



## Burns Tourism Partnership SSDA Action Plan Two: September 2024 – September 2025

### Executive Summary:

Between November 2023 and May 2024, the SSDA delivered a 35-point six-month surge action plan to help develop Burns tourism in Dumfriesshire, working with all related local businesses, attractions and partners.

In June 2024, the SSDA hosted a roundtable meeting in Dumfries to brief stakeholders and partners on what had been achieved, what had been learned, and, together, to agree next steps. Between June and September 2024, the SSDA has met with a number of stakeholders to develop the roundtable discussions into 15 tangible proposed objectives for the following 12 months (September 2024 – September 2025):

1. Burns signage visible across Dumfries, using consistent branding
2. A coordinated and collaborative Burns marketing and PR campaign delivered
3. Big Burns Supper successfully restarted in Jan 2025, with both a local and global audience
4. National Lottery Heritage Fund funding secured for Ellisland
5. Burns Quarter visitor centre secures building warrant and is open (opposite the Globe Inn) within 12 months
6. Dumfriesshire established as a leading Burns destination by developing the visitor experience and itineraries
7. A daily high-quality, locally-run Burns tour is operational, which is online bookable
8. Funding secured for a part-time post to coordinate Burns in D&G
9. Capital funding secured from the Levelling Up funds for improvements in the key Burns visitor attractions and the related public realm
10. Updated audio guide and walking tours developed and launched, and sign-posted from all Burns attractions
11. Investment is made to develop the visitor experience at the Burns museums in Dumfries
12. A coordinated Burns Travel Trade product launched
13. A dedicated vintage 'Burns Bus' under operation, to take visitors between the Burns-related attractions in Dumfriesshire
14. A partnership with the Burns Birthplace Museum in Ayr developed, with the co-promotion of a multi-day Burns 'birth to burial' itinerary
15. Dumfriesshire's Burns story/offering is an integral part of a longer-term South of Scotland strategy to radically increase the number of high-spending international visitors

This is an extremely ambitious set of objectives for the coming year and, given the capacities available and the various uncertainties, it is very unlikely all will be achieved in these timescales. However, by aiming high and setting this bold ambition it is hoped that all the various organisations have a shared vision of where we want to get to. It will also allow us to, together, make a clear, coordinated and consistent ask of wider partners and potential funders to help us achieve this vision. These points have all been highlighted after the initial work and represent a positive next step in the development of Burns tourism in Dumfriesshire.

## **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](#)

In March 2024, the SSDA, D&G Council, Scottish Borders Council, SOSE and VisitScotland launched the South of Scotland's all-agency [Responsible Tourism Strategy](#) which explicitly includes a commitment to "significantly strengthen the Burns tourism product through the Burns Tourism Partnership".

The strategy outlines how literary tourism, with Burns at the centre, will be a key growth and development hub for our destination and specifically that a significantly revamped Burns in Dumfriesshire visitor offering will be part of a "stepping stone pathway of satellite attractions and related stories ... to encourage international visitors to move west-east across the region, rather than travel up to the central belt and Highlands" (pg25).

## **November 2023- May 2024, six-month surge action plan:**

### **General principles:**

The following general principles underpinned the six-month action plan:

- 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.

In November 2023, 12 organisations fed into SSDA consultations for the development of a six-month Burns Tourism Action Plan, to May 2024.

**The Goal was to have a:**

“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.”

**The Objectives were to:**

- 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.

**The Actions were:**

Coordination:

1. Monthly action-focused 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.

SSDA investment November-May:

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 50 different projects and major pieces of work, of which the Burns Tourism Partnership is just one. It is important it is always honest about these capacity limits and manage expectations accordingly.

However, the SSDA 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 was 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.

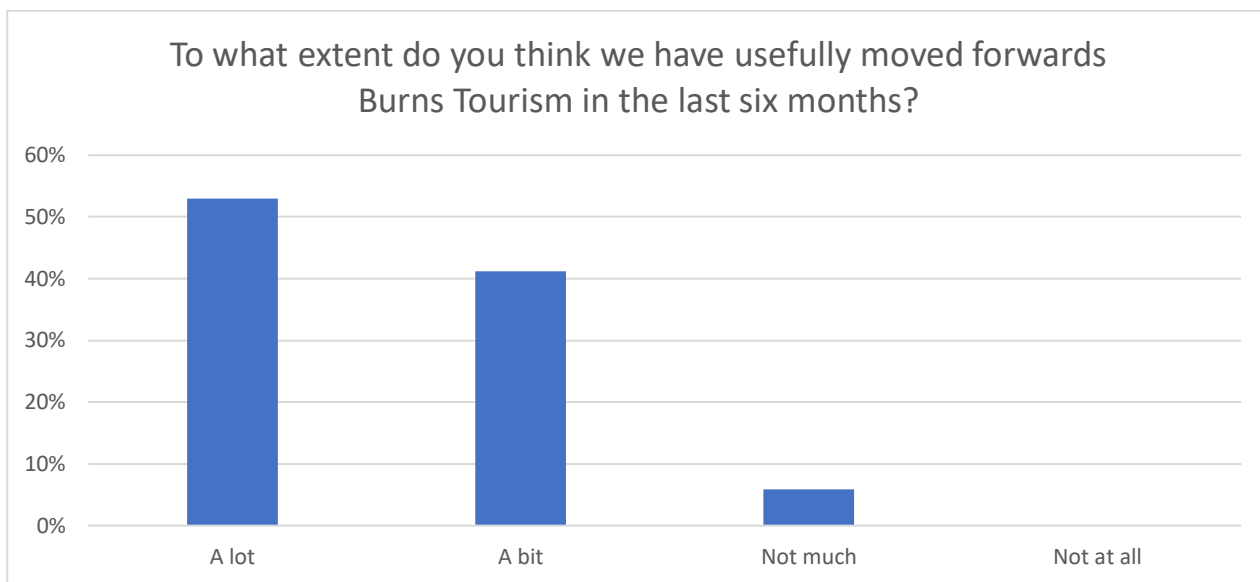
**June 2024 Roundtable meeting:**

As promised, at the completion of the six-month period, the SSDA hosted a roundtable meeting to brief all partners, businesses and the community on what had been achieved and what had been learned, and, together, to agree next steps. This meeting took place on the 11<sup>th</sup> June 2024.

Sarah Macdonald of the SSDA briefed partners on success achieved in the six months. All 35 actions had seen some progress, around 25 were significantly completed and, with an extra few months, this figure would rise.

Using Mentimeter, everyone in the meeting was able to give their feedback and share their views on next steps:

When asked ‘To what extent do you think we have usefully moved forwards Burns Tourism in the last six months?’, 53% said ‘a lot’ 41% said ‘a bit’, 6% said ‘not much’ and 0% said ‘not at all’.



To the question ‘What are your top three priorities for Burns Tourism in the NEXT YEAR’, the top answers were:

Priority	Number of votes
Coordinated marketing	20
Targeting international audiences	10
Funding and support for existing attractions and associated public areas	10
Develop regular Burns Tours and itineraries in Dumfries	7
Build brand awareness and local support in Dumfries	6
Extend Burns celebrations outside January	4
Make Dumfries the global capital of Burns Night	4
Regular collaboration	3

To the question ‘What are your top three LONGER-TERM priorities for Burns Tourism?’, the top answers were:

Priority	Number of votes
Making Dumfries a global Burns Destination	13
Investment in people/product/existing attractions	7
Use film and TV to reach a wider audience	6
Town centre improvements	3
Coordinated marketing	3
Burns visitor information hub	3
A recognised and established event in Dumfries - a Burns Week	2
Be part of high-quality Scotland-wide offer building on Burns the Brand	2
Engage young people	2
Environmental focus / sustainability	2
Establishing Dumfries as romantic destination	2
High street improvements	2
Unesco protection for Burns Night	2

### Proposed Actions September 2024 – September 2025:

Informed by the learning Nov-May and the discussions at the June meeting, the below 15 objectives are proposed for September 2024 – September 2025:

Ref	Objective	Purpose	Target by Sept 2025	Lead
1	Burns signage visible across Dumfries, using consistent branding	To increase the visibility and local/visitor awareness of Dumfries' Burns story	At least five prominent physical signs, at key visitor locations, with links to digital information/tour	SSDA
2	A coordinated and collaborative Burns marketing and PR campaign delivered	To maximise marketing impact and have a coordinated, impactful narrative from which all benefit, establishing Dumfriesshire as a core Burns destination	Reach of 200m+	SSDA
3	Big Burns Supper successfully restarted in Jan 2025, with both a local and global audience	30,000 attend the events over the three weeks of festival (17 <sup>th</sup> Jan – 2 <sup>nd</sup> Feb 2025), with 15% from outside of D&G and 10% outside Scotland, and a further 50,000 taking part in a hybrid event, targeting North America as a free to view event going out on Facebook Live.	Record attendance at the Jan 2025 event, with increased numbers from outside the region	Big Burns Supper
4	National Lottery Heritage Fund funding secured for Ellisland	To improve the visitor experience and increase financial sustainability	Funding secured and work underway	Ellisland
5	Burns Quarter visitor centre secures building warrant and is open (opposite the Globe Inn) within 12 months	To provide visitors a central hub for information and inspiration relating to Burns	Centre open and widely advertised	Globe Inn

6	Dumfriesshire established as a leading Burns destination by developing the visitor experience and itineraries	To build a clear and compelling visitor offering, increasing the number of Burns-inspired visitors	New itineraries developed and under use and demonstrably improving visitor feedback	SSDA
7	A daily high-quality, locally-run Burns tour operational, which is online bookable	To increase the quality of the visitor offering	Tour running through the week on a profit-making basis	SSDA & DGC
8	Funding secured for a part-time post to coordinate Burns in D&G	To give capacity to make this work sustainable	Staff member in place	DGC & SSDA
9	Capital funding secured from the Levelling Up funds for improvements in the key Burns visitor attractions and the related public realm	To improve the visitor experience and attract new, higher-spending visitors	Funding secured and work planned	Dumfries Town Board
10	Updated audio guide and walking tours developed and launched, and sign-posted from all Burns attractions	To offer visitors an easy-to-engage Burns product and to direct visitors to Burns attractions and businesses	Audio guides and walking tours live and used by 100+ people a month	SSDA
11	Investment is made to develop the visitor experience at the Burns museums in Dumfries	To offer a more immersive and engaging visitor experience	Demonstrable increase in positive visitor feedback	D&G Council
12	A coordinated Burns Travel Trade product launched	To increase visitor spend by bringing in groups	300+ visitors have paid to take part in a Burns Dumfries travel trade experience	SSDA
13	A dedicated vintage 'Burns Bus' under operation, to take visitors between the Burns-related attractions in Dumfriesshire	To provide a travel solution for those arriving by public transport but also to give a quirky visitor experience around which we can build marketing	Bus service underway	Globe Inn
14	A partnership with the Burns Birthplace Museum in Ayr developed, with the co-promotion of a multi-day Burns 'birth to burial' itinerary	To make Dumfriesshire an integral part of Scotland's Burns offering	Multi-day itineraries, linking Ayr and Dumfries, are actively underway	SSDA
15	Dumfriesshire's Burns story/offering is an integral part of a longer-term South of Scotland strategy to radically increase the number of high-spending international visitors	To build the foundations to, in the future, have a regular stream of higher-spending North American visitors	Funded feasibility study completed and network of key contacts in North America established	SSDA