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**EXPERIENCE DARLINGTON – A VISITOR ECONOMY STRATEGY**

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**Responsible Cabinet Members – Councillor Chris McEwan  
Economy and Regeneration Portfolio and  
Councillor Nick Wallis, Leisure and Local Environment Portfolio**

**Responsible Director - Ian Williams, Director of Economic Growth**

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**SUMMARY REPORT**

**Purpose of the Report**

1. To consider the Draft Experience Darlington Strategy (**Annex 1**) and within that context the draft Culture strategy (**Annex 2**), and agree them as a mechanism for wider engagement that will shape detailed action and intervention plans of not only the Council but of other stakeholders.

**Summary**

2. Experience Darlington is a proposed visitor economy strategy. It builds on the work of the Economy Strategy; the Town Centre Fringe Master Plan, the Town Centre Strategy and the recent work of the Creative Darlington Board. It knits together these strands as an overarching strategy with a tourism offer focused on three particular assets and opportunities. These are the town's theatre offer, rail heritage and the development of a Tees valley 2025 City of Culture bid.
3. Darlington's Economic Strategy highlighted more could be done to utilise our heritage assets to boost jobs and spend in the Borough as well creating opportunities for social engagement, skill development and civic pride. It was developed with the participation of over 100 local businesses.
4. At the same time Town Centre Fringe Master Plan based on a heritage regeneration philosophy linked to the river Skerne sparked the Heritage Campus work which was a particular focus around the rail heritage assets. However, this was too narrowly focused and a broader visitor strategy is necessary to ensure all the relevant conditions are addressed that can increase the attractiveness of the town to visitors. This is set out in the attached visitor strategy.
5. Further given the recognition at both national and regional context of the importance of culture, heritage and the arts it is prudent for Darlington to articulate its offer and ambitions in this respect and to align these with other organisations and resources. For example the Tees Valley Combined Authority is recognising this in its emerging Strategic Economic Plan.

6. Tees Valley Combined Authority has plans to bid to be the 2025 City of Culture and there are obvious links here with the 2025 celebration of the first passenger railway between Darlington and Stockton.
7. Darlington is perfectly placed for other attractions in Durham and North Yorkshire. However more can be done to link Darlington to these opportunities.
8. In addition to this there is the recently announced Festival of the North due to take place across 77 days in 2018 in Newcastle and Gateshead.
9. In order to capitalise on the opportunities these events present Darlington needs a clear proposition into that agenda and into the wider regional cultural agenda.
10. Within Tees Valley, all Local Authority areas have a concentrated cultural offer which is individual and distinct to their areas – such as Hartlepool’s Marina, Redcar’s Coast, Stockton’s Festivals and Middlesbrough’s Mima etc.
11. Experience Darlington pulls together its entire offer under one strong identity to compliment the Tees Valley offer and compete for investment. Experience Darlington will give us that proposition but it will be a community wide proposition and not just Council owned. It has its roots in significant partnership working and participation in heritage, culture, economic and place making issues. In particular the work of the Darlington Partnership, Creative Darlington and the Rail Heritage Stakeholder Group has been significant.
12. The Experience Darlington Strategy pulls together existing plans, adds in the Heritage and Culture lens with a view to boosting the visitor economy that supports greater economic activity in the borough but equally plays role in maintain and augmenting Darlington’s unique story of where passenger railways began.
13. If agreed a broader engagement exercise will be carried out with a view to reporting further to Cabinet in May 2017 on proposed action plans and resources as to how the wider partnership can move towards the 2020 and 2025 objectives set out in the Annex 2.

## **Recommendation**

14. It is recommended that Cabinet endorses the draft Experience Darlington strategy and its sister draft Culture Strategy to enable further engagement with stakeholders on how the strategy and action plans can be further developed to align organisations and other potential external resources to achieve the vision and objectives.

## **Reasons**

15. The recommendation is supported as the draft Experience Darlington Strategy needs wider engagement with external stakeholders and partners to understand their priorities and how they can support the indicative actions within the plan.

**Ian Williams, Director of Economic Growth**

## Background Papers

1. Darlington Economic Strategy 2012-2026
2. Creative Darlington strategy
3. Darlington Local Plan
4. Local Transport Plan
5. Town Centre Business Plan
6. Heritage Campus
7. Town Centre Fringe Master plan
8. Tees Valley Consultative Draft Strategic Economic Plan

Lucy Humphreys: Extension 6308

S17 Crime and Disorder	There is a positive link between the economic wellbeing of a population and the reduction in crime and disorder.
Health and Well Being	It is acknowledged that good health and wellbeing are linked to economic productivity
Carbon Impact	Improved connectivity and sustainable transport links between key sites can have a positive impact on reducing carbon.
Diversity	A locally diverse and resilient economy will provide opportunities for all.
Wards Affected	All
Groups Affected	All
Budget and Policy Framework	<p>The Experience Darlington and Culture Strategy does not have any immediate impact on the Council's MTFP.</p> <p>Subject to the completion of the wider engagement proposed and emerging funding opportunities there may be a need to review the Council's priorities within the Future Funding in order to match or secure priority projects and outcomes.</p> <p>The Experience Darlington and Culture Strategy does not at this time represent a change to the budget or policy framework.</p>
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	Yes
One Darlington: Perfectly Placed	The Experience Darlington Strategy supports the vision and outcomes of the Darlington Partnership by seeking to make sure that more people have access to employment in line with the perfectly placed priority.
Efficiency	No new implications

## MAIN REPORT

### Information and Analysis

16. Darlington is a unique borough with a strong industrial and social heritage. There is a key opportunity for the town to make more of its unique 'ingenious' story, from its lead role in the birth of the railways, Quaker heritage, through to its globally renowned reputation for bridge building and emerging role in biologics. Darlington also benefits from fantastic transport connections that place it "perfectly" to enable residents and visitors to enjoy the town and the host of attractions within easy reach, from the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle to Kynren in Bishop Auckland and the National Railway Museum in York and Shildon. Experience Darlington offers a real opportunity for Darlington to develop an investment prospectus which demonstrates joined up thinking and a vision for attracting visitors to the town.
17. Over recent years real steps have been taken to develop economic growth for Darlington through the development of core economic, town centre and place making strategies including the Ingenious Darlington brand, Invest in Darlington promotions.
18. Importantly the Creative Darlington Board has engaged with and supported a growing community and professional arts and culture stronger offer.
19. Experience Darlington is not itself another initiative but rather the overarching strategy which ties all these existing elements together to recognise the huge potential the visitor economy has for the borough. The strategy is made up of four themes which all link to existing strategies and action plans. The themes are; Place making and Regeneration, Arts, Culture & Heritage, Town Centre and Connectivity. In addition to these four distinct themes there is a strong cross cutting theme linked to branding and communications.
20. Experience Darlington is a proposed overarching visitor economy strategy; that is nested in the Economy Strategy. Darlington's Economic Strategy highlighted more could be done to utilise our heritage assets to boost jobs and spend in the Borough as well creating opportunities for social engagement, skill development and civic pride.
21. At the same time Town Centre Fringe Master Plan based on a heritage regeneration philosophy linked to the river Skerne sparked the Heritage Campus work which was a particular focus around the rail heritage assets. The Master Plan also underscored the potential cultural assets of the theatre and the Forum. However, this work needed a broader visitor strategy necessary to ensure all the relevant conditions are addressed that can increase the attractiveness of the town to visitors. This broad strategy is set out in Annex 1 and is promoted as a basis for further engagement with key partners and the community.
22. Further given the recognition at both national and regional context of the importance of culture, heritage and the arts it is prudent for Darlington to articulate its offer and ambitions in this respect and to align these with other organisations

and resources. For example the Tees Valley Combined Authority is recognising this in its emerging Strategic Economic Plan.

23. The consultative draft Experience Darlington Strategy is attached at Annex 1. It has four key strands.
- (a) **Place Making and Regeneration:** The main focus for regeneration activity will be a focus on the Central Growth Zone that includes the Town Centre, Bank Top and North Road Stations with the Town Centre Fringe Master Plan area connecting them all. In facilitating and shaping development in these and other areas the strategy recognises the opportunity to weave in additional value that will add to the visitor experience.
  - (b) **Connectivity:** the connectivity theme seeks to build on the Transport Strategy and Local Transport Plan by adding a further visitor lens to this programme. The objectives of this programme would be to create a place that is well connected, is legible and clear as to how to get around and access different destinations.
  - (c) **The Town Centre:** Most visitors experience a place through its town centre. It is normally an arrival and departure point; it is where leisure and cultural activities are normally located and where visitors stay. There is already in place a Town Centre Action Plan monitored and managed by the Town Centre Board and an active and successful Business Improvement District. However this strategy again brings another lens of the visitor economy to that action plan and the challenge is how might organisations, businesses and the broader community benefit from an enhanced visitor offer. In this context it is timely to review this action plan in the light of the emerging Local Plan and the need to review Town Centre planning and land use policies, the opportunities that “Experience Darlington” might bring and equally the opportunities that the “Digital High Street” initiative being developed by Digital City might bring.
  - (d) **Heritage, Arts and Culture:** this theme is the most recent to be developed although there has already been significant work in respect of the rail heritage proposition and cultural strength in the borough. The Creative Darlington Board has recently broadened its remit to include heritage and agreed three priorities that the Council in particular will focus upon. These are:-
    - (i) Promoting and developing Darlington’s significant theatre offering and assets
    - (ii) Railway heritage
    - (iii) 2025 City of Culture
24. There is in addition an ongoing commitment to the wider vision and goals of Creative Darlington, and opportunities to maximise the impact of the significant contribution that artists, arts groups (such as Darlington for Culture), producers, and arts venues make to a vibrant town. A draft Culture Strategy is set out in **Annex 2** to the report and is proposed to be the centre of further engagement and the development of action plans.

25. There is a fifth theme to the strategy that concerns an integrated branding, promotion and marketing activities.
26. In 2025 Darlington has ambitions to be a significant visitor attraction which celebrates the birthplace of the first steam hauled passenger journey on a public 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.
27. Experience Darlington is not just a Council Plan but a wider community plan for partners within the Darlington Partnership, businesses, community groups and residents to both benefit from and participate in. In a similar way to the Local Plan and Economic Strategy this Visitor Strategy should be viewed as an investment prospectus for all of our community. 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.
28. Tees Valley Combined Authority has plans to bid to be the 2025 City of Culture and there are obvious links here with the 2025 celebration of the first passenger railway between Darlington and Stockton.
29. The strategy recognises the opportunities for Darlington at three scales. The first is a regional scale and the location and connectivity of Darlington to other attractions. It is well located to attract visitors that are interested in rail heritage at Shildon, York, Wear Dale and North Yorkshire, the historic cities of Durham and York, the broader offer of the National Parks and the coast and more recently Kynren. In addition to this, there is the recently announced Festival of the North due to take place across 77 days in 2018 in Newcastle and Gateshead.
30. Within Tees Valley, all other Local Authority areas have a concentrated cultural offer which is individual and distinct to their areas – such as Hartlepool's Marina, Redcar's Coast, Stockton's Festivals and Middlesbrough's Mima etc.
31. The second scale relates to the Borough and town offer. This relates to the general needs of the visitor of getting around, where to stay, where to eat, what to do and see. It also relates to general experiences of customer service, information, safety and convenience.
32. The third scale is focused on key assets of interest to the visitor within the town. These include the Theatres, North Road Station and the 1825 track bed, Locomotion No 1, the town centre offer, and an enhanced Bank Top Station.
33. The Council wants to create the conditions for Darlington to be recognised as a place to invest, live, work and visit. Real steps have been taken in this regard. However, there is a key opportunity for the town to make more of its unique

'ingenious' story – from Quaker / rail heritage / bridge building to the current day. It can also take advantage of the place branding "Darlington a most ingenious town".

## **The Economic Case**

34. Tees Valley Combined Authorities revised Strategic Economic Plan will recognise the importance of Town Centres, their role in shaping reputation and image but also in creating GVA and jobs in leisure and services. Most visitors experience places through town centres, the convenience, safety, connectivity, activities and things to do and therefore the continued attractiveness and offer of the town centre will remain critical. Creating cultural experiences that attracts people to a place has significant economic potential.
35. The visitor economy delivers a significant total contribution to the UK economy, generating £106 billion a year and employing 2.6 million people.
36. 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:
  - (a) Accommodation
  - (b) food and drink
  - (c) transport
  - (d) travel agencies
  - (e) Cultural activities and more
37. 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.
38. 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 current base point in Darlington**

39. Visit England data suggests that between 2013 and 2015 Darlington received an average of 1.64 million visitors a year, spending £52.65 million in the local economy.
40. 1.43 million of these were day visitors while 209,000 stayed overnight.
41. Domestic day trips to Darlington contributed £24.65 million to our economy with an average spend per visit of £17.23 per person.
42. 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.

## **Economic Potential for Darlington**

43. Future growth potential for Darlington's visitor economy is substantial.
44. By developing and adopting a strategy which creates the conditions to enable an enhanced visitor offer Darlington has the opportunity to create an additional £26 million per annum into Darlington's economy by 2026.
45. This can be achieved by aiming to:
  - (a) Increase the current day visitor spend to the national average of a small town
  - (b) Increase the number of day visitors by 10% (+143,000 visits pa)
  - (c) Increase the number of overnight visitors by 30% (+63,700 visits pa)
46. By developing and adopting a strategy with stakeholder buy 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.
47. It is also important to recognise the important outcomes that can also be achieved in social capital through learning and skills, community participation, changing reputation and perceptions of place.

## **Financial Implications**

48. The majority of the actions identified in Annex 1 that the Council can lead on are already funded or could be possibly used as matched funding against partner organisation resources.
49. The outcome of the wider engagement would be to populate the broader action plans of all partner organisations and clarify this commitment over the next four years. It is intended to create the conditions for a longer term investment portfolio for the Borough.
50. Funds are already secured for the theatre projects and a fund raising strategy is in place.
51. The Tees Valley Combined Authority has allocated some resource to the 2025 City of Culture Bid.

## **Equalities Considerations**

52. The strategy and any actions and implementation plans will have the proper regard for equalities issues.

## **Engagement**

53. It proposed that the draft Experience Darlington strategy (Annex 1) and the Culture Strategy (Annex 3) be widely communicated to all partner organisations and to the local community in order to obtain feedback, allow resources to be aligned and to shape the promotion and marketing activity.



54. It is proposed that the engagement will include a Conference held in the town centre in February 2017 that will bring the Four Key themes of the Experience Darlington Strategy together. The output of that conference will be to inform and update the town centre action plan, inform the Local Plan and relevant policies and shape the implementation plan of the Culture Strategy. It is proposed that will be reported to Cabinet in Summer of 2017