

Hopetown Darlington

McNay Street, DARLINGTON, Durham, DL3 6SW, United Kingdom

Summary

RATING**Quality Assessed****SCHEME****Visitor Attraction****OVERALL QUALITY SCORE****94%****VISIT DATE****09 June 2026****VISIT TYPE****Day Assessment****ASSESSOR****Rachel Thompson****DEBRIEF CONTACT****Leona White-Hannant** Development Director

Hopetown Darlington has achieved a score of 94% at the time of this assessment and has retained the VisitEngland accreditation of a quality attraction. This is a 1% increase since the last assessment and demonstrates consistently high standards across all elements of the attraction.

Highlights of the visit were many from the varied forms of engaging interpretation to the consistently excellent standards of customer service from both staff and volunteers.

Due to the high scores achieved, the attraction will once again be nominated for three prestigious accolades from VisitEngland; the 'Welcome' for the outstanding customer service, the 'Best Told Story' for the superb interpretation including the volunteer guide in the Stores, and the 'Gold' for the overall high scores in all areas. Winners of the accolades will be announced later in the year.

This report highlights the key findings of the assessment as discussed on the day of visit with Leona White-Hannant, Development Director.

Quality Rating

How the Overall Quality Rating is Achieved

When VisitEngland assessors visit, they will evaluate and give a quality score to all assessed elements.

Elements in each section are scored as follows:

- 0 Unacceptable
- 1 Poor
- 2 Disappointing
- 3 Good
- 4 Very Good
- 5 Excellent

In order to achieve accreditation, a score of at least 60% overall and in all sections, excluding Pre-arrival is required.

Additionally, all individual elements must score 1 (poor) or higher.

A sectional or overall score below 60% or an individual element score of 0 (unacceptable) will result in a fail.

	SCORE	PERCENTAGE	RATING
Pre-arrival	9	90%	
Online Presence	5		
Leaflet/Brochure	4		
Arrival	18	90%	Quality Assessed
Car Park	4		
First Impressions	5		
Layout & Entry Management	5		
Visitor Information & Signage	4		
Attraction	42	93%	Quality Assessed
Layout & Visitor Flow	5		
Range of Content	5		
Visitor Information & Signage	5		
Appearance of Grounds & Gardens	4		
Appearance of Buildings	4		
Décor & Maintenance	5		
Presentation of Displays	5		
Quality of Interpretation (Fixed)	4		
Quality of Interpretation (Other)	5		
Cleanliness	23	92%	Quality Assessed
Car Park & Arrival Areas	4		
The Attraction	5		
Toilets	4		
Catering Outlets	5		
Retail Outlets	5		
Toilets	13	87%	Quality Assessed
Provision, Location & Layout	5		
Décor & Maintenance	4		
Fixtures & Fittings	4		
Catering	22	88%	Quality Assessed
Layout & Ease of Use	5		
Ambience & First Impressions	5		
Decoration, Furniture & Fittings	4		
Food: Range & Menus	4		
Food: Quality & Presentation	4		
Retail	20	100%	Quality Assessed
Ease of Use & Visitor Flow	5		
Display Units, Fittings & Lighting	5		
Presentation of Merchandise	5		
Range & Appropriateness of Merchandise	5		

	Staff	64	98%	Quality Assessed
Appearance of Staff		5		
Admissions: Customer Care		5		
Admissions: Efficiency		5		
Admissions: Knowledge		5		
Guides: Customer Care		5		
Guides: Efficiency		5		
Guides: Knowledge		5		
Catering: Customer Care		5		
Catering: Efficiency		4		
Catering: Knowledge		5		
Retail: Customer Care		5		
Retail: Efficiency		5		
Retail: Knowledge		5		

Pre-arrival

The attraction has a strong online presence with a bold and comprehensive website and well managed social media platforms. In addition, there is a well populated Knowledge Panel on Google and an up to date entry on RatedTrips.com.

The website hopetowndarlington.co.uk is an excellent resource, with clear and helpful information to assist and inspire visitors including an excellent AccessAble guide and 3D Tour. Social media pages are maintained on a regular and consistent basis. The number of followers continues to increase; on Facebook there has been an impressive increase of 8k followers since the last assessment to now over 25k, meanwhile Instagram is up from 2930 to 4595 and TikTok from 735 to 1269. YouTube remains popular and it is good to see new videos for visitors to enjoy. Google and TripAdvisor are still good methods for gaining visitor feedback. The Google rating has increased to 4.6 (from 4.5) from 1348 reviews, while TripAdvisor remains at a rating of 4.4 from 542 reviews.

The attractive promotional leaflet provides a very good overview of the attraction to inform and inspire. The top of the front cover was utilised well with the name of the attraction and reference to Free entry.

There was good use of the VisitEngland logo to further promote the quality of the attraction.

Recommendations

- reply to online reviews (both negative and positive) in a timely and professional manner to demonstrate engagement and build trust
- the opening times on TripAdvisor require updating as they currently state the attraction is open on Mondays
- consider a two tier location map for the leaflet; a detailed map of Darlington along with a smaller map of the wider area to put the detailed map in context. The wider map could include the entire distribution area to assist those browsing leaflet racks further afield
- pictogram symbols could be utilised on the back page to summarise the services and facilities available

Arrival

There was very good signage to direct drivers to the car park, both white on brown and branded. The large car park was to a very good standard with clearly marked bays on a smooth tarmac surface. It was disappointing that the EV charges were still not operational; it was discussed that the car park was managed by the Council and not the attraction.

From the car park the iconic Skerne Bridge could be seen and it was encouraging to note that the attraction had made a feature of this by installing a large steel picture frame.

Directional signage from the car park was clear and prominent to direct visitors. The attraction was announced well and included a large external plasma screen for passing traffic to see. Whilst there was a number of steps up to the entrance they had been adorned with inspiring words to add interest. There was a purpose built accessible route, automatic doors and low level information desk to enhance ease of use. Whilst opening times were provided on the doors there was no reference to free admission.

The interior of the Goods Shed had positive impact with impressive features such as the large split-flap display and plasma screen running the length of the counter.

Having the map of the site on the counter was an excellent concept to offer visitors an introduction to navigating the attraction.

Recommendations

- activate the EV chargers
- fix the broken fence rail by the ticket machine (see pic)
- reference to opening times and free admission could be provided in the car park, and free admission could be highlighted at the main entrance
- the VisitEngland plaque could be installed to further promote the quality of the attraction

Attraction

The layout and visitor flow around the site works particularly well with some excellent pathways, automatic doors, numerous benches and many picnic tables for visitors to enjoy.

The range of content was superb with a most comprehensive look at the story of Darlington's role in the creation of the railways. Utilising the original railway buildings creates an authentic visitor experience. They have been re-purposed to an excellent standard. In addition to the Station Museum, Carriage Works, Wagon Woods and Viewing Gallery, at the time of this assessment the new Garden was complete and offered a picturesque and peaceful area for visitors to enjoy with well placed seating. Further additions include more fun outdoor games including swing ball, giant Guess Who, Snakes and Ladders and Jenga to complement the internal lego area. The large canopy with bean bags was an excellent concept to offer visitors shelter from both sun and rain. Visitor information consisted of well placed orientation panels which were clear, helpful and included useful 'you are here' markers.

The appearance of grounds was mixed; the new Garden was maintained to an excellent standard but the grassed areas were often quite patchy. Numerous flower tubs were colourful and weed free. There was good provision of water bowls for dogs and well stocked poo bag dispensers. Buildings were seen to be in a very good state of repair with just occasional peeling paintwork as seen on the Carriage Works. Internally standards of decor and maintenance were found to be excellent.

The displays of artefacts were creative and attractive; from thousands of items in the stores to the impressive locomotives in the Station Museum. The many and varied interpretation styles were engaging and entertaining as well as being educational; they included many innovative and impressive digital techniques. All the interactives were found to be in good working order and play stations such as the dressing up and Refreshment room role play were well stocked and seen to delight younger visitors. The immersive 'Experiment' experience was a superb and fun experience for all the family.

The interpretation provided by the volunteer guide was excellent.

There was very good opportunity for visitors to make a donation using one of the contactless points across the site.

Recommendations

- address the interpretation which utilises QR codes; it was not working on the day of visit
- attend to some of the areas of erosion where visitors have cut corners instead of following pathways
- a permanent path could be created on the small section of eroded grass which links the toilets by the kiosk to the tarmac path which is in the direction of the Goods Shed
- remove the Hopetown leaflets from 2025 that are available within the Stores
- opaque vinyl could be utilised on the windows of the first floor of the Station Museum to improve appearances and conceal all the items that are currently stored there which look untidy
- some areas of grass could be reseeded to offer better coverage such as near the pram park

Cleanliness

Considering the large size of the site it was encouraging to note such high levels of cleanliness in all areas with just occasional points noted as highlighted below. There is clearly a regular and thorough cleaning routine in operation across the whole site. In particular it was good to note that all the sanitary ware in the toilets was to a high standard of cleanliness. No litter was seen within the site which is most commendable however some was seen within the car park.

Recommendations

- once the surface is dry consider remove the yellow cones to create more space on the stairs up to the Viewing Gallery
- check toilets, particularly after school group visits, to remove the tissue noted on the floor
- include the car park in the daily litter pick if resources allow
- a deep clean or fresh sealant could be considered for the 3 cubicles by the Kiosk where black mould is starting to appear

Toilets

There was excellent provision of toilets across the large site with facilities in the Goods Shed, Station Museum, Carriage Works and by the Kiosk. A number of accessible facilities were available along with baby change units. In addition, a very well equipped and spacious Changing Places was provided.

All checked were found to be well stocked with soap and tissue, and in a good state of repair. The decor and fittings were modern and included excellent provision of mirrors.

The gents toilets were not assessed.

Recommendations

- the sanitary bins in the ladies in the Carriage Works are not appropriate as they do not allow visitors to sit on the toilets without touching them; continue to seek alternative receptacles for these small cubicles
- review the provision of the poster holders and utilise where empty, as noted in a few facilities
- fix the bulb in the accessible facility in the Carriage Works
- install hooks in all cubicles to assist visitors
- the baby change unit in the cubicle behind the information desk requires attention as the strap had got caught and was unusable
- ensure all emergency cords are hanging freely to the floor as recommended

Catering

Outlet(s) Visited Clocktower Cafe, Kiosk

Food & Drink SampledAmericano, Cheese Scone, Can of water, Falafel wrap and crisps, Rocky Road, Rose Lemonade, Takeaway Tea from the kiosk

The Clocktower Cafe is a very good facility overall. Situated within the original Goods Shed the space is complemented by interesting features such as the coal pouring into the wagon, the overhead train, and the impressive hologauze display. The furniture was appropriate and the small, portable tables offered flexibility to cater for larger or smaller groups.

The wooden cutlery and condiment stations were well stocked and there was good provision of high chairs.

It was good to note more items were now available since the last assessment due to the new supplier. The chiller cabinet was fully stocked with a variety of sandwiches, wraps and children's bags. In addition, the menu included soup and jacket potatoes. The impressive cakes and bakes on display looked most appetising.

Everything was clearly labelled and priced to assist visitors and the drinks menu was clearly displayed behind the counter.

The americano was to a high standard and served in an attractive mug. The Cheese Scone was fresh and flavoursome and generous in size; the chutney worked very well with it. On returning for lunch the visitor chose the Falafel wrap which was enjoyed however the tortilla was soggy in places, it is to be acknowledged that the use by date was the day of visit and the wrap had 50% off. The Rocky Road was delicious and again, a very good size portion.

The Kiosk offered a basic but welcome service of drinks and ice cream. There was excellent provision of outdoor seating, although on the day of visit the intermittent showers rendered it rather wet all day. A cup of tea was purchased.

Recommendations

- consider providing jugs of water and glasses to allow visitors to help themselves
- as required, replace the rubber stoppers on the base of the chair legs
- consider expanding the menu offer at the Kiosk if felt appropriate
- some sheltered seating could be considered for visitors to the Kiosk
- plates and glasses could be made available for visitors to help themselves (no plate was provided for the wrap nor a glass for the can of water)

Retail

Outlet(s) Visited

Hopetown Goods & Gifts, Carriage Works

The purpose built retail area at Hopetown is a credit to the attraction. The inventive and appropriately themed display units, some made by hand by a local supplier, offer creative and attractive ways to present stock.

Great effort has gone in to sourcing and producing a comprehensive range of branded merchandise including clothing, sweets, toys and souvenirs, to cater for all ages.

All items were clearly labelled and priced using mini chalk boards which worked well.

It was good to note that quality baskets were available for those making multiple purchases.

A limited range of stock was also available in the Carriage Works where the high standards of presentation were repeated.

Recommendations

- continue with these excellent standards

Staff

All staff were easily identifiable in bright branded clothing with the powerful phrase 'We changed the world from here' on the reverse.

On arrival the visitor was greeted by a cheerful member of the team behind the desk. He provided a warm welcome and used the orientation map to highlight the different areas of the site. He answered all questions very well and overall created an excellent start to the visitor experience.

A volunteer guide was on duty in the Stores; he proactively engaged with the visitor and provided fascinating information using the impressive model of the Darlington and Stockton line. He had great enthusiasm and superb knowledge and enhanced the overall visitor experience.

In the Carriage Works a cheerful female member of the team was on hand to answer questions and provide information about the forthcoming exhibition.

A ticket for 'Experiment' was purchased adjacent to the ride from a friendly member of the team, he provided clear instruction and reassured the visitor how to stop the ride if they were uncomfortable.

Across the attraction other members of staff were noted intermittently and all provided a cheery greeting.

All members of the catering team, in the Clocktower Cafe and Kiosk, were friendly, knowledgeable and helpful. They were efficient with regards to service and clearing tables. In addition to answering questions about the catering offer well, it was encouraging to note that they could competently answer questions about the wider site.

High standards continued in the shop where staff enthused about the stock and were keen to assist visitors.

On leaving the attraction staff offered a smile and a 'thank you' which was a positive way to end the visit.

Overall the staff and volunteer made the visitor feel most welcome and valued.

Recommendations

- the catering team could promote the loyalty card at point of sale
- continue with these consistently high standards as they enhance the overall visitor experience

Images

Broken rail in car park



Erosion between path and toilets



Cluttered windows



Ill fitting sanitary bins



Useful Numbers

Customer Support

All property enquiries, including assessments, reports, ratings, signage, training, and logo requests

01256 338350

VisitEnglandAssessmentServices@aamediaigroup.co.uk

Assessment Services Accounts

All financial and payment enquiries

01733 207324

VECreditControl@aamediaigroup.co.uk

Useful Links

Online Details Portal

Change your online information on RatedTrips.com; add up to 20 photographs and showcase your facilities.

<http://www.ratedtrips.com/update-your-profile>

Business Support

Advice and support for your business, including training opportunities and discounts.

www.ratedtrips.com/business-support

Participant Benefits

Exclusive offers and discounts to help your business

www.ratedtrips.com/participant-benefits

Participant offers and discounts



Discover more at www.ratedtrips.com/participant-offers

Got a question? – email us at contact@ratedtrips.com

Action Plan

Record the key recommendations from your assessment, assign the action to an individual person and keep track of progress across the year.

Action	Assigned To	Completed On