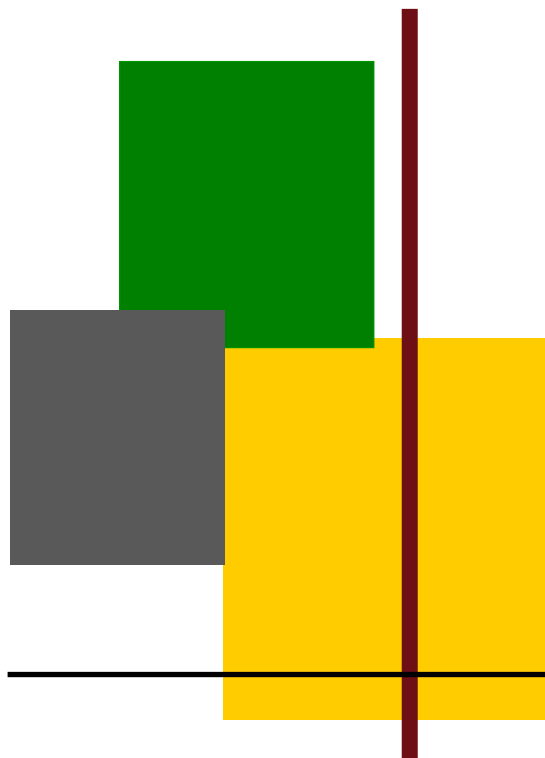


EXPERIENCE DARLINGTON

CONSULTATIVE DRAFT A VISITOR ECONOMY STRATEGY 2016 - 2026



FOREWORD

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. These experiences impact on the reputation and perception of the area that can be so critical in attracting both Inward investments into the town that creates jobs and attracting and retaining the right people for those jobs.

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.

The Council and the new Combined Authority does not have a magic wand but it can significantly influence the places we create through planning and economic regeneration activities. We can help create the conditions for businesses and communities to thrive and enjoy a good quality of life, however, we don't run businesses, we don't in the main build the housing for our growing population and we don't manage the great work of the community that enriches the Darlington experience whether that is through arts and culture or volunteering support to individuals and communities.

I hope you find the Darlington Experience relevant to you and that you can contribute to it.

Cllr. Chris McEwan

Darlington has a unique claim to fame that is recognised across the globe. As the birth place of the modern passenger 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 200 anniversary of the first passenger railway journey 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.

There is the original 1825 track bed, the £5note bridge and Locomotion No 1, but there is other industrial history that can be revealed along the river Skerne and Tees. 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 well placed as a centre for railway experiences in Shildon, York, The North Yorkshire Moors Railways and the Yorkshire Durham Dales railways. Other attractions exist at Durham, Barnard Castle, Kynren, Croft Park and not forgetting the glorious countryside that is in easy striking distance of the town.

I am determined that our growing and diverse offer in culture and arts should play a central role in the Experience Darlington ambition and you can be part of that too.

Cllr. Nick Wallis

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Darlington is a special place 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 thriving theatre and arts scene. Darlington 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 is an investment prospectus which capitalises on key assets to ensure more people have a better experience when they visit the borough.

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 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. The main focus for regeneration and activity as a result of this strategy will be on the central area of the town between and including the Town Centre, Bank Top and North Road Stations, but recognise great assets in our villages and natural environment.

In 2025 Darlington has ambitions to be a globally 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.

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 iOne Darlington, our Local Strategic Partnership. 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 has built on its reputation as the birth place of the railways to strengthen and promote a strong cultural offer that provides a distinctive experience for visitors.

Subsequent visions for the four themes within the Experience Darlington strategy are:

Place making & Regeneration

Darlington will maintain its identity as a historic market town situated amongst countryside and villages, whilst developing its reputation for ingenuity and its status as an economic driver.

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.

Arts, Culture & Heritage

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.

Telling and re-telling the story of Darlington's arts, culture and heritage in ways that engage, inspire and reveal the assets. 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, the range of lovely and distinct theatre venues, festivals and events, cinema, comedy, live music in pub venues and restaurants.

Town Centre

Darlington will have a thriving Town Centre offering a high quality Shoppin, leisure and cultural experience, 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.

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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.

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 = **+£13.97M**
- 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**

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

By developing and adopting a 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 support and encourage growth, the visitor economy also has wider benefits to residents. Currently Darlington has 3,600 economically active people registered as unemployed. In addition to this there are 3,200 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. 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.

Place Making & Regeneration

- New Hotels at Morton Palms and Feethams
- Increased hotel spaces
- £53 million recent investments in town centre including;
- Feethams cinema and leisure complex
- £1.8M House of Fraser renovation
- Business improvement district for Town centre, Distinct Darlington
- Distinctly delicious food festival, attracting 50,000 visitors
- The Best Large Hotel outside London
- Michelin starred restaurant

Connectivity

- Inner ring road improvements
- Improvements to Car Parking creating safe, high quality parking within the town centre.
- Bank Top Master Plan, unlocking investment to regenerate and improve Darlington's train station.
- More regular service on Bishop line
- New Cycle network
- Improvements to bus network
- Real time travel information
- Half hour service to London and Edinburgh
- Improvements to access to North

Arts & Culture

- A vibrant arts and culture offer
- Creative Darlington Partnership
- Strong Partnership work
- Civic Theatre Restoration
- Centre for excellence theatre Hullabaloo
- Jabberwocky Market
- Festival of thrift
- Arts and events pro-

IMAGE

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

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 four 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 Darlington 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 existing strategies and explore how they can better fit together.
- Integrate the strategy into the Council, Tees Valley Combined Authority and National governments agendas to align resources.
- Develop better information for visitors on all the town has to offer and strengthening links with hotels, etc.
- Better links with neighbouring attractions to develop Darlington as a great base for exploring the wider region.
- Aligning promotions with events.

IMAGE

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THE ACTION PLAN 2016 - 2026

The Action plan 2016—2026 identifies the actions we intend to deliver under the four theme headings of:

Place Making & Regeneration

Arts, Culture & Heritage

Town Centre

Connectivity

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.

NOTE: XENTRALL TO PRODUCE HIGH QUALITY VERSION OF VISUALISATION OF STRATEGY INCLUDED BELOW.

PRIORITIES FOR ACTION

To address our challenges and barriers to achieving the Experience Darlington vision our priorities for action include:

Theme	Priority Considerations (not in priority order)
Place Making & Regeneration	Explain the regeneration opportunities at North Road to enhance heritage offer.
	Complete the second phase feasibility work for remodelling the River Skerne.
	Incorporate appropriate policy in the local plan and determining applications for planning permission accordingly.
	Cherish and protect the heritage/ natural environment and promoting it - ensuring Darlington will maintain and enhance its identity as a historic market town situated amongst countryside and villages.
Arts, Culture & Heritage	Revisit heritage offer by presenting the Darlington narrative and wider attractions in a new way; mapping heritage, explaining it, the value of it.
	Telling and re-telling the story of Darlington's arts, culture and heritage in ways that engage, inspire and reveal the assets to new audiences.
	Work with other attractions, hotels and tour operators to provide an integrated offer such as NRM in Shildon and Kinren in Bishop Auckland
	Promote the S+D track bed as a key leisure route
	Promote Darlington as a theatre town with the impact of arts and heritage being better understood.
	To work alongside partners to develop a strong and successful proposal for Tees Valley as UK City of Culture in 2025 and to actively contribute to the aims of the Case for Culture for the North East
	2025 bicentenary of first passenger railway
	Encourage broad engagement in arts making positive contribution to the community plan.
Town Centre	Safeguard the function of Darlington town centre and capitalise on its shopping, culture, leisure, tourism and employment opportunities.
	Complete Feethams quarter
	Revisit the Oval site for future potential.
	Darlington to become a Digital High Street.
	Secure a sustainable future for investment in events.
	Regenerate the indoor market offer
Connectivity	Secure improvements to the East coast main line and regeneration of bank top station.
	Enhance accessibility to North Road station and the Bishop line.
	Continue to connect Town Centre/ Bank Top/ North Road destinations, improving signage.
Branding & Communications	Continue to promote Darlington as an ingenious town.
	Rationalise the branding and promotional strategy for the town, to enable familiarity and understanding from a visitor's perspective.
	Work with digital city to develop a digital communications strategy.