

Visit County
Durham



Annual Review 2016-2017

Welcome

I am very pleased to state that this has been yet another year of real success for Visit County Durham.

As well as continuing growth in visitor numbers and in the contribution tourism makes to the county's economy, we have laid the foundations for further progress in the coming 12 months and beyond.

These key building blocks include:

- Continuation of our successful collaborative approach to working with destinations nationally and VisitEngland/ VisitBritain
- Ensuring Durham reaps maximum benefit from the Government's £40m Discover England Fund to develop world-class product
- Northern Heartlands Great Place Scheme funding of £1.5m which will use arts and culture to animate rural Durham and its communities
- The Durham Place of Light brand which provides a compelling image, identity and reputation for the county – helping to differentiate Durham from its competitors
- A partnership approach to delivering national destination marketing campaigns

To realise this even brighter future for Durham we can rely upon the continued commitment of our experienced staff team, under the leadership of our managing director, Michelle Gorman, as well as the invaluable input from our expert board.



Ivor Stolliday
Chairman
Visit County Durham



Michelle Gorman
Managing Director
Visit County Durham



This last year has not been without its challenges for our sector, but once again I am proud to report that it has been an extremely productive 12 months for Visit County Durham, with many notable achievements.

Key among these include the roll-out of our Partnership scheme – which is now benefiting over 180 businesses across the county; the successful England's Heritage Cities bid for Discover England funding to develop an augmented reality app that brings our fascinating heritage to the attention of a younger overseas audience; securing Northern Heartlands Great Place Scheme funding of £1.5m to place arts and culture at the heart of communities, and achieving over one million unique web visits to thisisdurham.com

Another shining success has been the new place brand for the county – Durham Place of Light. Developed by Visit County Durham, it is being utilised to put our great county in the spotlight as a place to live, work, invest, study and visit. Read more on pages four and five.

As ever, our achievements are only made possible through the support of the county's tourism businesses, who work with us and support us in our activity to grow the visitor economy.

We are making real progress towards seeing Durham fulfil its potential as one of England's lead destinations, but a lot of work still remains.

We look forward to continuing to work with our partners at county, regional and national level during the next 12 months towards realising this shared ambition.

World-class product for Durham in development

The Discover England Fund, a three-year £40m programme announced by Government in 2016, is providing Durham with exciting opportunities to work in partnership with destinations from across England to develop world-class, stand-out, bookable tourism product which is set to benefit the county.

The fund will ensure England stays competitive in the global tourism industry, whilst also strengthening the domestic tourism offer. In the first year of the fund, Visit County Durham was a partner in two successful bids:

Augmented reality app

Durham City was one of 12 of England's historic cities to collaborate to develop an innovative augmented reality (AR) product that is set to bring heritage to life in a new and unique way. The app has been produced by the England's Heritage Cities consortium, of which Visit County Durham is a founding member. Working in partnership with Durham Cathedral, the ground-breaking new augmented reality experience consists of an app and videos that transport the user back in time to unveil the hidden lives of some of history's most fascinating characters. It brings the story of the historic cathedral to life through a set of trigger points inside the iconic building. Through the app, visitors can discover the earliest stirrings of recorded English history, meet the Venerable Bede and experience a rare glimpse into the enigmatic lives of the Benedictine monks.



Michelle Gorman, managing director of VCD, and The Very Reverend Andrew Tremlett, Dean of Durham

Telling the stories of England

Visit County Durham was a supporting partner for a UK Countryside Tours project – Telling the Stories of England. An inspirational new collection of cultural heritage tours, aimed at the American alumni and special interest markets, were produced to showcase the very best art, culture, heritage and countryside experiences, taking in treasures including Durham Cathedral and The Bowes Museum. VCD worked in partnership with UK Countryside Tours to produce the Art Treasures of North East England itinerary – featuring Durham attractions including Durham University, The Bowes Museum, Durham Cathedral and Raby Castle; and a joint Durham/Northumberland itinerary based on the region's rich shared Christian heritage.

Looking ahead...

Visit County Durham partnered with a number of destinations in bids for Year 2 of the Discover England Fund (successful bids will be announced in summer 2017).

- The second stage of the England's Heritage Cities project, from 2017–19, further builds on Year 1 activity to develop new international audiences, specifically the under 35s and to drive visits into England's regions via main gateways, including London, to experience England's regional heritage product. This is being done by presenting 13 heritage cities in new ways (geographically and thematically); creating new content to motivate new audiences to travel out of London. This includes: changing the language so that heritage appeals beyond the core audience; ensuring that the cities meet the needs and expectations of international visitors both pre and post-arrival; maximising the attraction of the new app and the cities' unique appeal with roadshows and special interest tours; as well as travel trade familiarisation trips and invites to bloggers.

- Manchester Gateway: The project focuses on growing Manchester's role as the international gateway to the North, by creating new itineraries and extending distribution channels for existing products which appeal to long-haul markets. A digital map is already in development to showcase key product from across the North, which will be utilised in Manchester's overseas marketing campaigns, by Manchester Airport and by key accommodation providers.

- The English Way: England's ancient coaching route – the A1, is the focus of a bid which aims to inspire visitors to explore the historic stopping-off points once used in the days of horse-drawn travel. Picturesque market towns that offer a quintessential English experience of coaching inns, afternoon tea and a comfortable base for exploring the surrounding area will become part of country-wide itineraries that target mature overseas visitors.

Durham Place of Light

Events celebrate exciting new place brand

Durham Place of Light, the exciting new place brand for the county developed by Visit County Durham, which shines a light on the county as a great place to live, work, invest, study and visit, has been celebrated at two major events.

At the House of Commons in February over 100 business leaders, industry partners and invited guests gathered to find out more about some of the enlightening stories that set Durham apart as a beacon for businesses, visitors and residents.

With the theme of light running through the event, exhibitors included: Durham

University's globally-recognised Institute for Computational Cosmology, performing research into the origins and evolution of the universe; The North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership, which is home to the county's dark skies - denoted for the superior stargazing potential; Spennymoor-based Thorn lighting which manufacture a wide range of lighting solutions; Eleven Arches, whose spectacular open-air live show Kynren is shining a light on the heritage of the region and PolyPhotonix, based at NETPark in Sedgefield, who are pioneering the early adoption of organic light.

Regional guests gathered at Durham Cathedral in November and were welcomed with an address by the Dean of Durham, and also Leader of Durham County Council, Councillor Simon Henig, who spoke about Durham Place of Light. A Trail of Light around the Cloister gave guests the opportunity to discover some of the stories that light up the county. Businesses exhibiting on the trail were: North Pennines AONB Partnership; PolyPhotonix; Auckland Castle Trust; Eleven Arches; Future Business Magnates; Thorn Lighting; Durham University's Institute for Computational Cosmology; Durham Cathedral and Artichoke – producers of the Durham Lumiere festival.

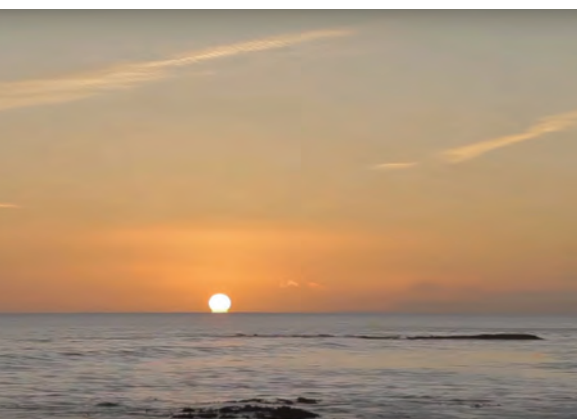


Durham County Council leader, Cllr Simon Henig; Cllr Edward Bell, then chairman of Durham County Council; Ivor Stolliday, chairman of VCD; Michelle Gorman, managing director, VCD; and Terry Collins, chief executive of Durham County Council

Durham Place of Light puts the county in the spotlight by showcasing the stories that light up the past, light up days and nights, inspire our here and now and illuminate the future, and demonstrate the shining spirit of the people of Durham.



Ivor Stolliday, chairman of VCD, Michelle Gorman, managing director of VCD, Cllr Simon Henig, leader of Durham County Council, and Simon Goon, managing director of Business Durham



Stunning film illuminates the county

One of the main elements of the Durham Place of Light brand toolkit is a stunning short film. Produced by Visit County Durham, the film showcases the stories that shine a light on the county – including the spectacular open-air live show Kynren and award-winning heritage attractions such as Durham Cathedral and Beamish Museum which light up the past; stunning natural landscapes, exciting festivals and events and stargazing which light up days and nights; ground-breaking products and research being delivered by organisations including Durham University, Polyphotonix and Thorn which inspire the here and now and illuminate the future; and the people of Durham, both past and present, who have real shining spirit. View the Durham Place of Light film at: DurhamPlaceofLight.com

Help tell Durham's story

The Durham ambassador programme is a network of people united to help spread the word about the county as an inspiring place to invest, live, work, study and visit. Showing your support for Durham will help create momentum and illuminate our county. For more information, visit: DurhamPlaceofLight.com #DurhamPlaceofLight

This is
durham
place of light

Campaign puts Durham in the spotlight

Visit County Durham worked in partnership with Durham County Council on a campaign which aimed to raise the profile of the county as a great place to do business.

The campaign fully utilised the Durham Place of Light brand, which provided a compelling platform to tell key messages about how Durham is a beacon for business, and why there has never been a better time to invest, live and work in the county. High-profile activity included an eight-page supplement in The Times, supplements in The Journal and Northern Echo, a series of editorial spreads in the London Evening Standard, regional media print and online and digital billboards, utilising the Place of Light film, at London King's Cross, Edinburgh Waverley and Newcastle train stations.

Leader of Durham County Council, Councillor Simon Henig, said at the time of the campaign: "Durham is a fantastic county and we are justifiably proud of the many reasons that make it such a great place to live, work, invest, study and visit, which is why showcasing all of these stories on a national level is so important. The work that Visit County Durham has done to develop the Place of Light brand really places our assets in the spotlight."



Marketing and information highlights



Ben Fogle films visit to Durham

All eyes have been on Durham's great outdoors following broadcaster Ben Fogle's visit last year to film an action-packed video in the county, which formed the main element of VCD's successful autumn 2016 national marketing campaign.

The adventurer and traveller stepped out to film an adrenaline-fuelled episode of his online series Ben Fogle's Great British Adventure. Visit County Durham commissioned the episode in a bid to showcase the county's amazing outdoor attractions and activities to a world-wide audience.

The video saw Ben take part in a range of activities county-wide including waterfall jumping at Low Force under the expert guidance of the Kingsway Adventure Centre, participating in a mountain bike challenge at Hamsterley Forest, striding out at the Durham Heritage Coast and experiencing some of the water sports on offer at the Seaham Harbour Marina, Water Sports & Activity Centre.

Footage from the episode showcases the stunning scenery of the Durham Dales and North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as well as one of England's most spectacular waterfalls – High Force. It also includes drone footage capturing aerial viewpoints of Durham's countryside. To date, the video has had more than 280,000 views across all channels. To view the episode, visit: thisisdurham.com/BenFogle



For the first time, Visit County Durham's official visitor website, thisisdurham.com, has notched up over one million unique visits in 12 months.

Looking ahead...

Lumiere Durham, the UK's largest light festival, returns to light up Durham City over four magical evenings from 16-19 November. Visit County Durham will be working closely with producers Artichoke to use the event to showcase the county to a national audience, encouraging visitors to stay longer and experience more of the wider county. To find out more, visit: lumiere-festival.com/durham-2017

Partnership & development highlights

Rural initiatives

Visit County Durham is working in partnership with a number of agencies on projects that will benefit the county's rural communities.

These include working with partners such as the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the North East Local Enterprise Partnership, to successfully secure £9.7m in grant funding through the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development to support tourism and growth in the region. Applications are currently being invited for projects that will grow a business, create jobs or bring more money in to the rural economy.

In another partnership initiative, Northern Heartlands successfully secured Great Place Scheme funding of £1.5m, which aims to place arts and culture at the heart of Durham's rural communities. As one of only 16 places across England receiving a share of the £20m fund, this was a real coup for Durham.

Social media training

Visit County Durham held two courses on digital business skills for Partners looking to improve their social media presence. The courses, delivered in conjunction with Durham Employment and Skills, covered all aspects of social media marketing, as well as how businesses can engage with VCD's award-winning activities. Thirty-three people benefited from the successful free training sessions, which were held at the Park Head Hotel, Bishop Auckland and New College Durham, with further courses due to take place later this year.

visitcountydurham.org

Annual Tourism Forum

Lady Cobham, then chair of VisitEngland, paid a visit to Durham in March and was keynote speaker at Visit County Durham's annual Tourism Forum at Ushaw. Lady Cobham, who was visiting the county as part of English Tourism Week celebrations, addressed tourism businesses and industry representatives from across the county.



The focus of the forum was 'what makes Durham special', with over 80 delegates also hearing presentations from Chris Woodley-Stewart, director of the North Pennines AONB Partnership, and Ruth Robson, head of marketing and events at Durham Cathedral, who talked about the importance of UNESCO designations for visitors. Lady Cobham highlighted the £40m Discover England Fund, which has already funded projects that are set to benefit the county.

Taste Durham Food & Drink Exchange

Last October Visit County Durham hosted a 'meet the producer' business networking event at Sedgefield Racecourse as part of Taste Durham Month. With food and drink accounting for 37%* of overall visitor spend in Durham, this is an important sector and the Taste Durham Month initiative enabled restaurants, cafés, hotels, farm shops and attractions across the county to showcase Durham's food and drink offer and local produce to tourism businesses. The Exchange saw representatives from over 60 tourism businesses network with 20 exhibitors to provide inspiration and new supplier opportunities.



*Source data: Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Model (STEAM) 2016

Looking ahead...

A number of projects are in development, including:

Durham City Riverbanks: VCD has been working with Durham County Council's regeneration team and a number of stakeholders to look at the potential of the city's riverside. Tourism consultants have been commissioned to scope potential riverside developments for residents, visitors, students and those working in the city.

Northern Saints: A regional network of partners, chaired by VCD, is progressing a Christian Heritage trails project which positions the region as the 'Cradle of British Christianity'. The project launch will coincide with the 2018 Durham International Conference on Pilgrimage.

Dark Skies: Large open moorland and views that stretch for miles make Durham ideal for stargazing, which has seen a recent surge in popularity. Visit County Durham is working with the North Pennines AONB Partnership to maximise the potential of the county's dark sky sites, and ensure that accommodation providers and other tourism businesses are equipped to capitalise on the activity.

We are currently working with over

750

businesses across the county

Visitor experience highlights

Visitor Survey results

Visit County Durham released the results from its latest Visitor Survey in April of this year. The survey, compiled from over 1,000 interviews carried out at over 20 locations across the county, helps us to identify destination strengths in terms of the experiences visitors to the county have, but also highlights weaknesses and opportunities. This evidence then enables us to work with our many partners across the county to address those areas requiring improvement.

Key findings include:

- A growth in the number of couples travelling to Durham, up from 28% to 39%

- Growth in retail and food as drivers for visits
- Word of mouth (16%) and experience from a previous trip (61%), heavily influence visitors on choosing to visit Durham
- 35% of visitors are now booking online, whereas the number of those booking by telephone has dropped from 34% in 2013 to 20% in 2016
- Over 90% rate attractions as very good or good

To see more results from the 2016 Visitor Survey, visit: visitcountydurham.org/the-visitor

Durham Tourism Superstar

Auckland Castle park ranger Alan Anderson was named the winner of Visit County Durham's Tourism Superstar 2016 award at the annual summer Garden Party in July. Alan, who has worked as park ranger at the castle in Bishop Auckland for more than 18 years, also made it to the finals of the national VisitEngland Tourism Superstar award.



VCD launched the award – the winner of which is decided by a public vote – in 2014 to showcase the unsung heroes of the Durham tourism industry – those that go the extra mile to ensure visitors have a memorable experience. Alan was a worthy winner, having been originally nominated by his colleagues at Auckland Castle Trust because of his warm and engaging personality and enthusiastic dedication to his demanding outdoor role.

Visitor Information Network

Visit County Durham's county-wide Visitor Information Network, which sees us working with partners to deliver information to visitors during their visit, was tested through the annual 'mystery shopper' exercise last autumn. 18 network partners, including attractions, visitor centres and cafés were assessed on their response to enquiries, and whether the information obtained by visitors met their needs. The findings were once again very positive: enquiries dealt with politely and professionally; well stocked racks with Durham literature; effective kiosks and touchscreens; and almost half of Visitor Information Network Partners achieving a customer satisfaction rating of 90% and over.

New board member



Last September saw the appointment of a new director to the Visit County Durham board.

Sally Dixon, Beamish Museum's Assistant Director – Partnerships & Communications, pictured, was welcomed in the summer, and brings a wealth of experience and skills to the VCD board from a decade of work in the arts, museums and heritage sector – further enhancing the strengths of existing members.

Sally started working at Beamish, England's largest open-air museum, in 2013 and has held her current role since November 2014, leading on the management and co-ordination of the museum's regional, UK and European partnership programmes; communications and marketing; fundraising; and driving earned income through group and venue sales activity.

She joined new board members Ross Grieve, Managing Director of Seaham Hall hotel, and Ruth Robson, Head of Marketing and Events at Durham Cathedral, both of whom were welcomed to their roles in June last year.

Ross, who has been at Seaham Hall since 2013, has worked in the hospitality industry for more than 20 years, while Ruth started working at Durham Cathedral in 2008. Prior to this she worked at The Bowes Museum and also had an extensive career in broadcasting.



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