

DARLINGTON TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY

2026-30



**DEVELOPING
DARLINGTON**



DARLINGTON
Borough Council



INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this strategy is to set out how the council will continue to support and contribute to the ongoing success of Darlington town centre, ensuring it remains at the heart of our borough and communities for years to come.

This strategy will seek to bring together both the council and town centre businesses objectives for the ongoing success of the town.

The council is committed to developing Darlington to ensure our town centre is a hub of activity, productivity and innovation within our borough and continues to be well used by both residents and visitors.

The council recognises that businesses and town centre stakeholders work tirelessly and play a critical part in the vibrancy and attractiveness of the town centre.

This strategy and subsequent action plan, aim to support our town centre businesses and stakeholders, by setting out clear and proactive aspirations and actions, to ensure our town centre remains vibrant, well used and thriving in the coming months and years.



A SUMMARY OF THE TOWN CENTRE STRATEGY - PLAN ON A PAGE

VISION:

By 2030, DBC working together with partners, businesses and local communities, will deliver real positive change to our town centre, placing it at the heart of our community for years to come.

OBJECTIVES:

- Enhance the attractiveness, useability and vitality of our town centre.
- Celebrate our heritage.
- Support local economic growth.
- Improve the health and wellbeing of people.
- Make Darlington a great place to live, work, learn and visit.

ACTION AREAS

Our town centre needs to offer a multi-use space and a mixed economy to be a real hub for our borough. The following themes for the strategy to deliver against have been identified:

LIVE HERE

WORK HERE

PLAY HERE

LEARN HERE

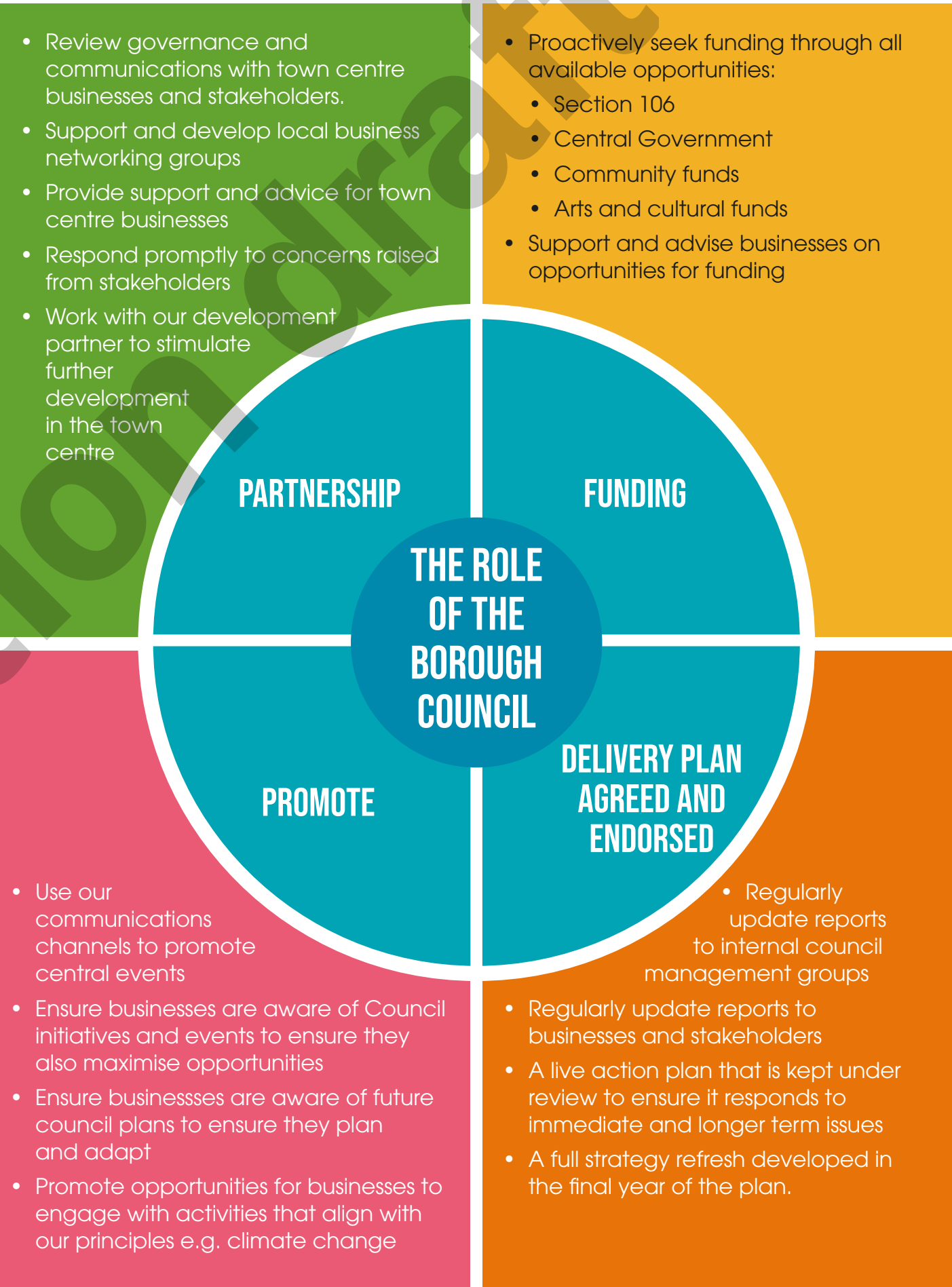
INVEST HERE

Thematic action plans will be developed and reviewed on an ongoing basis through the life of the strategy. Actions will have metrics on which monitoring and evaluation will take place.

COMMUNICATION

Progress made, activity and good news stories across all themes will be communicated across a range of channels on an ongoing basis in line with the strategy's communications and marketing plan.

DELIVERY FRAMEWORK:



OUR TOWN CENTRE TODAY

The look, feel and use of town centres across the UK has changed significantly over the decades and more rapidly in recent years, and Darlington is no exception.

Changes in shopping habits, particularly the unprecedented shift to online shopping, and changes in eating out and socialising habits post Covid, have all played a huge part.

These changes are here to stay, so it's vital as a council we respond positively, remaining ambitious and realistic as we look forwards and adapt.

We're already in a good position with much to celebrate.

Despite changes to the make up and use of our town centre, Darlington football has remained largely unchanged in recent years, and our car parks remain busy and consistently fully occupied at peak times, which is encouraging.

Shoppers and diners in the town centre continue to have a good choice of places to enjoy, with more than 100

independent shops, restaurants, cafes and bars and over 50 high street brands on offer.

The council delivers dozens of town centre events every year, as part of a comprehensive, free to attend animation and events programme. The events are well attended, with thousands of people coming to Darlington to enjoy what's on offer, particularly during the summer months.

Darlington is perfectly situated for key transport links such as the east coast main line, A1(M), A19 & A66, with the railway station recently undergoing a £140m makeover, making it easier than ever to get to Darlington.

Crucially, this is a significant time for change and growth in Darlington, with the council's focus *being on developing* Darlington to secure real positive change in our town centre, placing it at the heart of our community for years to come with much work going on to support this.

This strategy will be key in achieving this.





OUR TOWN CENTRE

MAP TO FOLLOW

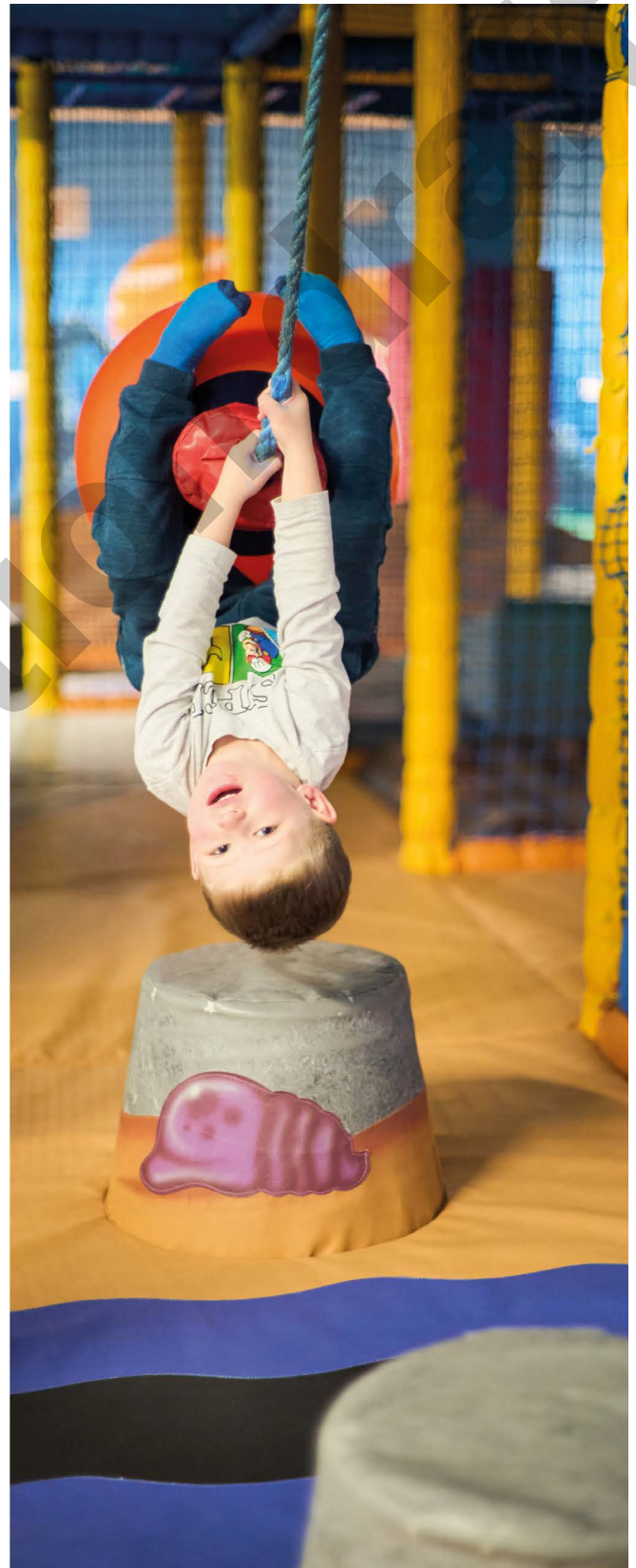
OUR JOURNEY SO FAR

Since 2019, much has been delivered in line with the strategy vision - all locations are available to view on the map.

Some of the key achievements paint a picture of how our town centre looks and feels today:

- The Hippodrome reopened in 2017 after a £13.7m restoration of the Edwardian theatre with 21st century facilities. Since then, the theatre has gone from strength to strength, offering a wide-ranging programme and regularly boasting a sold-out auditorium.
- In 2020, Feethams House and the £8m multi storey car park opened. The £8.5m Feethams House is now home to HM Treasury as part of the Darlington Economic Campus (DEC).
- In 2021, the £1.8m Dolphin Centre bowling alley – the DC Bowl – opened with 42,000 games played in year one.
- In 2022, £1.1m improvement works on Victoria Road were completed offering an improved and more attractive route from the train station to the town centre.
- In 2023, a £3.7m transformation of the Library on Crown Street was delivered.
- In 2023, £1.8m of work was completed to update and improve Darlington's indoor market.
- Business Central opened in 2015 and was followed by Innovation Central which opened in 2022, with a £15m joint investment.

£230M INVESTED IN OUR TOWN SO FAR



- In 2024 Hopetown, Darlington's £38m railway themed visitor attraction, opened to the public. Located on the 1825 Stockton and Darlington Railway route, it features restored historic buildings, an immersive play park, and the Darlington Locomotive Works, transforming the former Head of Steam Museum into a popular, state-of-the-art visitor attraction.
- In 2025, work to improve outdoor facilities for bars and restaurants on Coniscliffe Road, to boost café culture in the town centre, was completed. The work included creating more permanent spaces for outdoor drinking and dining and new planters and floral displays.
- 2025 saw the 200-year anniversary of the Stockton and Darlington railway. The celebrations brought an impressive 100,000 visitors to the area to enjoy the celebrations with many visiting Hopetown as part of their visit.
- In 2026, work completed on the regeneration of The Yards area of the town. A long-term government funded project, which began in 2021, this project aimed to transform the look and feel of The Yards, by improving and updating signage, shop fronts and the general look and feel of the area.



- In 2026, work completed on the £140 million upgrade to Darlington's station, making it easier than ever to get to and from Darlington.
- We are proud to offer some fantastic green spaces in Darlington, with South Park and Stanhope Park offering space for dog walking, picnics and play. South Park also plays host to the town's weekly parkrun.
- An increasingly popular Darlington Running Festival is held every summer with the event drawing thousands of runners and spectators into town to enjoy the festival and the town centre food and drink options afterwards.
- The town offers a popular and well used VUE cinema as part of the DL1 Complex.
- Darlington continues to be an accredited Purple Flag town which means it is recognised as offering excellence in the management of the evening and nighttime economy.



£250M CURRENTLY BEING INVESTED IN OUR TOWN



ON THE HORIZON

This is a significant time for change and growth in Darlington, with the council's focus being on developing Darlington to secure real positive change in our town centre, placing it at the heart of our community for years to come with much work going on to support this. This work will support the delivery of this refreshed Town Centre Strategy:

- A £100m ambitious town centre regeneration initiative of a scale that was last seen when the town centre remodelling works were carried out in the 1960s and 80s, is about to start, with work currently in the planning stages and set to continue in the coming months and years. The development work will be carried out at three key town centre sites and will result in more vibrant and useable spaces which will bring more people into the town centre, with new town centre living options, workspaces, attractive public realm and commercial space all part of the plan.
- The £1.45m Dolphin Centre mini golf and spinning studio is set to open in 2026, increasing what's on offer at the Dolphin Centre and bringing more choice of leisure activity for users.
- The £10m Northern Echo building on Priestgate is set to open later in 2026 and will be providing an adult educational space for Darlington College and DBCs Learning & Skills as well as affordable commercial space on the upper floors, which will see an upturn in town centre users.

- Work is ongoing to regenerate and improve the Skinnergate area of the town ensuring it is an attractive space for town centre users to enjoy.
- More than £20m is being invested in a science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) centre which will offer cutting-edge teaching and a learning hub is to be built at the Science Park sitting alongside Teesside University and CPI. The introduction of the centre, which will be operated by Darlington College, will provide clear pathways from school so young people can access high-value careers in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Building will begin on the centre in 2026.
- Work is also now underway on the £118m Government hub on Brunswick Street which will house nine government departments including HM Treasury, with 1600 civil servants based in the building, boosting footfall in our town.
- The refurbishment of 156 Northgate which will see the building developed into new office space, is due to be completed in 2026.
- The annual animation and events programme continues to go from strength to strength with new and updated events added every year, attracting thousands of people into the town centre.



With all that's going on, and many exciting things on the horizon, positive changes in the way our town centre is used are undoubtedly on the way. These changes mean we are well placed to respond to shifting trends and conditions, ensuring our town centre continues to be an attractive, vibrant and useable space for people to live, work and enjoy their free time.

OUR VISION

This strategy will seek to achieve our vision:

By 2030, DBC working together with partners, businesses and local communities, will develop Darlington to deliver real positive change to our town centre, placing it at the heart of our community for years to come.

We will do this by developing a more diverse and modern role for our town centre by:

- Enhancing the attractiveness, useability and vitality of our town centre.
- Celebrating our heritage.
- Supporting local economic growth.
- Improving the health and wellbeing of people.
- Making Darlington a great place to live, work, learn and visit.

Our strategy will support the town centre in continuing to be a place people will want to continue visiting, shopping, working and living in now and in the future.







ACTION AREAS

This strategy is extensive and inclusive, in that it considers and aims to deliver against five key themes, which reflect the multi purpose nature of town centres today.

This strategy aims to encourage people to:

- Live here
- Work here
- Play here
- Learn here
- Invest here

Now, and for many years to come.

Darlington Borough Council will work to deliver this strategy using a detailed action plan which will outline how the aspirations below, for each of the five areas, will be delivered:



LIVE HERE



We will:

- Repurpose and regenerate key areas of the town centre, offering new and versatile town centre living options, workspace and retail units for the future.
- Continue to work towards a pleasant, attractive and clean town centre, with floral displays, seating areas and attractive and useable public realm.
- Continue to work towards a safe town centre experience for everyone, by working with partners to tackle crime and anti-social behavior, maintain purple flag status and reduce begging.





WORK HERE



We will:

- Support people in gaining high value employment and create opportunities for businesses to showcase their employment opportunities.
- Create new and affordable town centre office space.
- Ensure there are versatile, reliable and efficient transport options to and from Darlington town centre for local communities, those who commute and those who visit from surrounding areas, this includes public transport users, drivers and cyclists.

PLAY HERE



We will:

- Work closely with town centre retail and hospitality businesses across our town, supporting them in locating to, and remaining in, the heart of our town centre for years to come.
- Transform and revitalise Skinnergate.
- Ensure our green spaces such as Stanhope Park and South Park remain safe, attractive and clean.
- Expand the national retail offer in Darlington.
- Continue to invest in the Dolphin Centre and its offer.
- Continue to deliver the annual animation and events programme, ensuring it evolves and goes from strength to strength each year.
- Continue to ensure Hopetown and The Hippodrome's and Hullabaloo provide attractive and engaging programmes that bring people to our town centre.





LEARN HERE

We will:

- Ensure there is a town centre learning presence for Darlington College and Learning & Skills in the former Northern Echo building on Priestgate.
- Bring a world class STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) centre of excellence learning facility to Darlington. This facility will support skills development and workforce growth.
- Continue to support our schools and young people with learning opportunities such as the annual STEM event at Hopetown.
- Ensure we continue to work with our town centre further education providers such as Darlington College & Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College.
- Provide library facilities that are welcoming and attractive spaces offering appropriate technology and access to learning support materials for everyone.



INVEST HERE



We will:

- Continue to ensure that new, affordable and attractive work and office spaces are available in our town centre by investing in the new East Street office space development.
- Work proactively to support businesses in coming to, becoming established and staying in Darlington through our business team offering a range of support and advice.
- Support business incubator sites such as Innovation and Business Central, to nurture start-ups and encourage investment in Darlington.
- Promote available sites and locations to encourage awareness of the options on offer in Darlington.
- Work closely with investors and agents to promote privately owned options, to help encourage inward investment opportunities and support growth from companies here.
- Continue to offer support to our independent business community who bring a diverse range of shopping and dining experiences across our town centre.



Consultation draft

