council will contribute to the Action Plan by continuing to facilitate the Burns Tourism Partnership and providing staff time for 2-3 days per month from the Principal Events Officer.

## **Tourism Goal**

A quality, coordinated, Burns offering which everyone is bought-in to, that targets new high-value visitors, adding value to the visitor economy in Dumfriesshire and Nithsdale, supporting community regeneration, and protecting Burns' legacy.

## **Project Objectives:**

- Establish a compelling, coordinated, Burns tourism offering, which is well advertised, easy to experience and which drives footfall to attractions and local businesses.
- Increase the number of Burns-related visitors, and their associated spend, in the South of Scotland.
- Increase the quality of the Burns experience visitors to Dumfriesshire have, such that in time it becomes a genuinely world-class cultural heritage experience.
- Build public support and raise advocacy awareness to ensure that existing and new Burns visitor attractions succeed.
- Help protect the legacy of Burns in Dumfriesshire and build pride and energy locally in what we have.

- Build and promote a quality travel trade product which brings new visitors in and helps power the visitor economy.
- Establish Burns' legacy and story, and the wider literary tourism offering, as an integral part of the South of Scotland's visitor economy, the Regional Economic Strategy and the D&G's Cultural Strategy, with sustained political support.

### Six-Month Actions:

The following actions can be achieved in six months, with the resources we already have if everyone contributes and gets behind this collective endeavour. They are grouped into ten categories, to show how they contribute to the strategic objectives:

#### Coordination:

1. Monthly action-focussed working group meetings, to coordinate work, drive delivery and track progress.
2. The Action Plan will be monitored by the Burns Tourism Partnership, which the SSDA is part of.

#### Visitor information:

3. Create a major new Burns Tourism section on the 'Scotland Starts Here' website, with visitor information, Burns insight, walking tours, etc.
4. *[(Only if appetite) could move the Footsteps website on to 'Scotland Starts Here' where it can be maintained, with dedicated social media promotion etc. ]*
5. Physical signs at all major Burns heritage sites with consistent branding and QR codes linking to the 'Scotland Starts Here' Burns visitor info landing pages.
6. Review and address existing signage including plaque on Burns House.
7. Approach The People's Project for support in improving signage.
8. Consider hiring a popup shop in the short term for visitors and updating the local community.

#### Visitor experience:

9. Support online bookable Burns walking tours in Dumfries by trained guides.
10. Consolidate the various different Burns Tourism walking tour maps into one single offering which is widely available across the town, with consistent branding and linked to the QR codes.
11. Develop a Burns audio walking tour which is available from the QR codes physically available at the key sites.
12. Explore what investment, or technical partnerships, it would take to have augmented reality element components to the walking tour.
13. Support attractions to consider diversity, inclusion and access, to help make accessible for all.

#### Collaborations and signposting:

14. Ensure all Visitor Information centres and visitor hubs are well briefed and have relevant Burns Tourism Partnership information.
15. Explore using Caledonia Park designer retail outlet in Gretna, just off the M74, as a signposting opportunity to Burns Tourism in Dumfriesshire.
16. Establish close working relationship with other Burns attractions elsewhere in Scotland, exploring a coordinated Scotland-wide Burns offering.
17. Collaborate with Ayr and the birthplace of Burns.

#### Advocacy and Awareness Raising:

18. Create a document which shows how the Burns Tourism Partnership directly integrates into, and helps deliver, all the various other public strategies that are out there.

19. Ensure the South of Scotland Responsible Tourism Strategy has clear references to the Burns Tourism Partnership and its delivery plan has actions set by the Partnership.
20. Brief the CEO of SOSE, the Leader and CEO of D&G Council and other key decision-makers on the delivery of the Action Plan with twice-yearly updates, looking to build sustained support.
21. Use the 20<sup>th</sup> March 2023 SSDA annual conference at Easterbrook to raise awareness of our work, potentially with a familiarisation visit, and look to ensure the Scottish Government Tourism Minister is briefed.
22. At the end of May 2024 host a formal meeting bringing together key political leaders and decision makers to show what has been achieved in six months and make clear asks for the medium and long term.

Travel Trade:

23. Develop a coordinated Travel Trade offering, bringing together attractions, accommodation and food & drink, and sell as a branded product at at least four key national/international Travel Trade expos in 2024, with digital and physical marketing assets.
24. Travel Trade support and training for businesses involved.
25. Explore what physical improvements (e.g. coach parking) would support travel trade development and include these in May 2024 Council recommendations.

Physical improvements:

26. At the end of six months have developed clear recommendations about improvements in the built landscape, to improve the look and feel of the Burns offering, in partnership with other key groupings such as the Dumfries Partnership Action Group, the Burns Quarter, Midsteeple Quarter, the Stove, Private Businesses.
27. "Quarterly high-level meetings with the council put in place for the next two years, to encourage and support action against these recommendations, tracking progress and reporting publicly.
28. Considering other ideas for small-scale physical improvements that could potentially be achieved within a short timescale. For example improvements to the area behind Burns House could create space for a programme of events to help bring it to life as a venue/visitor destination.

Marketing and PR:

29. Have at least one Burns media trip to Dumfriesshire to secure positive media coverage.
30. Have at least one social media influencer trip to Dumfriesshire.
31. Use Burns Night 2024 as a media hook to raise awareness about our ambition, looking to secure local and national coverage and build support.
32. Include Burns Tourism in the 'Scotland Starts Here' £60k seasonality campaign running November 2023-March 2024
33. Have at least three promotions of Burns Tourism on 'Scotland Starts Here' social media channels in the next six months.

Long-Term Added Value:

34. Ensure that Burns Tourism is an integral part of the major new long-term proposition the SSDA is developing, aiming to bring significant numbers of high-value American visitors into the region, arriving into Stranraer and then heading east within the South of Scotland.
35. Through Screen Scotland and others, pitch the idea to the industry to produce a feature film/high production value mini-series about Burns, filmed in Dumfriesshire.

## Appendix: Data from action plan brainstorming:

Over 90% of all ideas/priorities received from stakeholders and listed below are represented in some way in the objectives and actions proposed for the next six months.

### Submissions received from:

Name	Organisation	Title
Graham Main	Big Burns Supper	CEO / Exec Producer
Rebecca Coggins	Dumfries and Galloway Council Arts and Museums Service	Principal Officer Arts and Museums
Julian Watson	DGU	Board Member
Yvonne Anne Barber	UNACCI A' the Airts	Centre Manager
Tom Hughes	Dumfries & Galloway Museums	Access Officer
Jan Cormack	Dumfries Museums	FOH @ Robert Burns Centre
Caitlin Wallace	Dumfries and Galloway Council	Community Learning and Development Worker
David Thomson	Annandale Distillery / The Globe Inn	Founder & Chairman of the MMR Group (owner of Annandale Distillery and The Globe)
Mark Donald	Dumfries Tours	Tour operator
Jennefer Hutton	Member STGA	Official Scottish Tour Guide
Jennifer Wilson	Theatre Royal/Guild of Players	Volunteer - Board Member, Heritage Co-ordination
Judith Hewitt	D&G Council Museums Service	Museums Curator (East)
Gerard Carruthers	University of Glasgow	Francis Hutcheson Professor of Literature

### Objectives:

Coordinated & joined up Burns offering	A joined up offer of Burns tourist attractions with partners working together for the mutual good of all communities and not just Dumfries based.
	A more joined up offer, offering an integrated world-class cultural heritage experience.
	Clear link ups with other Burns Tourism providers in the region
	Established, integrated into overall tourism offer, with increased and measurable activities and attendances that contribute to social, reputational and financial growth
	Get the Burns heritage sites working together, rather than in competition
	Improve co-ordination between organisations involved in Burns tourism

	Partnership/collaborative working that brings benefits to all rather than a feeling of being in competition for scarce resources
	Make effective use of what we have already in Dumfries
	Make much better use of the Burns equities that exist in Dumfries (including Ellisland) and meld them into a coherent whole.
	Work collaboratively to create and promote experiences
	Shared partner responsibility for realising & monitoring programme
Improve quality of Burns offering	A high quality tourism product focussing on the exceptional life and works of Robert Burns while enhancing society and business in D&G
	Maximise our assets and resource potential.
	Diversify our current products.
	Enhance our Burns knowledge
	I'd like to see the Burns Quarter in Dumfries firmly established with all the attendant tourist facilities to make it a pleasurable and informative experience.
	Improve condition of streetscapes and amenities relating to Burns.
	Making Dumfries town centre a more interesting place for locals and visitors alike.
	Not to encourage MASS tourism but have a high quality experience
	Ensure a top quality experience for locals to be proud of and visitors to enjoy
Increase visitor numbers/spend	Doubling Burns income (to over £40M) over next ten years
	Identifiable increased footfall and spend
	Attract visitors to the region as a result of the Burns offer
	Increase footfall and spend at Burns attractions, from both visitors and local audiences
	Increased Visitor Spend
	Provide opportunities for more people to visit Burns heritage sites in Dumfries
Increase visibility/signage/visitor information	Improve the visibility of Burns tourism in the town
	QR codes/digital app that allows self-guided tourism
	Make our offer more visible.
	Bring tourists into the centre of the town and engage them with things of interest and refined facilities that will deliver enjoyment and rewarding experiences that will encourage them to stay and spend.....and tell their friends.
Better associate Burns with Dumfriesshire	To see an integrated (NOT the same as 'unified') presentation of the Dumfriesshire phase/inheritance of Robert Burns in all its aspects - historical, cultural, artistic, inspirational, past, present - so that it becomes natural to associate him with this part of the world and its culture.
	Establish/enhance the region's reputation as a Burns destination
	To make Dumfries the Burns Town
	Establish Dumfries as THE place to visit for Burns story
Coordinated programme of events/activities	Co-ordinated annual Burns-related programme available in Nithsdale
	Sustain Dumfries as the home of Burns Night.
	Exciting Burns focused events programme in place throughout the year
	More Social Celebration
	Travel trade - giving people the chance to see all the sites across D and G

Offer a Burns package, including to travel trade	Weekend packages of events and festivals mapped throughout the year Offering a complete Burns package, offers/discounts between the different attractions
Increase knowledge/interest in Burns	Create interest in Burns to help perpetuate his legacy. Deepen knowledge, understanding and enthusiasm for the region's Burns heritage among tourism providers and the wider population so they can communicate this to visitors and new residents Enhance and share knowledge of Burns heritage in Nithsdale.
Safeguard the legacy of Burns	The legacy of Burns in the South of Scotland is cared for, celebrated and sustainable. To preserve the beautiful environment and biosphere to enhance the visitor experience
Support and invest in Burns attractions	Invest in and promote venues connected to Burns. Invest in existing Burns tourism offer
Increase international reach	I would like Burns Tourism to be widely advertised in North America with clear links to the organisations and business offering services liked to Burns in the region. Increase oversee visitor numbers to Dumfries
Better marketing of Burns in Dumfries	Marketing of above by all partners
Build local pride and awareness	Stronger local pride and understanding
Create jobs	Increase business and employment possibilities
Expand beyond Burns	Explore tangents for those who don't care about Burns
Improve visitor infrastructure	Improve tourism infrastructure - signage, parking, accommodation, toilets
Increase visibility/signage	Burns Trail Signage
Maps	Clear maps of where to visit
Research	Committing to enhancing research for Burns in Dumfriesshire brand
Staffing/capacity	Employing a full-time project manager for three years
Deliver Cultural Strategy	Being a key player in delivery of D&G Cultural Strategy vision is that 'by 2030 Dumfries and Galloway's distinctive creativity, culture and heritage will have an international profile and be renowned for their contribution to the region's economy and quality of life'

**Actions:**

Coordination and collaboration	Create a firm partnership with an SLA
	Connecting/ Networking Burns Locations
	Maintaining a regular discussion forum with concrete actions arising from each mtg.
	Commit to Burns Town, an interim two-year framework of joint working which will include bi-monthly partnership meetings to drive forward more cohesive working.
	Commit to a strategic plan with actions and deliverables by partners which can be used as framework for growth.
	Regular active partner meetings
	Share what is on offer, and what is new with each other annually
	Working together with support from key agencies



	Annual action plan monitored and evaluated
Event/festival	A mid-summer Burns event (doesn't have to be huge, but must be expansive and thought provoking)
	Launch Burns Town as a key policy action on Burns Night and invite key stakeholders to the launch to help position Dumfries as the home of Robert Burns.
	Creation of annual Burns Festival in town centre - outdoor live poetry performances, plays
	Festival, rather than conference, like Big Burns Supper, with perhaps more heritage input
	Improve the Mid-Steeple area - farmers markets weekly, outdoor events etc
	Restore Big Burns Supper (a brilliant idea in spirit and execution)
	Stage some events where things happen at the sites in Burns Quarter
Digital visitor information	Creation of a digital tool (QR codes) for visitors to clearly illustrate the places, poems, songs, letters and traditions connected to Burns in Nithsdale.
	Digital Presence
	Resource development (app for instance)
Staff member	A Burns Development officer to promote tourism
	Create capacity and identify funding for a Burns Project Manager post.
	Project manager position
Travel Trade product/readiness	A Burns in D&G stand at Visit Scotland expo and a concerted effort to create a Burns in D&G brand with appearances at different expos and in marketing
	Long term - without food offer for 50+ people, loos and parking for coaches, group travel is a non-starter. Need all this in place if we're serious about this
Visitor data/understanding	Doing more visitor analysis
	Increased understanding of likely target/existing markets and their interests - for example how English visitors might be encouraged to engage with Burns
Town planning change	Change traffic flow around Dumfries as road layout takes visitors away from Dumfries
	Fix the flooding at Whitesands, restrict traffic access if possible - it could be such an asset.
Signage	Better signposting in Dumfries town and environs, and also to other regional Burns sites
	Introduce more signs on roads and make parking clearer for tourist attractions
Appearance of assets/area	Improve the appearance of Dumfries. Why so many empty buildings during a housing crisis?
	Paint and fix the existing signs (for pedestrians) around Dumfries
Tourism training	Launch Burns Ambassador training for front of house staff / owners in Dumfries to help enhance destination experience.
	CPD training or qualifications for Tourism providers
Leadership	Genuine support and leadership from D&GC or some other body that has influence and funds
	Most of the above would require input and finance from D&G Council, Scottish Government and private enterprise
Burns Quarter	The Burns Quarter is an obvious and easy starting point that could be activated very quickly.
Increase understanding	Couch the Burns inheritance better to ourselves
Information hub	A hub or single portal where all local businesses connected to Robert Burns
International marketing	Present Burns programme/offer outwith Scotland (real or virtual)

Connect with Ayr & Edinburgh	Offer packages that include all the Burns areas of interest and not just Dumfries
Marketing	Relaunch of existing Burns Trail -social media campaign, etc.
Physical marketing collateral	Physical Marketing Materials
Research	Obtain other funding for research projects & resource development (app for instance)
Support museums	Re-invigorate Burns in Nithsdale story with Doonhamers of all ages - support Museums initiatives
Touring exhibition	A touring exhibition on Burns in D&G which could showcase the region and draw people to it
Action not talk!	Less talk and more action. If this was a commercial enterprise it would have been backed and implemented years ago.
Marketing & Communications strategy	Develop a MARCOMMS strategy as part of this with key stakeholders.

**Other comments on process: how, practically, we best move the exciting ideas forward and deliver on the huge potential that Burns has for tourism in the South of Scotland**

Working together with support from key agencies
Back it, allocate some investment funds and get on with it.
Commit to attend meetings.
Regular meetings with specific action points to work on in between. A tourism officer could be good, but only if there's buy in from all partners to avoid them being dragged in too many directions.
Signage! Every building on the Burns Trail needs to have a sign saying (for example) 'Welcome to the Robert Burns Centre, #12 on the Burns Trail'. We also need info boards around the town advertising the trail. With maps. What about a Burns Trail passport where you can earn stamps or stickers from each stop? A souvenir sew-on patch or enamel pin? And please put 'Dumfries' in a bigger font all over the Burns Trail. Big up the town! This is our USP :)
I'M NOT SYMPATHETIC TO TOURISM TRADE LINGO/ATTITUDES. Culture comes first and Visitor Enhancement (both from within and outwith) is the result. If you present it the other way - presenting a locality solely for outside consumption and boosting revenue figures - it is often, and demonstrably, profoundly destructive.
Robert Burns is a fantastic, international tourism product. Promote through academic conferences, by doing fam trips with dmos here and abroad. Visit Scotland? Utilising all media possibilities, Burns the Blog? Walks and small coach tours around Dumfries and surrounding area. Develop literary tours with Burns as focal point. So much underutilised potential - Burns the Brand
Accept gradual progress, and set achievable goals (eg bus parking, road crossings, signage) for early action
Time to stop talking about it and start doing it. Should not wait until we have millions of pounds or new visitor centres etc. We have great attractions open now.
Partners need to commit to the first two year period at least, to see if this changes anything.