

Market Town Welcome PRESS RELEASE

Let's all give visitors an even warmer welcome!

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How can the market towns of Morpeth and Hexham offer an even warmer welcome to visitors right throughout the year is the question local businesses, traders and residents will be asked over the next few weeks.

With their rich heritage, town centres full of character and charm, niche shops, picturesque parks, countryside and riverside walks Morpeth and Hexham have long been among the most popular destinations on Northumberland's tourist trail both for day trippers and short-break holidaymakers.

However, in the face of increasing competition from cheap flights coaxing greater numbers of short-stay travellers abroad and with people tightening their belts in the current economic climate, towns such as Morpeth and Hexham have to closely examine just what they can do in the future to tempt even more visitors.

Over the next few months both will be collaborating in a Market Town Welcome initiative to look at new ways of boosting their visitor economies and attracting fresh investment into their towns.

Both have a proud heritage, interesting and historic places to visit both in the towns and the surrounding countryside, and rely heavily on tourism to support their local economy.

So with funding from regional development agency One NorthEast and working with the local Market Town Partnerships, Northumberland Tourism, business, heritage and culture groups the two towns will be looking carefully at what sort of packages they are offering visitors to see how they can be improved.

Greater Morpeth Development Trust and Hexham Community Partnership will locally lead the initiative which is being co-ordinated by a team from Miller Research, to bring together business people, traders, heritage and culture groups to develop a tourism vision for the towns over the next decade.

Together over the next five months they will examine among other issues, what makes the Morpeth and Hexham distinctive as visitor attractions; what stories about the towns would interest visitors; and what can be done to make them even more alive as a visitor attraction.

Initial workshops will be held later this month to launch the process of improving the towns' overall visitor welcome, but before that a business survey and further information about the initiative, is already available on a www.markettownwelcome.co.uk website.

David Lodge, Chief Executive Officer of Greater Morpeth Development Trust, which is working in partnership on the initiative with Morpeth Chamber of Trade, Morpeth Town Council and Castle Morpeth Borough Council commented: "Both Morpeth and Hexham already have distinctive identities as attractive Northumberland market towns.

"Through this initiative we will be focussing on developing our strengths to bring more visitors into our towns as well as encouraging them to stay longer which, in our case, will aid the post-flood economic recovery

“Tourism is a crucial part of our local economy and there is a market that can be tapped by supporting and encouraging businesses to deliver top quality products in their specialist fields whether they are catering and hospitality, heritage attractions or retailing.

“Over the next few months we will be asking local people, groups, organisations and businesses to think about whether there are hidden business opportunities that can be explored; are we making the most of what we have on offer; what investment can we bring into the town; and what they consider would attract more people to Morpeth and Hexham.

“It is a fantastic opportunity for everyone not just those who are in daily contact with visitors, to work together by getting involved in an initiative that will ensure we retain our rightful place on the regional tourism map.”

Tamsin Beevor of Hexham Community Partnership added: “Tourism could be our greatest asset, but right now visitors tell us we have some way to go. Better shopping, places to eat, upmarket accommodation, is this what visitors in the 21st Century are looking for?

“So this is a really great opportunity for the two towns, and we want all businesses having any contact with visitors to get involved with us.”

- One way everyone can get involved is to send photos of Morpeth and Hexham picking out both their good and bad features, to sam@miller-research.co.uk or by uploading them directly to the www.marketownwelcome.co.uk website to help the researchers focus on the special qualities of the two towns as well as their strengths and weaknesses as a visitor destination.

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