



Shepton Mallet Town Council

A Strategic Approach to Tourism

I. Introduction:

A. Background

Until Spring 2020, the Tourist Information and Heritage Centre (TIC) was the principle organisation responsible for tourism in Shepton Mallet. The Town Council had for a number of years funded the TIC to the amount of £6K a year. The TIC also received funding from Mendip District Council (MDC) via Mendip Tourism Limited (MTL) which received £50K a year to share between the five main Mendip towns. The TIC announced its closure in the Spring of 2020.

There is currently a gap in the provision of tourism-related services in the town, most notably:

- The provision of information to visitors at the planning stage of their journey (before arrival).
- The strategic promotion of Shepton Mallet as a destination.
- The coordination of information sharing to those businesses and stakeholders impacted by tourism locally.
- The provision of information to visitors upon arrival at their destination.

The town council currently has very limited data on visitors to Shepton Mallet. Some data is available regarding visitors to Mendip and Somerset.

The town council currently has no resource allocated for the provision of tourism-related activities and a regular tourism function would need its own resource. A budget for tourism will be requested for the financial year 2021/2022, this can also be supplemented with additional funding from external sources such as the district council and other funders.

B. BLUF: Bottom Line Up Front

Shepton Mallet Town Council is faced with an opportunity to play a more active role in the promotion of the town as a destination for visitors. The closure of the Tourist Information Centre (TIC) means that there is currently a gap in the provision. Moreover, changes in the visitor journey – from planning to on the day travel – mean that a review should be conducted in to what services and resources cater most effectively and adequately to visitors' needs. The overall recommendation made here is that the town council should embrace the opportunity it is presented with, while being realistic about what can be achieved, by who, and in what timeframe. Crucially it must also recognise the importance of looking outwards and engaging with local partners if any strategic vision is to be truly realised.

Mendip District Council has recently taken the decision to review how it supports the visitor economy in the district. The decision has been made that MDC will play a more active, strategic role in allocating funding and supporting each of the main Mendip towns. The town clerk and project officer have been invited to sit on the steering group (Mendip Strategic Tourism Group) which meets regularly throughout the year. The group will be the body that shapes the vision for the visitor economy across the Mendip District as well as defining MDC's tourism strategy and steps that need to be taken to achieve that vision. This will include influencing how Mendip District Council's funding for tourism is allocated (currently £50K per year). The creation of this group presents a timely opportunity for the town council to become involved in developing a district-wide strategic vision, benefiting from discussions with district partners and participating in collaborative or joined-up projects. The recommendation made here is **that the town council should continue to engage with the Tourism Steering Group for Mendip and collaborate with the other Mendip towns** where the opportunity arises. This will involve a resource commitment for both the town clerk and project officer.

In addition, the town council should look **to foster a local steering group with representatives from the main stakeholder groups in Shepton Mallet**. Local partners such as accommodation providers, attractions, retailers, the hospitality sector, the arts and culture sector, transport providers and individuals with an interest in volunteering in tourism should all be consulted. An initial consultation with businesses such as the Royal Bath & West Showground, Shepton Mallet Jailhouse Tours, Berrys Coaches and Kilver Court has shown that there is support and interest in working with the town council in this area. The objective of this group would be to identify opportunities for different parties to align and work together, to share ideas on how to improve the experience of Shepton Mallet as a destination and how to better promote the town to visitors. The town council would use this local steering group to influence its action plan for tourism both at a town level and also in its conversations with the Tourism Steering Group for Mendip. A lead councillor should act as the main representative of the town council on this group and report back to the relevant committee.

A number of themes have emerged from an initial SWOT analysis of the town as a destination, namely: **Heritage and History; Food and Drink; Outdoor Activities; Arts and Culture; and Retail**. These should act as a starting point to steer discussion of how the town can improve its offering as a destination (i.e. the tourism 'product'). These themes are also aligned with the priorities of the MDC Tourism Strategy and are therefore likely to be supported by district-wide projects and initiatives funded at district level.

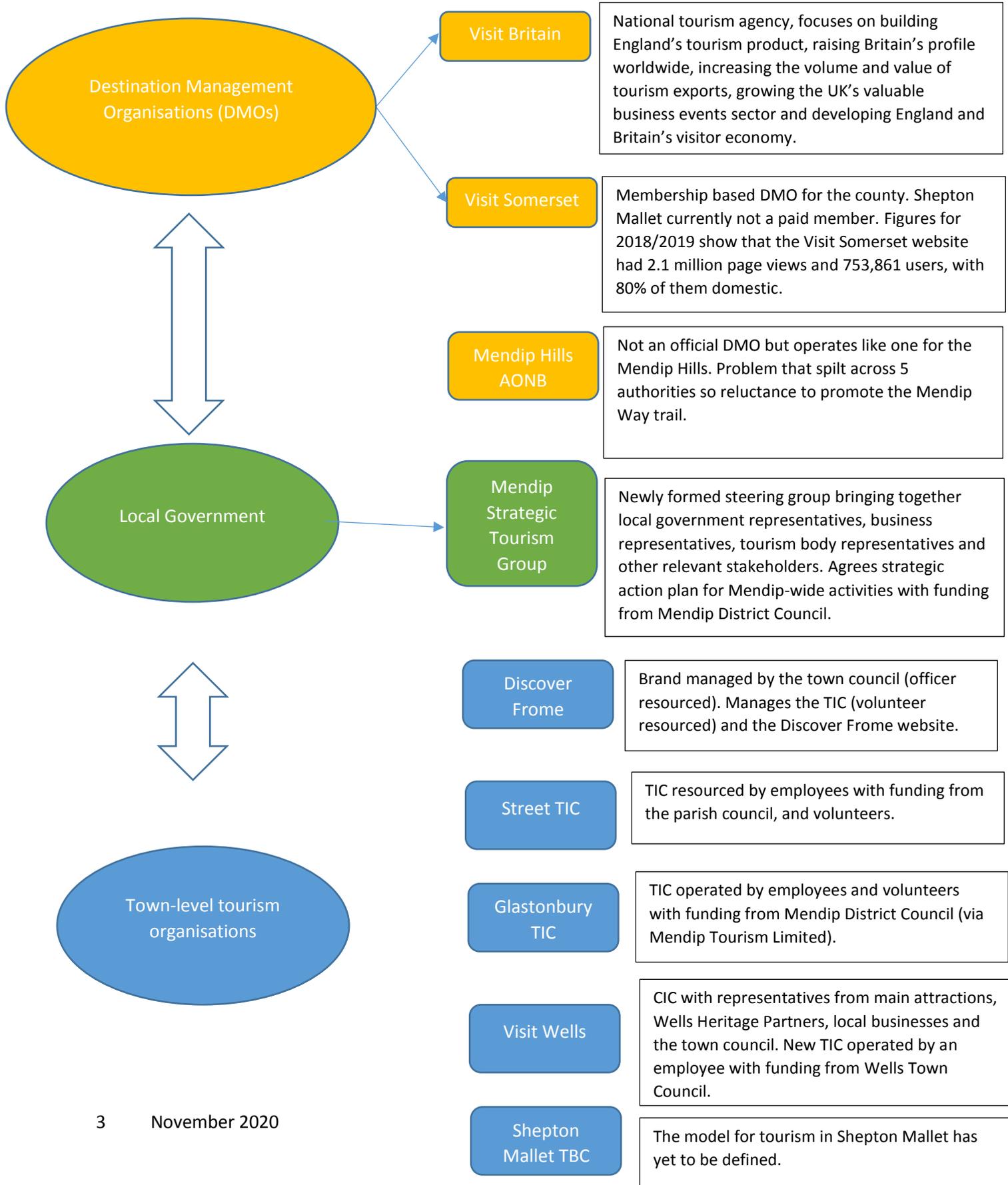
While the overall recommendation is that the town council focus on its participation in both the Mendip Tourism Strategic Group and a local level steering group, the town council should consider an **initial action plan for 2021/2022**. There is a £6K budget for tourism available to spend in 2020/2021 and the possibility of around £8K in funds being allocated by Mendip Tourism Limited for 2020/2021 also. The recommendation made here is that this initial action list should focus on setting up some basic infrastructure for the promotion of the town, such as a digital provision, marketing materials and a database of events and key partners. However, delivering this action plan will require adequate resourcing, both in terms of the demand on the existing members of the office team and any additional resource which might be required.

Finally, the town council should consider how to **measure the impact of its actions** with regards to tourism and for this, it will require a benchmark against which to measure change. This could be done through an independent benchmarking report, or through direct consultation with local businesses and organisations – the latter requiring internal resource. The investment in terms of both funding and resourcing should generate a demonstrable benefit to the town.

II. Setting the Scene

A. Current organisational structure

The following is an overview of the organisational landscape related to tourism for Shepton Mallet:



B. Future trends

In 2017, Visit Britain published its [Future Trends Report](#), looking at the major trends for tourism product development for the next 5-10 years. The main points from this report on trends are as follows.

Planning the trip:

- Visitors are increasingly risk averse and prepare to plan carefully before they visit a destination. They will sacrifice adventure and surprise for greater reassurance.
- Visitors want to maximise experiences by doing and seeing more but spending less time and money in doing so – they are looking for ‘good value’.
- Visitors learn about destinations through filter bubbles – to promote a destination you need to find a way in to the bubble.

Booking process:

- While visitors take longer planning a trip, they want to be able to book more quickly and via platforms such as Instagram or Pinterest where they build up their ‘wishlists’.
- The rise of Conversational Commerce is significant: visitors want to use existing apps such as messenger, WhatsApp and equivalents in the Asian market to communicate with providers and book.

Connected travel:

- Increase in use of digital tools for information sharing during travel: location-based technology to push out relevant information, travellers using social media to push feedback out, etc.
- Locations considering their ‘shareability’ and social media capital: will visitors want to share their experiences online?

‘Authentic’ travel:

- Move away from traditional ‘tourist’ experiences, travellers want authentic experiences, to go ‘off the beaten track’ and experience the ‘real’ nature of a destination.
- Increased demand for experiences which combine leisure and learning. Eg. cookery classes, craft skills, etc.

III. Tourism in Shepton Mallet

A. Stakeholder mapping

Below is an overview of the main stakeholder groups and partners involved in the visitor economy in Shepton Mallet.

Retail	Arts, Heritage & Culture	Accommodation	Transport	Food and drink
High-street shops	Shepton Mallet Prison	The Shrubbery Hotel	First West of England	Restaurants
Friday market stall-holders	St Peter and St Paul's Church (historic)	Charlton House	Frome Buses	Pubs
Haskins Retail Park	East Somerset Railway	The Thatched Cottage Inn	Berry's Coaches	Cafes
Chamber of Commerce	The Shepton Experience (Sunday market)	Bowlsh House	Local taxi firms	Bakeries
Kilver Court	Royal Bath & West Show	The Highwayman Inn		Take-aways
Tesco	Mid-Somerset Agricultural Society	The Well Inn		Cider producers
Dobbies	Snowdrop Festival	Bed & breakfasts (approx. 7)		Other food and drink producers
Other shops in and around the town centre	Lantern Parade			
	Festival of Dogs			
	Carnival Club			
	NASS Festival			
	SMart (Shepton Mallet Art)			
	The Art Bank			
	The Antiques, Vintage and Collector's Fair			
	Craft4Crafters			

B. Strategic analysis:

An initial Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (S.W.O.T.) analysis has been undertaken below. However, a more thorough SWOT analysis should be carried out in consultation with local partners.

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Threats
<p>Many heritage buildings</p> <p>Historic town well known across the country</p> <p>Increasingly well known for its artistic community</p> <p>Diverse cultural offering (Lantern Parade, Carnival, Snowdrop Festival, Festival of Dogs...)</p> <p>Located in the heart of Mendip and close to popular Wells, Frome and Glastonbury</p> <p>Close proximity to Mendip hills and outdoor areas</p> <p>Many local food and drink producers (cider producers, cheese makers)</p> <p>High-street mostly independent businesses</p> <p>Proximity to Glastonbury Festival</p> <p>Reputation for antiques and collectibles thanks for the Antiques Fair</p>	<p>No overarching organisation coordinating promotion of the town</p> <p>Lack of online or printed information for visitors</p> <p>No consistent branding or marketing for the town</p> <p>No town council resource for tourism</p> <p>Relatively poor public transport links to nearby towns and wider region</p> <p>Poor signage makes it difficult for visitors to navigate</p> <p>Town centre appearance tired and in places uninviting</p> <p>Few ticketed attractions (prison only)</p> <p>Visitors to local attractions do not usually visit town centre (Kilver Court, Bath and West Showground, etc.)</p> <p>Limited data gathered from businesses and accommodation providers</p>	<p>Creation of a MDC Tourism Steering Group, action list and supporting budget</p> <p>Increased demand from visitors for 'experiences' including agritourism such as cookery courses, cheese making, cider making etc.</p> <p>MDC interest in improving cycle and walk paths connecting to other towns</p> <p>Appetite for cross-promotion between Mendip towns</p> <p>Increase in domestic travel as a result of pandemic (could be a short-term trend)</p>	<p>Short and long-term impact of coronavirus pandemic on the economy (unemployment, reduced income, business closures...)</p> <p>Uncertain future for major events due to public health restrictions (festivals, shows, parades...)</p> <p>Arts community at threat due to economic climate</p> <p>Brexit uncertainty</p>

IV. A Strategic Approach

A. Priorities: promoting *what*?

Based on the SWOT analysis, these themes should be considered a starting point to steer discussion of how the town can improve its offering as a destination (i.e. the tourism 'product'). In other words, these themes should be considered when trying to answer the question: *what* should we be promoting in Shepton Mallet? These themes are also aligned with the priorities of the MDC Tourism Strategy and are therefore likely to be supported by district-wide projects and initiatives funded at district level.

Heritage and History

There are a high number of listed buildings and historic landmarks in Shepton Mallet. The town is a historic town, with link to the Ancient Romans and was prominent during the late Middle Ages as a market town. The town's heritage is one of its strengths and something which should be showcased.

Food and drink

Shepton Mallet is a bastion of cider production in Somerset and the UK. The town is home to well-known brands as well as a number of artisan cider makers. Within close proximity to the town there are also a number of cheese producers, as well as other food and drink producers. Given the growing appetite for 'experiences' and skills-based activities (e.g. cheese-making, etc.) there is potential for Shepton Mallet to develop its reputation for food and drink based activities.

Outdoors activities

There are a number of scenic walks connected to Shepton Mallet and accessible from the town centre. There are also MDC plans for new multi-user paths connecting Shepton Mallet to nearby parishes. There is potential for Shepton Mallet to become a hub for outdoor activities such as cycling and walking.

Arts and culture

Shepton Mallet has developed a local reputation for its artistic and cultural offering scene, thanks in large part to groups and events such as the Lantern Parade, the Snowdrop Festival, the Festival of Dogs, the Art Bank, SMart (Shepton Mallet arts), the Carnival club, Make the Sunshine and many others. This unique offering set Shepton apart and has the potential to attract visitors from near and far.

Retail

There are a number of retailers in and around Shepton Mallet and the high-street is notable for its independent retailers. In particular, there are a number of retailers specialising in antiques, vintage and collectibles – something the town is already well-known for owing to the Antiques Fair at the Royal Bath & West Showground. Furthermore, Shepton Mallet is known for being the home of Kilver Court designer outlet which attracts visitors from near and far. The unicity of Shepton Mallet's retail offering is something which sets it apart but also puts it in a strong position on a district wide retail circuit.

B. Communication: promoting *how*?

Given the growing demand for information about a destination during the planning stage of the visitor journey, the town council should consider how this information is provided. Below is an overview of the current state of affairs and options for how the communication could be improved under each heading.

Online:

Currently, the main online sources of information about Shepton Mallet as a destination are the DMO Visit Somerset, and the website TripAdvisor. However, following the closure of the TIC there is currently no website focusing on the provision of information relating to Shepton Mallet as a destination, operated with any input from the town council.

→ Online presence through own destination website or relationship with DMO?

Social media:

There are no known public social media pages dedicated to the promotion of the town (activities, events, etc.). There are a number of closed community groups, as well as pages for some of the main events such as the Snowdrop Festival.

→ Publicly available social media page where local groups and businesses can promote the town?

Media:

The town has benefited from local and national media coverage in the past, some of which is still visible online. The town council has a relationship with a number of local media contacts and circulates press releases where relevant.

→ Improve frequency and content of press releases, and widen distribution list?

Print:

Some printed materials such as leaflets were previously available from the TIC, however there is nowhere now stocking these materials. Furthermore, some of these materials are likely to be out of date as businesses have changed or relocated.

→ Produce new marketing materials focusing on 'trails' and different types of experience?

Face to face:

With the closure of the TIC there is currently nowhere to get face to face or over the phone information about Shepton Mallet. Some of the local Tourist Information Centres (e.g. Wells, Glastonbury, Frome) are likely to be able to provide some information about the main attractions in Shepton Mallet such as the prison and Kilver Court.

→ Strengthen relationship with other TICs and information points, provide them with up to date information?

Branding

There is no visually recognisable brand associated with Shepton Mallet. For example, Frome has its 'Discover Frome' name and associated typographies, Wells has 'Visit Wells'. These brands are often used independently to the town council's even when the town council funds and manages these brands and their websites. Other times the brands appear similar if distinct, for example 'Explore Bradford on Avon' and BOA Town Council. A brand with its own visual identity makes it easier for visitors to recognise a reliable source of local information. A strong brand which gets the buy-in from local stakeholders also strengthens the overall image of a destination.

→ Consider developing a brand for tourism in Shepton Mallet?

IV. Next steps

This document aims to be the starting point for an ongoing conversation between the town council and the various individuals, businesses and groups who are at the centre of the local visitor economy.

Proposed next steps:

- ➔ To set up a **Shepton Mallet tourism steering group**: an informal group meeting once every few months to share information and discuss new initiatives and projects. To be attended by a SMTC lead councillor and representatives from the main stakeholder groups.
- ➔ To continue participating in **the Tourism Steering Group for Mendip** and working in partnership with the other Mendip towns.
- ➔ To agree an **action list for 2021/2022** focusing on the basic infrastructure required for a tourism offering in Shepton Mallet. To consider:
 - A digital provision for activities, events and attractions.
 - Branding and marketing materials for the town
 - A calendar of the main events throughout the year and key partners