

HOW TO...GUIDES

How to...Make the most of Quality Assurance

'Quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten' The Gucci family

What is 'Quality Assurance'?

Formal 'Quality Assurance' in tourism involves being assessed by quality assurance schemes that give visitors the reassurance that, when they see the award symbols at accommodation establishments, restaurants and visitor attractions, they will be guaranteed a top 'quality' visit.

If we can assure visitors of a quality experience then they are more likely to return and to spread the word to their friends and family. Raising quality means:

- Meeting and exceeding customer expectations
- Raising business performance
- Putting quality behind everything you do
- Working with other businesses in your destination
- Working towards sustainability.

Who's Who in Quality in Tourism?

VisitEngland (www.visitengland.org) is the national organisation for tourism in England. As the authority for tourism in England, VisitEngland is the custodian of the enjoyEngland consumer brand (www.enjoyengland.com)

VisitEngland develops the accommodation schemes, the visitor attraction and places of interest quality assurance schemes, and national accessible scheme, sets the standards, champions the ratings and promotes only quality-assessed accommodation, attractions, and places to visit in the enjoyEngland campaigns, and via VisitBritain's international marketing activities.

VisitBritain (www.visitbritain.org) is the national tourism agency, funded by the Government, to build the value of tourism to Britain, working in partnership with the tourism industry and the nations and regions of Britain. It operates in 25 offices worldwide and its goals are to raise the world's aspiration to explore Britain, to be the authority on maximising the value of the visitor economy and to raise tourism up the economic agenda.

Local regional and destination partners support the quality agenda by promoting quality-assessed accommodation in publications, websites and in Tourist Information Centres.

Quality in Tourism (QIT) is the assessment service provided for VisitEngland. Over 60 experienced assessors and a highly dedicated in-house team carry out the assessments and handle the administration of the national quality assessment schemes on behalf of VisitEngland.

VisitEngland currently supports and promotes the Green Tourism Business Scheme (www.green-tourism.co.uk) for tourism businesses keen to gain external recognition for their business' green credentials.

And the AIM (Accredited in Meetings), developed by the Meetings Industry Association (www.mia-uk.org) provides the meetings industry and its buyers with a universally recognised indicator of quality for meetings and services.

The Hospitality Assured scheme (www.instituteofhospitality.org) is a quality standard created by the Institute of Hospitality for businesses operating in the hospitality, tourism and leisure sectors. It provides a framework for measuring customer satisfaction and improving business performance.

How does Quality Assurance and being quality assessed help?

Quality Assurance provides your customers with an independent assessment of what they can expect to find. It informs customers of the standard of accommodation, visitor attractions and places to eat and visit, and gives them a rating they can trust.

A quality assessment scheme also offers a support role and 'best practice' benchmark for tourism businesses to work towards by:

- Helping you focus on the needs of your customers
- Focusing on your staff – tourism is a 'people' business
- Focusing on your premises – the environment in which your customers enjoy your products and services will have a big effect on their overall customer experience
- Focusing on your products and services – this is ultimately what your customers come to experience
- Focusing on your business management – ensuring that great staff and quality products and services are backed up by excellent business management, i.e. finance, marketing, meeting legislation, training etc.

Quality assessment schemes also provide guaranteed benefits such as: unlimited use of internationally recognised marques and star ratings in all promotional materials (including

associated commercial websites), an opportunity to gain recognition of high achievement through VisitEngland's special awards, access to marketing opportunities offered by regions and destinations that operate 'assessed only' policies, and VisitEngland quality awareness days and quality workshops.

Starting with your own Quality Plan

Making a quality plan is a bit like making a shopping list. First you need to look at what you've already got, then decide what you need, and then make it happen.

Look carefully at each area of your business and identify what's going well and where you could improve, keeping your customers' needs firmly in mind.

- **Customers** – understanding who your customers are (and taking the time to think about whether you could target others) is an essential first step before you start to plan. You may have already included 'customer research' in your marketing plan, but it's a useful exercise to do in terms of looking at what customers want and expect from tourism and leisure, as well as analysing customers who already book or buy from your business, and understanding the customers who make enquiries but don't actually buy or book.
- **Assessing yourself** – if you're serious about raising quality inside your business – and you are the only person who can do it – then you have to start with yourself. Raising standards means putting quality at the heart of everything you do: your staff, your suppliers, and to a large extent your customers, will take their cue from you. Things to think about are: your appearance, your approach, your organisational skills, and your business skills.
- **Your staff** – your staff are your most important asset, especially in tourism. The way your staff interact with your customers and how well they do their jobs has a big effect on how positive your customers' overall experience is, and how well they view your business.

Things to think about are: culture – do you make an effort to pass your culture onto your staff – the way you want to do business? Do you have an induction pack and an initial training routine so staff know straight-away how you like things done, and the standards?

And how much do they know? Customer-facing staff need to be knowledgeable about your business, your products and services and your destination. They should be ambassadors for your business and for your area, helping customers to get the most out of both.

Are your staff friendly and approachable? Do they make time to talk to guests and smile? Do they listen and deal with queries promptly and directly? Do they help customers get the most out of your business and your destination? Are they willing to go out of their way to take on tasks that aren't strictly 'theirs', to help customers?

Do they have the right skills? In small businesses staff often have to cover a number of different areas. Whilst they may be strong at some parts of their jobs, are there other parts they are less sure of? Lacking skills makes staff less productive and more stressed. There are lots of courses, both vocational and academic, that can be done part-time, during evenings or remotely. Check out Step 9 – Training, in this Guide.

Attendance – if you have regular attendance problems with a member of staff then deal with this appropriately. Do you have a positive and supportive culture? Are there things you can do to make your staff more comfortable at work, or to let them know they're appreciated? Happy staff have a much more positive impact on customers.

- **Your premises** – how much you invest in your building and your facilities depends on many things: available cash, whether you own or lease, planning regulations, what customers demand etc. Consider the following: approach road, parking, landscaping, signage, exterior décor, entrance, reception, cleanliness, smell, lighting, furniture, toilets, pay area, facilities, equipment, comfort, entertainment, and information. Assess these areas as if you are a customer yourself, and pay particular attention to comfort and entertainment. Help customers get more from your business by paying attention to how attractive, pleasant and appealing your premises are, and also how well your premises help to sell to your customers. And don't overlook staff areas – your staff spend a lot of time at work and the environment affects them too.
- **Your products and services** – your products and services are one of the most important aspects of your business. They are also your chance to differentiate yourself from your competitors, and they are the area of your business where you can do the most to meet and exceed your customers' expectations. Consider all your products, i.e. rooms, bathrooms, public areas, transport, indoor and outdoor areas, and food (this is valued very highly by all customers).

Don't forget, the purpose of doing the review is to generate quality ideas. What else could you be doing? – can you source quality local food packs as an optional purchase, can you provide a folder of menus from nearby eating places, is there somewhere for customers to safely leave valuables, or, if you're an activity provider, have you done everything to make the changing and transport facilities as comfortable and clean as possible?

- **Business management** – finally, look at all of your business management areas. How well your business runs will communicate itself to your customers. Well run businesses perform better, last longer and are better at meeting customer needs – and they tend to have happier staff and happier managers. Review each area including: finance, marketing and advertising, website, e-commerce and IT, rules and regulations, research, your staff, customer service, environment and networking.

Get proper costings for any change that has a significant cost implication. Talk over any major investments with your accountant or your business advisor.

Delegate, if you can, to your staff. Think about what targets they could take on. Your staff will feel more involved, you will be taking advantage of the skills you have in your organisation, and you will be widening the scope of what your staff do and therefore creating more satisfaction and variety.

When you have made your plan, with dated targets against each section, keep going back to it regularly so you can regularly review changes you've made as well as being able to monitor the effects of any changes.

VisitEngland's quality assessment schemes

Quality in Tourism

VisitEngland's 'Quality in Tourism' assessment schemes cover the following business types:

- Hotel accommodation
- Guest accommodation
- Self-catering accommodation and serviced apartments
- Budget accommodation
- Parks, Holiday Villages and Chalets
- University/Campus and Hostels
- Hire Craft and Hotel Boats
- Welcome schemes for: Walkers, Cyclists, Pets and Families

Joining the scheme involves: assessing which category is best for your business (refer to Quality in Tourism - www.qualityintourism.com), talking to a representative from Quality in Tourism (tel: 0845 300 6996) to chat through any queries and concerns, completing an Application & Sector information form and making the membership payment. Once the application has been received, an Assessor will make contact and visit your establishment, then follow up with a written report and confirmation of your rating.

Benefits of joining the VisitEngland 'Quality in Tourism' scheme include:

- Unlimited use of VisitEngland's internationally recognised marque and star rating in all your promotional material, providing potential visitors with the assurance that your

accommodation has been independently assessed. The star ratings are promoted by many commercial websites including Active Hotels and LateRooms.com

- Annual assessment by one of VisitEngland's professional assessors. 'Mystery guest' overnight stay every year for all hotels, irrespective of star rating
- Written report after each assessment, outlining strengths and areas for improvement
- Free exterior sign
- Opportunity to achieve Silver and Gold awards for hotels and guest accommodation
- Opportunity to achieve Gold awards for self-catering and serviced apartments
- Opportunity to achieve Breakfast awards sponsored by Kellogg's
- Free subscription to VisitEngland's Quality Edge magazine
- Free subscription to www.accommodationKnowHow.co.uk (the Pink Booklet online) – widely respected online resource, which provides straightforward information and advice to help you unravel the legislation and regulations that affect your business
- Free entry on www.enjoyengland.com and www.visitbritain.com
- Eligibility for annual VisitEngland Awards for Excellence
- Opportunity to take paid advertisements in the annual VisitEngland Accommodation guides. Better coverage than ever with five new iPhone Apps.

(NB: at the time of writing this Guide, VisitEngland is planning to re-package the service. Check for up-to-date details of national accreditation and assessment scheme membership on www.visitengland.org/busdev/accreditation)

National Accessibility Scheme

'Quality in Tourism' also covers a **National Accessibility Scheme (NAS)**, which is the only scheme that rates the accessibility of visitor accommodation throughout England. The NAS helps accommodation operators improve and promote their true level of accessibility and includes helpful entry-level guides such as 'One Step Ahead' as well as the NAS standards booklets containing all the criteria you need to gain a rating.

Visit: www.visitengland.org/busdev/accreditation/nas for more details.

And refer to '*How to ...make your business more accessible*' guide.

VAQAS – Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme

The Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme (VAQAS) is managed by VisitEngland and, through its network of regional assessors, has an excellent reputation for instigating, modifying and shaping change to the customer experience at visitor attractions across England.

The VAQAS assessment covers the entire customer journey, from pre-arrival to the visit itself, and includes a written report of the assessment that contains key observations and recommendations as well as highlighting positives and any negatives.

Visit: www.visitengland.org/busdev/accreditation/attractions/VAQAS for more details.

PIQAS – Places of Interest Quality Assurance Scheme

The Places of Interest Quality Assurance Scheme (PIQAS) was launched in 2010 and is aimed at locations not eligible for VAQAS due to size or infrastructure.

The assessment is carried out in exactly the same way as for a VAQAS assessment and benefits include unlimited use of the Quality Rose Marque, a full report of the assessment including key observations and recommendations, and identification of areas that require either investment or internal up-grading, or simply just a general re-fresh, e.g. removal of graffiti or cutting back overgrown shrubbery.

Visit: www.visitengland.org/busdev/accreditation/attractions/PIQAS for further detail.

Sustainability in quality standards

‘Going green’ and quality go hand-in-hand. Sustainability has been integrated into all of the ‘Quality in Tourism’ assessment schemes, and ‘Good Practice Guides’ are available for all sectors of the schemes including Guest Accommodation, Holiday Parks, Holiday Villages, Hostel Accommodation, Hotels, Self Catering Accommodation and Visitor Attractions.

Green Start is a tool from VisitEngland, available free of charge to all tourism businesses interested in understanding how they can save money, encourage greater efficiency, add appeal to their business and begin a journey of doing business even better. Visit: www.visitengland.org/busdev/bussupport/sustainability for more details.

VisitEngland Awards for Excellence

The VisitEngland Awards for Excellence (formerly the EnjoyEngland Awards) are the highest accolade in English tourism.

The Awards recognise businesses that incorporate best practice throughout their operation and also celebrate the very best quality and innovation, helping to raise standards across the industry and secure England's place as a world-class holiday destination.

The Awards are open to tourism businesses, tourism support organisations and the thousands of people who work in them.

VisitEngland has recently reviewed the management of the Awards to make it possible for all businesses in all parts of the country – including those that may not be able to enter regional heats – to have an opportunity to participate. Categories include: Access for All, Business tourism, Best Tourism Event, Guest Accommodation of the Year, Outstanding Customer Service of the Year, Taste of England Award, and Sustainable Tourism Award.

Visit: www.visitenglandawards.org for further details.

Hospitality Industry training schemes

Hospitality Assured

Hospitality Assured is the quality standard created by the Institute of Hospitality specifically for customer-facing businesses.

The Hospitality Assured process encourages businesses to look at their own operation from the customer's perspective and to see where improvements should be made. This is done by looking at how businesses score against the criteria in the 9-step standard that helps to: improve quality standards, improve leadership and management skills, increase customer loyalty, improve staff morale, reduce staff turnover, increase market share, generate great PR, and develop service ideals, values and principles that support a culture of excellence.

The Institute of Hospitality also run other Award schemes that recognise quality in specific areas of the industry such as the Hospitality Apprenticeship Awards, the Hotel Excellence Awards, and the Shine Awards (recognising achievements of outstanding women working in the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism sector).

Visit www.instituteofhospitality.org for further detail.

The Hotel Cateys Awards

The Hotel Cateys Awards – supported by Caterer and Hotelkeeper – were created to recognise and applaud the people and teams who work across all layers of management and operations within the hotel sector.

There are 17 award categories that include: Front of House Manager of the Year, Conference and Banqueting Team of the Year, Housekeeper of the Year, Green Hotel of the Year, Hotel Restaurant Team of the Year, and Hotel Chef of the Year.

The Awards have become one of the highlights of the hospitality industry, culminating in a glittering annual Awards event each year.

Visit www.hotelcateys.com for further detail.

Meetings Industry quality assessment scheme

Accredited in Meetings

The Accredited in Meetings scheme provides the meetings industry and its buyers with a universally recognised indicator of quality for meetings and services.

Being AIM accredited gives venues and suppliers a clear marketing advantage over non AIM accredited venues and product and service providers.

Developed by the Meetings Industry Association but available to all venues and suppliers in the meetings industry, AIM is endorsed by VisitEngland as well as by VisitBritain, VisitWales and MPi UK.

The most noticeable aspect of the AIM scheme is its simplicity. The three-level scheme is effective because it encourages continuous improvement.

Visit www.mia-uk.org for further detail.

Training, quality awareness days and workshops

There are key national organisations that offer support, training and skills to help your business stay on track with quality awareness. There are also colleges, universities, private trainers and consultants that deliver specialist training and advice for the industry. Below are four of the key national organisations:

- **World Host:** People 1st – the sector skills council for the hospitality, passenger transport, travel and tourism industries – has developed WorldHost customer service training for the UK market, with the support of VisitEngland. Training workshops include: Principles of Customer Service, Serving Customers with Disabilities, Service Across Cultures and Ambassador Workshop. For more details visit: www.worldhost.uk.com
- **UKSP** is a unique ‘one stop’ shop for information on jobs, careers, qualifications and training within the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism industry. Registration is free for

employers and individuals to find all the information they need about developing a career, and improving the skills of employees. Visit: www.uksp.co.uk

- **People 1st Training** – is the sector skills council for the hospitality, passenger transport, travel and tourism industry. It offers nationally-recognised qualifications in management and leadership, customer service and Train the Trainer programmes. Visit www.people1sttraining.co.uk for more details.
- **Welcome to Excellence** – the Welcome to Excellence training initiative offers a range of eight one-day customer service courses – ideal for staff at all levels. Clients range from small B&Bs and guesthouses to larger organisations such as London Gatwick Airport and English Heritage. Visit www.welcometoexcellence.co.uk for more details.

Where to go for more help

- VisitEngland: www.visitengland.org/busdev/bussupport
- VisitEngland Awards for Excellence: www.visitenglandawards.org
- Quality in Tourism: www.qualityintourism.com
- The Green Tourism Business Scheme: www.green-tourism.co.uk
- Meetings Industry Association: www.mia.uk-org
- Institute of Hospitality: www.instituteofhospitality.com
- The Hotel Cateys: www.hotelcateys.com
- World Host Training: www.worldhost.uk.com
- UKSP (UK Skills Passport): www.uksp.co.uk
- People 1st: www.people1sttraining.co.uk
- Welcome to Excellence: www.welcometoexcellence.co.uk