

South Somerset

Tourism strategy

2004 – 2007

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1 Preface

In 1989 the council adopted a tourism strategy, which had three key elements: to manage the growth of tourism, to minimize the impact of tourism and to optimise the benefits by diverting tourists toward using local services in towns and villages. This sensitive and selective growth remains at the core of this new strategy.

2 Executive summary

The tourism service aims to increase the prosperity of South Somerset by maximizing the tourism potential, whilst minimising the impact on the environment.

We will build on our strengths to improve the quality of the tourism product and overall visitor experience. We will work closely with the tourism trade to ensure that their businesses are profitable and their workforce well trained. We will ensure that the local population are fully aware of the benefits tourism brings to the local economy so that visitors are welcomed. We will work hard to market South Somerset as a quality tourism destination and above all we will seek to be sustainable in everything we do.

Annual action plans will be drawn up from this strategy, which will be evaluated, and the results fed back to the stakeholders at the Tourism Forum.

3 Introduction

South Somerset is a diverse destination with a wide range of attractions and leisure facilities, varied countryside, market towns, picturesque villages, houses and gardens, world class museums, a vibrant arts and crafts community and year round events and festivals, all of which are complemented by quality accommodation.

The district's distinctive qualities are marketed through promotional material, public relations, the Internet, direct mail, advertising and attendance at key exhibitions. We provide an information service to the trade through our office at Brympton Way and to the general public at Yeovil and Cartgate tourist information centres. We also support Chard tourist information centre and seven local information centres at Wincanton, Bruton, Langport, Crewkerne, Ilminster, Somerton and Castle Cary. We work in partnership with the local tourism industry and other agencies that enable us to meet our objectives.

Figure 1 - Map of South Somerset

Include SSDC map of area showing TICs, LICs and trails.

4 Tourism statistics

UK

Tourism accounts for 7.4% of employment in England and is the sixth largest industry in the UK worth 76 billion in 2002, 4.5% of UK GDP.

The average UK resident took two and a half holiday trips of one night or more in the UK, during 2002 spending £50 per night. In total this equates to 167 million trips and a spend of £27 billion. Visits to friends and family account for nearly a quarter of these trips and it has been found that the host spends as much as the visitor. (Source: International Passenger Transport Survey and United Kingdom Tourism Survey).

The average overseas visitor stays eight nights and spends £58 per day. Overall in 2002 overseas residents made 24.2 million visits to the UK and spent nearly £12 billion. 37% of all overseas visitors arrive via Heathrow Airport.

Business tourism accounts for almost one third of inbound tourism revenue. On average overseas business visitors stay for four nights and will spend £500 per trip.

There are nearly 130,000 VAT based enterprises in tourism related businesses, but of these 77% are small firms with a turnover of less than £250,000.

(Source: Britain Tourism Facts, Visit Britain, 2002)

South West

Tourism is worth over £8 billion each year to the South West economy and sustains over 300,000 jobs. Over 26 million people visit the South West. The vast majority of visitors are from the UK with overseas visitors accounting for just 6% of trips but 14% of spend. Over half the visitor spend is in Devon and Cornwall.

There are approximately 1,000 tourist attractions in the region and over half relate to historic and cultural heritage. The forecast is that day trips in the South West will grow by 20% by 2011, with spending growing by 15%.

South West Tourism has produced a draft ten year plan, Towards 2015. This identifies new priorities for tourism which are:

- value of tourism over volume of tourists
- quality jobs over quantity jobs
- focussing on the quality of the experience
- an emphasis on high quality across the range of holidays taken in the region.

(Source: Towards 2015, consultation document, South West Tourism, March 2004)

Somerset

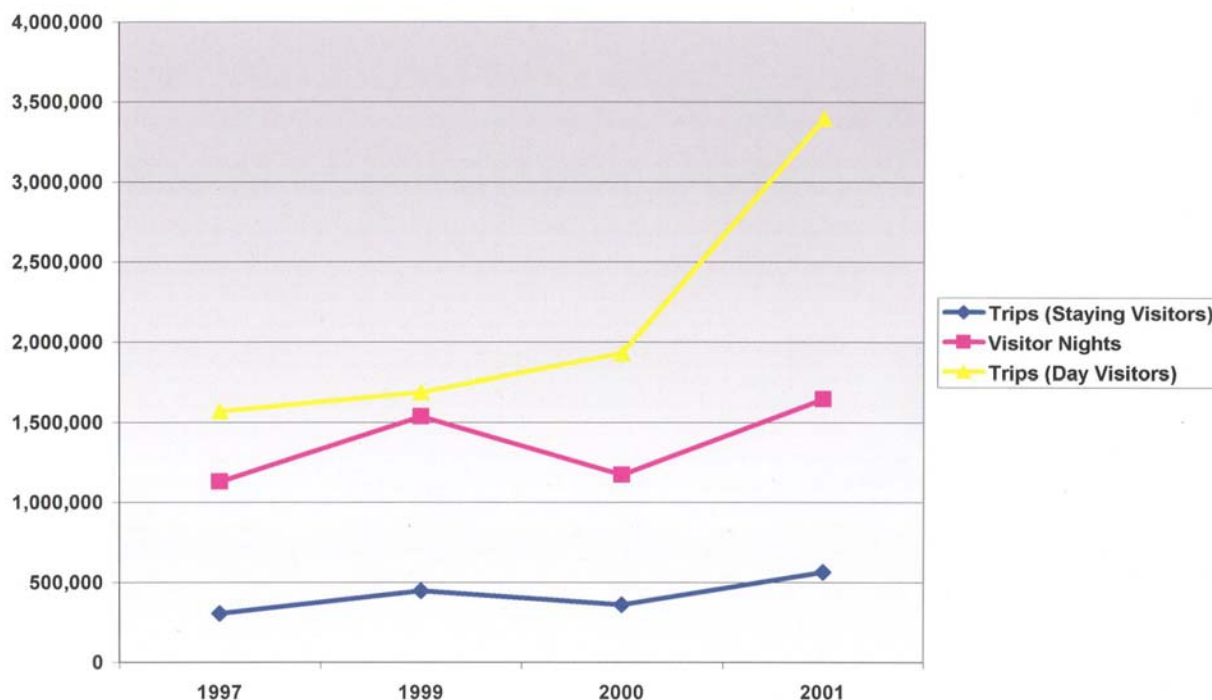
In 2001 Somerset had approximately 16 million day trips, over 3 million staying trips and visitors spent over £850 million. Tourism is an integral part of Somerset's economy with 34,838 full and part-time jobs in the county directly and indirectly supported by visitor expenditure. 15% of employment in Somerset is related to tourism, the largest proportion being within the catering sector.

(Source: The Facts, Somerset County Council, 2001/2002)

5 Benefits of tourism to South Somerset

Tourism helps to boost the local economy. In 2001 visitors spent over £159 million in South Somerset. There were 560,000 staying visitors and day visitors to the area made 3.4 million trips.

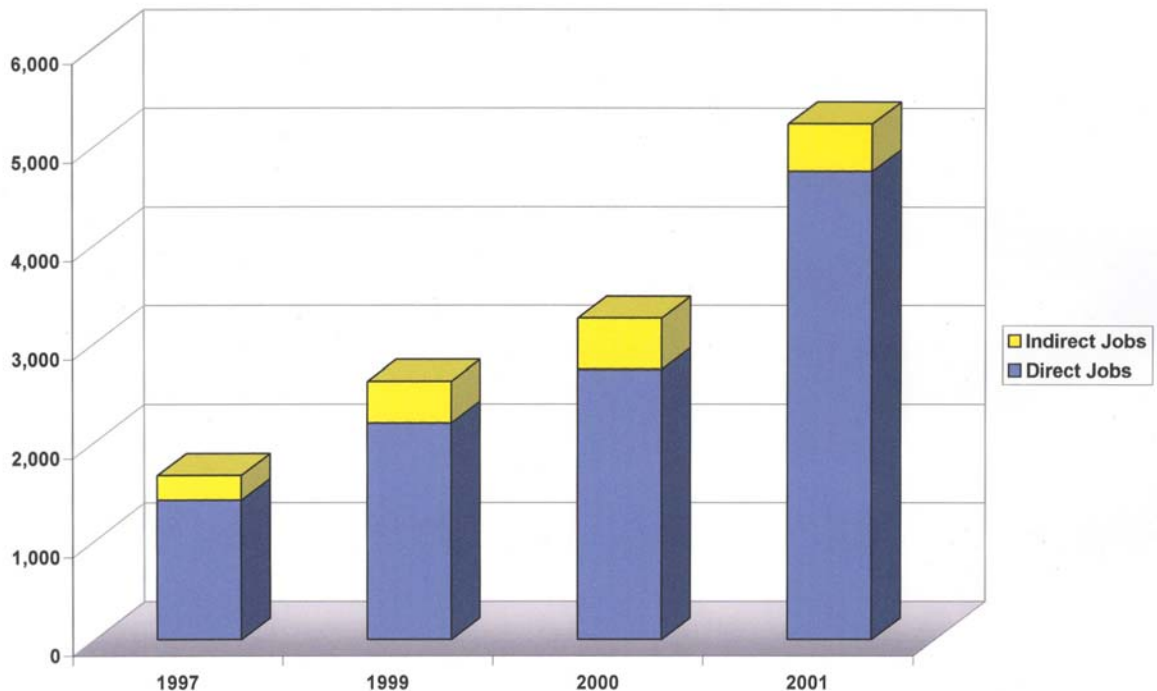
Figure 2 – Number of trips taken in South Somerset from 1997 to 2001



(Source: Economic Impact Survey, 2002)

Tourism provides opportunities for employment and supports 5,440 full, part-time and voluntary jobs in tourism in South Somerset - this equates to 7% of the workforce.

Figure 3 – Number of jobs supported by tourism in South Somerset from 1997 to 2001



(Source: Economic Impact Survey, 2002)

Tourism can create increased leisure opportunities for residents and visitors eg events, guided walks, educational visits, attractions and leisure facilities.

Tourist information centres provide a service not only for visitors but also for local people such as booking UK holidays, selling tickets for shows and attractions and local souvenirs as well as providing information on South Somerset.

Tourism supports local shops and services. A recent survey showed that 29% of visitor spend is on shopping, 15% on accommodation, 15% on travel, 10% on attractions and 31% on food and drink.

Tourism can help to sustain a better environment by maintaining footpaths and historic buildings.

Tourism can help to improve the quality of life by sustaining a vibrant area to live and work.

6 Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats

Strengths

Award winning local produce

- Acknowledged as having 2 of the best traditional unpasturised cheddar cheese makers in the county, award winning cider makers and a cider brandy distillery.

- Established network of farmers markets.
- A range of organic fruit, vegetable and meat producers.
- Award winning pubs, restaurants and tearooms many of which have made a commitment to source local produce.
- Vibrant arts and craft industry including four performing arts venues.
- Withies from Somerset Levels are an integral part of our natural heritage and are used for hurdle making and basket weaving.

Diverse countryside

- 39 Sites of Special Scientific Interest and 750 County Wildlife Sites.
- The moors of the Somerset Levels are a Special Protection Area (one of the highest international designations given to sites rich in conservation value) and most are part of the Environmentally Sensitive Area Scheme. There are two other National Nature Reserves and 4 local nature reserves.
- The Blackdown Hills and Cranborne Chase are both Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Numerous established apple orchards.
- 6,720 species of animals and plants have been recorded to date, however the estimated number is thought to be over 10,000. There are around 109 species that are legally protected including kingfishers, peregrine falcon and barn owls. South Somerset has the largest heronry in South West England.

Numerous tourist attractions and events

- 81 tourist attractions that received 3.4 million visits in 2002.
- 10 museums including two world-class museums - Haynes Motor Museum and Fleet Air Arm Museum (one of the largest aviation museums in the world).
- Many heritage attractions including ten National Trust properties, which are marketed internationally by the Trust and an English Heritage site.
- Montacute House has a world class collection of portraits from the National Portrait Gallery.
- Ten “Classic Gardens” plus smaller gardens and award winning nurseries.
- Cadbury Castle – reputedly King Arthur’s Camelot.
- 67 scheduled ancient monuments, some of which are private.

- Many galleries, studios and potteries.
- The 10th largest mosaic in Britain dating from 360 AD was discovered in South Somerset.
- A collection of unusual Follies and five Fives Walls.
- South Somerset has 130 churches, 14 internationally renowned towers and one of the oldest churches in the county with wall paintings dating back to 1300.
- An established programme of cultural events eg the autumn carnivals, Wassailing, Punkie Night.
- The Battle of Langport in 1645 was one of the last battles of the first civil war.

Established walking and cycling routes

- Three self-guided medium distance walking routes: the Leland, Liberty and the award winning River Parrett Trail plus many circular walks, a guided walks programme and 1025 miles of public rights of way.
- An 80-mile signed, on-road cycle route, plus a number of self guided circular routes.

Quality accommodation

- It is South Somerset District Councils policy is to promote accommodation that is accredited by the AA, RAC or Visit Britain. 97% of the hotels, inns, bed and breakfasts/guesthouses, campsites, farmhouses and self catering cottages that we promote are 3 diamonds/stars or above and we have 5 establishments that have been awarded 5 diamonds, the top accolade for quality.
- 76% of these businesses have email addresses.
- Established training/development programme for trade. 288 tourism businesses have attended South Somerset District Council training courses since 1999.

A range of leisure facilities

- Four 18 hole golf courses, four swimming pools, Yeovil Alpine Village - a dry ski slope, ten pin bowling, a cinema, sports and leisure centres, Wincanton race course, an outdoor activity centre at Mill on the Brue and numerous opportunities for fishing.
- Range of leisure courses on offer at local colleges and arts and crafts venues.
- Home to many sporting events eg Yeovil Town Football club, known locally as the Glovers and Aldon Horse Trials.
- Wide range of opportunities for shopping in the district including established department stores (in Yeovil), antiques and bookshops, food and drink producers and arts and crafts outlets.

Attractive towns and villages

- Attractive villages and 12 market towns, many built from the locally quarried honey coloured Ham Stone.
- Somerton was alleged to be the ancient capital of Wessex.
- South Somerset is home to 5,500 businesses that are registered for VAT, the largest number for any rural district in the South West of England.
- South Somerset featured in the films *Chocolat*, *Emma*, *Restoration*, *Sense and Sensibility* and in the television series *To the Manor Born* and *The Monocled Mutineer*.
- Odcombe was home to Thomas Coryate, known as "the Odcombe leg stretcher", a travel writer who walked most of the way from England to India nearly 400 years ago.

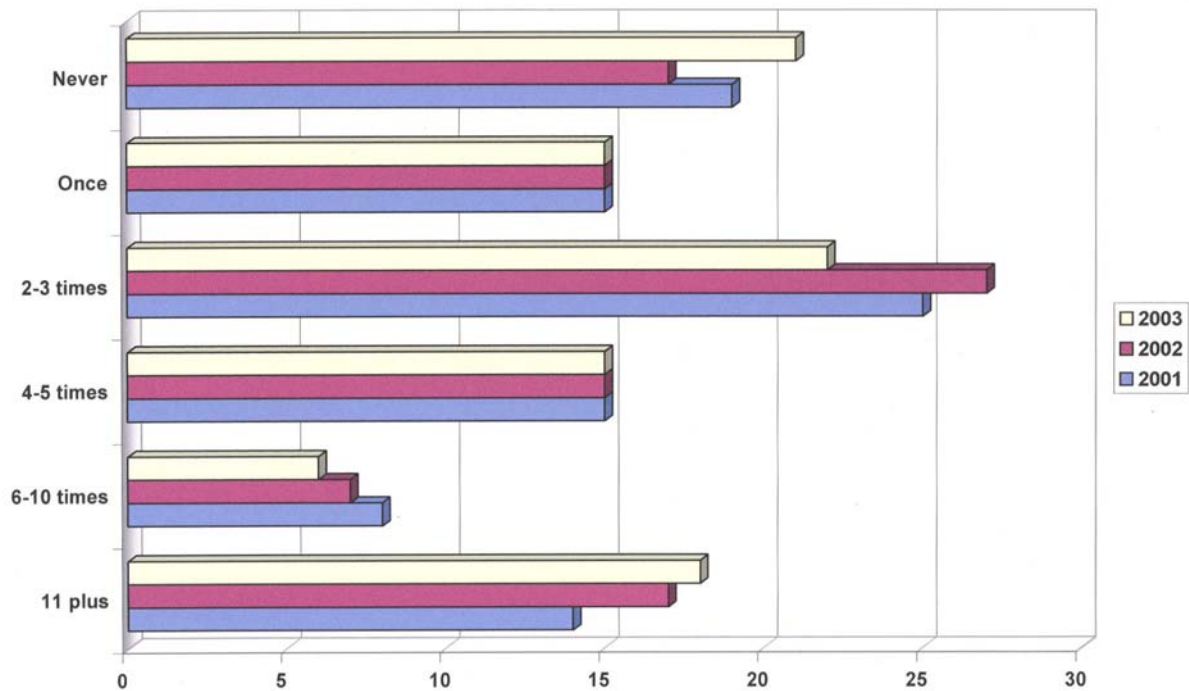
A professional visitor information service

- Three networked tourist information centres and seven local information centres. In 2003 100% of visitors to Yeovil and Cartgate tourist information centres rated the quality of customer service given as good or excellent.
- Enthusiastic, dedicated and knowledgeable tourism staff.
- The Council has two dedicated tourism websites www.country-breaks.com, and www.visitourgardens.com plus www.southsomersetmuseums.gov.uk. In 2003 nearly half of the visitors to South Somerset used the Internet to research their holiday and a quarter of these booked on line (source: Country Breaks questionnaire, 2003).
- 97% of the trade questioned in 2002 rated the overall quality of the tourism service good or excellent.

Loyal Customers

- High level of customer loyalty – in 2003 40% of tourists had visited South Somerset at least five times before.

Figure 4 – Number of times tourists have visited South Somerset



(Source: Country Breaks questionnaire, 2003)

- Established accommodation guide, Country Breaks. In 2003 99% of visitors surveyed rated it good or excellent. 32% of those who received a brochure booked a holiday in South Somerset, over a third of these booked for seven nights or more, and nearly a quarter made a day trip (source: Country Breaks questionnaire 2003).

Excellent Access

- Excellent access from major centres of population by road, A303 and M5 junction 25, by coach, by rail via six stations, by air via Bristol, Exeter and Bournemouth (all within 40 miles) and by sea via Poole.
- Midway between North and South Coast.

Weaknesses

- South Somerset is a relatively unknown destination, without any major landmarks eg a city, National Park or coast.
- Viewed as stopping off place en route to Devon and Cornwall.
- Main season is predominately in the summer months.
- Fragmented industry.
- Lack of large hotel that could cater for coach groups or big conferences.
- Lack of inspected accommodation in certain areas of the district.

- Limited attractions for families and teenagers.
- Irregular opening hours in some attractions and lack of year round attractions.
- Low awareness of tourism benefits within the host community.
- Lack of information and accredited accommodation for visitors with disabilities.
- Low annual occupancy for serviced accommodation.

Table 1 – Occupancy figures for South Somerset

	2000	2001	2002	2003	Somerset 2003
Serviced Accommodation					
Room Occupancy	41%	39%	43%	51%	50%
Bed Occupancy	29%	24%	28%	38%	40%
Self Catering					
All static units/chalets	47%	39%	74%	*	76%
Holiday homes	62%	51%	61%	56%	62%
Camping/touring	17%	20%	26%	*	34%

* Indicates small sample size or no results available

(Source: South West Tourism)

- Lack of structured links with other services within SSDC eg Local Agenda 21, Community Development, Environmental Health and Planning.
- Limited understanding of visitors’ needs.
- Lack of on line booking facility for accommodation.
- Poor public transport infrastructure across the district.
- Poor quality of some roads with limited destination signage in some areas.
- Low unemployment (1.6%) has led to difficulty in recruiting trained staff for the hospitality industry.
- Lack of county-wide strategy, which leads to some duplication.
- Poor quality of associated tourism facilities such as toilets and signage.
- Low number of unique visitors to the website.

- Lack of information on effectiveness of themed publications.
- Lack of linked bridleways.

Opportunities

- To work with the Somerset Tourism Partnership to market Somerset in line with South West Tourism's plan, Towards 2015.
- To implement a destination management system (DMS) that will allow the collection and distribution of visitor information through England Net.
- Improved destination signage.
- Development of a high profile, quality tourism attraction reflecting the diversity of the district.
- Development of good quality hotel that can cater for groups.
- More quality inspected accommodation in certain areas of the district.
- More accommodation that is accessible for visitors with disabilities.
- Development of off-road routes for cyclists/horse riders.
- Work with public transport providers to increase accessibility in rural areas and to tourist attractions.

Growth in:-

- breaks of 1-3 nights - forecast to rise by 27% by 2005, visiting friends and family - increase by 29% and business tourism by 36% (*source: Visit Britain*)
- consumers awareness of green issues
- visitors who are "money rich – time poor" who require holidays that are easy to research, book and that fulfil their emotional needs
- use of IT. Internet users are forecast to double by 2005 to one billion. Britain has the highest Internet usage in Europe, 46% of households, but only 16% of people use it to book domestic holidays
- number of active, mobile middle-aged and retired consumers who are demanding higher quality, value for money holidays that are tailored to their needs
- the number of single households has doubled in the last thirty years to reach 2 million today (*source: Visit Britain Foresight, February 2004*).

Threats

- Competition from other similar tourism destinations both in UK and Europe.
- Lack of government funding and European funding opportunities.
- Industry vulnerable to external factors eg fuel increases, foot and mouth.
- Perception that England is an expensive destination along with the falling costs of holidays abroad.
- Climate change and flooding.
- Recession.

7 Who are the stakeholders in tourism?

Our stakeholders can be broken down into the following groups:

- Visitors
- Industry
- Community
- Environment.

This strategy will seek to ensure that visitors are welcomed and will therefore return, that the tourism industry is prosperous, that residents are aware of the economic benefits and that the environment is protected and enhanced by tourism.

8 Stakeholder feedback

In 2002, our visitors told us that they wanted:

- more themed promotions eg walking, antiques, churches, horse riding, events, arts and crafts, golf, museums and food and drink
- more accommodation without a single person supplement
- more information for visitors with disabilities
- more information about accommodation that will take dogs
- improved signage to Yeovil tourist information centre (TIC)
- town centre location for Yeovil TIC
- more information on attractions, events, public transport and disabled access in Country Breaks

In 2002, the tourism industry told us that they wanted:

- an annual tourism forum
- a quarterly trade newsletter
- range of development opportunities at times to suit their business operation
- more internet marketing
- more proactive approach towards encouraging visitors to South Somerset

The local residents told us to:

- include community attitude survey
- maintain high quality countryside and ensure access to it
- protect the character of our market towns and villages and the old buildings in them
- keep alive the traditions of South Somerset life
- promote arts and historical events
- 72% (of a cultural strategy telephone survey) use the tourist information centres and postal surveys have shown that 65% are satisfied with the level of service.
- a survey of Parish Councils shows that 43.3% think SSDC should continue to spend the same amount on tourism promotion whilst 34.9% think we should spend more. A further 4.9% think we should spend less and 16.6% didn't answer.

9 Visitor Profile

Two thirds of visitors to South Somerset travel in groups of two and a fifth in groups of more than four (source: Conversion analysis, 2003). Only 17% of visitors travel with children and over half are over 55. 91% of visitors to South Somerset travel by car or motorcycle (source: Somerset Visitor Survey, 2003).

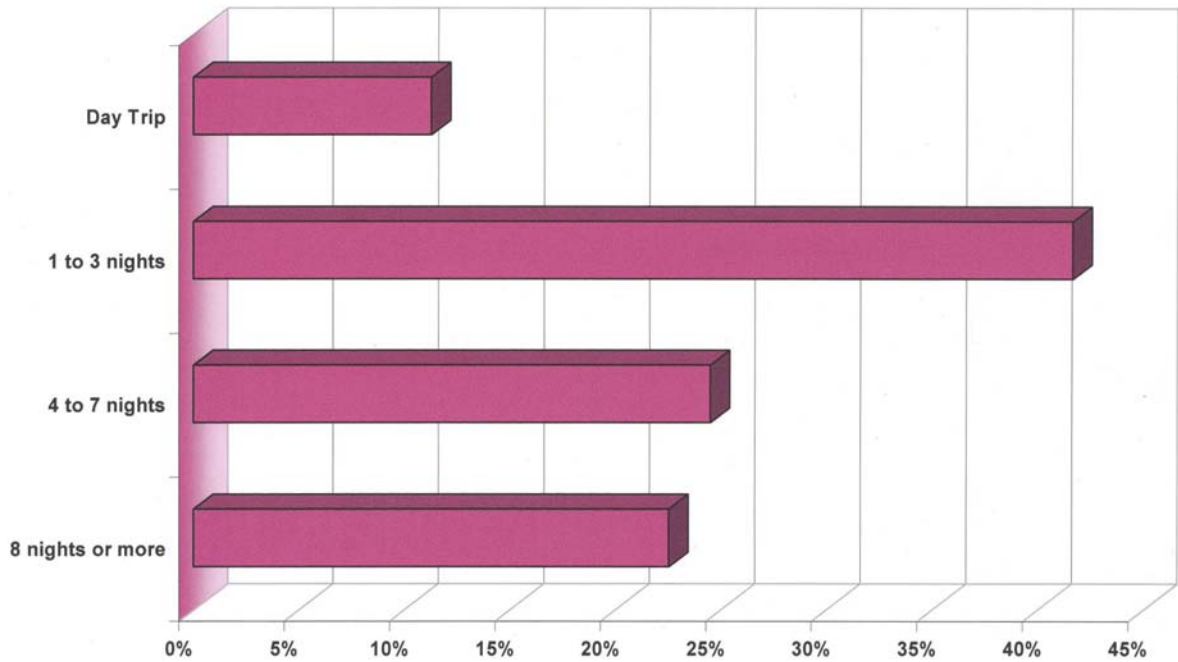
Table 2 - Why do visitors come to South Somerset?

1	Countryside	7	Accommodation
2	Houses and gardens	8	Food and drink
3	Peace and quiet	9	Visiting friends and family
4	Attractions	10	Events
5	Touring base	11	Arts and Crafts
6	Walking	12	Cycling

(Source: Country Breaks questionnaire, 2003)

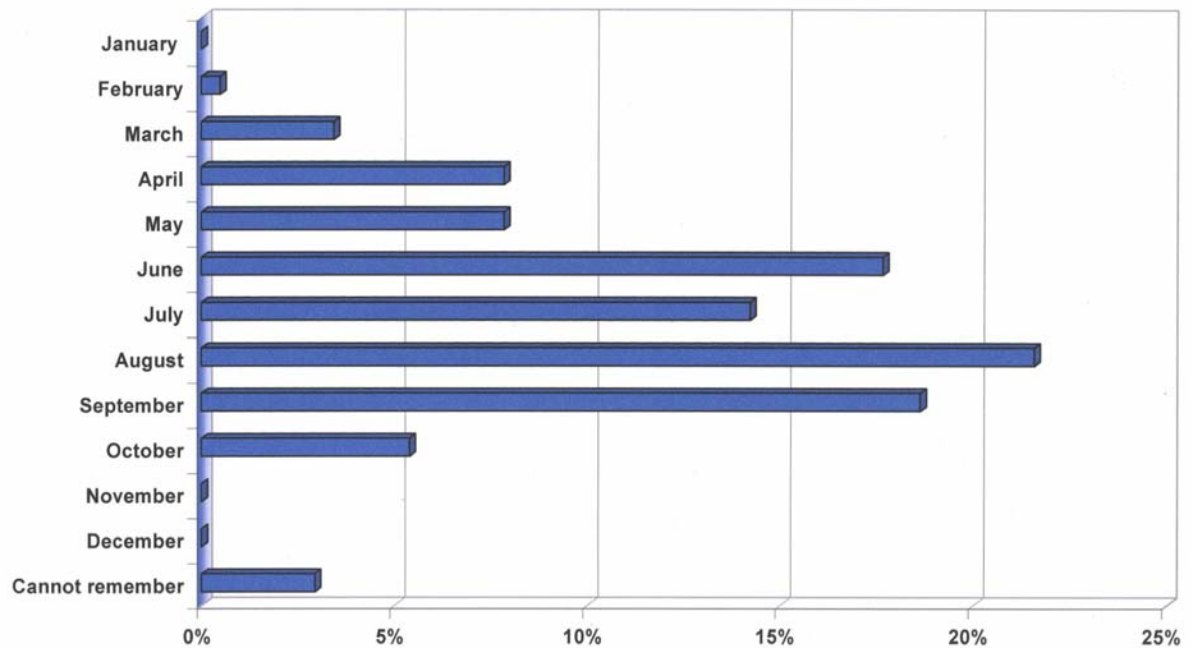
The 'other' reasons for visiting South Somerset were quoted as family research, passing through, historic buildings, golf, sport, shopping and moving to the area. Price and availability were the least important factors when deciding to visit (source: Somerset Visitor Survey, 2003).

Figure 5 - How long do visitors stay in South Somerset?



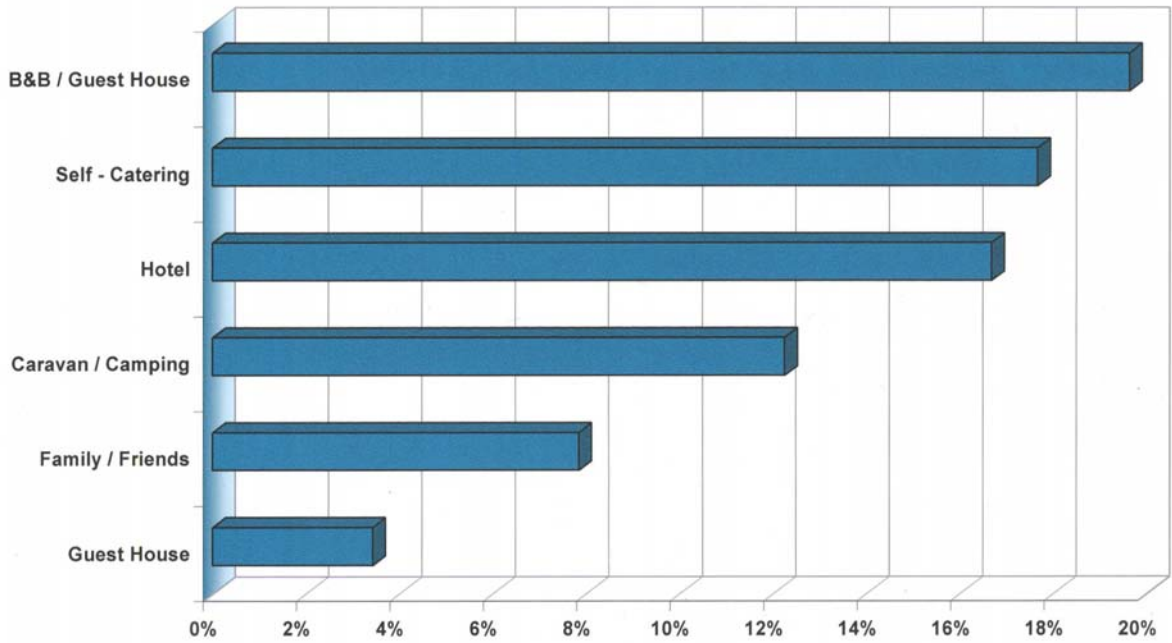
Source: Country Breaks questionnaire, 2003

Figure 6 - When do visitors come to South Somerset?



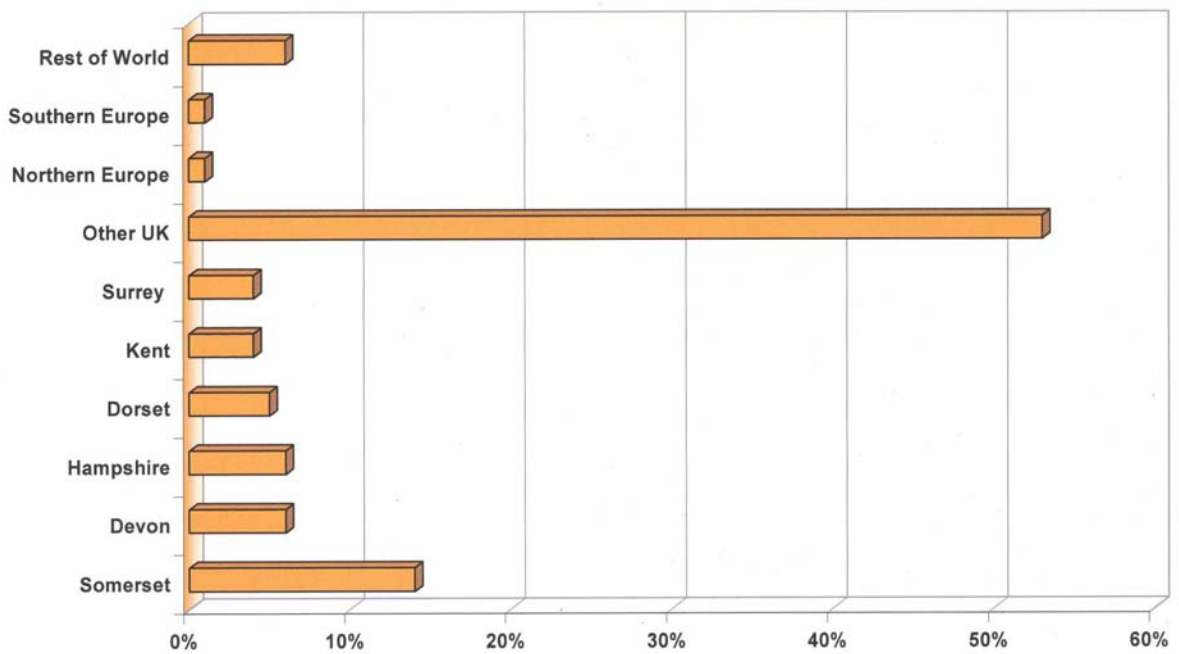
Source: Country Breaks questionnaire, 2003

Figure 7 - What accommodation do they use?



Source: Country Breaks questionnaire, 2003

Figure 8 - Where do visitors come from?



Source: South West Tourism 2004

10 The strategy

Aims of the tourism service

The tourism service aims to increase the prosperity of South Somerset by maximizing the tourism potential whilst minimising the impact on the environment.

Our primary objectives are to:

- increase the value of tourism in South Somerset by marketing the area as a quality sustainable tourism destination
- provide a professional visitor information service to all enquirers
- work in partnership with the tourism industry to improve the quality of the tourism product and to ensure visitors expectations are exceeded
- develop and support sustainable tourism initiatives and partnerships.

Objective

To increase the value of tourism in South Somerset by marketing the area as a quality sustainable tourism destination

How will we achieve this?

We will produce, implement and evaluate a marketing plan looking particularly at PR, e-marketing, website development and the opportunities for marketing the distinctive qualities of the area in partnership with South West Tourism, Visit Britain and the Somerset Tourism Partnership.

Use the South Somerset Tourist Information Centre to encourage visitors en route to Devon and Cornwall to return to holiday in South Somerset.

Work with South West Screen and the National Trust to market South Somerset as a “film friendly” destination that provides quality accommodation, great food, Ham Stone villages, unspoilt scenery and easy access from London and the South East.

How will we extend the season?

We will develop promotions out of peak season eg walking festival, food and drink festival, encourage and promote year round opening of attractions and market year round events and activities eg Carnivals.

How will we improve facilities for visitors with disabilities?

Ensure that tourism businesses are accessible and offer a warm welcome to all sectors of society including people who have disabilities. Work with the Tourism Skills Network to raise awareness with trade of the Disability Discrimination Act and increase participation in accreditation schemes and Welcome All training courses. We will produce a new guide for visitors with disabilities and look at potential funding sources for improving disabled access.

How will we develop the day visitor market?

Develop an attractions partnership to create an annual marketing plan. This could include an annual attractions campaign “Days out on your doorstep”, promoting South Somerset to schools, colleges, local associations, twinning organizations and marketing the benefits of tourism to the host population.

How will we develop the business tourism market?

Work with the Economic Development unit to promote South Somerset to business visitors and to encourage the development of a hotel within South Somerset. Work with accommodation providers to market South Somerset to business visitors, as the place to return to on holiday.

How will we reduce the impact of tourism on the environment?

Develop sustainable tourism initiatives eg walking and cycling leaflets and improved public transport to attractions, in line with customer demand.

Encourage the development of sustainable tourism businesses through use of green audit kit, local sourcing of goods and services and signposting to specialist help.

Develop awards for food and drink establishments that source quality local produce.

Work with other agencies to develop walking, cycling, riding routes as well as the “quiet lanes” project.

Work with Countryside Service to improve quality of footpaths particularly those that are promoted eg River Parrett, Leland, Liberty and circular walks.

Encourage the use of public transport by working with operators eg Heart of Wessex and encouraging accommodation to promote literature on public transport.

How will we improve our knowledge of visitor needs?

Undertake research into visitor needs through:

- an independent visitor survey
- evaluation of questionnaires in Country Breaks
- collation of visitor information centre feedback
- implementation of visitor satisfaction survey when checking out of accommodation

Evaluate the effectiveness of our special interest publications.

Objective

To provide a professional visitor information service to all enquirers

How will we achieve this?

Produce an annual business plan for the tourist information centres

All tourism staff to attend Welcome Host and Welcome All as part of tourism induction programme. TIC staff to attend familiarisation visits as appropriate to develop product knowledge.

Provide support to Chard TIC and the seven local information centres (LICs) at Wincanton, Bruton, Langport, Crewkerne, Ilminster, Somerton and Castle Cary. Assist those LICs that wish to become networked.

Increase the range of merchandise on sale in line with customer demand.

Work with the Somerset Tourism Partnership to implement a new destination management system and work in partnership with the tourism trade by providing the customer with up to date information on accommodation availability

Promote TICs and LICs to the local population through leaflets, posters, direct mail, adverts, talks and open evenings.

Apply for accolades for quality such as 2005 England for Excellence awards.

Increase the number of customer satisfaction questionnaires completed and act on feedback.

Share best practice with other TICs.

The TICs will endeavour to make their offices as sustainable as possible.

Improve signage to TIC within Yeovil and look at opportunities for relocating Yeovil TIC to a town centre location.

Objective

To work in partnership with the tourism industry to improve the quality of the tourism product and ensure visitor expectations are exceeded.

How will we achieve this?

Encourage the development of sustainable skilled tourism businesses through business advice, support and training opportunities.

Work with the Agricultural Advisory Service to support the farming community.

Work with the Economic Development Unit and Foodlinks to raise awareness of the benefits of tourism in the retail and food sectors.

Look at the feasibility of providing an in-house Welcome to South Somerset course for the industry.

Encourage partnerships within each sector eg accommodation, where businesses can share good practice and network. Establish an annual tourism forum.

Identify skills and training gaps within tourism businesses and work with partners eg Business Link, Tourism Skills Network, and South West Tourism, to develop cost effective, relevant training courses.

Ensure the industry is kept informed of current issues by the production of an email newsletter for the trade.

Encourage sustainability in all aspects of the industry eg use of public transport, local purchasing, recycling, green awards scheme and provision of walking and cycling information.

Promote quality standards eg disability and those who have won awards for adopting a sustainable approach.

Identify the total number of accommodation businesses operating in South Somerset and increase the number of tourism businesses that work with the tourism unit and that become inspected in particular in areas of short supply.

Work with agencies to ensure that the quality of the tourism infrastructure is maintained eg litter collection, public toilets and signage to them.

Promote and support the regeneration of the market towns and the delivery of the Yeovil Vision.

Objective

To develop and support sustainable tourism initiatives and partnerships

How will we achieve this?

Work in partnership with: -

Agricultural Advisory Service
Blackdown Hills Partnership
Bristol to Weymouth rail partnership
Countryside Agency
English Heritage
Envolve
HATS (Horses and Tourism in Somerset)

Highways Agency
Levels and Moors Partnership
Local information centres
Local tourism associations and chambers of trade
Media
National Trust
Rural tourism benchmarking group

Somerset Art Week
Somerset Steering Group
Somerset Tourism Partnership
South Somerset District Council
South Somerset residents
South West England Sustainable
Tourism Partnership
South West Regional Development
Agency
South West Screen

South West Tourism
Sustrans
The River Parrett Trail Partnership
Tourism Management Institute
The Tourism Industry
Tourism Skills Network
Town and parish councils
Town centre managers
Visit Britain
WS Atkins

Grant aid sustainable tourism projects and monitor success of current grants programme.

Raise awareness of work of tourism unit within SSDC eg Planning Department, Regeneration, Local Agenda 21 officers and Environmental Health through networking.

Work with planners to ensure tourism elements are considered in the planning process.

Complement and support other related strategies eg SSDC cultural and community strategies, local transport plan, local plan and Towards 2015 produced by South West Tourism.

Work with the Somerset Tourism Partnership to produce an action plan for Somerset in line with Towards 2015.

Work with rural benchmarking group to disseminate best practice.

Work with the River Parrett Trail Partnership to develop the River Parrett Trail.

Work with the Blackdown Hills and Levels and Moors Partnership to develop tourism projects.

Develop closer working relationships with relevant bodies eg Countryside Agency, DEFRA, NFU, Business Link, National Trust and English Heritage.

Work with the Customer Relations team at SSDC on signage throughout the district.

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Thank you to all those who gave their feedback on the Draft Tourism Strategy in 2004.

If you would like to comment on this document or would like more information on South Somerset please contact the Tourism Unit, SSDC, Brympton Way, Yeovil, Somerset, BA20 2HT, telephone 01935 462462, fax 01935 462243, email tourism@southsomerset.gov.uk or visit www.country-breaks.com.