

QUALITY ACTION PLAN (DRAFT)

Vision

To deliver quality professional tourism products and services in line with changing consumer needs and expectations, contributing to 5% growth, year on year, in the England tourism market by 2020.

Objectives

1. To increase the ability of consumers to make purchasing decisions that meet their expectations.
2. To increase the awareness of tourism businesses and service providers of the changing needs and expectations of consumers in order to continually improve the quality of the visitor experience.
3. To increase the awareness of businesses and tourism service providers of the benefits of continuous quality development and investment and of how, and where, to source appropriate resources.

What is quality?

Quality is difficult to define. It means different things to different people and the level of quality delivered or received is a subjective matter. Quality is an assessment in the mind of the individual - it is not so important to define it, as it is for businesses to clearly communicate the quality on offer so that consumers can select appropriate products and services to meet their needs and better judge the value for money being offered and delivered. A business delivering a quality product and service to consumers is more productive and profitable and has the ability to continually re-invest in their product, service and people.

In tourism the quality debate has been synonymous with accommodation and star ratings despite the fact that it is widely acknowledged that quality is far broader in scope than this. The national quality standards along with the many schemes on offer across the visitor economy have played and continue to perform an important role in establishing a means of communicating the level of quality being provided to consumers and providing a process to support business to make improvements that will provide a return on the investment made.

It is also important that businesses understand the changing needs and 'quality' expectations of consumers so that they can develop and adapt to satisfy the needs of their customers.

The drive for Quality underpins the entire Strategic Framework and is fundamental to each of its objectives:

01 - To increase England's share of global visitor markets: To grow the market as a whole, we must ensure that visitors return and recommend. They will do this if the overall experience is a good one, of good "quality".

02 - To offer compelling destinations of distinction: Destinations are comprised of many individual experiences across the visitor journey and including the public realm. It is self-evident that these experiences should be of good quality.

03 - To champion a successful, thriving, tourism industry: Businesses need the right conditions to thrive. In the case of quality this includes knowing where to access up to date intelligence on changing consumer trends and behaviours and being able to interpret this data so it is meaningful to them. The use of case studies, benchmarking and best practice are a means of assisting and supporting businesses to respond to changes, giving practical not theoretical support.

04 - To facilitate greater engagement between the visitor and the experience: This objective includes the welcome and accessibility action plans which are intrinsically linked to improving the visitor experience. In addition, the modernisation of visitor information gives us the opportunity to listen to the visitor (through social media and user generated content) as well as providing good quality, relevant information to enhance the visitor's experience.

Across the Strategic Framework Action Plans quality has been incorporated into the vision, objectives and actions of the plans, for example, in providing professional customer service in the Skills and Welcome Action Plans and quality visitor experiences in the Destination Management Action Plan.

Why take action on quality?

“Quality” issues are therefore being addressed by many of the Framework's Action Plans, in one form or another but there is a need to consistently drive the quality agenda and specifically champion it, to provide intelligence, advice and guidance across all the sectors of the visitor economy and ensure all of the Action Plans consistently champion the improvement of quality as it relates to their vision and objectives.

The vision, objectives and actions of this Action Plan therefore do not attempt to repeat the many actions included in the other plans, they focus specifically on the need to provide that drive and support for the quality agenda.

This is particularly important over the period of this plan as many of the organisations at national and local level, previously involved in the delivery or promotion of business support programmes for the industry, have either disappeared or have had considerable budget cuts.

The need to make the business case for quality improvements is crucial. The Action Plan will focus on supporting businesses to consistently improve quality and encourage the sharing of best practice and evidenced examples of return on investment.

Ultimately, through implementing the actions set out, the partners identified can influence the levels of visitor satisfaction, improvements in the quality of the product, higher levels of repeat business and increased visitor spend.

Context

Consumers have access to more information than ever before as they seek to make decisions about holiday destinations, activities and attractions. Almost 80% of UK households now have Internet access, while the increased prevalence of smartphones (there are now almost 18 million mobile Internet users in the UK) allows visitors to research their choices during, as well as before, the trips they take.

As the amount of available information has grown, the “share of voice” actively managed by tourism businesses and organisations has fallen, with TripAdvisor perhaps the best known source of user-generated content, but with many other options for those seeking others' opinions. VisitEngland

research suggests that one in four use review websites to help research their domestic trips, while 45% claim to have communicated online in some way about their most recent English break, whether through social networking conversations (19%), uploading photos (23%) or writing their own reviews (8%).

At the same time though, all this can actually serve to make decision-making more difficult, as time-starved consumers struggle to make sense of the mass of conflicting information. While many are fully aware that reviews can be manipulated by businesses, or distorted by unreasonably demanding guests, they can find it difficult to extract the information they need. As a result, there is a real need for ways to help consumers do this, and futures company Trendwatching predicts that *“any service that helps present, edit, display, strip, filter, bundle and curate all the choices into something easily digestible and relevant will do well in the next 12 months and beyond.”*

Accreditation schemes can help consumers in precisely this area, likely to be a reason why they are used at least “sometimes” by three quarters of those looking for serviced accommodation in England – almost certainly not instead of other information sources, but perhaps as a much-needed short-cut through the information overload. Research also shows that official star ratings are seen as more trusted than review sites, with levels of trust increasing further when consumers are aware that they are administered by the UK’s National Tourist Boards. This suggests that schemes can still have a very active role to play in aiding decision-making, provided of course that this trust is rewarded by the accreditation criteria matching consumer expectations.

Accreditation schemes – whoever owns or delivers them – are dependent on having a set of robust criteria or standards to provide a benchmark against which businesses can be measured or assessed. It is important that these criteria and standards have the involvement of and buy-in from the relevant sectors of the industry. Standards and schemes should be regularly reviewed by industry to ensure that they are relevant and reflective of both industry and consumer trends and as a rule, they should also be funded by industry to cement their engagement.

The main national accreditation schemes are delivered by a variety of partners and are briefly listed below. This list is not intended to be exhaustive but to paint a picture of the types of schemes currently in the market:

Accommodation

National Quality Assessment Scheme – VisitEngland together with the AA and the National Tourist Boards of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are joint owners of the “common standards” relating to hotels, guest accommodation and self-catering. The standards against which all bodies undertake their inspection visits are common and all partners award stars (from 1 to 5).

British Graded Holiday Parks Scheme – the National Tourist Boards together with industry associations (British Holiday Homes and Parks Association and National Caravan Council) manage the standards for this scheme. Eligible businesses are again awarded stars (from 1 to 5).

VisitEngland, through its licensee, G4S (Quality in Tourism), also manages schemes for campus accommodation, boats, chalets and other forms of accommodation.

Attractions

VAQAS (The Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme) is now a well-established and recognised accreditation scheme with over 1000 participants throughout England. VAQAS is a pass/fail scheme and does not award star ratings. The emphasis is on giving businesses practical advice to enable them to raise quality and visitor satisfaction.

PIQAS (Places of Interest Assurance Scheme)

Introduced in 2010, this scheme is designed for those attractions with less visitor infrastructure and less dwell time (e.g. Dream in St. Helens) and supports areas such as faith tourism.

VisitEngland Bespoke Schemes

VisitEngland is also providing bespoke quality assurance schemes for Motorway Service Area operators and the Racecourse Association (on behalf of 55 English racecourses).

Business Tourism

The Meetings Industry Association (MIA) runs the Accredited in Meetings scheme. AIM is the nationwide 'kitemark' for accredited venues and service providers in the meetings, conference and events industry. (See Business Tourism Action Plan).

Sustainable Tourism

The largest sustainable tourism scheme in England is the Green Tourism Business Scheme (GTBS). The GTBS is the national sustainable tourism certification scheme for the UK. Businesses opting to join Green Tourism are assessed by a qualified grading advisor against a rigorous set of criteria, covering a range of areas, like energy and water efficiency, waste management, biodiversity and more.

There are a wide range of other schemes to recognise the sustainability performance of a business, the most robust and credible ones are endorsed through a validation process as described in the Wise Growth Action Plan.

Accessibility

The National Accessible Scheme (NAS) 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. (See Accessibility Action Plan).

Local Schemes

There are also a number of local destination or tourism association schemes covering accommodation, attractions and sustainability. These are important for local engagement or branding purposes although it is desirable that there is some linkage to national schemes and standards. For this reason, VisitEngland introduced its entry level framework for destinations in 2009 – enabling destinations and tourism associations to engage with accommodation businesses beyond the official star rating schemes. Businesses included in these locally badged schemes are checked for cleanliness, safety and compliance with legislation.

Other Sectors

There is an extensive range of food schemes available – two of the most high-profile ones being Michelin and AA Rosettes. Whilst there is an argument to say these only play a role in the top 10 % of restaurants they do have an important role to play in the visitor journey. Both of these leading guides are now looking to recognise “good local restaurants”. There is also a range of local or “taste” schemes which play an important part in defining a sense of place.

Other schemes which influence both the visitor and the wider visitor economy include Blue Flag (Bathing Water), Purple Flag (night time economy), Quality Coast Award (coastal areas), Green Flag (open spaces) and “scores on the doors” (food hygiene).

Mystery Shopping

Many companies offer and consume mystery shopping services aimed at testing various aspects of an organisation’s service delivery and a closer relationship with mystery shopper organisations at a strategic level could well provide greater insight into cross-sector issues and opportunities for improvement.

The role of VisitEngland

VisitEngland, the National Tourist Board for England, has an important role in driving forward improvements in quality. VisitEngland gathers national intelligence on consumer behaviours and trends which help businesses to understand and respond to consumer expectations. Other VisitEngland work on measuring visitor satisfaction and the destination experience can help demonstrate whether the industry is in fact driving forward quality.

Whilst VisitEngland recognises and celebrates successful tourism businesses whether quality assessed or not, its leading role in setting the standards for the National Quality Assessment and Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Schemes provide a unique opportunity to engage with businesses face to face on an annual basis with approximately 25,000 tourism businesses via the c. 65 assessors - **which are funded entirely by those businesses.**

Consumers and tourism businesses place a level of trust in the quality marques they participate in and therefore the communications, related exterior and online signage is important and hugely valuable and should be protected, by ensuring all schemes are delivered robustly and efficiently.

VisitEngland also currently supports, endorses or validates other schemes including the Meeting Industry Association’s “Accredited in Meetings” programme, the Green Tourism Business Scheme, the Peak District Environmental Quality mark, BS8901 (certified by SGS) and the Premier League’s Stadium Scheme.

VisitEngland has now licensed the management of the accommodation schemes programme to G4S (Quality in Tourism) but will continue to be responsible for the development of the accommodation standards, liaising regularly with the other national assessing bodies where a ‘Common Standard’ is in place. The focus will be on continuing the modernisation programmes for the schemes, improving the robustness of the ratings, reducing inconsistency between assessors and improving consumer awareness, particularly through enhanced profile within third party commercial websites.

Objective 1: To increase the ability of consumers to make purchasing decisions that meet their expectations.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	DELIVERY PARTNERS	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
i. Develop initiatives for better consumer promotion of quality schemes.	Quality Scheme Operators	Quality Advisory Panel (see Objective 2; Action i)	Take up of quality messages by third parties (e.g. Late Rooms).
ii. Review the future direction and development of VAQAS.	VisitEngland	Visitor Attractions Group; Quality Advisory Panel; DMOs	Scheme developed and revised by 31 December 2012.
iii. Quality schemes to increasingly report on the role of quality scheme advice in influencing consumer purchasing decisions and in leading to increased productivity/profitability.	Quality Scheme Operators	DMOs	Established methodology in place by September 2012.
iv. Promote the outcome of the Excellence Awards and other industry award schemes with consumers.		VisitEngland; DMOs; Trade Associations and Industry Bodies	Increase in PR coverage.

Objective 2: To increase awareness of businesses and tourism service providers of the changing needs and expectations of consumers to continually improve the visitor experience.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	DELIVERY PARTNERS	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
i. Establish a cross industry panel to advise on industry developments and consumer expectations and behaviours that impact on the development of national quality standards.	VisitEngland	Trade Associations; DMOs	Quality Advisory Panel established by 31 March 2012.
ii. Incorporate business support/marketing advice into all existing quality schemes at national and local level across the visitor economy to ensure businesses develop at a pace with consumer	VisitEngland	DMOs; Quality Scheme Operators	Increase in satisfaction measured through scheme satisfaction surveys.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	DELIVERY PARTNERS	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
behaviours and expectations.			
iii. Organise two national events to share best practice across and between sectors.	VisitEngland; Visitor Attractions Group	Visitor Attraction Conference Committee	Attendance and delegate satisfaction

Objective 3: To increase the awareness of businesses and tourism service providers of the benefits of continuous quality development and investment and of how, and where, to source appropriate resources

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	DELIVERY PARTNERS	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
i. Develop and communicate the business case for continuous quality development and investment by businesses.	Industry Advisory Panel	VisitEngland	Business case developed and used by businesses; case studies developed (see action ii below).
ii. Businesses to feedback on the impact of quality improvements.		Businesses; Destination Management Organisations (DMOs); Trade Associations	Production of business focussed case studies.
iii. Develop initiatives for business support and marketing advice and ensure that assessors are trained to be able to give businesses the most up-to-date support and advice.	Quality Scheme Operators	Quality Advisory Panel	Increase in satisfaction measured through industry satisfaction surveys.
iv. Identify and share best practice on the benefits of continuous quality development and investment.	VisitEngland	DMOS; Trade Associations	Best practice identified and shared through assessors, journals, newsletters, advice sheets and websites.

ACTION	LEAD PARTNERS (where appropriate)	DELIVERY PARTNERS	OUTCOME OR SUCCESS MEASURE
v. Use industry awards (including VisitEngland Excellence awards) as a catalyst for quality improvement and promote winners throughout their year of tenure.	Award Scheme Operators	DMOs, Trade Associations	Case studies developed and an increase in PR coverage.
vi. Provide a portal for business development tools and resources and promote to all tourism businesses.	VisitEngland	VisitEngland, DMOs and Trade Associations	Increase in web visits, downloads and sign ups.

Questions for Consultation

1. Do you support the overall objectives, context and key issues highlighted in the Action Plan which have helped to steer the more detailed actions?
2. Are there any key actions missing from the Action Plan and / or do you have any alternatives to suggest that are realistic and achievable?
3. Do the delivery partners make sense or are there other organisations that could help deliver any of the actions which are not referred to?
4. What can you do to support the delivery of this Action Plan? Would you be prepared to lead on any of the actions?
5. Does the Action plan embed accessibility and sustainability (wise growth) principles fully enough, or does this need highlighting further?
6. Are there any case studies or good examples you can share that relate to and support the actions outlined. What is the best way of sharing these with the industry?
7. Are we (collectively) fully aware of the areas/topics in which businesses need most support/advice/information?
8. Are there any other visitor economy sectors where an accreditation or quality scheme is in existence but which could be strengthened through association with VisitEngland or other schemes, or are there any sectors where there is a perceived or proven need for an industry scheme or standard?
9. Are we (collectively) engaging with all sectors of the visitor economy on quality issues?
10. Are there any other comments you wish to make in relation to taking this (or these) action plans forward?