

Hopetown Darlington

North Road Station, Station Road, DARLINGTON, County Durham, DL3 6ST

Summary

RATING

Quality Assessed

SCHEME

Visitor Attraction

OVERALL QUALITY SCORE

94%

VISIT DATE

31 July 2024

VISIT TYPE

Day Assessment

ASSESSOR

Rachel Thompson

DEBRIEF CONTACT

Natalie Collins Visitor Experience Manager

Hopetown, formally Head of Steam has achieved a score of 94% at the time of this assessment and has achieved the VisitEngland accreditation of a quality attraction. The attraction has been open just 3 weeks following a 2 year closure and £35 million pound investment to extensively develop the existing attraction and utilise a series of unused railway buildings across the redundant site.

Highlights of the visit were many including the consistently high levels of customer service and the impressive presentation and interpretation of Darlington's railway history. In all areas there has been great attention to detail to create an attraction for the modern day visitor.

Due to the high scores achieved the attraction will be nominated for three of the prestigious VisitEngland accolades; 'Welcome', 'Best Told Story' and 'Gold'. This is a great achievement and reflects the teams commitment to providing a quality visitor experience. 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 Natalie Collins, Visitor Experience Manager.

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	8	80%	
Online Presence	4		
Leaflet/Brochure	4		
Arrival	19	95%	Quality Assessed
Car Park	4		
First Impressions	5		
Layout & Entry Management	5		
Visitor Information & Signage	5		
Attraction	39	98%	Quality Assessed
Layout & Visitor Flow	5		
Range of Content	5		
Visitor Information & Signage	5		
Appearance of Grounds & Gardens	4		
Appearance of Buildings	5		
Décor & Maintenance	5		
Presentation of Displays	5		
Quality of Interpretation (Fixed)	5		
Cleanliness	22	88%	Quality Assessed
Car Park & Arrival Areas	4		
The Attraction	4		
Toilets	4		
Catering Outlets	5		
Retail Outlets	5		
Toilets	14	93%	Quality Assessed
Provision, Location & Layout	5		
Décor & Maintenance	5		
Fixtures & Fittings	4		
Catering	22	88%	Quality Assessed
Layout & Ease of Use	4		
Ambience & First Impressions	5		
Decoration, Furniture & Fittings	4		
Food: Range & Menus	4		
Food: Quality & Presentation	5		
Retail	19	95%	Quality Assessed
Ease of Use & Visitor Flow	5		
Display Units, Fittings & Lighting	5		
Presentation of Merchandise	4		
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	5		
Catering: Knowledge	5		
Retail: Customer Care	5		
Retail: Efficiency	5		
Retail: Knowledge	4		

Pre-arrival

The online presence of the attraction is found within the website hopetowndarlington.co.uk and a number of social media platforms. The new, mobile friendly website benefits from a clean, modern design and clear functionality although some key visitor information was missing as noted below. Social media pages are used to very good effect to communicate with visitors and appeal to a new audience. Facebook had 12k followers at the time of assessment and Instagram 1297. It was good to note that TikTok and YouTube were gaining in popularity meanwhile 'X' could not be accessed, the link just directed the visitor to their personal page. Whilst it was good to find a listing on ratedtrips.com it referred to the old attraction 'Head of Steam'. TripAdvisor and Google have 341 and 610 reviews respectively and both have an average rating of 4.5. It was encouraging to see well written replies to comments since the re-opening.

The A5 8 page 'Summer Activities' leaflet was produced to a high standard on quality stock.

Recommendations

- a google map with route planner facility could be provided on the website to assist drivers and highlight where the car parks are in relation to the attraction
- with regard to 'Access' avoid stating 'fully accessible' or follow the bold statement with specific information, for example 'to pushchairs and wheelchairs' for clarity
- catering menus with prices could be added to the website to allow visitors to make an informed decision in advance
- update the entry on ratedtrips.com
- continue to reply to online reviews on a regular and consistent basis to further enhance customer relations
- regarding accessibility, VisitEngland will make available new guidance on the key accessibility features at tourism venues that are most important to people with a range of accessibility requirements (anticipated available from Summer 2024). In addition, you are encouraged to provide detailed accessibility information, with the recommended format being an AccessAble Detailed Access Guide. Find out more via the [AccessAble Your Accessibility Guide](http://AccessAble.org.uk) portal (not a scheme requirement).
- the next edition of the activities leaflet could include a series of pictogram symbols on the back page to summarise the services and facilities available
- the VisitEngland quality marque could be added to the website and all other promotional material to further promote the quality of the attraction

Arrival

The new car park is signposted very well for motorists. The large facility had a smooth tarmac surface and clear demarcation lines, and appeared to have excellent capacity for the number of cars on the day of visit. Only two accessible bays were provided which was disappointing, and whilst some bays had been marked 'EV' the electric charge points had not yet been installed. Bicycle racks were provided within the main site. First impressions were extremely positive on the approach from the car park with a colourful wild flower area, the historic Skerne Bridge, welcome signage, the impressive entrance leading up to the Goods Shed, outdoor digital screen seen from North Road and helpful orientation information. Once at the entrance the layout was well considered with an automatic door leading into a spacious area with a low level information desk, staff were also on hand to meet and greet visitors which created an excellent start to the visitor journey. The large digital screens in here were impressive and represented the new brand well. Despite having the car park on the other side of a main road the team have addressed this very well with comprehensive directional signage and a new safety crossing. On returning to the car park, the overhead 'Thank you for Visiting' sign created a positive last impression and there was a nice reminder to see the Skerne Bridge.

Recommendations

- create more accessible parking bays
- install the electric vehicle charge points as soon as possible
- the VisitEngland plaque could be displayed to confirm that the venue is a quality attraction
- the admission charges for the exhibition could be displayed alongside the charges for Wagon Woods on the information desk
- with regards to the admission charge for the exhibition programme a review of the offer in place to Museum Association members is required; their website states free entry to all exhibitions for members. This was not honoured on the day of visit

Attraction

The large 7.5 acre site is accessed via a very good network of footpaths; even on the busy day of visit very few pinch points were noted. The interactive footpath along the 'railway line' demonstrates the broad range of interpretation styles that have been incorporated. Lifts were provided where required although it was noted that the one in the Carriage Works was out of order. Quality seating was provided throughout to encourage visitors to enjoy a leisurely experience. The range of content was superb with the story of the railways and Darlington's role in this significant time in history retold in creative and imaginative ways to appeal to a wide range of ages and levels of interest. In addition to the free to enter areas the Carriage Works provides a temporary exhibition programme. 'Brick Journeys' was an impressive display of lego and contained an activity area for younger visitors. The other ticketed area, Wagon Woods was a superb and well themed adventure playground for children to enjoy. The Wagon Woods was a particularly popular area and it was good to note that there was good provision of seating for accompanying adults. There were a number of other activities for younger visitors to enjoy with interactive exhibits including dressing up. Visitor information and signage was clear and helpful and included strategically placed 'you are here' orientation panels. The appearance of the grounds included some colourful and well maintained planters and attractive block paving, elsewhere large areas of recently seeded grassland still appeared as soil and was surrounded by harris fencing; it is understood that this is temporary and will be removed when the grass is grown. The historic buildings have been lovingly restored to a very high standard and brought back into use while retaining many original features such as the Booking Office and Toilets. New additions such as the tower leading to the Locomotive Works and the Experiment have bold, modern designs to complement the railway heritage. Having only been open 3 weeks the standards of decor were excellent throughout. Standards of presentation were very high from the collection in the Carriage Works and Wagon Woods play area to the engines and authentic original features in the Station Museum. The interpretation was creative and imaginative to provide visitors with an engaging, immersive and enjoyable experience. There was good use of t-loops and subtitles on a number of displays which is encouraging.

Recommendations

- admission charges for the Wagon Woods could be displayed at the kiosk at the entrance to the activity; it was discussed that signage was due to be installed to address this
- the audio visual in the Refreshments area could benefit from subtitles as seen elsewhere, particularly as children play with the activities adjacent to it and there is some noise conflict as a result
- a piece of plasterboard on the ground near the tower to the Locomotive Works could be removed
- the 'press the button to see...' interactives on the bridge to the Locomotive Works did not appear to work and could benefit from attention
- having QR codes for those wishing to learn more is an excellent concept however some were not working such as on the panels in the Goods Yard; review as required
- remove or conceal what appears to be an out of place server on the floor of the The Stores
- an area of soil with drain covers in front of the Station Museum requires landscaping to enhance appearances
- attend to faulty lifts as soon as possible

Cleanliness

Standards of cleanliness were very high in all areas of the new attraction. There was very good provision of bins and staff were noted to be cleaning throughout the day to maintain standards.

Recommendations

- remove litter from the car park and around the attraction, particularly on the tracks near the 'Experiment'
- continue with regular cleaning of the toilet facilities to address the tissue seen on the floor mid afternoon

Toilets

There was excellent provision of toilets with facilities provided in each of the four main areas of the attraction, as a result no queues were noted on the day of visit which is most encouraging. All facilities were found to be well stocked and in very good working order although the cubicles in the ladies in the Carriage Works were too small for the sanitary bins. Having self contained unisex cubicles in the Goods Shed was an efficient use of space. Automatic taps, large mirrors, efficient hand dryers and attractive tiling were welcome features. There was good use of promotional posters across the facilities. It was encouraging to find a well equipped Changing Places as listed on the Changing Places website, and a large, comfortable baby change room in the Station Museum.

Recommendations

- the sanitary bins in ladies cubicles in the Carriage Works were too big and simply did not fit; replace with something more appropriate as soon as possible, such as cylindrical bins
- not all cubicles had hooks and this could be addressed to assist visitors, particularly in the Goods Shed and the Station Museum
- the emergency cord in the accessible facility near the Changing Places could be lengthened in order to reach the floor as recommended
- to align quality standards avoid using plastic soap bottles on the counter when the well stocked integrated dispensers work well

Catering

Outlet(s) Visited	Clocktower Cafe, The Kiosk
Food & Drink Sampled	Americano, Croissant Espresso ice cream, water Feta and pesto salad tub, mug of tea

The Clocktower Cafe is an attractive space with impressive features such as the full-size steam engine holograms, coal falling from the ceiling, the overhead miniature railway and plenty of natural light creating a positive first impression. Whilst the layout worked well there were some teething problems noted at the counter as highlighted below. The fixtures and fittings were most appropriate and in keeping with the railway theme; comfortable and stylish chairs along with tables that could be moved to cater for any size of party. The menu was a little limited and it was discussed that this is likely to expand when sufficient visitor feedback can assist with the decision process. An appetising range of cakes and pastries were on display on the counter, it was good to see that these were clearly labelled and priced. The chiller cabinet was well stocked with drinks, salad tubs, ciabattas, toasties, sandwiches and Kids Loco Lunches. The food and drink sampled here was to an excellent standard; the coffee had a good depth of flavour and the croissant was a good size and very fresh. The feta and pesto tub was tasty and nutritious.

The Kiosk was very well placed in the popular Wagon Woods area to cater for a large number of visitors. The attractive wooden cladding, feather banners and good provision of picnic tables created a very pleasant area. The Northern Block ice cream was delicious and very refreshing on the warm sunny day.

The new branding has been adopted very well in all areas of the attraction including catering for example the new logo can be found on everything from ice cream wafers and napkins to cutlery tubs.

Recommendations

- consider expanding the menu
- if visitors are to be encouraged to collect hot drinks from the end of the high counter, as experienced, consider reducing the height of a section to allow ease of access
- add stickers to the base of chair legs to reduce the harsh noise when dragged along the hard floor
- when entering from the shop provide signage to indicate which side to queue from
- if felt appropriate consideration could be given to different styles of additional seating such as a breakfast bar and comfy seating
- promote the sustainable principles of the cafe such as the palm leaf plates and husky ware
- a loyalty card could be introduced to encourage repeat visits, this could also provide visitors with benefits to other aspects of the site for example retail and Wagon Woods; it was discussed that this was being considered

Retail

Outlet(s) Visited Carriage Works gift shop, Hopetown Goods & Gifts

Purchases Made Card, Guide Book

The Hopetown Goods & Gifts is a well laid out area that continues the railway theme well. The numerous carriage lamps make an attractive feature hanging from the ceiling and other railway memorabilia such as the suitcases and milk churns further compliment the theme. Fixtures and fittings were to a high standard and worked well to further enhance displays, such as the wagon carts. Most items were clearly priced to assist browsers using clear mini chalk boards. Utilising lower areas for storage worked well. The range and appropriateness of merchandise was excellent with a comprehensive collection of Hopetown gifts, produce and souvenirs. In the Carriage Works the small retail area provided an opportunity to purchase a memento from the Brick Journeys exhibition.

Recommendations

- the guide book could be sold at the Carriage Works shop and also the Kiosk if felt appropriate
- ensure all items are priced, for example the clothing in the Carriage Works shop and on the pocket money cart in the main shop
- the retail items that visitors pass at the main entrance on arrival could be rotated so that visitors see products as an attractive display instead of just the labels on the backs of items
- mirrors could be provided to allow visitors to try clothing and hats before making a purchase

Staff

The appearance of staff was excellent. All were easily recognisable in t-shirts representing the bold colours of the brand; they were printed on both the front and back to make them identifiable from all angles. The quote 'We changed the world from here' is powerful and memorable and further adds to the interpretation of the site. Some also wore name badges, bum bags and lanyards, and it was good to see some of the catering team also wearing aprons which offered reassurance of a professional approach being taken.

On arrival the visitor was greeted with a warm welcome by a smiling member of the team. On establishing that free tickets had not been pre-booked she happily directed the visitor to the information desk where a cheerful male member of the team provided an introduction to the site and provided a ticket.

A number of staff were seen across the site ready to assist, they were all happy to engage with the visitor and answer questions.

In the Clocktower Cafe the team were efficient and polite. They were seen to clear and clean tables promptly. In The Kiosk the two members of staff were friendly and very knowledgeable about the ice cream offer.

When buying items in both shops it was good to note that both a receipt and bag was offered with each purchases.

Throughout the day questions were asked to various staff members about elements of the attraction they were not working in; they demonstrated very good levels of wider knowledge of the site which is most encouraging. The whole team appeared enthusiastic and cheerful in their role and were great ambassadors for this new and innovative attraction.

Recommendations

- admissions staff could verbally promote the guide book
- continue to offer receipts with all purchases
- ensure staff have access to the prices of all retail items rather than provide incorrect information as experienced in the Carriage Works
- continue with these high standards of customer service as they can significantly enhance the overall visitor experience

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