

Celebrating 20 years of Visit County Durham as tourism reaches new heights



County Durham's visitor economy has achieved another record-breaking year, with the latest independent tourism data showing a further year of record performance across the county, the third in a row.

In 2025, visitor expenditure rose to £1.48bn, an increase of 8% on the previous year, reflecting the strength of the destination and the continued appeal of its diverse tourism offer.

The latest STEAM assessment also records 21.98 million visits to the county in 2025, up 2% on 2024, making County Durham the most visited destination in the North East. (STEAM is an economic impact model used to measure the value of tourism). These figures underline the county's growing profile as a leading UK destination for short breaks, heritage and cultural experiences, and outdoor exploration.

As Visit County Durham, the tourism service for Durham County Council, celebrates its 20th anniversary, these results highlight two decades of sustained partnership working, destination development and investment. Over this period, County Durham has strengthened its reputation as a vibrant and high-quality visitor destination, with record-breaking results for three consecutive years.

A key focus for the Destination Management Organisation remains growing overnight stays to support sustainable economic growth. In 2025, staying visitor numbers increased by 1.8% to 1.67m, while overnight visitor spend rose by 11.2% to £651.94m. Although staying visitors represent just 8% of total visits, they account for 44% of all visitor expenditure, demonstrating their significant economic value.

Tourism continues to play a vital role in the local economy, supporting more than 14,000 full-time equivalent jobs in County Durham. This includes 11,250 people directly employed in the sector and a further 2,819 supported through the wider supply chain.

Twenty years on, County Durham's tourism sector continues to grow in quality and ambition, underpinned by strong collaboration and a shared vision for the future.

Michelle Gorman, reflects on two decades of success

This June marked 20 years since Visit County Durham was established to champion and support and grow the county's visitor economy. It is an opportunity to celebrate how far we've come, reflect on the partnerships that have made that progress possible, and look ahead.

County Durham has welcomed visitors for centuries. From its rich heritage and breathtaking landscapes to its vibrant culture and warm hospitality, our greatest strength has always been the people who bring the destination to life.

And as we celebrate this milestone, three words define both our journey and our future: **People. Place. Possibility.**

A changing role

When Visit County Durham was created in 2006, destination management was still emerging. Tourism promotion was largely print-led, social media was in its infancy, and County Durham's visitor offer and promotion was fragmented. Our ambition was simple: unite the sector, create a strong destination identity and raise the county's profile.



“ Over 20 years, we have helped transform County Durham from a collection of great attractions into a confident, unified destination. ”

Michelle Gorman, Managing Director

Two decades of progress

Together, we've achieved significant milestones that have helped shape today's visitor economy, including:

- **2006** – Baseline performance 17.4m visitors, £600m spend, 12,100 jobs.
- **2008** – Launch of Taste Durham showcasing local food and drink.
- **2010** – National recognition as VisitEngland names County Durham one of England's 'attract brands, raising destination profile.
- **2012** – Continued destination development phase: strengthening sector engagement and building cohesion; embedding digital/consumer-facing marketing foundations.
- **2014** – Brand consolidation and unified destination offer.
- **2016** – Post-EU referendum uncertainty - focus on reassurance and reinforcing County Durham as a welcoming destination.
- **2018** – Continued growth phase pre pandemic; strengthening partnerships and destination leadership approach across public and private sectors.
- **2020** – COVID-19 pandemic disrupts travel and operations; shift to business support, and campaigns such as “Explore from Your Door.”
- **2022** – County Durham's visitor economy surpassed the £1bn milestone for the first time, with visitors spending a record £1.04bn in the county, marking a major milestone in the sector's recovery and growth.
- **2023** – Visit County Durham became one of the first three destinations in England to achieve Local Visitor Economy Partnership (LVEP) accreditation from VisitEngland, recognising its national leadership in destination management and visitor economy growth.
- **2024** – Strong performance growth; visitor numbers rise to 21.98m, up 8% year-on-year, with continued momentum in spend and recovery.
- **2026** – 20-year milestone for Visit County Durham; record-breaking visitor economy performance for the third consecutive year.

To see more highlights from the past two decades go to: visitcountydurham.org/20years

Projects that have made progress



Local produce is a key element of the Taste Durham initiative

As we mark 20 years of Visit County Durham, we have been reflecting on the journey of the county's visitor economy and the range of projects that have helped shape its progress. The Projects That Delivered Progress video series highlights just a few of these, showcasing how sustained investment, partnership working and destination development have transformed the county.

From supporting the development of new products to enhancing skills together they demonstrate how the destination's offer has grown in quality, confidence and diversity, helping to attract more visitors, encourage longer stays and increase spend.

A strong theme throughout the videos is collaboration. They reflect the importance of Visit County Durham working alongside Durham County Council, local businesses, regional partners and national organisations to deliver shared priorities.

Importantly, the videos also demonstrate impact. They highlight how tourism projects contribute not only to visitor growth, but also to jobs, investment, skills and community pride, reinforcing the role of the visitor economy as a driver of wider economic and social value.

The video series provides a clear reminder of how far County Durham has come. It captures a destination that is continually evolving, shaped by ambition, partnership and creativity, and now firmly established as a confident and competitive visitor destination.

Looking ahead

Today, tourism is recognised as a vital part of County Durham's economy, supporting businesses, communities, culture and investment.

None of this has been achieved alone. It has been made possible through the commitment of businesses, partners, local authorities and communities working towards a shared ambition.

This anniversary is not simply about celebrating the past. It is about building on 20 years of success and continuing to create a thriving, sustainable visitor economy for the future.

Together, we're shaping the next chapter of County Durham's story.

Milestone Moments

For more than 20 years, Visit County Durham has played a leading role in growing and supporting the county's visitor economy. During that time we've navigated change, overcome challenges and celebrated remarkable achievements, helping to establish County Durham as one of England's leading destinations.



Our interactive milestone timeline highlights the key moments that have shaped our journey – from the establishment of Visit County Durham in 2006, to the launch of world-class attractions, achieving a visitor economy worth more than £1bn, and becoming one of England's first accredited Local Visitor Economy Partnerships.

Explore the timeline to discover the milestones, partnerships and successes that have helped shape County Durham into the thriving destination it is today.

Find out more and join our anniversary celebrations at: visitcountydurham.org/milestone-moments

A ticket to County Durham's key attractions

Three new bus services have been introduced across County Durham this summer, making it easier than ever for residents and visitors to access the county's leading attractions by public transport.

Commissioned by Durham County Council following research on the gaps in transport provision and the impact on the Visitor Economy led by Visit County Durham, the new Durham Explorer services operate at weekends and on bank holidays between 23 May and 31 August, offering a simple and sustainable way to travel between some of the region's most popular destinations.



The routes will connect Durham City with a wide range of visitor attractions across the county, including Locomotion in Shildon, Ushaw Historic House, Chapels and Gardens, Beamish, The Living Museum of the North, The Auckland Project in Bishop Auckland, Raby Castle, Park and Gardens, The Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle, and High Force Waterfall in the Durham Dales. Many of these attractions will also be offering discounts and incentives for visitors arriving by bus, further encouraging sustainable travel.

The initiative has been funded through the North East Mayoral Strategic Authority, as part of wider efforts to improve transport connectivity and make bus travel more affordable and accessible for both local communities and visitors to the region.

Next Stop Durham continues to drive national awareness and visitor growth



Visit County Durham's national destination marketing campaign, **Next Stop Durham**, continues to inspire UK holidaymakers to stop, stay and explore the county following a highly successful first year.

Since launching in spring 2025, the campaign has showcased County Durham's award-winning attractions, rich heritage, spectacular landscapes and vibrant food and drink offer, reinforcing the county's reputation as a must-visit destination for UK short breaks.

The campaign has already delivered significant economic impact, generating an estimated £165 million in visitor spend, equivalent to 12% of the county's annual visitor economy. The campaign reached more than 18 million people nationally, with 58% of surveyed visitors recalling the campaign.

Research highlights the campaign's influence on visitor behaviour, with 57% of respondents saying it encouraged them to extend their stay in County Durham. A further 69% said it inspired them to visit attractions they had not originally planned to include in their trip.

As the campaign continues, partners will have further opportunities to get involved through media visits, influencer activity and wider promotional activity, helping to raise County Durham's profile as a leading visitor destination.

Find out more at:

visitcountydurham.org/national-destination-marketing-campaign



Staycation campaign

Visit County Durham is set to build on the success of its domestic tourism activity as its annual Staycation campaign returns for another year, inspiring more people to choose County Durham for a memorable UK short break.

Marketing activity will showcase the county's outstanding mix of heritage, culture, countryside and coast, highlighting experiences for families, couples and adventure seekers, all within easy reach of major cities and key transport routes.

The campaign is part of Visit County Durham's long-term marketing strategy to grow domestic tourism, strengthen year-round visitor demand and encourage longer stays, supporting local businesses while responding to continued demand for authentic, experience-led UK breaks.

Visit the campaign content hub at: **thisisdurham.com/summer**

Visit County Durham further strengthens travel trade presence

Visit County Durham is continuing to strengthen its engagement with the travel trade sector, through a busy programme of upcoming national events, showcases and familiarisation visits designed to raise the profile of the destination and convert growing interest into future bookings.

Building on strong relationships across the group travel and coach tourism markets, the programme will ensure County Durham remains highly visible to key decision-makers, tour operators and itinerary planners during a crucial period for product development and forward programming.

Group Leisure & Travel	8 October, Milton Keynes
Steve Reed Tourism Showcase	19 October, Chester
Coach Tourism Association Winter Showcase	22-23 November, Bournemouth
Excursions	27 January, London
Coach Tourism Association Annual Workshop	6-9 February
Association of Group Travel Organisers Showcase	February
British Travel and Tourism Show	11 March, Birmingham

Free business support

Visit the Business Support Hub at visitcountydurham.org for toolkits on attracting and targeting key markets, the latest market intelligence, upcoming events, social media guidance and training opportunities.

To find out more about any of the opportunities featured above, or to access additional resources and advice, visit the Business Support Hub.

Media library

Visit County Durham's online media centre enables partners and the media to access a range of images and footage of the county for use in their own activities.

Register at: visitcountydurham.org/images



New world-class attractions

The county's visitor offer grows even stronger this summer with the opening of two new world-class attractions - The Light cultural venue in Durham City, and The Storied Lands, Kynren's live-action show park.

Find out about these developments and more at: visitcountydurham.org/new

Stay informed

To stay up to date with the latest news, blogs and events from Visit County Durham, visit our website at visitcountydurham.org. You can also follow VCDBusiness on Facebook and X and Visit County Durham on LinkedIn. Don't forget to sign up to Grapevine, our weekly e-newsletter, via the website.

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