

Railway town of Darlington plays new role in sector skills

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The great railway town of Darlington is playing a new role in developing the next generation of industry experts, having been selected as the first regional base for a national skills organisation.

The National Skills Academy for Rail (NSAR), which oversees the quality of apprenticeships and assessment for the rail sector and other industries, has set up a new office at the town's Business Central – just metres from the birthplace of the world's first commercial railway.

The move signals a new approach by the NSAR to establish a more regional presence across the country. If the Darlington move proves successful the organisation will consider pushing out further into the regions to address local skills gaps.

Barry Smith, Head of Assessment at the NSAR, said: "We have a central office in London, near the corridors of power in Whitehall, but our vision is to look much more closely at, understand better and promote the local skills agenda and design solutions that are relevant and effective at this level.

"Darlington is the location for our new external quality assurance service line and we are really excited

about our new Business Central office. What better location for us than the birthplace of the commercial railway?

“We’re just yards from Darlington Station and we’ve a daily reminder from the window of our lovely new office of where Britain’s proud railway heritage began. It’s really satisfying to know we’ll be playing a part in helping it to continue as a competitively positioned industry well into the future by securing a pipeline of talent.”

Six staff will work from the Darlington office and with the NSAR planning to continue to recruit, the team is already considering a move to bigger offices at Business Central.

Barry added: “We considered a number of different places across the region as our new Northern base but Business Central was by far the best for us. Its proximity to the railway means we can build sustainable transport into our work, and its conferencing facilities, open spaces, hot desking area, fantastic support staff and flexible terms make it a perfect fit.”

Though it was originally established as a skills and quality assurance organisation for the rail sector, the NSAR is increasingly diversifying to support the Government’s apprenticeship reforms by extending its expertise in industries including digital, freight and logistics. Its main function is to ensure apprentices and employers get consistently high-quality apprenticeship assessment, regardless of their end-point assessment provider.

Vanessa Wood, Centre Manager at Business Central, said: “It’s a real coup for Business Central to have attracted the NSAR, such a nationally-important company. Darlington and Business Central is already benefitting from an elevated profile thanks to influential visitors and national events that showcase the strengths of our wonderful region.”

As well as 60 offices to rent, Business Central offers co-working space and virtual office services for those who don’t require dedicated space but want a vibrant business community and professional address. Tenants have access to a business support adviser, regular networking and social events as well as a gym and micro spa.