



where  
digital  
happens

Celebrating Success in the  
Tees Valley Digital Cluster





## Professor Craig Gaskell

Pro Vice-Chancellor (Enterprise and Business Engagement),  
Teesside University

**Over the last 20 years, a flourishing digital sector has been a key part of the economic resurgence of the Tees Valley.**

DigitalCity, the university and a whole host of local organisations have played a part in this – sharing expertise, creating a thriving community, and guiding fledgling business leaders through the difficult first steps on their entrepreneurial journey.

It's those business successes – born, raised, and scaled here in the Tees Valley – which deserve celebration.

There are some familiar faces and stories in this summary of the past two decades of work forging a DigitalCity, but there are many previously untold stories too, alongside recollections of the rollercoaster ride of success and sacrifice which every founder goes on.

It's because of those founders, and the wide range of talent that we have on our doorstep, that this region has the thriving digital sector it does.

I am immensely proud that Teesside University has a role in enabling it, and although on a personal level I've only been in this post a relatively short period of time, my predecessor the late Prof Jane Turner OBE was instrumental in that – driven by her passion to create opportunities for everyone and see the best for the whole of the region.

We now have a Tees Valley which, through collective effort, creates digital content for global consumers, develops ground-breaking games and makes real technical innovations in fields like industrial controls and process management.

Now, Teessiders get their head down and get on with the job in hand, but it's important we don't forget to stop and celebrate our successes.

Just because it's your day job doesn't make it any less worthy of note; your business as usual can still be remarkable – it was a delight to read so many stories in this collection which prove that's the case.

We need to shout about those stories from our digital sector, the people behind it and their aspirations for the future.

We don't do that to be big-headed, or because the job is done, but because it helps attract the talent we need to this region and to raise the aspirations of our people.

This publication is a collection of some of these fantastic stories, dedicated to the people and digital powerhouses that we have here in the Tees Valley.



## Lynsey Robinson

Director, DigitalCity

**You don't often get the chance for nostalgia when working with cutting edge businesses, so reflecting on how far DigitalCity has come and the tremendous achievements of the businesses we've worked with is a real pleasure.**

Reflecting on the past allows us to learn about the future and it is a very bright one for the Tees Valley.

Like every vision of the future, it contains uncertainties, but one thing which is unquestionable is that our tech and digital sector will be at the heart of it – not just as stand-alone successes, but supporting more traditional businesses to adapt and grow.

I've been with DigitalCity for a little over five years, but I inherited a thriving and impactful community. For that, I must offer a special dedication to Janice Webster, who founded the organisation and initially suggested a 'DigitalCity'.

Her energy, passion and enthusiasm made it all happen, and she was our greatest supporter even into retirement. Janice sadly passed away in 2022, but her legacy lives on in our vibrant digital cluster.

For two decades, DigitalCity has been a collective effort, shared between our team, our colleagues at Teesside University and our partners.

There are simply too many people to mention, but they all contributed to putting Teesside's digital cluster on the map.

When I think back on just the last few years, the breadth of what has been achieved has been remarkable.

**Our Accelerator** programme has helped early-stage businesses launch or bring new products to market.

**Our SCALE** programme has helped established businesses grow rapidly.

**Our consultancy support** has allowed us to work with a number of businesses to undertake audits, specify solutions and understand technology.

I'm proud of what has been achieved and know that we can look ahead to the cluster continuing to evolve and grow, thanks to the support and energy of the community that's grown up around it.

I look forward to working with you all in the future to tell new stories of fresh businesses, innovative digital products and services, and homegrown talent.

In putting this publication together, we loved hearing about the brilliant stories in the local digital sector and we hope this inspires you to tell yours.



# Mapping the DigitalCity

**Twenty years is a long time in technology. For the last two decades, DigitalCity has been a catalyst for growth and innovation in the Tees Valley, accelerating startups, nurturing talent and helping to create hundreds of high-value jobs.**

Our project was conceived in 2003, as a collaboration between Teesside University and Middlesbrough Council. Since then, DigitalCity has helped create over 250 companies.

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DigitalCity's ethos and culture of co-operation is a huge part of attracting outside businesses to the area. It's really inclusive and welcoming, and it provides something extra – an incentive for companies to be based here.

**Dan Watson,**  
Digital Manager, Middlesbrough Council

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DigitalCity exists to provide a link between industry experts and local talent and make the Tees Valley the best place in the UK to start and run a digital business.

Our history is full of success stories, including independent game developer and publisher Double Eleven, and Big Bite, which builds digital content platforms for huge organisations like The Wall Street Journal, Guntree and Amnesty International.

With the emergence of new technologies and leaner ways of working, our portfolio has expanded to support the wider Tees Valley economy in recent years.

Since 2016, digital transformation has been high on the agenda - with the primary focus being on assisting business owners in traditional industries with their digital plans.

Through our Accelerator, SCALE and consultancy support, we reach a broad cross-section of Tees Valley businesses.

But developing the region's digital sector isn't a standalone project – it takes a village to raise a DigitalCity!

Partnership has always been a key element of what we do, and initiatives like our Technology Futures Institute and our work with the Industrial Digitalisation Technology Centre help businesses in other sectors find practical tech-based solutions to the problems they're facing.

Connecting local digital business with their neighbours in industries like construction and manufacturing means that DigitalCity is a bridge between the Tees Valley's past and future, melding historic expertise with new thinking and cutting-edge technologies.

The solutions are often deceptively simple, but their impact is significant and, ultimately, we help the region and its businesses become more productive and profitable.

After twenty years, we can be proud that the Tees Valley's digital cluster stands shoulder-to-shoulder with their regional, national and international peers.

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DigitalCity has been at the vanguard of championing Digital business across the Tees Valley and its impact in helping develop the capabilities, skills, and tools they need has been extremely valuable. The incredible business stories here show just how strong we are.

**Craig Walton,**  
Chief Digital Officer, Tees Valley Combined Authority

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There's a digital revolution underway, creating a huge opportunity for digital businesses to co-develop with industrial partners here in the Tees Valley, especially with the Tees Valley's digital strengths in areas like data and immersive technology. At the IDTC, we give senior leaders in those industrial businesses - engineering, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, energy – the opportunity to get hands on with technology, so they really understand it and can have confidence in their investments. The businesses we work with don't need to look beyond the Tees Valley to find support and the right partners, DigitalCity are a vital part of that.

**David Hughes,**  
Teesside University's Industrial Digitalisation Technology Centre

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## Case Study

# Wander Films

Chloë Clover, CEO

**My business partner Lou Tonner and I started Wander Films as a video marketing agency nearly five years ago now, while we were travelling round the world. We made content as we travelled, and came home to Teesside to set up the business.**

We've achieved amazing things and worked with so many exciting clients since then, while growing with support from DigitalCity, Launchpad and Teesside University, among others. We're now a team of 20, with our own studio in the centre of Middlesbrough, and we're working on some really cool new ideas, especially in the TV world.

We knew that we wanted to launch the business in Teesside. When we were growing up, the assumption was that you'd need to move away to be successful, and we wanted to challenge that. It was always so important for us to create a space for creative people here in the Tees Valley, and stay in the region we love.

We've faced plenty of challenges along the way. We were totally new to the world of business when we started Wander, so we didn't know anybody, and needed to meet people, be seen and be heard.

We first heard about DigitalCity through Teesside University's Launchpad programme. We were introduced to the DigitalCity team, who have been incredible. We've received support from them multiple times over the years, starting with the Accelerator programme, which gave us the mentorship and advice to pivot and grow at speed.

DigitalCity also helped us access a community of businesses for us to learn from and collaborate. Had we not had that, our growth would have been much slower, and their support is invaluable for any growing business.

In 2021 I was also named in Forbes 30 Under 30, which was mad and even now I think 'how did that happen?!'. That's a recognition of the whole team, how we do things differently and the huge growth we've achieved, working with big names like Hilton, Riot Games, KPMG.

But I hope that it's also a great reflection of our region. As far as I know I'm the only person from the Tees Valley in that list, and it brought a lot of positive attention for the area. There's now a whole new generation of young entrepreneurs coming up, and I think that they are going to do something very special in the Tees Valley.

→ [wander-films.co.uk](https://wander-films.co.uk)



▲ Chloë Clover, CEO Wander Films



▲ (From left) Darren Cuthbert and Bob Makin of Behaviour UK – North



## Case Study

# Behaviour UK – North (formerly SockMonkey Studios)

Bob Makin, Head of Studio

**When Darren Cuthbert and I started SockMonkey Studios ten years ago, we didn't have a business plan – we were just games developers who wanted to make great games.**

As two Teesside University graduates we knew about DigitalCity, and as we had a bit of experience in the industry and a will to do something, we were accepted onto the DigitalCity Fellowship scheme.

That scheme gave us support and mentorship, but it also provided us with a grant to cover our food, our rent and our living costs for the six months while the scheme ran and we started the business.

We honestly thought SockMonkey would last those six months and that would be it, but here we are ten years later.

When the Fellowship ended after six months, DigitalCity could have just shut the door on us, but they didn't. That continues to this day – I'm really good friends with the DigitalCity team, I know I can call on them with anything.

I don't think there are many other clusters with support programmes like DigitalCity; programmes that have been going as long and had such an impact, especially in the gaming industry. There are some really big studios that have been involved with DigitalCity.

The games industry in Teesside must be close to a thousand plus people now, and when we go around the world, they know Teesside. They know the companies.

It all starts with groups like DigitalCity, giving creative people a chance and building the right ecosystem here.

There's Teesside University with its talented graduates, DigitalCity funding and teaching the business skills, and Teesside LaunchPad enabling people to start while keeping the cost down.

There's a fantastic community that has spawned from DigitalCity too, a group of people who've been through their business journeys, have got the battle scars and can share experiences and help each other.

If we'd started this business without DigitalCity we never would have made it this far – the Fellowships got us going, and the SCALE programme changed our mindset so we weren't happy with ten people; we wanted fifty people, a hundred people.

SockMoney Studios started with DigitalCity supporting two lads, and we've just sold to Behaviour Interactive, a 1,200 person multi-national. It's been a wild journey!

DigitalCity's Fellowship is the best thing I've ever done. It's changed my life.

→ [bhvr.com](https://bhvr.com)





## Case Study

# Key Wellbeing

Melissa Armstrong, Creative Director and Co-Founder and Marie Ranson, Commercial Director and Co-Founder

**Our focus is on making workplaces happy and healthy places to be. We had experienced corporate burnout ourselves and wanted to support people directly.**

We started the business in early 2020, before everyone knew what was going to happen in the world that year! Our original plan was to do lunch-and-learn sessions in workplaces, however once the pandemic hit it became clear that wasn't possible.

We knew that COVID was going to be a really hard time for people, and our first thought was: how can we help? We had always planned to have a digital offering, but lockdown accelerated that. So within two weeks we had put together a website with a range of free resources for wellbeing.

The pandemic made people realise that they had to look after both their mental and physical health. Putting that top of the agenda helped us as a business, and employers want to get that help and support for their staff. Our mission is to continue to help people as we grow as a business, to evolve our offering further, support the workplaces of the future, and to create long-lasting change.

We reached out to businesses, inviting them to share the website with their staff to help them during that tough time. In only a few weeks, we had thousands of people on the website, but not having a tech background ourselves we felt a little daunted!

It was around then that we met the DigitalCity team. We accessed a grant and a programme of support, which helped us structure our digital offering and shape our MVP (minimum viable product). Our advice to anyone would be to take up that support from DigitalCity – you don't realise until you speak to the experts how much they can really help.

The Tees Valley benefits from a great business network. People are willing to help and share their own stories, especially fellow female founders, and really want to see our local businesses succeed.

A lot of traditional businesses know that they need to be digitally 'visible', so connecting with digital businesses is very important and it's great to see that happening in our region. Whether it's employee engagement, marketing or cyber security, there are so many businesses out there who can help. The support is there to help you – if you have a good idea, go for it!

→ [keywellbeing.co.uk](https://keywellbeing.co.uk)



▲ Melissa Armstrong, Co-Founder (Left), Marie Ranson, Co-Founder (Centre) and Hannah Draboczy, Marketing Lead at Key Wellbeing (right)

# DigitalCity - A Digital Timeline







▲ Paul Bass, Director, Core Systems Software



## Case Study

# Core Systems Software

Paul Bass, Director

**Core Systems Software came from an idea I had while working as a quantity surveyor on big construction projects.**

I knew we needed something to allow people working both on-site and off-site to capture data and use it in a clever way.

I went to Darlington Borough Council and said 'I've got an idea, how do I go about making it happen?' and they sent me straight to DigitalCity.

When I met with the DigitalCity team they pointed me to the Accelerator Programme – it gave me the background and the introduction on how to create Core Systems Software.

The support was brilliant, I've done workshops, had mentoring and been on an investor-readiness programme.

The community and connections around DigitalCity have been instrumental too.

They put us in touch with Paul Drake at Sapere who have done all our development, and with Duco Digital who've built our website.

They've even made introductions to clients, connecting us with Woodsmith Construction Group, who were the primary early adopters of Core Systems Software and are now using it on all their projects.

Through one DigitalCity connection - the offshore business Trident - we've done work in France, Scotland and Rhode Island in the US, and visited the World Offshore Wind Summit in Baltimore.

Before the Accelerator Programme there wasn't a system, there was an idea.

Then through the process we've been through with DigitalCity over the past five years, it's gone from nothing to actually being something – all built here in the Tees Valley.

In the past, this region has had rough press, but there's a really strong digital community and a lot of opportunity unique to the area – people are proud to live here and want the Tees Valley to do well.

There are huge benefits that come from mixing our digital and traditional businesses.

When I look at what Core does for the construction sector – helping manage projects and assets, keep site diaries, even create virtual environments for staff inductions – it all saves time and money and makes them more productive.

When we work together, we can innovate and solve problems – DigitalCity is a massive part of making that happen.

Simply put, we wouldn't have been able to achieve what we have today without DigitalCity's support.

→ [coresystems-software.co.uk](https://coresystems-software.co.uk)





## Case Study

# Memory Applications

Peter Holdsworth, CEO

### Memory Applications was founded three years ago when I lost my grandmother.

As people we create memories every day, but we've lost the ability to tell the story behind the memories and explain the significance and meaning to the people who create them.

That's not just for each of us now in the present time, it's for the generations that come after and how the memories we create today can have an impact tomorrow.

Thinking about this, we started looking at applications which could record a person's whole life story.

We had our idea and started to build a prototype with an outsourced development team in India, but we struggled with the language barrier and with timezones.

We wanted to bring production back to the UK, being based in the Tees Valley was important to us – we're a northern product, the north is big on family and we wanted to be rooted in the community in everything we do.

To help us achieve that, we contacted Teesside University and had a conversation with the team at DigitalCity.

The DigitalCity team looked at the prototype we'd built, gave us some really valuable feedback.

As a start-up you have so many questions you don't have the answers to – but going to DigitalCity helped us answer some of those questions.

From then on, the help and support that DigitalCity has offered is another level – it's world class.

The Digital City team and the Accelerator programme mentoring team's advice is so valuable, and they've got so many connections and ties with the digital sector in the area.

On our own journey, a challenge was we didn't have a brand identity.

The DigitalCity team knew graphic designers who had been through the programme they could put us in touch with.

Then when we explained that we wanted to bring development back home, they knew developers and we were able to build strong connections through them helping us.

Without their support, so many businesses would have struggled to get off the ground or gone to the wall.

DigitalCity don't just leave you when you're finished with them, they're there all the way through your journey and throughout your business life – they're just great friends.

→ [odyssea-app.com](https://odyssea-app.com)



▲ Making memories – (from left) Sven Hampson, Peter Holdsworth and Richard Brown from Memory Applications.





▲ Matthew Protheroe-Hill, Managing Director, Sencode Cyber Security

## Case Study

# Sencode Cyber Security

Matthew Protheroe-Hill, Managing Director

**Sencode Cyber Security offers comprehensive training programmes to improve cyber awareness and cyber security across industry.**

Three like-minded Teesside University students decided to go into business together – and the rest is Sencode history. We spotted a clear gap in the market for penetration testing; companies were getting their infrastructure tested but then there wasn't much tangible improvement in security a few months later.

On top of this, workplaces also lacked cyber awareness and didn't fully understand the risk that cyber attacks pose. That's a big industry problem that we at Sencode wanted to tackle.

Sencode was set up in 2019, and we were soon introduced to the fantastic DigitalCity team through the Launchpad, Teesside University's Entrepreneurial Community. Immediately, DigitalCity was a game changer for us.

At the time, we had a hurdle to overcome; we knew what problems we wanted to address in industry, but we didn't yet have the expertise to set up or run a business.

There was so much uncertainty around the pandemic so we needed to know how to run a lean business efficiently and effectively. That's where DigitalCity made a big difference to us, giving us the information we needed to get started.

DigitalCity offered us an amazing level of support and advice, which continued during and after our time on the Accelerator programme, and we've kept in touch ever since. They continue to support us in pursuing the right opportunities for us as a business, even to the point where we've been able to secure angel investment.

Being based in the Tees Valley has been hugely beneficial – after all, we met right here at Teesside University! We're lucky enough to have state-of-the-art premises on the University campus, which is a big help for our business.

We've been able to access not just support from the University and the Launchpad initiative, but the wider community also. We're rubbing shoulders with other great business minds who are growing at the same time as us.

The future for Sencode is bright. We have big plans for growth, including expanding to Darlington, and the level of support here in the Tees Valley is a real enabler of that growth.

→ [sencode.co.uk](https://sencode.co.uk)





## Creative FUSE Tees Valley

**Creative Fuse Tees Valley is an ERDF-funded DigitalCity initiative and part of the wider Creative Fuse North East project, which is run in partnership by Teesside, Durham, Sunderland, Northumbria and Newcastle Universities.**

It aims to boost the region's creative and cultural sectors by supporting freelancers, sole traders and SMEs to innovate and grow through mentoring and masterclasses on key business and financial themes.



### Case Study

## Theatre Hullabaloo

Miranda Thain, Artistic Director

**Theatre Hullabaloo is a charity which believes that creativity should be a part of everybody's childhood.**

We have a broad portfolio of creative activity focused on children and families, mainly based at our home The Hullabaloo, which opened in Darlington in 2017.

When we were forced to close our doors during the pandemic, in the first few months we were contacted by lots of families in our local communities who felt that they didn't know how to do positive things with their babies in the way that they'd hoped.

We created Hullabaloo baby play packs with support from the Tees Valley Combined Authority and partnerships across South Tees, which we were able to roll out to 3,500 families across the region.

We clearly had a product that was of interest, but we didn't have the expertise in the team to exploit that fully – we took that challenge to Creative Fuse to find experts in product development and scaling of the product.

We faced a similar problem around our digital presence, where we didn't have the skills in-house, and we worked with DigitalCity to connect with an agency who carried out a digital audit for us.

Creative Fuse helped us to decide that scaling of the baby play packs in that model at that time wasn't the right decision for Theatre Hullabaloo, but once we were able to engage with people in real life again, the packs became an integral part of a socially-prescribed play programme which is answering a real need in our communities and proving to be a valuable collaboration with health partners.

What I was able to access at a really crucial point was a whole skillset that I just didn't have. Not only was that really useful to the development of our business, but it became a really interesting, creative dialogue as well.

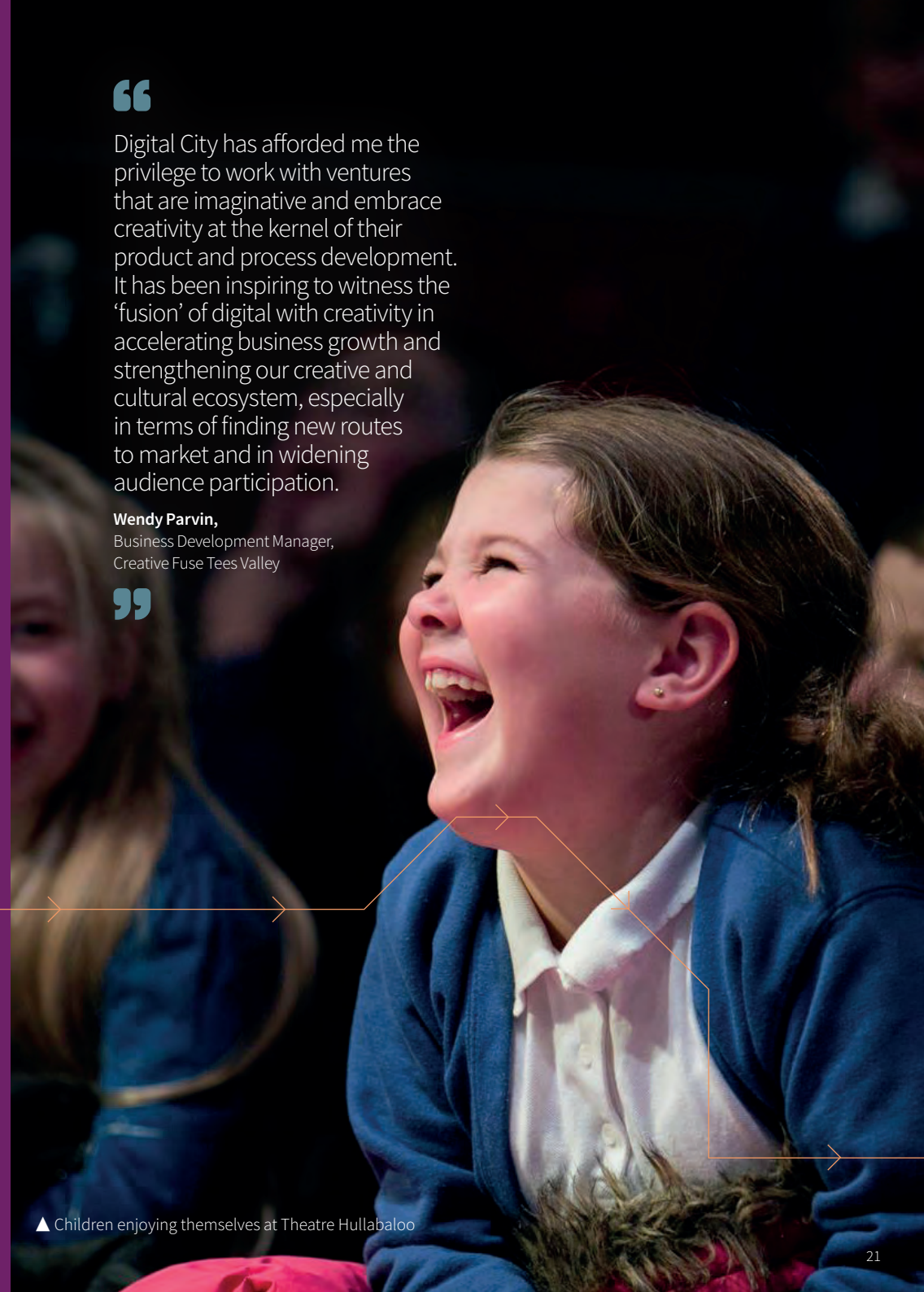
→ [theatrehullabaloo.org.uk](http://theatrehullabaloo.org.uk)

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Digital City has afforded me the privilege to work with ventures that are imaginative and embrace creativity at the kernel of their product and process development. It has been inspiring to witness the 'fusion' of digital with creativity in accelerating business growth and strengthening our creative and cultural ecosystem, especially in terms of finding new routes to market and in widening audience participation.

**Wendy Parvin,**  
Business Development Manager,  
Creative Fuse Tees Valley

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▲ Children enjoying themselves at Theatre Hullabaloo

# What DigitalCity means to me



It's a pleasure working with the incredible companies who've shown real imagination and bravery in creating this digital cluster; centred on Middlesbrough and spread across the Tees Valley.

**Cheryl Evans,**  
Project Manager, DigitalCity



Having been born in Middlesbrough, it's wonderful to see Teesside have the ambition to invest in and build an internationally renowned digital ecosystem.

**Scott Watson,**  
Sector Growth Manager,  
DigitalCity



Through my role, I can see the upward trajectory the Tees Valley is on – it's an exciting time and our digital businesses are a big enabler of that.

**David Dixon,**  
Digitalisation, Scale and  
Investment Manager, DigitalCity



The opportunity to share my knowledge with local companies, supporting in their digital transition is incredibly rewarding, as well as witnessing their ongoing success with the knowledge we were able to help.

**Martin Green,**  
Sector Growth Manager,  
DigitalCity



Growing up locally, one of the most rewarding things about working with DigitalCity is seeing local businesses develop and benefit from our support.

**Akeel Majid,**  
DigitalCity Communications &  
Events Officer



This publication is a great celebration of the achievements in the Tees Valley digital and tech sector, I look forward to what the future will bring for the region.

**Michelle Tanner,**  
Project Coordinator  
DigitalCity

# DigitalCity in companies

DigitalCity has worked with more than 500 companies over the years. Here are some of them:

SENCODE CYBER SECURITY VOXPOPULAR MARK KIERAN FREELANCE THE WISHING WELL SOCKMONKEY 3FLY DESIGN LAMASALECH FILE UNDER MEDIA COATSINK SOFTWARE G.E.P. ODDBALL MEDIA OPPORTUNI DIXIO E-FINITY GAMES STUDIO HELIDRAGON SONODROME LISTENUPNORTH.COM KUMOPROJECT HUSH DIGITAL DECIBEL PICTURES DANIEL MCCLOSKEY FREELANCE BRIGHTARCS DARLING DASH WAYNE SMITH FREELANCE POWER TO THE PEEPLES WRITERS BLOCK NORTH EAST THE MOLECULAR WORKSTATION ONENINEFOUR STUDIO CARDBOARD SWORD FLOW PRODUCTIONS SPEARHEAD INTERACTIVE ARCUS STUDIOS DIGINIMBUS GOSPELWARE KIDS FOR KIDS UK DANDY THREADS REFERENCE POINT FILMS COLONY THE GAMES FREE DREAM JMW DIGITAL MICROELECTRODE SOLUTIONS OUT DE ANYMC KOLAIT HACKS CALM WHITE AERIAL NEURO PINEVI MEMOF STUDIO ACAD FILMS MUSIC LOGIC TECH INNOV SOUND AUDIO SEED F YELLOW PROPAGANDA OBSCURE DIMENSION SEERBI FRANK DHO TEL FREELANCE HALCH HYBRID HOBGOBLIN 3D SOUND OF DESIGN CONCEPT PICTURE PRODUCTIONS LO-JEN REALWORLD INTERACTIVE AVENUE ENGINEERING STRAWBERRY CHALK TWISTED STUDIO BABEL DIGITAL ELAMB CONSTRUCT PHOTOGRAPHY FLUID PIXELS HEADTOWN DESIFA MEDIA MARQUE ILLUSTRATED IDENTITY NUYU NUTRITION WANDER FILMS TAKEONE27 VERSO-STUDIO MARC GANLEY FREELANCE ANDREW MCADAM FREELANCE NOOR FILM PRODUCTIONS RIVIERA DIGITAL PHILANTHROPY STUDIOS HAMBLETON GROUP MARK CROSS FREELANCE DIGITAL ZENITH NEIL MILLWARD FREELANCE FRESHOLD TONY SHAW DESIGN KRACKEN IM ZAYNA MEDIA OPTO-MEDIA CORE SYSTEMS SOFTWARE WIDELOAD MEDIA





[www.thedigitalcitymap.com](http://www.thedigitalcitymap.com)



## Interactive Map

- Use the map to search for digital expertise or sign up to an event on the platform, and the map can route you to the location of the business, multiple venues or places of interest in the Tees Valley.
- Put yourself on the map (literally!) – Our dedicated admin team can review and approve your digital/tech Tees Valley business and have it added to our map, so users can search for you through the service catalogue and map.

You can add your digital organisation on the map by signing up. Access the platform now via [www.thedigitalcitymap.com](http://www.thedigitalcitymap.com) or by scanning the QR code on the right.



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SCAN ME

DigitalCity has been driven by:

