

## ***Feeling Towns: Pride and Northgate***

### **Partner Report for Darlington Borough Council**

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#### **Executive Summary**

The *Feeling Towns* project, in collaboration with the needs of Darlington Borough Council, explored the meaning of pride in place in the Northgate ward of the town. Research was undertaken across summer 2022, when funders and policymakers were putting more political weight on evaluating pride in place. We spoke with approximately 100 people using a variety of research methods, including interviews, fieldwork, surveys and a facilitated creative workshop.

We found that many of the sources of pride in Northgate accorded with national findings: people were proud of its green spaces, people, and heritage assets. People were often proud that the town was seen more frequently in the national eye and welcoming of the opportunities that this exposure might bring. We noted that pride in green spaces, in particular, united different communities: this perception was as true for the established, largely white community as it was for the more recent and ethnically-diverse communities. Many residents were anxious about housing development, in particular, which threatened these spaces. We also noted that Northgate residents found pride in their diverse, heterogeneous composition: the sense that Northgate is welcoming and non-judgemental was important to the residents.

However, the relationship between Northgate and the rest of Darlington was complex. Northgate residents do not strongly identify with “Northgate” as a clear geography, nor do they feel an integrated part of the rest of the town and the new opportunities heralded by levelling up. (The renovations to the yards, the ‘string of pearls’ narrative, and the Treasury campus all feel quite remote to the residents of Northgate.) Yet, at the same time, they do feel a clear emotional investment in the town’s heritage and community assets that could be valuably built upon. Our recommendations focus on building an inclusive and pluralised heritage strategy that includes collaborative and creative policymaking to address antisocial behaviour and reanimate local spaces, further developing skills and civic identity.

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#### **Introduction**

[\*Feeling Towns\*](#) is an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded knowledge exchange project led by the University of Southampton. It explores the role of place and identity in governance and local policy, paying close attention to the government’s [Levelling Up](#) agenda, which identified “restoring pride in place” as one of its 12 guiding missions. We have brought together a community of practice from a range of sectors, communities and geographies to share knowledge and expertise to better understand the correlation between pride and place attachment—understood as the emotional bonds developed between people and place—and the health of local cultural ecologies. The project has four wider aims:

1. **To explore** collective methods and metrics for understanding pride

2. **To share** qualitative methods that challenge dominant econometric approaches to understanding the impacts of investment in culture and regeneration
3. **To cooperate** across multiple political and policy realms engaged in the Levelling Up agenda, sharing findings and influencing policy making
4. **To produce** new understandings of the complex roles that pride, place attachment and civic engagement play in local decision making

With our partners from Darlington Borough Council, Southampton City Council, Rural Media (Herefordshire) and Historic England, we developed a co-produced case study approach to address the specific needs of each organisation and place. We have conducted fieldwork and developed our creative methodologies with the communities who live, work and volunteer in these places.

Levelling Up was the flagship policy of Boris Johnson's post-Brexit UK government. It aimed to spread opportunity and prosperity to all regions of the UK, addressing regional imbalances in social mobility and people's life chances. [Some evidence](#) suggests that the allocation of funds has not matched the government rhetoric, and the future of Levelling Up in the current political climate is uncertain.

The purpose of this report is threefold: i. to articulate the specific challenges in Darlington that relate to identifying and measuring "pride in place"; ii. to summarise the project's activities in Darlington; iii. to present key themes, findings and recommendations.

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### **Challenges for Darlington**

Located in the North East of England, Darlington has significant areas of need and deprivation that require—in the language of the political moment—"levelling up". Some of the key challenges for Darlington include: the lowest workplace and residence-based earnings in the Tees Valley; a high proportion of young people aged 18–24 not in work, education or training; local graduates often leaving the town; and adult in-work poverty.

In 2019, as part of the Stronger Towns initiative, the government invited Darlington Borough Council to develop a [Town Investment Plan](#) (TIP). This plan focused on projects that would boost outside investment and visitor spending, which included redeveloping the Yards and town centre, creating an "enlivened" shopping quarter of independent retailers, and investing in Darlington's railway heritage assets. The bid was successful and the Council is currently developing business cases to take forward the Town Deal proposals.

Local Conservative MP, Peter Gibson, has described Darlington as the "[poster child](#)" for Levelling Up, with the government committing to [relocate parts of the Treasury and other government departments](#) to a soon-to-be-built Economic Campus in Brunswick Street. There are currently over 130 Treasury staff already based in Darlington, with numbers set to reach 300 by 2025. The government aims to have the permanent site completed [within the next few years](#).

In 2022, the Council bid for the second round of the Levelling Up Fund (LUF2). The three LUF2 proposals comprised the Linear Park regeneration in Northgate, improving A68 transport connectivity, and the development of a Railway Heritage Quarter, expanding on the

work started in the Town Investment Plan. The culture and heritage focus seeks to build on [“the pride that exists in our borough around our rail heritage ahead of the Bicentenary celebration of the Stockton and Darlington railway”](#). Pride is thus a key measure of success for the Council’s proposed regeneration projects, the arrival of the Darlington Treasury Campus, its tourism strategy, and for its wider ambitions to improve the lives of residents across Darlington.

Given the importance of pride to Darlington’s Levelling Up ambitions, our project sought to understand the meaning, value and utility of pride across the town. We advised on and contributed to the Council’s LUF2 bid, gathering baseline data for the LUF2 monitoring and evaluation. This included trialling new creative community engagement methods through which to explore residents’ understanding of pride in place. Discussions with senior Council officers, leaders from the private and public sectors and local representatives led us to focus on the Northgate ward, an area that [“for too long \[...\] has been overlooked and put on the ‘too difficult’ pile”](#), according to local Councillor Andy Keir. Indeed, our early conversations with decision-makers confirmed the prevalence of this view, made more acute given that Northgate is at the centre of a heritage narrative that city leaders are keen to develop.

The Council’s [Darlington Borough Profile 2021](#) contains the following data about the Northgate ward:

- Northgate has a population of 4,332, the seventh lowest in the town
- Northgate is the most ethnically diverse area of Darlington: the White British population is 78.4% and the lowest in the town.
- 26.4% of Darlington’s Asian population live in Northgate, 12.3% of Northgate’s population
- Northgate has highest proportion of White: Other (5.4%) and Black (1.0%) residents
- Northgate’s Index of Multiple Deprivation score is 7.1, the third-poorest in the town
- Northgate has relatively poor health outcomes, with a self-reported bad or very bad health score of 7.1, one of the poorest in the town
- Northgate scores relatively poorly on a number of children’s health and behavioural risk factors, including A&E attendances and emergency admissions in Under 5s and in its prevalence of overweight children across age groups
- There is a correlation between child obesity and deprivation, with nearly half (46.2%) of Northgate 11–12-year-olds measured as overweight
- Northgate has the third highest levels of premature mortality in Darlington and scores relatively poorly on emergency admissions but well on several incidences of disease
- Out-of-work benefit claimants are most likely to live in the town centre, Northgate, North Road, Firthmoor, Skerne Park and Red Hall areas. Claimants tend to be concentrated towards the centre of the borough, most notably in the Northgate
- The proportion of 18–24-year-old residents in Northgate receiving out-of-work benefits in September 2021 was 15.2%
- While residents in College wards enjoyed an average net annual household income of £32,400 per year in 2018, those living in Northgate averaged just £19,100
- The proportion of children living in relative poverty before housing costs varied between 7% in Hummersknott to 47% in Northgate, almost seven times higher

- Between 2017 and 2021, reported crime had reduced by 21% in Northgate, which has medium crime rates compared to other wards, although it reports a relatively high number of thefts and burglaries
- Areas around the town centre were the most common areas for fly-tip reporting, specifically Bank Top & Lascelles, Northgate, North Road and Park East wards

It was recognised that city-leaders did not have a fully representative, up-to-date view of Northgate from within. Engagement officers we spoke to agreed, adding that a refreshed understanding of the views and needs of Northgate residents would make an important contribution to their work. Responding to these challenges, and in collaboration with community stakeholders, we formulated the following research questions:

- 1. How are residents in Northgate responding to wider changes in Darlington connected to the Towns Fund and the levelling up agenda?**
- 2. How can the Council articulate and make space for the multiple identities of Northgate?**

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### **Research Methods**

Following a period of desk research and online interviews with city leaders and stakeholders, we conducted two fieldwork visits to Darlington: i. during the Platinum Jubilee celebrations (02–05/06/2022), which centred on the Market Square; and ii. in the week leading up to the Community Carnival (20–26/06/2022), an annual event to celebrate and promote community groups and residents in Stanhope Park. On both visits we also conducted research in Northgate: with the Bread and Butter Thing (at The Well Methodist Church and Corporation Road Primary School), Darlington Snooker Club, the Community Picnic in North Lodge Park, and at Ward Degnans Boxing Gym. We devised a creative consultation toolkit to explore our key questions and spoke with around 100 people aged between 16–85, men and women, mostly White British.<sup>1</sup>

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### **Key Themes and Findings**

In this section, we present a descriptive account of responses from the combined research activities, which have been grouped to reflect the key themes that emerged.

#### Heritage

- Residents across Darlington, including in Northgate, often mentioned aspects of Darlington’s heritage: in particular the Head of Steam (more commonly referred to as the “Railway museum”), the Barclays Bank, the legacies of Edward Pease and George Stephenson, the Quakers, and the market town history. The “string of pearls” metaphor did not register as a way to understand or visualise Darlington’s heritage, with some residents rolling their eyes at the idea.
- Residents had strong attachments to historic buildings such as the Darlington Library, though the current scaffolding was deemed an “eyesore”. This attachment, articulated by a few residents, was in part because Pease “gave the library to the town and to the people of the town” (Northgate resident, 2022). This sentiment was

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<sup>1</sup> We made several attempts to contact ethnic minority groups and community leaders, but we were unable to formalise partnerships that would have ensured their more substantial contributions to this study. Conversations with Kurdish, Bengali, Polish and other communities did take place, though mostly on an ad hoc basis.

echoed by several other residents. Even if respondents did not use the building they were very proud of its existence. Indeed, many respondents resented the Council for attempting to close it down. This built into a wider narrative of the Council “not caring” about heritage and historic buildings, which residents found perplexing. Relatedly, many lamented that the Congregational Church in Union Street was demolished.

- Residents are aware and fond of Darlington’s railway heritage but there was a sense that nearby places (e.g. York and Shildon) have more historically important railway heritage assets.
- Relatedly, residents could recognise images of Darlington Railway Station, but rarely used it to travel, citing cost and a lack of necessity. On occasion residents did travel elsewhere (e.g. Leeds for shopping). These people mentioned that they often missed Darlington and looked forward to returning.

### Housing

- There appeared to be a significant number of vacant properties, HMOs, low energy ratings and renters. In August 2021, there were 159 empty homes out of 2,298 residential properties (6.9%). The average for the rest of Darlington is 3.8%. Many landlords do not live in Darlington, and some do not live in the country. Further, residents have anxieties about new housing developments. There is a feeling that “houses are being built everywhere”. However, a participant at the Well Methodist Church acknowledged that new housing was needed, and that regeneration was always “complicated”. Despite the dilapidated Northgate House being a common concern for residents, few wanted it converted into flats due to the associations of social housing with anti-social behaviour. Some preferred that it become office space.
- Some were worried about gentrification caused by the Council’s Northgate Initiative and Railway Quarter regeneration; some worried about compulsory purchase orders to meet the needs of development; and some worried about Northgate residents being priced out of the area. “If I ever won the lottery, I’d buy all the run-down houses and build them up to how they used to be,” noted one Councillor.
- The landlords who appear to live in or near the area are visible in Darlington—they are often found driving in and out of properties—but are understood by many residents as not part of the community. We met one landlord, who owned the property where a youth hub, funded by the Job Centre, was located. They had little knowledge of the activities taking place inside.

### Green spaces

- Welcoming green spaces and revitalised heritage assets were important sources of wellbeing and pride in place for residents of the area. North Lodge Park, North Park, South Park and the Denes were widely liked, and these areas received the most stickers during emoji mapping exercises (**see Figure 1**). Kurdish women in North Lodge Park saw green spaces as vital to building relationships with each other and the wider community. Many started using the parks during the pandemic.
- North Lodge Park was viewed as not the only attractive green space in and around Northgate: the Denes, the Bee Apiary, Skerne Park and other small parks deserve attention and exposure.
- Public events such as the Blues Festival, while popular and lauded, could show more consideration to the multiple cultural and religious perspectives in Northgate. Some

noted that music was played during prayers at the nearby Jamia Mosque, despite requests being made to pause for the duration.

- Residents had concerns about the new developments proposed for the Skerningham Community Woodland. Many treasured this area for days out and were aware of a Facebook group organised against the proposals.
- [Yardens](#) (a combination of garden and yard), which proliferated during the pandemic, were publicised as the "[hidden gems](#)" of Northgate. Along with the underappreciated architecture of [Westbrook Villas](#), these indicate the diverse, lesser-seen attractions of the area which are not always included in official narratives.

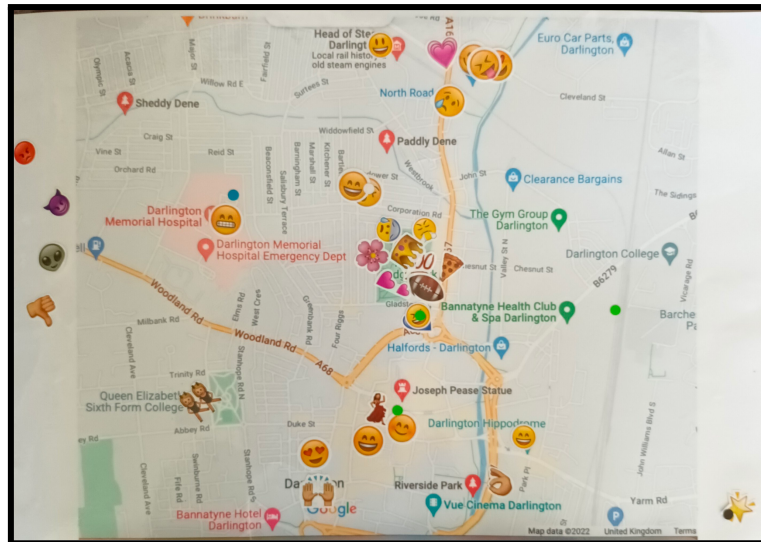


Figure 1

### Jobs and economic growth

- Residents bemoaned the high number of hairdressers, takeaways and nail bars. Asked what they would like instead, residents were sometimes uncertain, with younger people suggesting retail brands such as JD Sports.
- When told about the forthcoming Darlington Treasury Campus and town centre regeneration, residents associated new jobs with these developments. Some were encouraged by the possibility of more employment and opportunities coming to the area. For example, a local business owner from the Bengali community thought the civil service in Darlington offered “opportunities” for his children. While some respondents felt that initiatives like the Treasury Campus did not provide personal prospects, it still signified that the town was “on the up”. Reflecting this view, one town planner thought the North East was a “great place to live” with the benefit of lower house prices and lower cost of living compared to elsewhere in the country.
- Local, small business owners have variable views of the Council. One shop-owner in the Yards thought the local authority had a top-down approach to consultation: “when the Council decides to do something, nothing changes their mind”. Another business owner in Northgate was concerned about the Council ordering a compulsory purchase on his buildings. These views often take in hyper-local concerns. For example, a business owner on Skinnergate felt regeneration always happened at the “other end” of the street.

- [Babul's](#), a restaurant set up by several South Asian friends from Northgate, opened its Darlington town centre branch. Seen as a "success story", and an example of people "giving back", it employs local people and uses local industry, including the steelworks.

### Crime and anti-social behaviour

- There were concerns about high rates of fly-tipping, drug and alcohol misuse, anti-social behaviour, vandalism, and dog mess. Some residents were worried about going out in the dark or at nighttime.
- Residents in Northgate generally did not want to see gates installed to prevent fly-tipping. It was seen as carceral and ineffective: "it would feel like a prison".
- Young people were concerned about and had witnessed bullying and violence in school and public spaces.
- Some residents reported feeling negatively towards young people when they saw them "loitering" and what they assumed to be drug-taking, though no evidence was given to back this assertion up.

### Community assets, services and relationships

- "The people" were often mentioned as Northgate's best characteristic; in particular that they see themselves as "non-judgmental". One community organiser recalled a well-known local man who passed away in the street, and how people across Northgate rallied together "to show respect and memorialise him". The people and the place were described as "beautiful", constituting "the West End of Darlington." Such responses are explained by [literature](#) which shows that pride in place is often rooted in memories, histories and relationships.
- Northgate residents generally had an entrenched, negative attitude to the North Road, which runs through the centre of Northgate, and that its poor reputation would not be necessarily improved through new businesses.
- Despite The Bread and Butter Thing being hosted by local community groups, it still feels to some like an outside imposition which doesn't allow individual choice and factor in cultural and dietary sensitivities.
- Some Northgate residents did not go to the town centre because of a lack of personal relationships and activities "for them".
- Many residents found it hard to imagine what might fill or replace sites that were abandoned or dilapidated: "anything" was a frequent and often forlornly delivered refrain. That said, some respondents could imagine events and activities instead of physical infrastructure to be the solution for derelict spaces. One resident wanted to see a "festival" in the car park mooted for the Darlington Treasury Campus.
- Many residents wanted to see the return of Darlington's outdoor market.
- GP services were thought to be oversubscribed, inadequate and that it was a struggle to get appointments.
- The boxing gym appeared to be one of the few community spaces for young people across Darlington. Sport is key for many residents: Darlington Football Club can be a link between communities and improve social cohesion, despite the history of racism attached to the club. As one respondent noted, "football has no religion."
- Some respondents could not feel pride in Darlington because they "loathe" the current national government.

- One Kurdish woman we spoke with reported that she volunteered in a church “to give back to the community”. In general, people we spoke with from this part of the community reported that they ‘felt comfortable’ using local services and seeking language assistance. Most had children attending schools in the area.

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### **Analysis and Recommendations**

There exist often difficult, sometimes competing, questions about Darlington’s identity, culture, topography, economy, health outcomes and social disparities. As we have shown, Northgate pales on several deprivation and local community indices. Nevertheless, many Northgate residents have a sense of ownership over the town, even if they rarely visited the town centre. This feeling of ownership is historical: the Peases were perceived as paternal ancestors who had bequeathed assets, wealth and status to residents. It may be the case that levelling up *within* Darlington is more pertinent than enhancing the town’s relative status within the country and the responses above demonstrate tensions between national, regional, local and hyper-local forms of pride.

The long-term impacts of reduced local government budgets have, however, thwarted the Council’s capacity for interventions in the area. The Council needs extra resources for inclusive and representative decision-making, for medium-term planning, for meaningful community engagement, and to produce alternative and innovative modes of evaluation for longitudinal research. Relatedly, we understand the loss or absence of community assets in Northgate to be felt as *wounds*. This finding is framed particularly through the experience of young people, with residents identifying that **more services and spaces dedicated to this group would significantly benefit the area**. Residents also recognise that **these services and spaces could simultaneously address the growing problem of antisocial behaviour**.

Many in the community have an emotional investment in protecting and renovating community spaces such as the [Northgate United Reformed Church](#). While funding has been achieved for some projects, we observe that the skills required to form a sustainable Community Interest Company (CIC) or community-led neighbourhood plan need developing. It is crucial to continue efforts to make the Church a community space for all faiths and cultures in Northgate.

**A key aim for the Council and stakeholders should be to develop a robust community ownership strategy. This might include developing relevant training schemes to build community project development and bidding capacity, as well as working with communities to develop links with charities and universities.**

We also make the following **recommendations**:

#### **Developing an inclusive and plural heritage strategy:**

Darlington leaders have a clear understanding that shared celebrations of heritage can improve residents’ place attachment and [senses of wellbeing](#). However, we note that many of Darlington’s plans focus on railway heritage and that decision makers struggle in attempts to exceed this singular narrative. While foregrounding railway heritage makes some sense (and indeed has had success in attracting external funding), it is sometimes at the expense



of other histories and it is not always clearly articulated to residents. While heritage forms a crucial pillar of the town's overall cultural strategy, we suggest that stakeholders be brought together to form an inclusive, plural and forward-looking heritage strategy that can support wider planning goals. It is not always clear how the current heritage strategy connects with residents, or that they are the intended beneficiaries.

### **Regarding the heritage trail:**

We suggest that decision makers pursue multiple heritage trails and might look to the city of Hull for creative solutions which have engaged schools, residents, local businesses and other stakeholders. Hull has the “fish trail” (maritime heritage), the “toad trail” (Philip Larkin sites), and the “moth trail” ([Amy Johnson sites](#)), among others. There is also a “Hull Blitz Trail” and recently a mini-boom in paid guided walking tours—especially around the old town—that explore the history of the city and some hidden gems of the built environment.

Such a programme in Darlington could include co-creation with communities and involve creative methods of marking the sites, mapping and narrating the trails. With [simple software](#), communities of residents and identity-based communities in Darlington could create their own heritage trails, which could also address some of the town-centre bias which can often—understandably—arise when appealing to outside visitors. The [Arthur Wharton Museum](#), for instance, is based in Northgate and run by a local businessman, Shaun Campbell. It celebrates the life of its namesake, a pioneering Black footballer and athlete who settled as a pastor in Darlington. The foundation has public recognition—BT Sport and Sky have covered the story and [Marcus Rashford tweeted about it](#)—but it did not come up in conversations with Council officers, stakeholders or residents. Attractions like this should be included on Council pages, such as [Enjoy Darlington](#) and [Love Darlo](#).

### **Collaborative and creative policymaking:**

We observed top-down approaches to creative culture and regeneration planning that resulted in actions designed to appease the most senior voice, rather than arriving at a considered solution through collective discussion. Sub-groups could be deployed to brainstorm and finesse ideas rather than relying on individuals to have occasional moments of inspiration in top-level meetings when pressed for time.

We advise engagement officers to undertake training in creative methodologies to improve community consultation. This could include workshops with communities to develop more imaginative uses of buildings such as Northgate House, support the development of local small businesses or CICs that may invigorate the high street, and include grassroots organisations and individuals in the project development pipeline. Local providers such as Darlington College, Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form, Darlington Action for Refugees and ELG Planning could host and contribute to the planning of these workshops.

### **Data sharing:**

To support some of these recommendations, we note the lack of qualitative analysis of data on the [Tees Valley Data Observatory](#). This platform does not display granular data beyond a local authority level. Darlington Borough Council could develop its own data observatory and revive (and update) the [Community Survey](#), last distributed in 2013. We suggest devising a joint bid to fund a pilot website, which would bring together narratives and histories of Darlington to complement the existing quantitative datasets. We further endorse the creation

of a report depository that allows local residents, organisations and stakeholders to network and discuss local challenges. Such a mechanism would enable longitudinal tracking of residents' views.

### **Improving local governance and civic upskilling:**

As noted above, communications with Northgate's multiple communities can be challenging. According to [Darlington Assistance for Refugees \(DAR\)](#), there are 28 different nationalities of refugee and asylum seeker in the town. The Council might benefit from employing DAR's knowledge and resources to engage with the multiple identities of Northgate. We further suggest instituting a regular in-person and online forum for the multiple cultural and ethnic groups in Northgate to network and converse.

Creative and participatory projects might be devised to understand how *common knowledge* is circulated locally, which could include strategies to dispel local myths and disinformation. This work could develop basic citizenship skills, such as team-work, communication and confidence. Events, such as the Community Carnival and the North Lodge Park picnic, might include activities to develop these skills and abilities with the community. These programmes could be developed in partnership with local schools, colleges, creative organisations and private businesses, who should be encouraged to contribute money and resources.

### **Reanimating public spaces, celebrating creativity, addressing anti-social behaviour:**

As discussed above, many residents understand the effectiveness of pre-emptive solutions to anti-social behaviour. They often desire interventions such as improved services and facilities for young people. A festival, or a high-profile programme of activities, might be created based around Darlington's green spaces, which we identified as a key part of the town's identity and a source of collective pride. It could include the local schools, drawing inspiration from [The Big Malarkey Festival](#). Such initiatives would create valuable opportunities to develop volunteering skills and capacities, developing on learnings from the [Hull2017 Volunteer Programme](#).

We suggest that a community-run cafe should be encouraged in Northgate to redress the lack of shared social and service spaces. This initiative could draw inspiration from various sources, including [Homebaked](#) and [Granby Four Streets](#). It must be noted that these examples are sustained by significant quantities of cultural, social and educational capital, which would likely need to be developed. An ambitious, long-term programme of community skills and training would transform the area.

### **Local skills strategy:**

To support the long-term sustainability of Levelling Up investments and make sure that the communities in Northgate can benefit, we suggest a programme is developed to include a robust analysis and temperature check of the skills, resources and assets, as well as the support needed for sustainable community ownership. These processes have been shown to increase community capacity in volunteering and other forms of social action, such as the development of neighbourhood plans. This work plan could be matched with investment into lifelong learning. The Northern Echo building is a key aspect of the town regeneration plans, the redevelopment of which will house [a new adult skills centre](#), but it is unclear how this initiative (and other employment opportunities, such as the Darlington Treasury Campus) fit into the [Tees Valley LSIP](#). It is crucial to [develop a critical public sphere](#) in Darlington.

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## **APPENDIX:**

The *Feeling Towns* team would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this report:

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Darlington Assistance for Refugees  
Darlington College  
Darlington Culture Volunteers  
Darlington Green Party  
Darlington Labour Party  
Darlington Neighbourhood Watch  
Darlington Snooker Club  
ELG Planning  
Friends of North Lodge Park  
Friends of South Park  
Friends of the Stockton and Darlington Railway  
The Forum  
Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College  
The Well Methodist Church