



# EXPERIENCE DARLINGTON

A VISITOR ECONOMY STRATEGY  
2016 - 2026



A MOST  
INGENIOUS  
TOWN

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# FOREWORD

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“Darlington has a unique claim to fame that is recognised across the globe. As the birth place of the modern railway, we are rich in ingenious history from our agricultural roots, through to the Quaker influences that were the building blocks of the engineering era of the industrial revolution. The 200th anniversary of the birthplace of the modern railway will be in 2025, coinciding with the Tees Valley ambition to be the City of Culture in that year. There is therefore a golden opportunity to make more of this unique history as a corner stone to a wider cultural experience that can be enjoyed in and from Darlington.

Darlington possesses nationally significant heritage assets such as the original 1825 track bed, the £5 note bridge and Locomotion No 1. Investment in theatre, a new cinema complex, new hotels for visitors, a series of cultural and leisure events are all visible. There is new place branding around the Ingenious Town Theme and work is going on to ensure people can get conveniently around the town and to it.

Darlington is also perfectly placed for visitors to enjoy a host of wider cultural attractions throughout Tees Valley and within a half hour travel time such as railway experiences in Shildon and York, Kynren, Bowes Museum, not forgetting the glorious countryside that is in easy striking distance of the town.

However, we need a coordinated strategy and action plan to enhance and promote these assets as part of our wider tourism offer.

During 2016 and 2017, Darlington Borough Council has consulted residents, businesses and visitors on their thoughts on Darlington’s current tourism offer and what could be done to enhance our offer. We received over 209 responses which been used to help shape this strategy and subsequent action plan. This consultation has been across a range of mediums and includes feedback from businesses, partner organisations as well as community groups and residents. What has emerged from our consultation is that there is strong support from the community for Darlington to adopt clear visitor strategy for the town and to improve the promotion of Darlington’s current offer and assets.

If you come to Darlington you experience it. That might be as a resident or somebody who works here; maybe on a business or a leisure trip. You will experience the place in terms of its convenience, how safe you feel, can you get around easily, how pleasant or unpleasant it is. You will also experience the interactions with people and services. Experience Darlington is an integrated approach to how the Council, businesses, organisations, services and individuals can work together to improve these experiences for the benefit of everyone. Enhancing and promoting our tourism offer to encourage additional visitors to the town as well as those who already come to visit more frequently and stay longer, will support local businesses and our economy.

As a member of Tees Valley Combined Authority Culture Group and the North East Cultural Partnership, I have been pleased to work with my opposite numbers in Stockton and Durham to build a consensus between partnership organisations of cultural priorities for our region. I am determined that our growing and diverse offer in culture and arts should play a central role in the Experience Darlington ambition and I am keen to encourage more individuals and businesses to join me in becoming involved and supporting the town in achieving our ‘Vision for Darlington’ by 2026.”

**Cllr. Nick Wallis**

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over recent years important building blocks have been put in place to grow Darlington through the development of core economic, town centre and place making strategies including the Ingenious Darlington brand, Invest in Darlington promotions and Creative Darlington partnership.

Experience Darlington is a visitor economy strategy focused on improving Darlington's tourism offer. It is not a new initiative but rather an overarching strategy which ties together the boroughs ambitions and plans linked to Arts, Culture and Heritage, Town Centre, Place Making and Regeneration and Connectivity. The Experience Darlington strategy outlines the huge potential the visitor economy has for the borough and identifies priority actions to develop Darlington's tourism offer to encourage visitors to the town thus supporting our local economy.

The strategy is made up of three priorities which will be central to developing our visitor offer.

- **A railway town** - building on our reputation as the birthplace of the modern railway, enhancing and promoting our historic assets
- **A theatre town** - where arts and culture happen
- **A town to visit** - incorporating town centre, events, connectivity and how we promote our offer to visitors

In 2025 Darlington has ambitions to be a globally significant visitor attraction which celebrates the birthplace of the modern railway in 1825. As the starting point of this journey it is hoped Darlington can attract funders, investors and visitors to build an experience that will reveal and celebrate the importance of the Stockton and Darlington railway to a local and global audience. While also feeding into the Tees Valley Combined Authority's plans to bid for the 2025 City of Culture which will bring increased visitors and make a huge economic contribution to the local area.

Experience Darlington is not just a Council Plan but a wider community plan for businesses, community groups and residents to take ownership. This is steered by the Creative Darlington Board and One Darlington, our Local Strategic Partnership and supported by Tees Valley Combined Authority and the Rail Heritage 2025 Steering Group. Much of this partnership work has already started through existing relationships and networks. However more needs to be done in the next ten years up to 2026 so that after the 2025 celebration event there is an ongoing legacy for people to enjoy.



# OUR VISION FOR 2026

By 2026 Darlington will be recognised for its world class heritage having built on its reputation as the birthplace of the railways to strengthen and promote a strong cultural offer that provides a distinctive experience for visitors.

Darlington will attract a significant amount of new visitors to the town. Our enhanced and recognised visitor offer will increase the number of overnight stays while also encouraging existing visitors to stay longer and spend more in our local businesses.

By 2026 Darlington will have built a lasting legacy following the 2025 Festival of the 200th anniversary of the first passenger railway and the 2025 Tees Valley City of Culture.

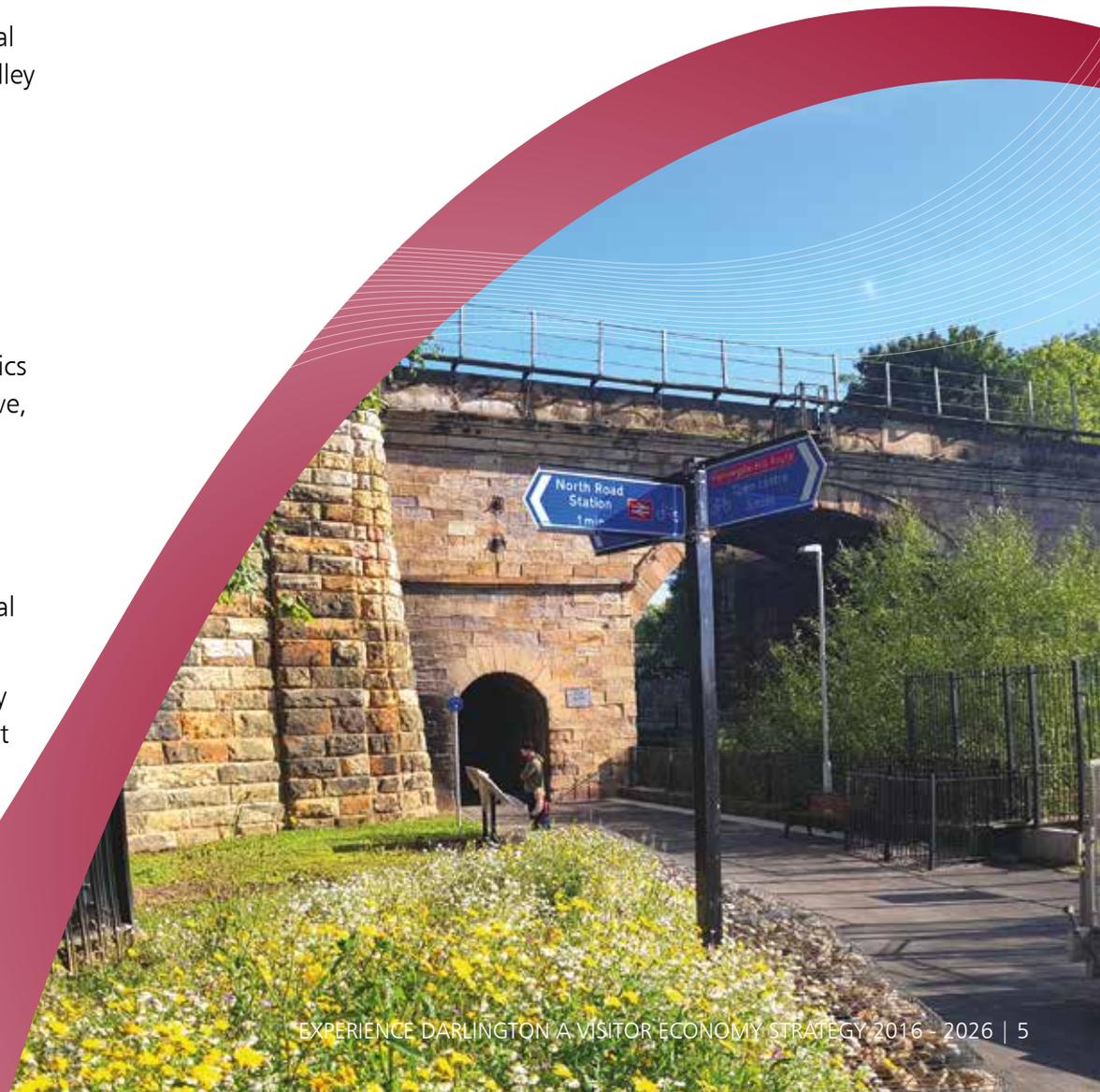
Darlington is recognised on a national and global platform for the breadth of cultural and historic assets we hold including the birth of steam powered passenger railways, its breadth of high quality and distinct theatre venues, a series of festivals and events with national significance as well as its popular cinema, comedy and live music programme.

Together with excellent national and regional connectivity, these characteristics will mean Darlington is a destination for visitors as well as a great place to live, work and invest.

Darlington will be a place where art happens, where the arts, culture and heritage matter and are central to Darlington's future identity and economic success. Darlington will be renowned for telling and re-telling the story of Darlington's arts, culture and heritage in ways that engage, inspire and reveal the assets.

Darlington will have a thriving and diverse Town Centre, offering high quality shopping, leisure and cultural experiences, where businesses choose to invest and people want to spend time.

Darlington will be recognised as a clean, safe and welcoming town with excellent facilities for visitors.



# THE ECONOMIC CASE

Creating cultural experiences that attract people to a place has significant economic potential. The visitor economy delivers a significant total contribution to the UK economy, generating **£106 billion\*** a year and employing **2.6 million people\***.

The direct impact visitor spend has is a contribution of **£48 billion\*** to the national economy and **1.4 million jobs\*** in sectors such as;

- accommodation,
- food and drink,
- transport,
- travel agencies,
- cultural activities and more.

The Local Government Association estimates that **1 in 12 jobs** in the UK are either directly or indirectly supported by tourism.

In 2015 Tees Valley had **7.26 million\*** day visitors per year spending a total of **£166.64 million\*** within the Tees Valley economy. This was the 3rd lowest visitor spend of 28 areas nationally and the 4th lowest amount of day visitors.

Establishing a Tees Valley wide approach to Culture has huge currently untapped economic potential for the area and is now incorporated into the revised Tees Valley Strategic Economic Plan. The Tees Valley Combined Authority anticipates a job growth of 4000 in this sector by 2026.

In 2015 **1.64 million\*** visitors came to Darlington from other parts of the UK, spending **£52.65 million\*** in the local economy.

**1.43 million\*** were day visitors while **209,000\*** stayed overnight.

## CURRENT BASE POINT IN DARLINGTON

17% (857) of Darlington's registered businesses are linked to the visitor economy.

Domestic day trips to Darlington contributed £24.65 million\* with an average spend per visit of £17.23 per person. **Nationally the average spends for day a visit is £34 per person per visit reducing to £27 per person per visit in a small town.** In the wider North East region 25% of day trips were to small towns, the majority of visits (46%) were made by North East residents to other North East areas.

While the day visitor market is driving the visitor economy in Darlington, accounting for 87% of all visits, overnight stays have a higher economic contribution of £28 million\* or an average of £134 per person per visit.

This can be broken down further by type of trip;

- 34% visits were holidays, contributing £10 million\* to Darlington's economy, average spend of £141 pp/per visit.
- 28% due to business visitors who contributed £9 million\*, average spend of £154 pp/per visit.
- 35% visiting friends or relatives, contributing just under £6 million\*, average spend of £82 pp/per visit.

# ECONOMIC POTENTIAL

## ADDITIONAL £26 MILLION PA INTO DARLINGTON'S ECONOMY BY 2026

Achieved by

- Increasing the current day visitor spend in Darlington to the national average for a small town = **+£13.8M**
- Increasing the number of day visitors to the town by 10% (extra 143,000 visits pa) = **+£3.8M**
- Increasing the number of overnight visitors to the town by 30% (extra 63,700 visits pa) = **+£8.4M**

Future growth potential for Darlington's visitor economy is substantial.

By developing and adopting a tourism strategy, with stakeholder support we can encourage more people to visit Darlington as well as encouraging those that already visit to stay longer, increasing productivity (GVA) through visitor spend.

In addition to the economic potential of adopting a strategy to enhance our existing offer and attract more tourists, the visitor economy also has wider benefits to residents. Currently Darlington has 3,500 economically active people registered as unemployed. In addition to this there are 3,100 economically inactive people in the borough who have identified themselves as wanting a job. Economic inactivity includes students, those looking after a family or home as well as those receiving disability related benefits.

The visitor economy provides many part time or entry level jobs, although not high value they are an important first step to becoming economically active for many social groups including those aged between 16 and 24 not in employment or education and training (NEET), parents with young children or those registered disabled.

Experience Darlington will also support growth in skills, participation and community resilience.



# WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED SO FAR...

Experience Darlington is not a new approach but rather re-casting of existing strategies into one cohesive document. Significant projects have already been done or are currently underway to help us achieve our vision. Below is a snapshot of some of the activity that details what has already been achieved or currently underway which will help achieve the Experience Darlington vision and enhance Darlington's tourism offer.

## A TOWN TO VISIT

- New Hotels at Morton Palms and Feethams
- Increased hotel spaces
- £54 million recent investments in town centre including;
- Feethams cinema and leisure complex
- £1.8M House of Fraser renovation
- The Best Large Hotel outside London
- Two Michelin starred restaurants

## CONNECTIVITY

- Inner ring road improvements
- Improvements to Car Parking creating safe, high quality parking within the town centre.
- More regular service on Bishop Line
- New Cycle network
- Improvements to bus network
- Real time travel information
- Half hour rail service to London and Edinburgh
- Improvements to access to North Road
- Dedicated coach stop

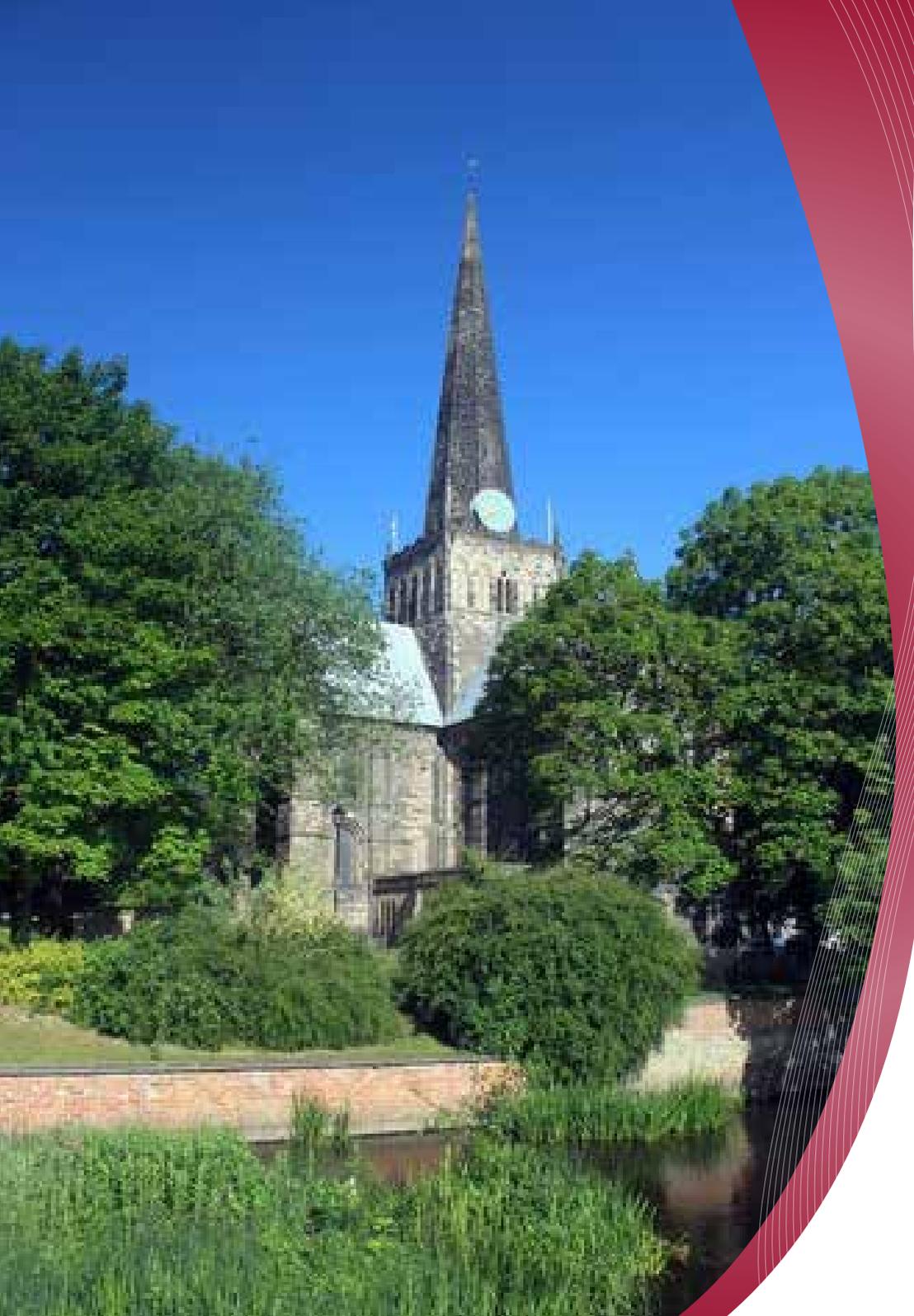
## ARTS & CULTURE

- A vibrant arts and culture offer
- A thriving independent arts community
- Fully restored 1,000 seat Edwardian Theatre
- Centre for excellence Theatre Hullabaloo
- Jabberwocky Market
- Arts and events Programme
- Birthplace of Festival of Thrift
- Art in the Yards
- Merging heritage with new

## HERITAGE

- Designated listed buildings
- Parkgate Conservation area
- Head of Steam
- Restoration of South Park
- Track Bed audit
- Heritage trail walk





# WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE

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Despite the recent successes, to fully capitalise on the huge economic potential developing an improved Darlington experience could create we need to work with partners to:

- Embed strategic vision that is bold enough to attract investment into the borough to develop a comprehensive visitor experience.
- Weave together the opportunities of the three key strands to deliver a programme of projects to deliver the 2025 legacy.
- Re imagine the railway heritage offer by developing a strategy that tells the rail story, in many ways by many people.
- Improve access and connectivity to North Road, the Town Centre and Bank Top. Helping visitors get around.
- Work with partners and stakeholders to promote, participate and contribute to the Darlington Experience.
- Revisit the branding and promotion of the towns assets and explore how they can better fit together.
- Work with Tees Valley Combined Authority and key partners agendas to align resources to the Experience Darlington vision.
- Develop better information for visitors on all the town has to offer and strengthening links with hotels and visitor leisure businesses.
- Better links with neighbouring attractions to develop Darlington as a great base for exploring the wider region.
- Aligning promotions with wider regional events, attracting more visitors to the town, supporting the local economy in the process.

# THE ACTION PLAN 2017 - 2021

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The Action plan 2017—2021 identifies the actions we intend to deliver under the three theme headings of:

**A railway town**

**A theatre town**

**A town to visit**

Under each theme we will outline the rationale, the actions we aim to take, the objectives we want to achieve, and explain exactly what we will do to ensure delivery.

Wrapping around the whole strategy will be an additional theme of **Communications and Branding**, which will focus on promoting the themes and assets within Experience Darlington to all visitors.

The Action Plan also states the proposed timetable for delivery. The Action Plan will be reviewed annually and updated to ensure that it is current and will also take into account prevailing economic and social issues that arise, including global and national economic turbulence, policy change and social need.



# PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

Below details the priorities for action that will enable Darlington to improve its visitor offer for 2026 and beyond, creating significant economic benefits that will support local businesses increase productivity and create jobs.

A Railway town	Continue to work collaboratively with Stockton, Durham and TVCA to make the most of our rich rail heritage in build up to 2025 and beyond.
	Develop Business Case for the regeneration of North Road as a Heritage Quarter, enhancing the visitor experience through improvements to historic assets.
	Promote the Stockton & Darlington track bed as a key leisure and visitor attraction.
	Maximise the opportunities the 2025 bicentenary of passenger rail presents, creating a lasting legacy which helps establish Darlington for its breadth of cultural, art and historic assets.
A Theatre town	Promote Darlington to be recognised within the Tees Valley and wider as a theatre town, where pioneering organisations and programmes develop their practice.
A Town to visit	Revisit heritage offer by presenting the Darlington narrative and wider attractions in a new way; mapping heritage, explaining it, the value of it.
	Establish base of dedicated champions and volunteers to provide guided and local tours.
	Raise profile of Darlington as a town to visit, playing up to our assets and connectivity to wider attractions.
	Work with organisations to develop packages, tours and experiences that engage, excite and attract visitors.
	To encourage broad engagement in arts making positive contribution to the community plan.
	Safeguard and enhance the function of Darlington town centre and capitalise on its shopping, culture, leisure, tourism and employment opportunities.
	Improved transport connections and networks that meet demand and need.
	Tees Valley Great Places - Greater Tees.
	Support Tees Valley Combined Authority City of Culture Ambition.