
EXPERIENCE DARLINGTON – A VISITOR ECONOMY STRATEGY

**Responsible Cabinet Members –
Councillor Nick Wallis, Leisure and Local Environment Portfolio**

Responsible Director - Ian Williams, Director of Economic Growth

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide Members with an update on feedback following the Experience Darlington consultation and seeks Members approval to adopt the amended Experience Darlington Strategy 2016 – 2026. **(Annex 1)**.

Summary

2. On 6 December 2016 Cabinet agreed to a public consultation on Experience Darlington – a visitor economy strategy 2016 – 2026 and that a subsequent report would be presented back to Cabinet that detailed an action plan as to how the wider partnership can move towards the 2021 and 2026 objectives.
3. Experience Darlington is a visitor economy strategy. It builds on the work of the Economic 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 that identifies the economic opportunity tourism presents and priorities for action to enhance and promote the Darlington visitor offer. It will also inform the Tees Valley Combined Authority sector action plans for Place, Culture and Skills.
4. The objective of the strategy is to enhance Darlington's attraction as a place to visit within the context of the regional offer. It aims to generate a further £26 million pounds annual spend within the local economy supporting jobs, town centre footfall, skills, arts & culture and the place making agenda.
5. Since December 2016 significant progress has been achieved, including a full public consultation, developing a revised action plan and securing financial support from key partner organisations such as Tees Valley Combined Authority, Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic England to help deliver the Experience Darlington vision.

Recommendation

6. It is recommended that:

- (a) Members agree the adoption of Experience Darlington – a visitor economy strategy 2016 – 2026.
- (b) Members note the support of the Tees Valley Combined Authority. providing resource to lead the Railway Heritage project forward as part of the Tees Valley economic development, and funding the Project Director for the 2025 200th Railway Anniversary as part of the Culture Development programme, to mark the first public passenger railway.

Reasons

7. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:

- (a) To maximise the opportunities tourism present to the borough for the benefit of existing businesses and residents by presenting a cohesive strategic plan and ambition, partner organisations can support.
- (b) To maximise the potential for investment in Darlington, increasing the Council's opportunity to bid for and deliver externally funded regeneration of key cultural and historic assets.
- (c) To underpin our strategies for economic growth by encouraging more people (footfall) into the town, spending money and supporting local businesses in the process.

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 Strategic Economic Plan: The Industrial strategy for Tees Valley 2016-2026

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	Actions identified within the first 3-5 years to develop a detailed business case, marketing and promotional material are within the existing MTFP. On production of the relevant feasibility reports the Council and its partners will be able to consider detailed financial information at that time.
Key Decision	Yes
Urgent Decision	No
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.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report has no impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers

MAIN REPORT

Background

8. Darlington is a borough with a strong and unique 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 passenger railways, Quaker heritage, through to its globally renowned reputation for bridge building and emerging role in biologics.
9. 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 MIMA and the Saltburn coast to the Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle, and the National Railway Museum in York and Shildon.
10. Experience Darlington is a proposed overarching visitor economy strategy; that is nested in the Economic 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.
11. 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 a wider audience that will generate sustainable growth in visitor numbers and spend within the borough.

12. The strategy has therefore built on the ongoing work with the portfolios for Leisure and Local Environment and Economy and Regeneration, with strong partnerships in place and good dialogue with Stockton, Durham and the TVCA.
13. 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 in the broadest sense.
14. Furthermore, 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.
15. 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.
16. As the starting point of this journey it is hoped Darlington with its partners, 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. Crucially, 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.
17. 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 nine years up to 2026 so that after the 2025 celebration event there is an ongoing legacy for people to enjoy.

Experience Darlington Consultation

18. Between January and April 2017 consultation was undertaken to allow residents, businesses and key partners to review the draft strategy and feed in any further ideas or considerations. Annex 2 details a summary of the consultation feedback.
19. Consultations were undertaken in a variety of ways. Face to face discussions were undertaken with 13 key stakeholder organisations that represented gatekeepers to funding, resources, skills and assets. Feedback was gathered from 37 local organisations, community and business networks. Finally there was a general attitude survey conducted using Survey Monkey through the Council's website.
20. In total the Experience Darlington consultation received 209 written responses. Of the public consultation;
 - (a) 86% agreed Darlington needs a distinct and cohesive visitor / tourism strategy,

- (b) 77% believe Darlington needs to be promoted in relation to wider regional attractions,
 - (c) 58% of respondents felt improvements need to be made for visitors to be able to see what there is to do in Darlington,
 - (d) 82% feel railway heritage can help encourage visitors to Darlington but a huge 75% said we don't promote this enough,
 - (e) Almost half (45%) felt Darlington's theatre offer helps encourage visitors to the town yet only 23% felt we promote that offer well enough,
 - (f) An overwhelming 87% of respondents believe public events are important to the economy of the town in terms of promoting Darlington as a place and encouraging visitors.
21. In addition to the public consultation, a series of face to face meetings were held with influencers, stakeholders and potential funders to explain our ambition and garner buy in for the ambition. Strong support has been offered from the Historic Lottery Fund, Historic England, Network Rail, Northern Rail, the Tees Valley Combined Authority, A1 Trust, the Friends of Stockton and Darlington Railway and other railway enthusiasts and organisations. Organisations within the Darlington Partnership and Creative Darlington Board are also supportive.

Revisions to the Strategy and the Experience Darlington Action Plan

22. While the vision for Darlington and the Economic case for the strategy remain the same notable changes have been made to the Experience Darlington strategy (Annex 1) to reflect feedback received during the consultation period.
23. A key change moves the strategy from four themes that often overlapped; Place Making and Regeneration, Arts, Culture and Heritage, Town Centre and Connectivity to one cohesive narrative.
24. Experience Darlington as a tourism strategy is now split into three distinct themes of a railway town, a theatre town and a town to visit.
- (a) A railway town aims to build on Darlington's reputation as the birthplace of the modern railway, enhancing and promoting our historic assets.
 - (b) A theatre town, establishing Darlington's regional and national reputation as a place where arts and culture happen.
 - (c) A town to visit, incorporating town centre, events, connectivity and how we promote our offer to visitors.
25. Experience Darlington outlines priorities that are essential to support the borough to achieve the economic ambition set within the Experience Darlington strategy of an additional £26 Million into Darlington's economy by 2026.

Priorities for Action

26. Following the consultation and feedback from key partners and potential funders an initial list of priorities for action has been developed and included within the strategy document (Annex1) which will cover the first three to five years of the plan period.
27. These priorities aim to outline key mechanisms required to enhance Darlington's tourism and culture offer by 2026, helping us achieve our ambitions of increasing the amount of visitors (including overnight) to the town and encouraging those that visit to stay longer and spend more.
28. Members should note that these priorities have been identified in collaboration with key partners such as Tees Valley Combined Authority; Historic England, A1 Trust, Arriva, Northern Rails, Creative Darlington, Durham County Council and Stockton Borough Council.
29. By working with partner organisations to identify the priorities for action on a three to five year basis there is confidence that the projects will attract external funding and expertise to support.

A Railway Town

30. Developing and securing funding for a celebration of rail heritage leading to and during 2025. The Tees Valley Combined Authority also sees the 2025 anniversary celebrations as important to the City of Culture bid and has indicated its intentions to support the development and delivery of the celebrations.
31. Developing the business case of the regeneration of the Rail Heritage Quarter at North Road. As an outcome of the consultation process Tees Valley Combined Authority has offered to take a lead and assign resources for the delivery on regenerating of the North Road Heritage Quarter. The aim is to utilise its world class heritage at the centre of a reimagined visitor experience that tells the first railway story.
32. Further, Historic England have now encouraged the four Local Authorities (Darlington, Stockton, Durham and the Tees Valley Combined Authority) to make a joint application for a Heritage Action Zone (HAZ) under a Rail Heritage theme, this was submitted on 7th August 2017. If successful the HAZ would prioritise Historic England's resources and expertise over a five year period. This then has the potential to provide revenue funding and capital grants to deliver heritage regeneration projects along the Stockton & Darlington track bed. The Portfolio Holder for Leisure and Local Environment has convened several meetings between leading politicians and officers of the four local authorities that has developed a regional approach to rail heritage and is supportive of the HAZ bid. A Rail Heritage 2025 Steering Group, involving key partners that can deliver the projects and oversee the programme, is being established that will also facilitate wider engagement with all those passionate about our heritage.

A Theatre Town

33. Members will note that much progress has already been made on the development and enhancement of the Borough's theatre offer and the continuing work of the Creative Darlington Board that is developing and delivering a Cultural Strategy. Over the last eighteen months over £100,000 additional funding has been secured to develop the cultural offer. This is in addition to the external capital funding for the Hippodrome and Hullabaloo. External funding is enabling an ongoing programme of activities, festivals and events which draw in visitors. Some recent examples include the variety of pop-up theatre in the Town Centre, Include fest for children at South Park, and the visit of the Halle Orchestra to support the Bridge.

A Town To Visit

34. The Cultural Strategy developed by the Creative Darlington Board straddles the themes of a Theatre Town and a place to visit. Drawing on external funding for a continued programme of music, visual arts and theatre to enhance the offer and build for 2025.
35. Coupled with an extensive events programme the Borough has a strong and attractive offer for residents and visitors. Events include the Darlington 10k run, The Rhythm and Blues Festival, tea dances, Hell of the North cycle ride, markets and fairs and much more. The new riverside park will prove a venue for activities during the Festival of Ingenuity in September
36. A refreshed Town Centre Action Plan seeks to ensure that the town centre remains an attractive and vibrant destination meeting the needs of visitors in terms of places to stay, eat and drink, visit and enjoy their leisure time. Visitors that enjoy a good and positive experience are more likely to repeat their visit and promote the town using social media. There is a gap in visitor information and the strategy assumes the development and implementation of a Tourism Information Service. The business case for this is in development and should be known in November 2017.
37. All actions associated with this strategy will be reviewed on an annual basis aligning with the MTFP development and will typically adhere to 3 to 5 year timescales.
38. In terms of Experience Darlington's three priorities, the key milestones are:
- (a) Audit of 1825 route is completed and published
 - (b) Complete HLF Resilience Grant Process November 2017
 - (c) The development of the proposition for the 2025 anniversary of the first passenger railways by March 2018. The Rail Heritage 2025 Steering Group to be established in September 2017
 - (d) The HAZ application and delivery plan to be completed by April 2018
 - (e) The 'Tourism Information' offer and resource plan to be researched by November 2017
 - (f) The Rail Heritage Interpretation Plan is to be completed by April 2018
 - (g) The North Road Heritage Quarter to be completed by June 2018
 - (h) Pilot scheme for live steam on Bishop Line June 2018
 - (i) Town Centre planning policies refreshed March 2018.

39. These actions essentially develop the key workstreams of the strategy into delivery plans to be implemented over the next 9 years. Cabinet will note that these milestones are subject to change dependent upon the time required to resolve the HLF Resilience Grant process that is critical in aligning key partner expectations, commitments and capacities to deliver the ambition to an agreed programme.

Financial Implications

40. Tees Valley Combined Authority has a dynamic plan to develop the role of Culture and Tourism within their revised Strategic Economic Plan 2016 – 2026 and as such have allocated £10 Million pounds through the devolution budget to support investment in this sector and it has indicated strong support for the Experience Darlington strategy and priority actions. We anticipate that TVCA will play a critical role in helping us realise the ambition for Darlington by leading on or match funding many of the priority actions contained within Annex 1.
41. It is anticipated that most of the actions will be led by partner organisations such as Tees Valley Combined Authority however it is anticipated Council funding will be required to provide match funding against partner organisation resources.
42. The Tees Valley Combined Authority has already allocated some resource to the 2025 City of Culture Bid.
43. Darlington, Stockton and Durham Councils along with Tees Valley Combined Authority have also agreed to fund some of the initial actions linked to; a railway town, from this Darlington has committed £63,000 from existing budgets, to support the works which has generated a match from the other three authorities of £205,000.
44. Further the Heritage Lottery Fund is very encouraging of applications to it for the whole of the Rail Heritage agenda. It anticipates that the scale of the ambition will be beyond regional funding allocations and will need to play into the national allocation process. Officers are collaborating across the four authorities in aligning applications to HLF and Cabinet is asked to endorse the bid being made for resilience grant circa £90,000 of which the other Authorities in combination would seek to match. There are existing resources to meet Darlington's anticipated contribution.
45. Funds are already secured for the theatre projects and a fundraising strategy is in place.
46. Darlington has also already committed to allocate £25,000 over a three year period to the Tees Valley Great Places programme which generates a match for Darlington of £120,000.

Equalities Considerations

47. The Experience Darlington strategy is broad and inclusive, focusing on accommodating all visitors to the town including those with mobility issues. A successful strategy will also deliver benefits for local people whether that is in jobs, improved facilities or skills.
48. Any subsequent actions and implementation plans will have the proper regard for equalities issues.