

An investment of more than £18m could see Portsmouth International Port become a leading destination for cruise ships.

The council is set to approve spending £18.7m to boost the port's appeal in the global market, by improving its facilities and promoting the city as a must-see for tourists.

As a result it is thought that the port, which last year contributed £7.8m to the council's budget, could see more than 100 cruise calls a year by 2022 - up from 48 in 2018.

Funding would pay for essential levelling work to take place on the port's cruise berth, allowing for more cruise ships to dock. It would also cover changes to the current terminal building to handle passengers more efficiently and replace the 30-year-old passenger boarding tower that is currently in a poor state.

Aside from structural changes to the port, there will also be a push to encourage cruise passengers spend more time, and money, in the city.

New itineraries that are tailor-made for specific interests such as Portsmouth's naval history and literary heritage have been developed and will be promoted on the ships.

Councillor Ben Dowling, Portsmouth City Council's head of economic development, said: 'Portsmouth is the UK's most successful council-owned port and we know it is the envy of many port operators. Cruise is a market we have a real opportunity to develop, if we provide industry standard infrastructure. Major operators are keen to use Portsmouth but we must be able to accommodate ships appropriately. The increase in visitors to the city would have huge benefits, as would the additional berthing fees of ships at the port.'

Speaking at a leisure scrutiny panel meeting last week, Ian Palacio, business development manager at the port, explained how this could boost spending in the city.

'80 per cent of cruise guests tend to go on organised tours once they arrive, with many of these going to London,' he said. 'About 20 per cent just look for something to do in the port. But if we could give those people an experience here, and encourage others who might usually go to London to stay, that would make a difference.'

Part of the drive was also backed by Shaping Portsmouth. The organisation's director, Stef Nienalto said: 'We need to create a more sustainable business case for people to stay here and spend by showing these people the value of this city.'

'One thing we have been looking at is the idea of a "sleep, park, cruise" offer. This would give people departing from Portsmouth the option to drive down the night before and stay at a hotel where they leave their car while on the cruise. It would be marketed as a more leisurely way to start your trip, and could see more business for local hotels.'

The capital bid for funding will go to full council for decision on February 12. A total of 1,094,000 passengers embarked on a cruise from UK ports in 2017/18.