

## Darlington Cultural Strategy Action Plan 2024/25 delivery and Action Plan for 2025/26

### 1.1 Introduction

Darlington Cultural Strategy for 2022 to 2026 (**Appendix 1**) is focused on maximising the social and economic benefits which culture can bring to people across Darlington Borough, including residents, visitors, those working and investing in Darlington. It considers the fantastic opportunities for culture to benefit the borough within this timeframe, including the bicentenary of the birth of the modern passenger railway marking the momentous journey of Locomotion No. 1 on the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825. It uses a definition of Culture as set out by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport covering:

- arts (including visual arts, literature, music, theatre and dance)
- architecture
- crafts
- creative industries
- design
- heritage
- historic environment
- museums and galleries
- libraries
- archives
- film
- broadcasting and media

## **1.2 Vision, priorities, opportunities and how this strategy will impact on Darlington's culture**

The vision and priorities for investment within the 2022-2026 timeframe are shown below.

### **Vision:**

*Darlington will be a place in 2026 and beyond where culture enriches lives, involves people and is central to identity and prosperity.*

### **Priorities**

1. To creatively celebrate Darlington's contribution to the birth of the modern passenger railway.
2. For Darlington to have an accessible, diverse and vibrant culture, encouraging economic growth.
3. For Darlington to champion engagement with culture, particularly amongst children and young people.
4. For culture to thrive within Darlington Borough and attract visitors to the Town Centre.
5. For Darlington to have a thriving theatre offer involving people of all ages.

## **1.3 Delivery of Darlington Cultural Strategy**

The 2022-2023 Action Plan alongside a report on Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 went to Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee on 17 February 2022, before its publication. The strategy has since been signed off and utilised to inform our work and advocacy, including in fundraising where appropriate, to address the vision above. Annual Action Plans are considered by Darlington Borough Council. The table following point 1.4 in this report summarises delivery against the 2024/25 Action Plan and the table following point 1.5 presents the proposed Action Plan for 2025/26 for consideration by Darlington Borough Council.

This paper asks the Communities and Local Services Scrutiny Committee to comment on and/or endorse the proposed Action Plan for 2025/26.

### 1.4 Darlington Cultural Strategy Annual Action Plan delivery 2024/25

The five priorities of Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022-2026 are listed below. We recognise these priorities overlap to some degree, and that some actions address more than one priority.

1. To creatively celebrate Darlington’s contribution to the birth of the modern passenger railway.
2. For Darlington to have an accessible, diverse and vibrant culture, encouraging economic growth.
3. For Darlington to champion engagement with culture, particularly amongst children and young people.
4. For culture to thrive within Darlington Borough and attract visitors to the Town Centre.
5. For Darlington to have a thriving theatre offer involving people of all ages.

The table below shows delivery against the 2024/25 Cultural Strategy Action Plan agreed by Darlington Borough Council.

Delivery of Darlington Cultural Strategy Action Plan 2024/25					
Priority	What	Lead	Partners	Action	Measure(s) of success
1	Promote the S&DR Bicentenary festival locally, nationally, and internationally through multiple channels  Work with the S&DR Bicentenary Festival Director to inform the project plan for Library and or community centre-based activity	Darlington Borough Council  Darlington Borough Council	Rail Heritage board partners  Rail Heritage board partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver 1 year to go Festival launch in September 2024</li> <li>• Liaise with Library Services and community venues and present a draft schedule for exhibitions and activity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased S&amp;DR Social Media</li> <li>• Increased Media coverage in 2024</li> <li>• Project plan developed</li> </ul>

<p><b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The S&amp;DR200 Festival launch was compered by Steph McGovern at Darlington Hippodrome on Thursday 19 September 2024 and secured significant local and national media attendance then coverage.</li> <li>• A well-attended WOW (World of Women) Think In event at Darlington Library on Wednesday 5 February 2025 will inform the programme of the WOW festival at Gala Durham within the S&amp;DR200 programme.</li> <li>• An S&amp;DR200 entry level exhibition is scheduled to visit several Libraries and Community Venues in Darlington borough, Stockton borough and County Durham into 2025/26, including at Darlington Library Art Gallery in 2025/26, alongside rail related works within Darlington’s Local Studies and Borough Art Collections. As of 8 May.2025 this touring exhibition has been seen in three locations to date.</li> </ul>					
1	Open the Hopetown Darlington site delivering a world class heritage visitor attraction by mid-summer 2024/25	Darlington Borough Council	PLB Ltd, Funders, Service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote opening of Hopetown Darlington programme</li> <li>• Address Art Fund enquiries regarding grant offer and agree plan to unveil new work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opening of Hopetown Darlington and visitor numbers</li> <li>• Art Fund grant utilised and commissioned work installed</li> </ul>
<p><b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A press opening for Hopetown Darlington, the north’s newest visitor attraction, took place on Monday 15 July 2024 and the newly opened attraction secured significant media coverage, with the public opening on Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> July 2024.</li> <li>• Hopetown Darlington welcomed over 35,000 visitors in the first month since opening on 16 July 2024. Visitor figures: in first six months (mid-July to end of December 2024) were 91,498, from opening to end of 2024/25 financial year were 129,831.</li> <li>• Tees Valley based sculptor Andrew McKeown produced a suite of public artwork, some pieces informed by engagement activity with Darlington school and community groups, which were successfully installed across the Hopetown Darlington site and commissioned with support from the Art Fund, who were invited to the attraction opening in 2024/25, wherein their funding support was acknowledged.</li> <li>• Tracks Darlington programmed the Last Train Home Express event in September at Hopetown Darlington, the Last Train Home 2024 music and comedy festival split across 7 stages at 3 venues on 7 September 2024 (Darlington Hippodrome, The Forum Music Studios</li> </ul>					

and The Hullabaloo) alongside other activity with support from Darlington Borough Council's Heritage & Culture fund budget and Arts Council England Project Funding award. 5 days of activity were supported, 1 participatory session + 47 performances were delivered in Darlington borough with 135 artists delivering the project, 16 new works were commissioned, with 683 audience members and 11 participants engaged. Within the Last Train Home project, they organised:

- A small internship scheme where they took on a small number of local students and gave them paid work experience at events
  - a Zine to pair which contained commissioned work by local artists (visual artists & writers)
  - a recording of some of the live performances
  - photography of live sessions with local artists in Darlington Hippodrome to promote the festival but also provide fantastic free content for them to promote themselves beyond Last Train Home 2024
- The Worshipful the Mayor of Darlington, Councillor Bob Donoghue, officially opened Hopetown Darlington on Friday 27 September, the 199th birthday of the Stockton and Darlington Railway.
  - Hopetown Darlington has already secured several awards and accolades recognising the quality of its offer including the 'VisitEngland Welcome' accolade which recognises excellence within the visitor attraction sector in October, the highly prestigious 'North East Culture Award for Best Museum or Cultural Venue' in November, and the 'Visitor Economy Award' in December 2024.
  - The opening of the 'Experiment!' state-of-the-art railway-themed time travel immersive experience in November 2024, and the 'Ho-Ho-Hopetown' festive programme added to the family visitor attraction offer of Hopetown Darlington in 2024/25.
  - Hopetown Darlington welcomed 625 Rainbows, Brownies, Guides and Rangers and 180 Guide Leaders from Darlington, Durham, Northumberland, Yorkshire and Leeds on Saturday 29 March 2025 to celebrate the launch of the Girlguiding North East England Railway Challenge – Celebrating 200 years of railway travel. The groups explored the site as well as taking part in a Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) session before visiting Wagon Woods and 'Experiment!' our immersive experience. The event was also attended by the Deputy Lord Lieutenant Cyndi Hughes with representatives from Rail 200 and Network Rail.
  - Hopetown Darlington several exhibitions alongside its collections in 2024/25, these being Brick Journeys (Lego) in the Exhibitions Hall from Friday 19 July to Sunday 6 October 2024, an exhibition by St. Aidan's Art Project in The Space from Saturday 12 October to Tuesday 31 December 2024, an exhibition created working with Darlington's Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Community in The Space from Saturday

11 January to Sunday 16 March 2025, and an S&DR Team Community Exhibition - The Space which opened on Saturday 22 March 2025.					
2	Follow the North East Filming Friendly charter and work across services to address location and project development enquiries	Darlington Borough Council	North East Screen, Northern School of Art, Teesside University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respond as per charter to address location and other enquiries as a Filming Friendly Authority, and work with partners to promote opportunities for talent development and locations for filming in borough</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enquiries addressed as per North East Filming Friendly charter</li> <li>Filming undertaken in Darlington borough</li> </ul>
<p><b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Chief Executives and Leaders of all TVCA councils, including Darlington Borough Council, have signed up to the North East Filming Friendly Charter. Darlington Borough Council addressed several enquiries from the film and TV sector in 2024/25 regarding permissions required to film in the borough.</li> <li>The Women X Film Festival is promoted by Darlington based Rianne Pictures and is a valuable showcase for North East talent. It was held from 20 - 22 September 2024 at Darlington Hippodrome, combined actual and digital activity, and included the screening of over 70 short films from various genres, including comedy, documentary and horror.</li> <li>The first screening of a short film, <i>A Light That Never Fades</i>, exploring the latter life of Arthur Wharton, was held on 22 January 2025 at the Forum Music Studios. It was commissioned by the Arthur Wharton Foundation and produced by Broken Scar Productions, with support from the National Heritage Lottery Fund and Darlington Borough Council. The cast included Derek Griffiths in the role of Arthur Wharton. Broken Scar Productions and the Arthur Wharton Foundation attended a Trailblazers awards night hosted by the Black Footballers Partnership at the Houses of Parliament in October 2024 and shared the film, which runs for approximately 20 minutes in length (sitting within the short film category of many film festivals).</li> </ul>					

3	Work with Children and Young Peoples Plan – Multi Agency Steering Group partners to provide an excellent and accessible cultural offer to children and young people across Darlington borough	Darlington Borough Council	Creative Sector individuals, organisations and enterprises, Creative Darlington, Darlington Academies and Schools, Darlington and Durham Music Hub, Further Education providers in Darlington, Northern School of Art, Teesside University, Tees Valley Combined Authority, Tees Valley Museums, Theatre Hullabaloo and additional Children and Young Peoples Plan – Multi Agency Steering Group partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darlington Borough Council will provide a Children’s Library Service, an Events Service, and a Museum’s Service providing opportunities for children and young people</li> <li>• Darlington Borough Council will support Darlington Hippodrome and Creative Darlington’s work with children and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service delivery and outputs</li> </ul>
<p><b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between September and December 2024, 20 classes visited ‘The Hive’ at Darlington Library, engaging children with STEAM activities and learning, including taking part in coding, animation, 3D design and print and virtual reality workshops.</li> <li>• Most events promoted by Darlington Town Centre Partnership and events service in 2024/25 were family friendly, and some were designed particularly to appeal to families. Springboard data demonstrates many event days saw an increase in average daily footfall count in the Town Centre. These included Darlington by the Sea from 24 July to 28 July 2024 (+8,548 per day on</li> </ul>					

average), the Christmas Lights Switch On of 17 November 2025 (+26,677) and Darlington Ice Sculpture Trail on 14 December 2024 (+11,849) which encouraged visitors from different generations to use maps to discover the icy creations at different locations within the Town Centre. A number of 2024/25 events showcased the talents of local children and young people including The Forum Freshers event on 30 August 2024 (+13,140).

- The Brick Journeys exhibition at Hopetown Darlington was accompanied by a variety of participatory activities for children and young people. 6 Bricklab sessions were held from Monday 22 July to Monday 29 August 2024 and 9 guided LEGO® sessions delivered by Construction Kids between Tuesday 23 July and Saturday 31 August 2025 at Hopetown Darlington.
- ‘Spooktown’, Hopetown’s Halloween programme, ran from Saturday 19 October to Sunday 3 November and featured family-friendly activities, workshops, and entertainment, including a pumpkin trail and ghost train installation.
- During the school summer holidays, young people joined in with circus skills workshops co-ordinated by Darlington Hippodrome (to complement performances by Cirque in the theatre), alongside Youth Theatre and Youth Dance taster sessions.
- Darlington Hippodrome’s pantomime in 2024/25 *Sleeping Beauty*, provided the box office with record sales. The theatre’s ‘A Place for Everyone fund’ enabled large numbers of schools and community groups to attend the pantomime, including one of the residents of Rose Lodge Care Home who had never been to a pantomime before this.
- A variety of workshop activities were offered alongside the Place, People and Living Memory exhibition in Darlington Library Art Gallery from Wednesday 31 January 2024 to Monday 25 March 2024. There were 1,661 visits to the exhibition and sixty-eight students from Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form’s A level and Foundation courses in Art & Design engaged with the accompanying events programme.
- Creative Darlington budget supported Theatre Hullabaloo’s Walk in Wonderland programme with Northern School of Art students as part of the Hullabaloo in the Park festival held in South Park from 26 – 28 July 2025. 23 people participated in Walk in Wonderland activity, with 380 audience members for promenade performances.
- Darlington Borough Council supported Darlington Community Carnival on Saturday 29 June 2024, which secured an estimated audience of 3,000 people. 46 artists took part in the parade, 567 individuals participated in the parade, 56 performers took part in the wider carnival and there were 32 separate performances on the day itself.

3	Darlington Borough Council will support children and young people’s cultural engagement through intervention programmes	Darlington Borough Council	Darlington Borough Council, particular Darlington Academies and Schools, cultural sector	Darlington Hippodrome will deliver the In2 programme, and Darlington Borough Council will provide	In2 programme and Holiday Activities Fund cultural programme outputs
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				cultural opportunities for children and young people through the Holiday Activities Fund	
<p><b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b>  <b>Action:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A variety of cultural programme engaged children and young people in the borough during 2024/25 within the Holiday Activities and Food programme.</li> <li>• Between Tuesday 1 October to Saturday 5 October over 2,000 secondary school students from across the region and beyond attended performances of National Theatre’s landmark production of JB Priestley’s classic thriller, An Inspector Calls, and the theatre’s ‘A Place For Everyone’ Fund helped meet the cost of over 650 tickets shared across 17 schools.</li> <li>• Darlington Borough Council Children’s Services and Heritage &amp; Culture Fund budgets supported Blue Cabin’s This is the Place programme of music-making activities in 2024/25 for care-experienced babies and children in Darlington, which is supported by Youth Music funding. The programme provided 31 term time weekly sessions to small groups of foster carers and children aged 0- 5 years old, securing 200 engagements of babies, children and foster carers Online engagements: 163 views of online training video 1493 listens to the song bank in 2024/25.</li> </ul>					
4	Support cultural engagement through events, exhibitions and programmes at Hopetown Darlington and Darlington Library benefiting families, residents and visitors	Darlington Borough Council	Creative sector, Arts Council England, National Heritage Lottery Fund	Programme cultural events, exhibitions and activity at Darlington Library (throughout the year) and Hopetown Darlington (from mid-summer 2024/25)	Programme outputs and funding secured
<p><b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hopetown Darlington promoted a variety of well received exhibitions and events in 2024/25, some of which were fully booked, e.g. the Hopetown Comic Con on 1 February 2025.</li> </ul>					

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A total of 43,572 people joined in one of 1,396 events within our libraries during 2024/25. 997 (71%) of these events took place at Darlington Library, including a variety of cultural events. In 2024/25 these included poetry, reading and writing groups, events for children and adults, and live music and spoken word events.</li> <li>• Literacy PLUS education packages were offered to Primary and Secondary schools at the Hive in Darlington Library. The package offers author visits, poetry, writing competitions and story stimulation workshops enhanced by virtual reality headsets there, and has generated income from various Darlington Schools and Academies.</li> <li>• Darlington Library service hosted cultural events within the BookFest and Crossing the Tees festivals in 2025/26.</li> <li>• Darlington Libraries Takeover Day took place in the market square on Wednesday 7 August 2024 offering children's entertainment, a range of author and illustrator experiences and mascot meet and greets. Building on the success of last year, the day presents an opportunity to engage with a large group of families, to promote library services and the Summer Reading Challenge.</li> <li>• Between 29.3. 24 and 31.3.25 11 exhibitions were held in Darlington Library Art Gallery (10 opening in 24/25) securing 34,655 visits (29.3. 24 to 10.4. 25). A significant majority of questionnaire respondents selected strongly agree, from strongly agree, tend to agree, neither, tend to disagree, strongly disagree menu to the statement 'I enjoyed my visit to the Darlington Library gallery'.</li> <li>• A variety of Your Library Story Arts Council England Project Funded project activity was held at Darlington Library in 2024/25, including a writing programme led by Penguin published author Lisette Auton, animation workshops in the Hive, Hark! the Sound of Stories and BIG Little Gigs events programmed by Tracks Darlington, and a Mini Pride events led by Curious Arts.</li> <li>• Tees Women Poets delivered five Positive Poetry Writing to Wellbeing sessions at Darlington Library from June - July 2024, as part of a programme supported by Arts Council England Project Funding and Darlington Borough Council.</li> <li>• Darlington born artist, and North East Culture Awards Visual Artist of the year 2024, Lizzie Lovejoy, delivered the Circe's Island creative writing project at Darlington Library supported by Arts Council England Project Funding and Darlington Borough Council.</li> </ul>					
4	Support economic growth through Enjoy Darlington offering accessible, diverse and vibrant cultural events, festivals and programmes that contribute to Town Centre animation	Darlington Borough Council	Darlington Borough Council, Darlington Borough Town Centre Partnership, Darlington Partnership, Tees Valley Combined Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote and manage a year-round Town Centre events programme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Town Centre footfall, estimated attendance at cultural events, media coverage secured</li> </ul>

<b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darlington Town Centre Partnership and events service promoted a variety of events throughout the year that contributed to Darlington Town Centre Strategy through town centre animation, and commissioned local creative sector service providers, and/or offered local creative enterprises opportunities to promote their business.</li> <li>• Springboard data shows many events coincided with an increase in average daily footfall count in the Town Centre, including a World Cultural event on 13 July 2024 (+4,418), Darlington by the Sea from 24 July to 28 July 2024 (+8,548 per day on average), Darlington Pride on 10 August 2024 (+20,752), Making Sense Together on 15 August 2024 (+3,246), a Diwali event on 26 October 2024 (+6,317), and a Chinese New Year event on 25 January 2025 (+4,161) with spectacular lion dance performances from the Chinese community.</li> <li>• The 2024/25 Enjoy Darlington programme included accessible, diverse and vibrant cultural events including the GOLD (Growing Older Living in Darlington) Tea Dance on Wednesday 17 July 2024 which featured live music, Making Sense Together a community celebration day to raise awareness of supporting people with learning disabilities or autism, promoting inclusivity for all on Thursday 15 August 2024, a Ukrainian Independence Day on Saturday 17 August 2024, and the ever popular Darlington Rhythm &amp; Tunes event Saturday 14 – Sunday 15 September (+3,505 per day on average).</li> <li>• Thousands of visitors came to Darlington to celebrate the LGBTQ+ community through Darlington Pride in August 2024. The annual Saturday event in the market square attracted many organisations with great live music on stage for visitors to enjoy and was followed by the more relaxed event in South Park on the Sunday and the Mongay Pride Party.</li> </ul>					
5	Audience development and sector development programmes are led by, promoted by, or held at Darlington Hippodrome	Darlington Hippodrome	Darlington Hippodrome, Creative Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tees Valley Youth Dance programme. Orchestras Live education programme, and A Place for Everyone programme delivered</li> <li>• Arts Council England Project Funding proposal submitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme outputs</li> <li>• Arts Council England Project Funding offer secured</li> </ul>
<b>Delivery in 2024/25:</b>					

- Over the course of 2024/25 Darlington Hippodrome continued to support “The Cuckoo Club” a peer-led dementia social group for people with dementia and their spouses by ensuring that they have a safe, supportive space in the Hippo Lounge every Thursday morning. They are supported by team members from Alzheimers Society, and numbers range from 20-30 each week.
- Further to this, Darlington Hippodrome assisted Dementia Friendly Darlington in staging “Dementia’s Got Talent” (21 January 2025) on the Hippodrome stage, a variety show in which all the participants had dementia (with some support from carers/loved ones). The production sold 414 tickets.
- GemArts delivered a Mini Mela at Darlington Hippodrome on 8 April 2024 with Bollywood dance, steel pan drumming, face painting, origami and other participatory artforms. This had 750 attendees.
- Darlington Hippodrome May 2024 launched their popular access scheme in May 2024, and from then until 31 March 2025 this benefited 1,444 people who can claim a free essential companion ticket, 323 people who can claim 50% off for their household on universal credit, 49 people who can claim 50% off their own ticket, please note that some of the people on Darlington Hippodrome’s access scheme are eligible for an essential companion ticket plus the universal or pension credit discount.

They have received fantastic feedback from their access scheme members and have people who regularly attend due to this breaking down barriers for them.

- The Mousetrap ran for seven performances at Darlington Hippodrome from 23 to 27 July 2024, selling over 4,200 seats across the week (up from 3,240 seats sold across the week in April 2019). Audio description and a touch tour for visually impaired people took place prior to the Saturday matinee.
- A Taste of Africa Family Fun Day was held at Darlington Hippodrome on Saturday 24 August 2024: a day of culture, entertainment, cuisine and community spirit for all ages in celebration of African heritage.
- From Tuesday 1 October to Saturday 5 October 2024 over 7,000 tickets were sold across eight performances of the National Theatre’s landmark production of JB Priestley’s classic thriller, An Inspector Calls, at Darlington Hippodrome. 2,000 secondary school students watched this show and Darlington Hippodrome’s ‘A Place For Everyone’ Fund helped meet the cost of over 650 tickets to An Inspector Calls, shared across 17 schools.
- LGBTQIA+ arts and youth charity, Curious Arts, returned to Darlington Hippodrome to deliver a Curious Takeover event on Friday 1 November 2024 supported by Arts Council England and Darlington Hippodrome’s ‘A Place for Everyone’ Fund. Admission to the event was free with visitors invited to drop in and take part in creative, family-friendly activities.
- Darlington Hippodrome’s charitable fund, ‘A Place for Everyone’, has supported the local community and schools, offering visits to the theatre to see shows, supporting transport costs, delivery of theatre workshops and tours, funded places for looked after

children on youth theatre and dance courses, and enabled artist development in Darlington. Darlington Hippodrome supported a variety of audience development activity in 2024/25.

- Longstanding partnership work with organisations and services, including Orchestras Live and Durham Music Service supported audience development, with many events within Darlington Hippodrome's 2024/25 programme sharing local talent e.g. Manchester Camerata performed at Darlington Hippodrome on Monday 25 November and workshops for adult folk musicians were organised through Darlington Folk Club, and young musicians through youth folk group Cream Tees, and other parties, which culminated in an opportunity to perform on stage at Darlington Hippodrome.
- Darlington Hippodrome submitted an unsuccessful Project Funding application to Arts Council England in 2024/25 to support delivery of the In2 programme.
- Darlington Hippodrome's Welcome Space (on Tuesdays between 10am and 12 noon) attracts regular customers for free tea and coffee and a space to socialise, including a group from Darlington Action on Disability who meet there every week.
- An exhibition from service users at Darlington Mind, who attend an art class to aid with mental health which opened at Darlington Hippodrome in December 2024 and continued into May 2025 showcases work from 5 artists, both their personal work and work informed by a visit to the Hippodrome and a meeting with archive volunteers.
- Matinee Matters, was a new initiative involving Darlington Hippodrome launched in 2024/25. Matinee Matters seeks to help battle loneliness and self-isolation through a series of free, hosted, informal meet-ups at the theatre supported by Care Matters and A Place For Everyone. Six sessions took place between Thursday 20 June 2024 and Thursday 20 February 2025, preceding week-day matinee performances of What The Butler Saw, The Mousetrap, Sister Act, Ghost, Blood Brothers and Dial M For Mayhem, attracting 75 people. These played an active role in helping tackle loneliness and self-isolation amongst people in the local community.
- Darlington Hippodrome continued to provide Touch Tours for the Visually Impaired and Audio Described Performances; in 2024/25, these formed part of our offer for 12 productions. As the year has progressed there have been further requests for BSL interpretation for some productions. In 2024/25, Darlington Hippodrome provided BSL for 6 productions.

### 1.5 Proposed Action Plan for 2025/26

The proposed 2025/26 Action Plan tackles the five priorities of Darlington Cultural Strategy 2022 – 2026 listed below. We recognise priorities overlap to some degree, and that a revised Council Plan is currently in development. It retains some priorities from the 2024/25 Action Plan and recognises the significance of 2025/26 as the year of the S&DR200 and the first full year of Hopetown Darlington operation:

1. To creatively celebrate Darlington’s contribution to the birth of the modern passenger railway
2. For Darlington to have an accessible, diverse and vibrant culture, encouraging economic growth
3. For Darlington to champion engagement with culture, particularly amongst children and young people
4. For culture to thrive within Darlington Borough and attract visitors to the Town Centre
5. For Darlington to have a thriving theatre offer involving people of all ages

1.5 Proposed Darlington Cultural Strategy Action Plan 2025/26					
Priority	What	Lead	Partners	Action(s)	Measure(s) of success
1	Promote the S&DR200 festival locally, nationally, and	Darlington Borough Council	Rail Heritage board partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote S&amp;DR200 activity in Darlington April – November 2025</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attendance</li> <li>• Media and social media coverage</li> </ul>

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	internationally through multiple channels  Support S&DR200 festival delivery in Darlington borough	Darlington Borough Council	Rail Heritage board partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support programme delivery in Darlington borough (activity, events, exhibitions, projects)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme delivery and outputs</li> </ul>
1	Promote Hopetown Darlington attraction and offer and increase visitor numbers	Darlington Borough Council	Arts Council England, National Heritage Lottery Fund, Funders, Service providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote Hopetown Darlington programme</li> <li>• Promote S&amp;DR200 Festival programme at Hopetown Darlington</li> <li>• Submit National Heritage Lottery Fund project funding proposal</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visitor numbers</li> <li>• Programme delivery and outputs</li> <li>• Media coverage</li> <li>• Funding offer secured</li> </ul>
2	Follow the North East Filming Friendly charter and work across services to address enquiries	Darlington Borough Council	North East Screen, Northern School of Art, Teesside University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Respond as per charter to address location and other enquiries as a Filming Friendly Authority, and work with partners to promote opportunities for talent development and locations for filming in borough</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enquiries addressed as per North East Filming Friendly charter</li> <li>• Filming undertaken in Darlington borough</li> </ul>

3	Work with Darlington Borough Council Children’s Services to provide an excellent and accessible cultural offer to children and young people across Darlington borough	Darlington Borough Council	Academies and Schools in borough, Creative Sector individuals, organisations and enterprises, Creative Darlington, the North East Music Hub, Further Education providers, Northern School of Art, Teesside University, Tees Valley Combined Authority, Tees Valley Museums, Theatre Hullabaloo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darlington Borough Council will provide a Children’s Library Service, an Events Service, and a Museum’s Service providing opportunities for children and young people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme delivery and outputs</li> </ul>
3	Darlington Borough Council will support children and young people’s cultural engagement through intervention programmes	Darlington Borough Council	Academies and Schools in Darlington borough, Blue Cabin, Darlington Virtual School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darlington Hippodrome will offer cultural opportunities for children and young people from disadvantaged wards in the borough</li> <li>• Darlington Borough Council will include cultural opportunities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme delivery and outputs</li> </ul>

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				<p>within the Holiday Activities and Food Fund programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural programme will be offered to Care Experienced Children and Care Leavers in Darlington borough</li> </ul>	
4	Support cultural engagement through events, exhibitions and programmes at Darlington Library benefiting residents and visitors	Darlington Borough Council	Creative sector, Arts Council England, National Heritage Lottery Fund	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme cultural events, exhibitions and activity at Darlington Library, including rail themed programme in 2025</li> <li>• Submit National Heritage Lottery Grant proposal submitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Programme delivery and outputs</li> <li>• National Heritage Lottery Grant offer secured</li> </ul>
4	Contribute to Darlington Town Centre Strategy by offering accessible, diverse and vibrant cultural engagement opportunities to residents and visitors	Darlington Borough Council	Cultural Sector, Darlington Town Centre Partnership, Darlington Partnership, Tees Valley Combined Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Promote and manage a year-round Town Centre events programme , including S&amp;DR200 festival programme</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Town Centre footfall</li> <li>• Estimated attendance at cultural events</li> <li>• Media coverage</li> <li>• Diverse programme delivered</li> </ul>

**APPENDIX 2**

					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local creative services commissioned</li> </ul>
5	Audience development and sector development programmes are led by, promoted by, or held at Darlington Hippodrome	Darlington Hippodrome	Darlington Hippodrome, Creative Sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tees Valley Youth Dance programme. Orchestras Live education programme, and A Place for Everyone programme delivered</li> <li>Arts Council England Project Funding proposal submitted</li> <li>National Heritage Lottery Grant proposal submitted</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Programme outputs</li> <li>Arts Council England Project Funding offer secured</li> <li>National Heritage Lottery Grant offer secured</li> </ul>
1 - 5	Update Darlington Cultural Strategy and produce an action plan for 2026/27	DBC	TVCA, ACE, NHLF, Darlington Partnership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consult with stakeholders</li> <li>Present 2026/27 action plan to DBC</li> </ul>	2026/27 Cultural Strategy action plan produced, considering legacy of S&DR200

