

## REPORT TO CABINET

15 JANUARY 2026

## REPORT OF CORPORATE MANAGEMENT TEAM

# CABINET DECISION

### Cabinet Member for Health, Leisure and Culture – Councillor Cooke

### 2025 EVENT SUMMARY AND 2026 MEMORIAL LIGHTING CALENDAR

#### Summary

This report provides an overview of the Council's 2025 Events Programme, combining events delivered directly by the Council's Events Service, with commercial and community-led events delivered by third parties but supported or hosted by the Council.

The report also includes details of the large-scale events delivered in 2025, including the Council's signature event Stockton International Riverside Festival (SIRF), which continues to receive very positive feedback from visitors and residents. Our large-scale events contributed an estimated £2 million to the local economy in 2025

The Stockton & Darlington Railway Bicentenary Festival featured some of the largest events in the Borough in 2025, including the spectacular Ghost Train show. This report includes some information about the S&DR Festival, but as that event extends into the spring of 2026, a separate, full report on the S&DR Bicentenary will be presented to Cabinet in 2026.

As is customary, this report also provides the suggested Memorial Lighting Calendar for 2026.

#### Reasons for Recommendation(s)/Decision(s)

This report gives members information about the impact of events staged during the year, to inform and assist the development future policy in relation to events. The report also provides a list of the campaigns or anniversaries that it is suggested we support using our controllable urban lighting, to enable the decision to be taken by Cabinet to formally endorse these campaigns.

#### Recommendations

1. To note the success of the 2025 events programme
2. To approve the memorial lighting calendar for 2026 and agree that any in year changes to the lighting calendar is delegated to Director of Community Services, Environment and Culture.

## Detail

1. The Borough's event programme continues to be popular with visitor numbers and satisfaction levels remaining high over the past year. There has been a good mix of small, medium and large-scale events delivered across the Borough, including commercial and community led events.
2. The Council's resources continue to be deployed to enable local event organisers to deliver their own community focussed events which, although supported, are delivered independently of the Council. Over 40 community and local events were delivered this year, many delivered on Council land. These events received practical support from the Council, including specialist planning and safety advice, access to relevant Council services and financial support for safety officers, road closures, signage and programming etc.
3. Our large-scale event programme continues to be temporarily impacted due to the ongoing major redevelopment work on Stockton's Riverside and High Street, which is due to be completed Spring 26. The Council is currently reviewing its future events programme as part of its Medium-Term Financial Plan and it will include a review of its large-scale festival and events, and options for a small-scale programme of amination and activation of the new Waterfront space.
4. Internally, there continues to be a joined-up approach across Council teams in the delivery of our events programme, and we acknowledge the effort and support provided from service teams including Enforcement, Highways, Legal, Communications, Media, CFYA and Design Services. The effectiveness of this joint working and ability to respond to unexpected challenges is evident each year and is an integral part of the success of the Council's event delivery. That said, the continued pressure of Council resources and the added work that event planning/delivery requires needs to be considered carefully, particularly for the largescale festivals and events which are resource heavy.

## SIRF

5. SIRF is a long-standing Arts Council England (ACE) National Portfolio Organisation (NPO), funded to present high quality work and support the street arts sector.
6. SIRF 25 is in the third year of an extended five-year funding agreement with ACE (2023 – 2026, extended to 2028) and our festival continues to be highlighted nationally as an exemplar of the development of sustainability in street arts and its management as an example of best practice by an NPO.
7. ACE funding for SIRF 2026 has been confirmed as £327,434.
8. SIRF has a strong reputation for showcasing international programmers, new commissions and we provide one of the largest and most diverse outdoor street arts

festival in the UK. Whilst our ambition is to sustain this reputation and to continue to support artistic development and new work, the wider sector is facing a lack of investment leading to a shortage of ambitious large-scale outdoor street arts shows. This is particularly true of international work, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to find new and exciting shows of the calibre associated with our festival, and with current resources.

9. There continues to be financial challenges associated with SIRQ, not least that the grant contribution for ACE and the Council's budget resource have both remain static since 2019. Inflationary pressures for technical suppliers and rising costs for artists, in particularly the large-scale ambitious shows that SIRQ is renowned for, are becoming increasingly difficult to deliver. This remains a risk area for the SIRQ and may mean a reduction to our festival to a 2-day delivery in the future.
10. We will continue to apply for additional funding from ACE, which is outside of our NPO investment, as well as other funding streams including those managed by TVCA, who are one of our main Cultural Partners.

#### SIRQ 2025 – Delivery & Sector Development

11. SIRQ 2025 hosted an impressive 47 companies, including 12 international groups and over 147 individual performances across the 3 days. This included 10 new commissions and 4 International premiere shows.
12. Although access to our usual Riverside event space was not possible this year, our programme remained ambitious and we delivered some exceptional moments, with a strong artistic programme and community elements.
13. The response we received from artists and audiences was fantastic and it was clear that the appetite for residents to experience high quality arts remains strong, with **94%** of visitors likely to recommend to a friend and **92%** of visitor likely to return.
14. We have estimated footfall of 55,000 visitors across the 3 days which is comparable to 2024. Independent market research has captured positive perceptions, including;

**92%** of attendees rating the festival overall as **good or very good** in 2025, which is consistent with 92% satisfaction in 2024.

15. Members will note a dip in some of the other satisfaction criteria which are detailed below and whilst it is difficult to pinpoint the reason this has happened, we are mindful that SIRQ has been operating in a contained space which has limited the types and scale of shows that can be presented.

**84%** stated that the festival is a **good use of council resources** in 2025, compared with 94% in 2024.

**83%** of attendees stated that the festival is **good for promoting Stockton** as a place to live, work or visit in 2025, compared with 91% in 2024.

**88%** of people stated that coming to the event has a **positive effect on their health** and wellbeing in 2025, compare with 96% in 2024.

16. The figures regarding economic impact remain strong despite a slight dip from last year's event with **direct spend per head** reported as **£31.94** compared to **£34.16** in 2024. The total direct economic impact remains high and more than doubles the Council's investment (budget) for SIRF. Total direct economic spend for 2025 is **£930,178**, compared to **£949,626** in 2024.
17. We continue our partnership with XTRAX, who deliver SIRF's international showcase which supports and promotes our festival across the Sector. The showcase provides opportunities for programmers and artists to pitch new ideas and connect and focus on a specific area of development as well as quality time to network and forge partnerships. In 2025, SIRF hosted delegates from Portugal, New Zealand, Netherlands, Hong Kong, France, Korea and Japan.
18. SIRF is a unique festival to platform work as it remains a 'buyers festival' this includes international programmers booking UK artists to perform in Europe and further afield, as well as UK companies extending their bookings across the UK. In 2025, 93% of delegates (including international delegates) stated that they were wanted to find UK artists/shows, and there was significant interest in 3 Tees Valley Shows and 1 show from the northeast region. These outputs are fantastic in support the wider Culture and specifically our local and emerging artists.

*"I think it's quite rare to see such a well-curated professional programme at a festival of this size. I really appreciated that all the professional sessions took place in the morning, leaving the afternoons free to enjoy the performances."*

*Sijin Kim, Project Dari, Korea*

*The Professional Programme is a very important part of the SIRF experience. It allowed me to make connections with other presenters, and to get an overview of the organisations and networks involved in developing, supporting and presenting outdoor work in the UK. I gained a better understanding of the range of UK artists and their work, alongside approaches to how inclusion, diversity and accessibility is integrated into work for audiences."*

*Drew James, World Buskers Festival, New Zealand*

## Participation & Engagement

19. Participation and engagement work is a key theme for SIRF and there are many opportunities for residents, children and community groups to engage in high quality arts experiences.
20. This year SIRF has worked with 18 Tees Valley artists who have been integral to the planning and delivery of the main SIRF Programme and, a further 24 local artists have

supported our communities, who have attended artist workshops creating costumes, music and choreography.

21. The Community Carnival remains one of our highlights of the festival and is very popular with our SIRC audience growing to 8,000 visitors at the Carnival in 2025, from 6,000 in 2024. We continue to cap our participant numbers at approximately 900, whilst we wait for the Waterfront Park to complete, with 28 groups taking part from local schools and community groups. We supported 5 new diverse groups at our Community Carnival including Whippet Up CIC, Redcar Kirkleatham Museum Group, The Dorman Museum Group and Saltburn Community Group.
22. The delivery of the Rivers of Hope project, in partnership with Thames Festival Trust, engaged with 510 primary school pupils for 11 primary schools and, 76 secondary school pupils from 5 schools.
23. We continue to support care leavers at SIRC, with 2 care leavers who successfully applied to work as part of our Visitor Experience Team. We also engaged with care leavers, to work with a commissioned artist from SIRC and as part of ARC's Make New Work commission on an engagement project through 2025, which will culminate in a visual outcome as part of SIRC Community Carnival in 2026.

#### Accessible & Sustainable SIRC

24. The major events presented by Stockton Council are designed to be accessible to all our communities and as such we continue to develop 'Accessible SIRC', which is a constantly evolving element of our programme and planning to ensure a safe and equitable space for high quality arts experiences which can be accessed by all.
25. SIRC has a well-developed and robust programme for access that is now fully integrated and embedded in our delivery. This includes British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation, Touch Tours, Relaxed Performances, fully interpreted access festival guide film and Audio Description films and resources.
26. We have also made changes to site design for physical access following audience feedback which has proved positive and this year we achieved **95%** of audiences rating the ease of access around the site was very good, which remained the same as 2024.
27. New for SIRC 2025 is the inclusion of learning from the accessibility audit delivered over SIRC 2024. The purpose of this audit is to establish a baseline of how we currently serve our audiences who identify themselves as living with a disability, and what adjustments can be made in terms ensuring the best experience possible. Our current SIRC audience statistics show that in 2025 17% of our audiences identify as disabled which is an increase from 14% in 2024. We engaged with focus groups and established a new Oversight Group of 20 members who represent diversity and lived experiences. We also worked with leaders in access provision; Attitude is Everything with auditor Bee Grzegorzek completing

a site audit during the festival. The report highlighted strengths in staff access training and briefing packs, with recommendations for improvements including viewing areas, signage and formats, and online and digital accessibility for 2025 delivery.

28. In terms of our sustainable festival plan, we collected 420kg of waste in our 'festival recycling' bins. As previously reported, we ensure that all our generators for our shows are HVO powered (Hydrotreated Vegetable Oil the Renewable Diesel Alternative) and this year we tested a solar powered generator for the production compound. Our Environmental Levy for our traders continues to be effective and is something that other festivals are now adopting across the Outdoor Arts Sector as good practice.

### **Stockton & Darlington Railway Festival – 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

29. S&DR200 Festival celebrates the bicentenary of the birth of the modern railways. The festival extends over many months and encompasses sites across County Durham, Darlington and Stockton. It has been made possible thanks to a partnership of Councils, heritage institutions, funders, visitor attractions, rail industry partners and community groups. The festival is not due to finish until March 2026, however, the majority of the programme has already been successfully delivered.
30. A major launch show was presented at 11 Arches, the site created for the Kynren show in Bishop Auckland. This live theatre, music and projected film event culminated with a unique drone animation of Locomotion No 1. The event was hugely popular and covered extensively in the media, effectively launching the S&DR200 Festival to national and international audiences.
31. A significant programme of exhibitions, events and activities have been delivered at Preston Park, including the 'Tracks of Change' exhibition series which explored the impact and legacy of the birth of modern railways. This exhibition programme has proven very successful, attracting thousands of visitors to our museum. Exhibitions include 'Corridors' by international artist Louise Law, 'Gateway to the World' a series of paintings by William P Frith loaned from national collections and 'All Aboard' a bespoke playscape exhibition designed for young children. The exhibition series will finish with a spectacular finale 'Perfume' – an extraordinary sound and light installation by internationally acclaimed French artist Yann Nguema.
32. The festival centrepiece was the recreation of the original 1825 journey from Shildon to Stockton, running a renovated and refreshed Locomotion engine with chaldron wagons and a replica of the first passenger carriage. This ambitious and complex restaging was only possible thanks to the partnership with Network Rail and heritage railway specialists. It allowed us to recreate the moment in 1925 when the first centenary brought the Locomotion to the platform of Stockton Station where it was greeted by the Duke of York, soon to become King.
33. The SDR200 Anniversary Journey weekend reached a crescendo with the massive outdoor theatre show Ghost Train. The show included a bespoke musical score from

international composer Sarah Llewellyn, live music, projections and a 75-strong cast made up of prestigious national and local performers. Audience numbers of in excess of 8,000 were recorded in the town centre and on the Riverside site.

34. The S&DR200 festival has connected and engaged communities in the Tees Valley and County Durham and attracted visitors from across the world, including America, Europe, Africa, Japan, and Australia. Extensive, positive and in depth media coverage across a range of platforms has presented Stockton and the region as a place proud of its historic achievements but looking to the future with ingenuity and ambition. Thousands of local people have taken part directly, illustrating their sense of the ways in which the railways have changed their lives and imaging the futures they might make possible.
35. A full report illustrating the quality and breadth of the S&DR200 Festival will be prepared in Spring 2026, including estimations of economic impacts and the value of media coverage secured.

### **Festival of Thrift**

36. Festival of Thrift is a nationally renowned festival which encourages and celebrates sustainable living. This festival is an important part of connecting our community with the Council's ambitious Environmental Sustainability and Carbon Reduction Strategy and ahead of the planned two-day event in September, the festival team have delivered an extensive community programme of related activities across our towns.
37. The Festival of Thrift took place for the third consecutive year in Billingham Town Centre and John Whitehead Park on Saturday 20 and Sunday 21 September 2025.
38. Visitor numbers across the weekend are estimated at 22,000, which is the same at the 2024 festival, of which 4,098 participated in a sustainability workshop.
39. **89%** of visitors rated their overall experience of Festival of Thrift as very good or good, an increase on 81% in 2024 and 72% in 2023
40. The audience profile over the past three festivals has been relatively consistent, showing that most visitors reside in the UK, half of all visitors are local people from Billingham or Stockton, [55% 2025, 48% 2024 and 48% 2023]. Visitor numbers from elsewhere in the Tees Valley were 24% in 2025, slightly lower than 2024 and 2023 which was 29% and visitors from elsewhere in the northeast were 16% in 2025 compared with 17% in 2024 and 15% in 2023. A very small minority are then from the rest of the UK at 5% the same as 2024.
41. The economic impact for the Festival of Thrift is provided by Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA) and is received the year following a festival. In 2023, Festival of Thrift reported a net GVA of £260,618, with 9.6 FTE supported because of the festival.

Provisional information for the 2024 festival shows a net GVA of £235,000 with 6.13 FTE supported (visitor impacts only) and an overall net GVA of £624,706, with 13.5 FTE supported (visitor and operational impact).

42. Unfortunately, the festival is unable to report on visitor travel in 2025 due to an error in the preparation of the digital survey.

### **Stockton Sparkles**

43. Stockton Sparkles is the remaining large-scale event in the 2025 calendar. The event runs for a period of weeks in the lead up to Christmas, and as usual commenced with a spectacular light switch-on event late November, which achieved one of the highest recorded audience numbers of 7,000.
44. The Christmas Market programme included 24 local artists, makers and food/beverage traders on Stockton High Street, a choir programme with 11 school and community group performing throughout the day and, professional musicians and Street Theatre artists.
45. The free Victorian Fair continues to be very popular with our family audiences, with over 7,000 rides recorded across the three days, and we had 350 children participating in the after dark Lantern Parade.
46. Independent Market Research including satisfaction levels and economic impact are pending at the time of writing this report.
47. 'Santa on Wheels' returns for the fifth consecutive year. This event remains extremely popular with families and communities across the Borough. This year we recorded audience figures of 39,000 across the four-day event. Santa Bus route includes all wards.

### **Other Events in 2025**

48. The Council continues to support a large range of well-established community and local events, including Thornaby Show, Billingham Carnival and Garden Show, EID Festival, Yarm Fair, Tees Regatta, Siren's Fest and for later in the year, Christmas focus celebrations and Light Switch On's events across the Borough.
49. The Council has also delivered and supported several national and memorial events, including Armed Forces Day, 5 Remembrance Sunday events across various Towns and we also celebrated the 80<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of VE-Day, which included 5 Beacon Lighting ceremonies in Stockton, Thornaby, Billingham, Long Newton, Grindon and Thorpe Thewles as part of the national celebrations.
50. The Council's Events Team provides technical support and advice for the numerous communities and externally led events, which includes help with production of event safety

plans, risk assessments, road closures and food safety. Further training and support from local and community event deliverers will be available for the 2026 event season.

51. Moving into 2026, the Council is committed to retaining its leadership role and further developing Stockton's reputation as a creative and dynamic events Borough. We recognised that a creative arts and events programme has many benefits to both the community and economy, and can attract high levels of satisfaction, improve well-being, increase 'direct' spend in the area and generally promote the Borough as a great place for residents, businesses and visitors alike.

### **Memorial lighting calendar**

52. The use of coloured lights in Stockton Town centre and on selected buildings and structures continues to provide the Council with an opportunity to acknowledge and support a range of good causes and important anniversaries. This memorial lighting programme is very popular and generates significant social media activity. The 2025 memorial lighting calendar has been delivered.
53. This report invites Cabinet to agree the programme for 2026, as listed in **Appendix A**. The list incorporates campaigns that might encompass a range of individually narrow issues/interests. The dates nominated in each case are those which are believed to be the subject of a meaningful campaign by others, such that when the lights are switched on the public may have some understanding of the significance of the event/colour.
54. Where a campaign lasts for a period of days or weeks, the normal procedure will be to mark the start of that campaign by turning our lights on for the first day/night. However, where a campaign promoter wishes to use an alternative day within the period to align with specific activity designed to raise the profile of the campaign, we may change the date on which we turn our lights on to fit with the organisers' promotions. The calendar listed at Appendix A therefore includes suggested dates for each event and may be subject to minor changes.

### **Community Impact and Equality and Poverty Impact Assessment**

55. The events programme is diverse and designed to reflect the interests of different communities. Every effort is made to make our events physically and financially accessible, they are presented in public spaces and are almost always free to watch or participate in.
56. Many of our events are specifically designed, in whole or in part, to raise awareness of the needs or characteristics of specific groups, including those with protected characteristics.

### **Financial Implications**

57. There are no financial implications arising from this report

### **Legal Implications**

58. There are no legal implications arising from this report

### **Risk Assessment**

59. All events presented by the Council or approved for Council land are subject to a full risk assessment and proportionate safety plans and, where appropriate are reviewed by Stockton's Independent Safety Advisory Group

### **Wards Affected and Consultation with Ward/Councillors (refer to Concordat for Communication and Consultation with Members)**

60. There is frequent consultation with Councillors over events before, during and after the events are staged. There has been no consultation with Councillors in relation to this report as its primary function is to report on the outcome of events already staged.

61. There has been consultation with the Cabinet portfolio holder for Health, Culture & Leisure in the development of the draft memorial lighting calendar.

### **Background Papers**

n/a

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