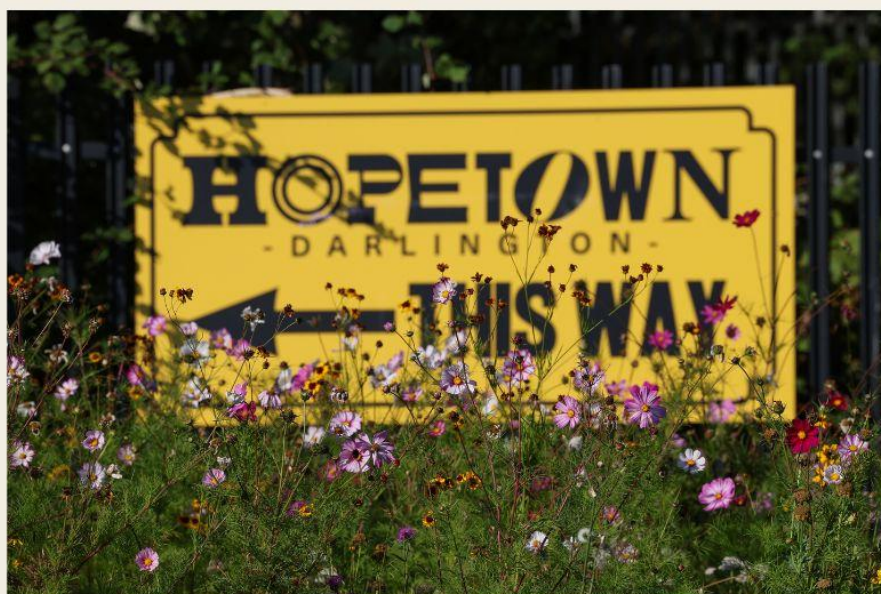


HOPETOWN

- D A R L I N G T O N -

MUSEUM GOVERNANCE PLAN

2025-2030



DARLINGTON
Borough Council

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Hopetown Darlington

Museum Governance Plan

2025-2030

1. Introduction

- 1.1.** The museum governance plan outlines the strategic objectives of Hopetown Darlington for the period December 2025 to December 2030 specifically for Arts Council England (ACE) Museum Accreditation.
- 1.2.** The plan will be reviewed annually, with the first review being in December 2026. The plan will be reviewed by the site's senior management team (SMT).
- 1.3.** Date on which this policy was approved by governing body: 06.01.2026

2. Mission Statement & Shared Values

Darlington changed the world as a pioneer of the modern railway. Hopetown Darlington will engage and inspire the innovators of the future by connecting them with our pioneering railway heritage.

Intelligent Play

- Imagination - the cornerstone of engineering
- Experimentation and innovation - that got us where we are today, and will take us into the future
- Interchange - this whole site is about interchange and exchange - of ideas, knowledge, experience

People Powered

- A place where staff and community are empowered to shape future developments
- A place that actively works to promote social inclusion and maximise accessibility
- Proud to tell Darlington's origin story

Progression

- Being a place that has a genuine commitment to co-design and co-curation - your story is part of this too.
- Reimagining what a heritage visitor attraction could be; how it interacts with people, the stories it tells, the impact it strives for.
- Balancing heritage stories with current developments and futuristic concepts.

3. Background to Site

- 3.1.** Hopetown Darlington is located on the route of the Stockton and Darlington Railway, the world's first steam hauled railway to carry fare-paying passengers. The site consists

of the Stockton and Darlington Railway's buildings of the 1830-50s, including the Goods Shed (retail and café), the Carriage Works (exhibition hall and open stores) and North Road Station Museum. The site also includes Darlington Locomotive Works and 1861 Shed which house railway heritage groups.

- 3.2.** The museum was founded in 1975, to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the Darlington and Stockton Railway, when the campaigning of enthusiasts and community activists resulted in the preservation of the passenger station. One side of the platform was partitioned off for ongoing main line usage and the remainder opened as 'Darlington Railway Museum'. The museum was originally administered by a charitable trust, but responsibility passed to Darlington Borough Council in 1984.
- 3.3.** The museum changed its name again in the early 1980's and became the 'Darlington Railway Centre and Museum'. This name change was adopted to highlight the other historical buildings on the site, i.e. Hopetown Carriage Works, Goods Agents Office and Goods Shed. As a whole, the site represents the world's most important surviving group of early railway buildings.
- 3.4.** Over the past 30 years the site has become home to several independent heritage railway organizations, working in partnership with the Council. Partnerships include A1 Steam Locomotive Trust, Darlington Railway Preservation Society, Darlington Model Railway Club, North Eastern Locomotive Preservation Group, North Eastern Railway Association and the Friends of Darlington Railway Centre and Museum.
- 3.5.** In 2007/2008 a £1.7m refurbishment project was undertaken with support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Northern Rock Foundation, the Railway Heritage Trust, English Heritage, European Regional Development Fund and other sources - Darlington Borough Council and the museum was re-branded the Head of Steam - Darlington Railway Museum.
- 3.6.** In 2023/2024 after securing £37 million of funding from TVCA, NLHF, ACE, Historic England, Railway Heritage Trust and Art Fund, the museum, and surrounding heritage buildings, were transformed into a brand-new visitor attraction, Hopetown Darlington. The name takes inspiration from the old Hopetown foundry works associated with the railways. The classic features from the museum are joined by ground-breaking new attractions spread over a 7.5 acre site and incorporating other heritage railway buildings showcasing Darlington's innovative history.

4. Review of the Previous Forward Plan (2022-2024)

- 4.1.** The previous Forward Plan was created in 2022 and was designed to be cover the period when the museum site was open to the public in 2022 and outlined the work plan for the period of redevelopment 2023-24 when the museum site would be closed

to the public (but museum engagement with the local communities would continue). A new Forward Plan/Business Plan would be developed for the newly redeveloped site.

- 4.2.** As a result of the £37m redevelopment of the site it is not appropriate to compare and review the previous forward plan from 2022, as the scale of Hopetown Darlington far exceeds the former offer.

5. Current Position

- 5.1.** Hopetown Darlington sits within Heritage and Culture in the Community Services section of the Environment, Highways and Community Services department of Darlington Borough Council.

- 5.2.** The site currently employs 33 FTE staff.

- 5.3.** During 2024/25 the site was used by 129,831 people (from opening on 16th July 2024 to 31st March 2025). This is a 222% increase on the last year of operation in 2022 (40,379). We are forecasted to reach 205,000 in the second year of operation (2025-2026).

- 5.4.** The [Council Plan 2024 2027](#) highlights the importance of Darlington's railway heritage to the future development of the town. The plan includes a case study on Hopetown Darlington showing how investing in Darlington's heritage and culture plays an important in preserving the identity of Darlington's communities, delivering regeneration and economic impact.

5.5. S&DR200 legacy

- S&DR200 presented a festival celebrating the birth of the modern railway between March to October 2025. The festival took place across Darlington, County Durham and the Tees Valley to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the first journey on the Stockton and Darlington Railway (S&DR).
- The S&DR200 festival presented a series of free large-scale outdoor spectacles, events, exhibitions and new art commissions in the public spaces, libraries and world-class museums, including us! The festival team worked with internationally and nationally renowned artists, makers, filmmakers, curators, historians, and local creatives, and communities to create a rich and varied festival programme.
- Visitors of all ages enjoyed immersive art installations and augmented-reality digital games, saw treasured artworks in the region for the first time, joined thousands of others for awe-inspiring outdoor events and saw some of the world's favourite locomotives.

- Visitors to Hopetown Darlington during the festival period enjoyed two blockbuster exhibitions ‘Railway Pioneers’ and ‘STEAM to the Future’. Thousands of people flocked to the site to enjoy ‘Titans of Steam’ a gathering of iconic locomotives including Flying Scotsman, Sir Nigel Gresley and Tornado in partnership with on-site railway heritage organisations.

- Visitor figures for the Hopetown S&DR200 Festival programme are outlined below:

Railway Pioneers: **22194**

STEAM to the Future: **31030**

Night at the Museum (Ghost Train at Hopetown only): **2527**

Titans of Steam: **11254**

Titans of Steam Footplate Tours: **1367**

Anniversary Journey: **6000**

Total: **74,372**

- Hopetown’s social media view in this period were 4.4 million views (1.2 million viewers), 83.2k interactions, and an extra 3.5k followers.
- Hopetown Darlington will work with railway heritage partners on-site to continue to offer a live steam and engineering programme and build on the legacy of the S&DR200 festival.

5.6. Environmental Sustainability

In July 2019, Members acknowledged the threat of climate change and passed a motion committing the Council to reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050. On 20th July 2023, a new motion reaffirming the climate emergency declaration and bringing the date forward to 2040, was passed.

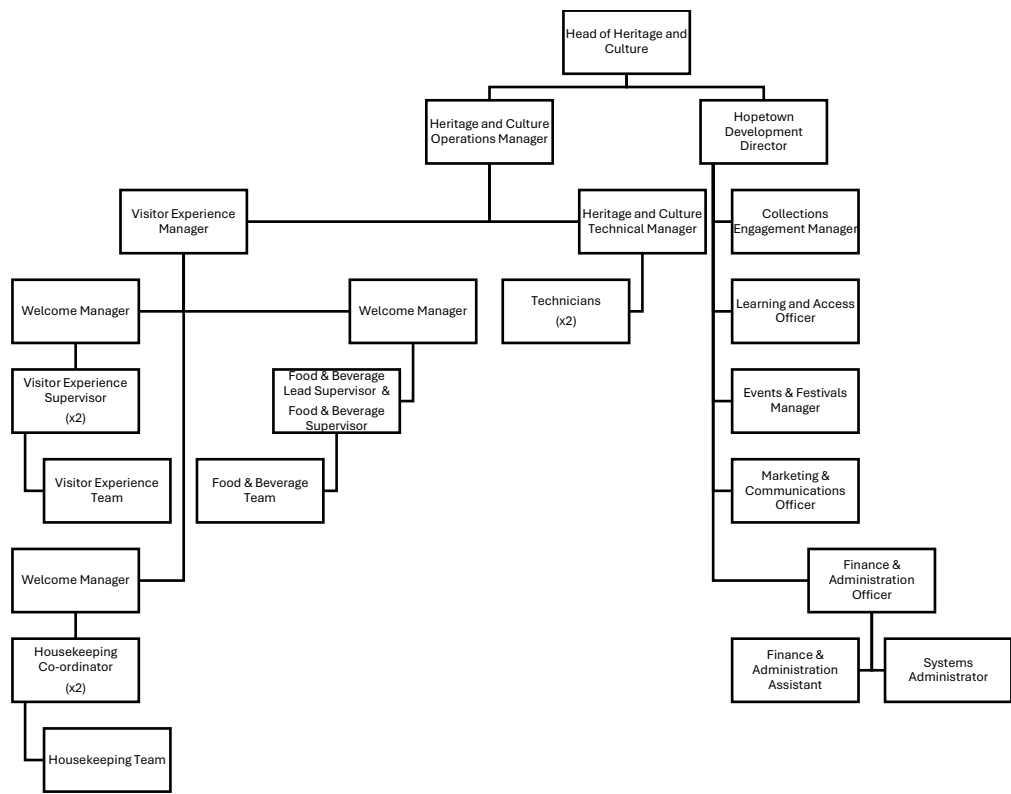
Our [Council Plan 2024 2027](#) has been published, which sets out our long-term vision, ambitions and priorities for Darlington. The three core principles are:

- addressing inequalities
- efficient and effective use of resources
- tackling climate change

We are also members of the Tees Valley Combined Authority, has its own region-wide [net zero strategy](#).

Hopetown Darlington will put sustainability at the centre of its decision making across all aspects of the site. [Hopetown - Sustainability](#)

5.7. Organisational Structure



5.8. Succession Planning

Hopetown Darlington has the following procedures in place for effective continuity and resilience to ensure the continuous running of the service. This will enable staff to ‘multi-task’ and cover other posts’ work if required.

HRMI001	Catering Activities
HRMI002	Event Management
HRMI003	Educational Activities
HRMI004	Exhibition Management
HRMI005	Playground Compliance
HRMI006	Technical Management
HRMI007	Building Maintenance
HRMI008	Emergency Action Plan & Fire Evacuation
HRMI009	Marketing Management
HRMI010	Ticketing & Box Office Management
HRMI011	Service Standards
HRMI012	Building Operations Management
HRMI013	Building Cleaning - Hopetown
HRMI014	Externally Funded Projects
HRMI015	Collections Management
HRMI016	Retail Management

HRMI017	Sponsorship
HRMI018	Virtual Reality Experience
HRMI019	Financial Management

5.9. Access

- We have worked with AccessAble so visitors can find out about our facilities before they visit. AccessAble's surveyors assessed our venue to create a Detailed Access Guide. Check out the Detailed Access Guide [here](#).
- Digital Maps: virtual 3D tour around Hopetown Darlington are available prior to visits, where visitors will find general facts and accessibility information for each building.
- Level access: Where there are stairs there is also a level access ramp or a lift for wheelchair users or those who use mobility scooters. The main entrance to Hopetown Darlington sits upon a bank. There is a ramp leading up to the entrance from the street below.
- Car Parking: Accessible parking is located in Skerne Bridge Car Park and on McNay Street. From here you can take the level access ramp up to the Goods Shed entrance.
- Places to Sit: There are benches inside North Road Station Museum. There are seated picnic areas located outside of Wagon Woods. There are accessible picnic benches in the Goods Yard. The café in the Goods Shed has plenty of seating.
- Toilets: Accessible toilets are located within the Goods Shed, North Road Station Museum, the Carriage Works and near to The Kiosk.
- Changing Places Toilet: There is a Changing Places toilet located within North Road Station Museum.
- Assistance Animals: Guide and assistance dogs – including assistance dogs in training – are welcome everywhere at Hopetown Darlington. Water bowls for dogs are available in the café and on Foundry Green.
- Blind or visually impaired: Large print text can be made available on request in advance.
- D/deaf or have hearing loss/hearing impairment: Hearing loops are fitted at the Goods Shed entrance and the reception desk in the Carriage Works.
- Information in other formats: Hopetown Darlington can provide information in other formats on request.
- Essential Companions/carers: If visitors require an essential companion or carer, they can visit the paid-for elements at Hopetown Darlington free of charge.
- Sunflower Lanyard Scheme: We are part of the Sunflower Lanyard Scheme.
- Baby Feeding and Breastfeeding: Hopetown Darlington is part of the BfN Breastfeeding Friendly scheme. Visitors are welcome to breastfeed anywhere on site. There is a baby feeding room located within North Road Station Museum if visitors wish to breastfeed in private. Baby bottles can be heated in the Clocktower Café.
- Quiet Times: Visitors may prefer to visit when we are less busy. Our quietest times are weekday afternoons during term time.
- Communicate in Print: Communicate in print and widget symbols can be found across all of our displays.

- Package for Sandy: Emergency supplies of sanitary products are available at the Welcome Desk in the Goods Shed and by asking for a 'Package for Sandy'. Visitors will receive a discreet envelope with emergency sanitary products, no questions asked.

5.10 Tees Valley Museums Group (TVMG)

- Tees Valley Museum Group is a consortium of five Local Authority Museum services: Stockton (the lead authority), Darlington BC, Redcar and Cleveland BC, Middlesbrough BC and Hartlepool BC.
- Mission statement: TVMG will ensure we remain ambitious and relevant for all of our communities; sharing and preserving their heritage and stories, giving real meaning to the work we do together.
- The site will continue to work with the Tees Valley Museums Group (funded by the Arts Council) during the period of this Forward Plan and beyond.

6. Consultation and Analysis of Views

6.1. Extensive audience development work was undertaken during the redevelopment of the site, as part of the branding work for the new site and the development of the interpretation plan for the site.

6.2. The key target groups included in the focus group programme were:

- Key personnel from Darlington Borough Council and the museum
- Stakeholder group of organisations sharing the site
- Friends and Volunteers
- Schools and Community Groups who use the site
- Family groups (existing visitors)
- Non-users

6.3. Audience data is collected via our post-visit e-mail questionnaire, travel survey, sign-ups for the website and data gathered through booking systems.

6.4. Reviews are collected via [TripAdvisor](#), [Facebook](#), Google, e-mails, visitor comments books across the site and verbally.

7. Aims

- 7.1.** Sustain and increase visitor volume to the site through a 5-year plan of exciting exhibitions.
- 7.2.** To encourage activity, interaction and enjoyment of the site.
- 7.3.** To develop the site to inspire learning and connect people with the past, present and future.
- 7.4.** To care for the site's collections and ensure they are accessible to the public.
- 7.5.** For Darlington to be known for Hopetown Darlington, its railway heritage and as the birthplace of the modern railway.
- 7.6.** To ensure Hopetown Darlington is operated successfully as a financially sustainable model.
- 7.7.** Sustain and increase visitor volume to the site through a 5-year programme of exciting events.

8. Objectives

- 8.1.** Develop partnerships with major national funders to deliver two blockbuster exhibitions each year that encourage new audiences and repeat visitors.
- 8.2.** Make Hopetown Darlington the place to volunteer by creating an inclusive and vibrant programme that enhances the visitor experience.
- 8.3.** Create new and exciting partnerships with schools and communities to inspire the future generations and pioneers through engaging and unique activities and workshops.
- 8.4.** Make Hopetown Darlington a leader in the museum sector by continuing to ensure the highest possible standards for collections management and increase access to the collection through partnership working, outreach and digital media.
- 8.5.** Establish Hopetown as a world class visitor attraction through destination marketing campaign to increase awareness of the site and increase visitor numbers.
- 8.6.** Hopetown Darlington to become a destination café, retail and meeting space for the northeast region through private hires and on-line retail presence.
- 8.7.** Develop and implement the UK's newest heritage railway line and event programme that encourages new audiences and repeat visitors.

9. Action Plan 2025-2030

9.1. Aim: Sustain and increase visitor volume to the site through a 5-year plan of exciting exhibitions.

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s) /Resources
Develop partnerships with major national funders to deliver two blockbuster exhibitions each year that encourage new audiences and repeat visitors.	Develop Escape Room activity proposal for 2028/29	Investigate possible funding streams	January 2027	Collections Engagement Manager/ Technical Manager
		Work with technical manager on possible design	September 2027	
		Produce P&L for proposal	December 2027	
	Investigate Light Show Exhibition for 2027	Investigate exhibition providers	June 2026	Collections Engagement Manager/ Technical Manager
		Feasibility of creating light show in house	September 2026	
		Work on P&L and design with Technical Manager	December 2026	
	Develop Railways on Film exhibition proposal for 2029	Feasibility of licensing costs	June 2027	Collections Engagement Manager/ Technical Manager
		Audience research to test theme	June 2027	
		Investigate possible funding streams	December 2027	
		Initial research into subject matter	December 2027	

9.2. Aim: To encourage activity, interaction and enjoyment of the site

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s) /Resources
Make Hopetown Darlington the place to volunteer by creating an inclusive and vibrant programme that enhances the visitor experience.	Finalise volunteer strategy based on previous consultation report.	Investigate possible funding streams	January 2027	Collections Engagement Manager/ Learning & Access Officer
		Work with technical manager on possible design	September 2027	
		Produce P&L for proposal	December 2027	
	Define new volunteer roles in consultation with Hopetown Management team.	Set meeting to discuss possible roles	April 2026	Collections Engagement Manager/ Learning & Access Officer
		Create role descriptions	June 2026	
		Work with H&S to create relevant paperwork	August 2026	
	Promote programme with community partners	Advertise through Darlington Cares	September 2026	Collections Engagement Manager/ Learning & Access Officer
		Liaise with Darlington Culture Volunteers	September 2026	
		Contact former corporate volunteers to promote new roles	October 2026	

9.3 Aim: To develop the site to inspire learning and connect people with the past, present and future.

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s) /Resources
Create new and exciting partnerships with schools and communities to inspire the future generations and pioneers through engaging and unique activities and workshops.	Formal learning - Work in partnership with teachers to continue to develop and extend our offer to schools, and those educating otherwise.	Establish a teachers' forum that will be in place to enable us to reapply for the Sandford Award for Heritage Education	2026	Learning & Access Officer
		Develop a new STEM workshop	2026	
		Develop self-led activities to be hosted on our website	2026	
		Develop ideas for a creativity offer for schools	2027	
		Building on work with Haughton and St Aidan's – develop new Secondary resources and or workshop.	2027	
		Extend our EYFS offer.	2028	
		Develop new SEND activities	2028	
	Informal learning – work with families to gain national recognition for	Establish a family forum that will be in place to enable us to apply for the Kids in	2026	Learning & Access Officer

	being Family Friendly.	Museums 'Family Friendly Museum' award.		
		Activity box for cafe	2026	
		Family learning activities as part of family learning festival	2027	
	Play – develop our play offer beyond physical resources	Play prompts cards for staff	2026	Learning & Access Officer
		Play ambassadors on staff team	2026-27	
		Develop consultation and feedback methods for children and young people	2027	
	Access – become a leader in the sector for access and inclusion	Regular accessible activities for families and adult groups – including the use of BSL, audio description and relaxed sessions	2026-30	Learning & Access Officer
		Identify new audiences and develop relationships	2026-30	
		Establish a Staff forum – ideas, groups to work with, wellbeing,	2026	

		perspectives and advice.		
		Establish an Access forum – (with NPO but independent of them)	2027	
		Establish a community forum – consultation, co-curation, ambassadors / advocates	2027	

9.4 Aim: To care for the site's collections and ensure they are accessible to the public.

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s)
Make Hopetown Darlington a leader in the museum sector by continuing to ensure the highest possible standards for collections management and increase access to the collection through partnership working, outreach and digital media.	Complete Documentation Backlog	Complete Documentation Stage Two	December 2026	Collections Engagement Manager
		Complete Documentation Stage Three	December 2027	
		Complete Documentation Stage Four	December 2028	
	Promotion of Collections and Archive	Develop collections area of website	July 2026	Collections Engagement Manager/ Marketing Officer
		Develop two new talks using archive material	December 2026	
		Publish one research article per year in heritage publication	December 2030	

	Partnership working within Darlington	Establish links with two new community partners	June 2028	Collections Engagement Manager
		Develop closer links with Centre for Local Studies e.g. exhibition sharing/ collections access	June 2027	
		Host six community groups in The Space each year.	Ongoing	

9.5 Aim: For Darlington to be known for Hopetown Darlington, its railway heritage and as the birthplace of the modern railway.

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s) /Resources
Establish Hopetown as a world class visitor attraction through destination marketing campaign to increase awareness of the site and increase visitor numbers.	Grow destination marketing to increase awareness of Hopetown Darlington.	Focus on Shildon (Locomotion) and York (NRM) with a simple call to action to visit our website to see what we are about.	2026	Marketing & Communications Officer
		Local TV advert using already produced content.	2027	
		Key campaigns in Edinburgh, London, York, Durham, Newcastle, Leeds and Northallerton	2028	

		railway stations.		
		Explore the possibility of conducting a Guinness World Record to bring Hopetown to a national audience.	2029	
	Relationship building with partners and local venues to increase awareness of site.	Build on Royal Navy Museum relationship to increase the awareness of Hopetown.	2026	Marketing & Communications Officer
		Work with LNER on the makeover of Darlington Railway Station.	2027	
		Work more closely with Locomotion – and Northern Rail – on joint marketing campaign.	2028	
		Build on marketing with Secondary Schools and the A1 Trust to attract more secondary visits focussed on the engineering side of the site.	2029	
	Monetise Hopetown Darlington's	Continue to grow our Facebook and	2026	Marketing & Communications Officer /

	digital presence.	Instagram channels to appeal to a wider audience, using family and heritage content. Also look to utilise TikTok as a marketing tool.		Collections Engagement Manager
		Investigate funding stream to employ additional Marketing Officer.	2027	
		Network with other attractions and partners to explore how to utilise YouTube and build a fit-for-purpose YouTube channel.	2028	
		Create live streams to monetise the YouTube channel.	2029	

9.6 Aim: To ensure Hopetown Darlington is operated successfully as a financially sustainable model.

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s) /Resources
Hopetown Darlington to become a destination	Develop existing on-line retail offer.	Investigate other venues with strong on-line retail offer.	2026	Finance and Administration Officer / Visitor

café, retail and meeting space for the northeast region through private hires and on-line retail presence.		Investigate on-line retail platforms e.g. Shopify, All-Wag	2026	Experience Manager
		Relaunch on-line retail offer.	2027	
	Develop existing Private Hire offer.	Analyse data relating to site private hire bookings to see if any trends.	2026	Finance and Administration Officer / Development Director
		Investigate other venues with strong private hire offer.	2026	
		Develop and implement Private Hire Strategy for site.	2026	
	Investigate implementation of Membership Scheme.	Investigate other venues with membership schemes e.g. Tank Museum.	2026	Finance and Administration Officer / Development Director
		Analyse data and decide whether membership scheme is feasible for site.	2026	
		Develop Membership Scheme Strategy.	2027	
		Implement Membership Scheme.	2028	

9.7 Aim: Sustain and increase visitor volume to the site through a 5-year programme of exciting events.

Objective	Action	Task	Completion by	Lead Officer(s) /Resources
Develop and implement the UK's newest heritage railway line and event programme that encourages new audiences and repeat visitors.	Review and Rewrite Events Strategy	Full data analysis of activities and events programme since opening.	2026	Events and Festivals Manager / Development Director / Marketing Officer
		Investigate events and activities programme at similar venues.	2026	
		Using data and research write a revised Events Strategy and 5-year plan that encourages new audiences and repeat visitors.	2026	
	Develop Legacy offer with on-site partners	Develop Legacy heritage offer branding.	2026	Events and Festivals Manager / Development Director / Marketing Officer
		Work with on-site partners on rail heritage offer on Legacy Line.	2026	
		Incorporate Legacy offer into existing events e.g. Ho-Ho-Hopetown.	2026	
	Review and develop the use of Private Hire events to supplement	Full data analysis of previous private hire events on-site.	2026	Events and Festivals Manager /

	events programme	Contact local clubs and organisations to promote site for hire for events.	2026	Development Director / Finance & Administration Officer
		Incorporate private hire events into the 5-year events programme.	2026	

10. Resources

10.1 Hopetown Darlington ensures an effective delivery of the service by splitting the workforce into two sections: development and operational. The Development Director oversees the strategic development of the site, and the Operations Manager oversees the day-to-day running of the site. The Development Director is the strategic lead for collections management, exhibitions and events, learning and access, finance and administration, marketing, audience development and fundraising. The Operations Manager oversees the visitor experience team, technical support and health and safety on the site.

10.2 Hopetown Darlington has a small but dedicated team of volunteers who help the site in a number of roles. Most of the volunteers have been recruited for exhibition stewarding and they help our audiences engage with the subject matter and enjoy their time in the exhibitions hall. We have five volunteers who attend regularly, and we work regularly with Darlington Culture Volunteers and the Stockton & Darlington 26 Miles team to supplement our existing volunteers during large events. We have two volunteers who work with the Collections Engagement Manager in all aspects of collections management. These volunteers are looking to progress in the sector, and their work is often based on skills building.

10.3 The budget for utilities lies with Corporate Landlord.

10.4 The site generates income through food and beverage, retail, private hires, monetary donations, events and exhibitions programme, sponsorship and external funding. The site relies on a detailed and comprehensive business plan to run the venue. Darlington Borough Council subsidises the site by a small amount (the same amount as the previous museum Head of Steam – Darlington Railway Museum). The remaining funding to run the site comes from income generated through the venue.

10.5 The food and beverage and retail offer are constantly under review to ensure that we offer the best possible quality for the best possible price to the customer and the organisation. These actions include reviewing the supplier chain, sandwich offer and increasing the product range in the café to increase the Gross Profit. With regards to retail actions include identifying bestselling items and removing slow selling items over time, introducing non-branded items into the shop and changing the focus of retail in Carriage Works retail to heritage/ railway books.

10.6 The site has been open for 1.5 years and is in the process of reviewing the budget, business plan and projected targets for the next financial year (2026-2027).

11. Review Date

The Hoptown Darlington Forward Plan will be reviewed annually with the first review taking place in **December 2026**.