

Hopetown Darlington

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

Summary

RATING

Quality Assessed

SCHEME

Visitor Attraction

OVERALL QUALITY SCORE

93%

VISIT DATE

06 June 2025

VISIT TYPE

Day Assessment

ASSESSOR

Rachel Thompson

DEBRIEF CONTACT

Leona White-Hannant Development Director

Hopetown has achieved an impressive score of 93% at the time of this assessment and has comfortably retained the VisitEngland accreditation of a quality attraction.

Highlights of the visit were found in all areas, from the consistently high levels of customer service to the retail offer. The new immersive interpretation 'Experiment' is worthy of special note; a superb experience.

Areas which could benefit from some attention include the range of menu in the cafe, the eroded areas of grass and the ill fitting bins in some of the toilet cubicles.

In recognition of the high scores achieved the attraction will be nominated for a number of the prestigious VisitEngland accolades; 'Welcome' in recognition of the high standards provided by all of the team, 'Best Told Story' for the innovative interpretation and 'Gold' for overall achievement in all areas.

This report highlights the findings of the assessment as discussed 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	38	95%	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)	5		
Cleanliness	23	92%	Quality Assessed
Car Park & Arrival Areas	4		
The Attraction	4		
Toilets	5		
Catering Outlets	5		
Retail Outlets	5		
Toilets	13	87%	Quality Assessed
Provision, Location & Layout	5		
Décor & Maintenance	4		
Fixtures & Fittings	4		
Catering	19	76%	Quality Assessed
Layout & Ease of Use	4		
Ambience & First Impressions	4		
Decoration, Furniture & Fittings	4		
Food: Range & Menus	3		
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	65	100%	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		5		
Catering: Knowledge		5		
Retail: Customer Care		5		
Retail: Efficiency		5		
Retail: Knowledge		5		

Pre-arrival

The online presence of the attraction is excellent with a well designed website complemented by well maintained social media pages to engage with visitors. The website, hopetowndarlington.co.uk, benefits from a simple and user friendly whilst offering comprehensive content including an AccessAble Access Guide. The social media platforms were found to be well maintained to inform and inspire users. It was encouraging to see that there had been an increase in followers on all pages; Facebook now has 17k followers (up from 12k), Instagram at 2930 up from 1297, X at 2142, YouTube with 37 videos and TikTok now with 735 lively clips to enjoy. It was good to note that the entry on RatedTrips.com had been updated. Online reviews are popular, with Google seen to have received 948 reviews with an average rating of 4.5 while TripAdvisor had a rating of 4.4 from 434 reviews. The colourful 6 page leaflet represents the attraction well with a strong front cover and a summary of the venue although it may be a little text heavy for the casual browser. It was good to find the VisitEngland logo and recently awarded 'Welcome' accolade logo prominently displayed online and within print in recognition of the quality of the visitor experience.

Recommendations

- the Google map with route planner facility could be relocated to the 'Getting Here' section, or perhaps a link to it put in this area as visitors may assume it is in 'Getting Here' and miss this useful tool
- whilst there is an explanation as to why no cafe menu is provided online this could be reviewed to give potential visitors an idea of prices, particularly for drinks, cakes and staple offerings
- reply to online reviews whenever possible to enhance customer relations and encourage others to leave feedback
- pictogram symbols could be incorporated within the leaflet to summarise the services and facilities available
- for those browsing leaflet racks further afield, consider adding an additional thumbnail map of the wider area to the back of the leaflet to put the existing detailed map into context
- consider breaking some of the text down into bullet points for ease of reading

Arrival

The attraction and parking was very well signposted for drivers. The large, and well presented car park is an excellent facility overall although the electric car charging points were still waiting to be installed. It was good to note that additional accessible bays have been provided since the last assessment. Bike racks were provided within the attraction to cater for cyclists and of course the attraction has its own train station so can welcome visitors by rail also.

First impressions were very positive in all areas; branded signage, the steps up to the Goods Shed featuring inspiring words, the refurbished building. The layout and entry was well considered with a ramp to the main entrance, automatic door and low level desk.

Visitor information and signage demonstrated good use of the brand and included static panels, plasma screens and impressive changing flip board as seen at railway stations. The orientation panels with 'you are here' markers on the path from the car park were useful, especially for first time visitors. On the counter a useful map of the attraction was provided for the member of staff to use to assist visitors.

For families it was good to see a sheltered 'Pram Park' available.

Recommendations

- install the Electric Vehicle charging points as soon as possible
- consider providing opening times and reference to free admission on the information boards in the car park
- the VisitEngland plaque could be displayed to further promote the quality of the visitor experience

Attraction

The different areas of the large attraction are accessed via an excellent network of attractive pathways, lifts and ramps. There was very good provision of seating, both inside and out, for the comfort of visitors.

The comprehensive range of content was broad and suited a variety of ages and levels of interest. From the excellent North Road Station Museum to the changing exhibition and events programme there was something for all to enjoy. The well designed Wagon Woods, play area on the Station platform and creative area in the Stores catered for younger visitors very well. As well as the original historic buildings visitors can experience the viewing gallery in the purpose-built Darlington Locomotive Works and watch engineering in action; bringing the railway story right up to the present day.

Visitor information and signage was well placed and helpful to assist visitors navigating the site. In addition, information about work in progress was useful in managing visitor expectations for example 'Time to let the grass grow under our feet' panels and the notice about the Station Garden.

The appearance of the grounds was very good overall with the exception of some areas of eroded grass as noted below. The Station Garden currently in progress will be a welcome addition to that area of the site.

Across the attraction high standards of decor and maintenance were observed. Having only reopened last July the attraction still looks in a very good state of repair.

The presentation of the extensive collection and the original buildings was done to a very high standard. In particular the Stores, where thousands of objects were displayed in a novel and impactful way.

Interpretation was creative and engaging to inform and entertain visitors, particularly in the Station Museum where a variety of traditional and fun interactives were found along with state of the art technology to present the story of the Darlington and the history of the railway. The new 'Experiment' was a superb immersive experience and was an excellent and memorable way to share the story of Darlington's railway heritage. With regular showings throughout the day visitors were able to book a time that suited them.

Contactless donation stations were available in the Carriage Works; it was discussed that these are a worthwhile way of generating income for the attraction which is encouraging.

Recommendations

- in an effort to address the badly eroded corners on some of the footpaths consider reshaping some of the footpaths to curves to remove temptation for visitors to cut corners (see pics)
- reorganise the contents of the rooms on the first floor of the Station building to remove the unsightly boxes currently on view from the front of the building. Alternatively opaque vinyl could be used as seen in the Goods Shed windows
- after rainfall consider drying some of the benches and picnic tables so that they can be used by visitors, particularly near the Kiosk
- the temporary metal barrier fencing in use on quiet days to encourage visitors to pay at the Kiosk for the Wagon Woods could be replaced with something more attractive
- the clip frame containing information about the Station Garden was water damaged and could benefit from attention
- consider installing a donation point at the main exit

Cleanliness

Given the size and popularity of the attraction the standards of cleanliness were very high in all areas which is most commendable.

Recommendations

- continue with ongoing litter picking to maintain high standards
- continue with regular checks of the toilets to ensure tissue on the floor, as seen in the Carriage Works and Goods Shed facilities, doesn't get chance to build up

Toilets

Toilet provision was excellent with facilities provided in the Goods Shed, Kiosk, Station Museum and the Carriage Works. In addition to the accessible facilities it was encouraging to note that the attraction has a spacious and well equipped Changing Places facility.

Standards of decor and maintenance were high, with all facilities found to be well stocked and in good working order.

Fixtures and fittings were modern and to a very good standard with just occasional points noted as highlighted below. Hand free taps, efficient hand dryers and large mirrors were used to good effect. There was also good use of magnetic poster holders to promote relevant information. The gents facilities were not assessed.

Recommendations

- replace the ill fitting sanitary bins in the ladies in the Carriage Works with something that fits behind the toilet bowl; cylindrical bins perhaps (see pic)
- monitor the sealant between the walls and the ceiling in the Kiosk cubicles; some black mould is beginning to appear
- review all facilities and provide hooks in those currently without, such as the ladies in the Museum
- ensure all emergency cords reach the floor as recommended
- check the accessible facility in the Carriage Works for a faulty bulb
- the panel under the far sink in the ladies in the Carriage Works is missing and requires attention

Catering

Outlet(s) Visited	Clocktower Cafe, Kiosk
Food & Drink Sampled	Americano, croissant with jam Tea, crisps Tuna crunch baguette, rocky road tray bake, water

The Clocktower Cafe is located in the Goods Shed. On leaving the admissions desk visitors are directed to the cafe via the toilets; this is helpful and ensures visitors start at the correct end of the counter. The well stocked chiller cabinet with good shelf edge pricing is viewed first, followed by the attractive display of cakes and pastries and finally the till point.

The large space pays homage to the history of the building with many original features still on view, such as the high ceiling, brick & stone walls, and large doors and windows. The overhead train track and large impressive holonet added further interest.

The tables and chairs were comfortable and had an industrial theme. There was good provision of high chairs. The cutlery and plates were made from sustainable materials and the napkins were to a high standard and contained the Clocktower Cafe logo.

The range of food was fairly limited to light lunches such as pre-packed sandwiches, crisps, cakes and pastries. Jacket potatoes were available but only one type of filling was on offer. It was good to see soup on the menu but it had sold out by 1.45 when the visitor returned for lunch. Whilst the menu catered for a quick and easy service it was disappointing not to see any healthy options such as fruit or salad available.

The americano and large fresh croissant provided an excellent start to the day. For lunch, the tuna crunch sandwich was chosen and a piece of the rocky road tray bake was purchased as a takeaway item. Whilst the filling of the sandwich was tasty, the bread was a little heavy. The rocky road was a good size and tasted delicious.

The Kiosk had a smaller menu, primarily ice cream and drinks, however this suited the outdoor nature of the facility with a number of picnic tables available.

The loyalty card was an excellent concept to encourage repeat visits.

Dogs were also catered for with clean, full water bowls with the fun signage 'Paws & Refresh at Hopetown'.

Recommendations

- consider expanding the menu and offering some healthier options. It was discussed that the catering is outsourced and a new supplier was due to take over this summer
- replace the worn rubber pads on the base of the chair legs as they can create a harsh noise when moved
- whilst the cutlery has excellent credentials for sustainability it is not always fit for purpose, particularly the knives; consider having some metal ones available for when necessary for example trying to cut a baguette
- the information about the sustainability policy the cafe adopts could be added to the tins on the tables to increase visibility and raise visitor awareness

Retail

Outlet(s) Visited Goods Shed Shop, Carriage Works retail area

Purchases Made Coaster £2.00

The shop in the Goods Shed offers an excellent retail experience. Perfectly positioned before visitors leave the attraction the space is utilised very well. The variety of display furniture continues the industrial theme of the attraction and is both attractive and practical with lower areas utilised for storage. The carriage lamps hanging from the ceiling add further interest. Products are neatly displayed and most are accompanied by mini chalkboards listing prices which is helpful.

The variety of merchandise is excellent with the Hopetown logo found on most items, from the pocket money range to the clothing. In addition food & drink, gifts and mementoes are all available.

A limited amount of stock is also available at the Carriage Works and this is also well presented.

Recommendations

- mirrors could be provided for those wishing to try some of the clothing

Staff

All staff were easily identifiable and wore a mix of colourful shirts, aprons, lanyards and name badges.

A warm and proactive welcome was received on arrival by a cheerful member of the team. She asked the visitor if they had been before which was an excellent way to gauge how much information to provide. Whilst the main attraction is free to enter she promoted the option for donations and upsold the 'Experiment' ride for which a ticket was purchased. She directed the visitor where to start and used the map on the counter to summarise the site. Overall an excellent start to the visitor experience.

On visiting the Clocktower Cafe the member of staff was helpful and promoted the loyalty card well. When the visitor asked if she had been on 'Experiment' she responded very enthusiastically about the ride which added to the sense of anticipation. Similarly at the Kiosk, the member of staff spoke highly of the Christmas version of the 'Experiment' film. The cross promotion of different aspects of the attraction by staff is encouraging to see and demonstrates the value in ensuring all staff are aware of all the different elements of the attraction.

During the visit other staff were encountered, including a smiling and friendly member of the cleaning team and the guides at 'Experiment' who welcomed visitors and ensured their safety and comfort.

The retail staff at both the Goods Shed and Carriage Works continued the high standards. It was good to note that a bag and receipt were provided with a purchase.

Recommendations

- Kiosk and Clocktower cafe staff could ask visitors if they have a loyalty card to stamp with each hot drink sale
- continue with these excellent standards of customer care as they can significantly enhance the overall visitor experience

Images

Hopetown



Hopetown



Hopetown



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