

Durham University

Winner of the Family Learning Innovation Award

Durham University is a globally recognised research institution and a member of the Russell Group. The Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics specialises in cutting-edge research on dark matter, dark energy, and cosmology.

Street Cosmos is a collaborative project, uniting Durham University with four community organisations under the Museums Association's 'Mindsets + Missions for Museums and Science Centres of the Future' initiative: Blackhall Community Centre, No More Nowt (Peterlee), Gaunless Gateway (Bishop Auckland), and Teesdale Community Resource Hub (Barnard Castle).

The community partners provide vital services, working to tackle socio-economic challenges, support social inclusion, and create stronger, more vibrant communities. Through Street Cosmos, these partners combine their expertise in academia, community engagement, and creative practices to empower local communities and address socio-economic challenges, fostering cultural and scientific exploration across County Durham.



Family Learning Innovation: Street Cosmos

County Durham boasts a world-leading university, but many of its communities face significant social and economic challenges: 16,477 children live in absolute poverty, 35.2% of residents receive state benefits (compared to 27.9% in England), and only 21.7% of the workforce holds a degree.

For families within the partner communities, there are complex challenges for engagement with more traditional learning activities, such as a lack of finances to travel to museums and learning festivals. To address this, local teams led a range of activities for their users, embedding astronomy and physics within familiar community settings. Working with three key community partners - Blackhall (coastal), Bishop Auckland (industrial), and Barnard Castle (rural) - Street Cosmos co-designed activities that reflected local interests and fostered long-term connections between communities and scientists.



Through a range of space-themed events, exhibits and installations, Street Cosmos created inclusive, hands-on learning experiences that sparked curiosity and imagination in families. The project brought together scientists, charities, food banks, artists and activists to enable families to engage with cosmic concepts in ways that felt approachable and meaningful.

The project engaged learners of all ages and abilities through theatre, art, zine-making and interactive workshops, allowing families to explore scientific ideas in a way that was both fun and impactful. Activities included:

- Space Days – brought families together for hands-on space science activities
- Workshops with scientists and artists, led by Durham University's science engagement team and space researchers
- Artist residencies – including Daisy Arts' space wormhole tunnel and space suit activity at Blackhall Space Day
- 'Go and See' trips – community members visited The Centre for Life, Newcastle
- Big Bang – a large-scale event to showcase the project, celebrate achievements, and recognise key contributors.



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Impact and next steps

"What they learn in school is different to what they learn in the community. We're not teachers – we have fun. It sinks in more for kids who don't get the opportunity to see real scientists and do real experiments. Whether they come out with a whole days knowledge or just one molecule of knowledge – that's what it's all about for us."

– Alison Paterson, Manager, Blackhall Community Centre

Since its launch, Street Cosmos has engaged over 11,000 people across 95 events, collaborating with 35 artists and 37 scientists to make space science accessible. By bringing high-quality cultural and scientific experiences directly into community spaces, Street Cosmos created new opportunities for families to learn together, strengthening intergenerational connections. The project also encouraged community co-creation, allowing families to shape activities based on their own interests and experiences.

Street Cosmos fostered long-term impact by embedding scientific curiosity within everyday life. Families who participated in activities reported a newfound interest in astronomy and science, with some children expressing aspirations to explore STEM subjects further.

The community organisations involved have also developed new skills and capacity to continue delivering creative, science-infused learning experiences beyond the project's duration. By bridging the gap between academia and local communities, Street Cosmos redefined what family learning can look like, making it more inclusive, creative, and impactful.

The project has laid the foundation for future collaborations, ensuring that families in County Durham continue to benefit from high-quality, accessible learning experiences.