

Accreditation Forum Sept 15

An industry workshop was held to discuss the accommodation accreditation schemes run by Quality in Tourism and the AA. Questions are being asked about the future of these schemes both nationally and locally. Are they still relevant? Should Northumberland's marketing be opened up to non-accredited businesses? These questions and more were debated.

Read an account of the debate and its outcomes.

Giles Ingram of Northumberland Tourism welcomed 45 attendees, thanked Eshott Hall for the venue, and kicked off the debate with a presentation of the key issues and questions before introducing two speakers; Barbara Huddart speaking in support of accreditation, and Ian Mills of Rothbury & Coquetdale Tourism Association speaking about their inclusive approach. A lengthy debate followed.

Skip to **OUTCOMES** for a quick look at our conclusions, or read on for the fuller debate.

Introduction

The full text of Giles' introduction is available towards the end of this document. But in brief, he highlighted the fact that an increasing number of businesses are dropping out of accreditation schemes or starting to question their value. He noted that this could impact Northumberland's ability to muster a strong marketing budget if only accredited accommodation is eligible to participate. Giles went on to introduce the pros and cons of the current situation and of any change in policy to open up marketing to non-accredited businesses. He showed examples of websites where accredited and non-accredited properties are promoted, and where Tripadvisor ratings are shown alongside ratings.

Barbara Huddart, Glendale PR

Key points:

- Accreditation has created a high standard of accommodation in Northumberland
- Advisory visits have been hugely beneficial for Eshott Hall
- Some of the standards of accreditation are slightly old fashioned and dated
- Ensures excellent customer service
- Provides a benchmark
- Encourages collaborative working with partners
- Regular reviews and inspections keep you on your toes
- Provides a route to very effective niche marketing (e.g. walkers welcome)
- Recognised by the public
- People pay more for quality
- It provides the customer with reassurance

Ian Mills, Rothbury & Coquetdale Tourism Association

Key points:

- Clarified that RACTA are not suggesting that the accreditation schemes should be discontinued.
- It is a business decision as to whether a business wants to go down the route of accreditation and the world is a very different place now with all the options available.
- Businesses spend money based on value and look at what they get back.
- The goalposts are shifting. Big companies do not need it. Small companies cannot afford it.
- Gathered comments detailing why businesses have left:
 - o Disenchantment with accreditation

- Not consistent
- Stars for all types of businesses results in confusion – i.e. a Linden Hall is compared to Katerina Guest House
- Possibility that everyone is given at least 1 star ‘ To get them in the system’, a quote from an assessor
- Doesn’t catch the ‘Touchy Feely’
- Shouldn’t the public define what they like, rather than an inspector?
- QIT has not caught up with the times
- In 12 years Ian has had no helpful advice and would rather work with colleagues
- NT would need to have sanctions to control complaints

General Comments from Floor

- Accreditation is most relevant to self catering businesses as few alternatives exist.
- QIT lacks consistency, is out of date, and isn’t flexible enough to properly fit all businesses. But acknowledged that QIT is updating the scheme.
- Concern over lack of policing by QIT – e.g. Removal of signs, website policing.
- It is competition that raises the bar, not QIT.
- Customers are savvy and will shop around.
- Need to ensure the benefits of accreditation are promoted very clearly.
- General concern that any new entry level scheme would cause confusion.

OUTCOMES

In conclusion the following was agreed:

- A QIT representative should come up to Northumberland to:
 - Explain new changes to the scheme
 - Explain the future of the scheme given changes in funding
 - Businesses want to be involved in the discussion around tender for QIT. Want to feedback their comments to VisitEngland
- Need to better understand visitors’ opinions on the scheme
- Need to better understand how many and which type of businesses are dropping out of the scheme
- Discussion on compromise and how this can be achieved:
 - NT should see if it’s possible to promote un-accredited accommodation on their website, as long as accredited properties are more prominent

Northumberland Tourism will follow up these actions.

Other comments

The full debate covered a lot of ground, the following is a collection of main points:

- We need to work at making the accreditation scheme work better for businesses.
- Serviced v non serviced – a different approach.
- Trip Advisor/Eviivo is irrelevant for self catering and offers no value.
- General conclusion from the Hoteliers Association is that the AA Accreditation Scheme is behind the times, yet there is still a place for accreditation in standard setting.
- More people advertising with NT secures future marketing activities.
- NCC provides regulatory frameworks so can handle complaints.

- Some people questioned the cost-effectiveness of the accreditation scheme. 10% of a businesses budget is spent on marketing of which 5% goes on accreditation - this is prohibitive. The accreditation scheme lacks standardisation and does not provide real value.
- We need to boost the promotion of Northumberland. Why be frightened of non accreditation and competition?
- People should not be pushed into two camps. Just because someone does not invest in QIT does not mean they have no interest in quality.
- One participant commented that they talk to all customers and is seeing a significant change in what people are using to base their decision on where to stay. Trip Advisor rates highly.
- Not a case of agree or disagree. The Coquetvale had to be assessed as a restaurant with rooms. They could not be a hotel as the restaurant is not open all winter. However to all intents and purposes they are a hotel. Accreditation is confusing and does not accurately represent the product. He knows of competing businesses whose quality is not as good yet they had a higher award. Trip advisor works well for the hotel.
- Want to be involved with NT but can't promote non-accredited accommodation. Would like marketing money to come to NT so that there is a bigger pot for advertising.
- Standards create value, what people are prepared to pay.
- Accreditation has driven up the standard over the past 25 years. Accommodation is now of a very high standard in Northumberland.
- For the Caravan Park, QIT did not work. Did not cover the right standards.
- QIT provides a level playing field and Trip Advisor will never do this. Scheme needs to be priced right. If NT do promote non accredited there needs to be a clear delineation on the website.

Introduction by Giles Ingram, Northumberland Tourism

1. Current situation

VisitEngland contracts and funds a company called Quality in Tourism to deliver the national quality accreditation grading scheme. The AA also offers an assessment scheme using the same criteria and linked to AA marketing opportunities. The schemes apply to serviced and unserviced accommodation, awarding them 'grades' – commonly recognised as the star ratings.

National tourist boards, Northumberland Tourism, Northumberland County Council, Northumberland National Park, Hadrian's Wall Heritage, and many tourism associations will currently only promote assessed accommodation. The objective being:

To improve the quality and competitiveness of Northumberland's offer to visitors

What are the benefits of accreditation?

- An independent grading reassures customers that they will receive a particular level of quality and value (countering concerns that independent businesses are a risky option).

- Businesses are provided with independent advice at each assessment, by experienced professionals who can advise on industry and customer trends.
- Businesses gain access to exclusive marketing opportunities from tourist boards.

This policy has been strongly supported by Northumberland's businesses. It is said to have driven real improvements in quality over the years, and by excluding poor operators from destination marketing has protected and enhanced Northumberland's reputation.

Northumberland's tourism database Desti.ne tells us:

- 72% of known accommodation establishments are accredited.
- 1252 are graded / 466 are not graded

But the number of ungraded establishments will doubtless be higher, as many ungraded businesses are unlikely to have provided their details for Desti.ne.

2. A Questionable future

2.1. Nationally

Industry rumblings and questions over the continued relevance of the grading scheme have grown over the last year.

The grading scheme was created when no alternatives existed. Today websites such as Tripadvisor offer a powerful alternative. For example, according to a June 2011 poll by online independent travel agency www.sunshine.co.uk review websites are used by 62% of UK holiday makers.

Government policy is now to end public funding of the scheme. Their Tourism Policy states:

“Many firms have lost confidence in it, or simply refused to join at all. As a result, *the Government will stop trying to corral tourism firms in England into joining an official rating scheme. We will leave decisions on whether and how to modernise, shrink or close the existing state-sponsored scheme to the industry itself, through the newly-refocused VisitEngland.*”

The Tourism Policy contends that direct customer feedback is the best route to improving quality and competitiveness.

VisitEngland's contract with Quality in Tourism runs until March 2012. They have announced that they remain supportive of the scheme, but have not announced their plans from April.

On a related point though VisitEngland have announced this week that one of the benefits of being accredited – your business listing on VE's website, will run to March 2012. Its future beyond then is under review.

2.2. Northumberland

In Northumberland increasing numbers of businesses are questioning the relevance and value of accreditation. Rothbury's tourism associations has started to promote un-accredited accommodation. Most of our large quality hotels have stated that they see no value in it.

We're told by an increasing number of businesses it's a cost they bear just to be promoted by Northumberland Tourism and the council. They do not value it for its intended purposes.

But it does have its supporters. Many small businesses particularly value the advice they receive during the inspection process. And many simply do not like Tripadvisor, distrusting its accuracy and how it can paint a distorted picture of a business. Alnwick Tourism Association chose to stick with the scheme in a debate this year.

When debated by tourism associations the issue has evoked heated discussion with strong emotions on both sides.

3. Implications

There are implications in both keeping and changing the current policy.

AGAINST KEEPING

If we continue to only advertise quality assessed businesses the impact for Northumberland could be:

- A decline in Northumberland's attractiveness and competitiveness because:
 - We present a declining portion of our accommodation to visitors
 - We are unable to market many of our best businesses
 - The marketing budget for the county will be further reduced
- Businesses forced to shoulder unwanted costs merely to access other services they do value – impacting business sustainability and competitiveness

AGAINST CHANGING

Arguments against promoting unaccredited accommodation include:

- Undermining the quality of our offer because customers may unwittingly book very poor accommodation
- No means of addressing customer complaints – no sanction against businesses that repeatedly let Northumberland down.
- A substantial number of small businesses are extremely anti Tripadvisor – experiences of bad ratings painting an unfair picture, or being held to ransom by unreasonable guests.
- The encouragement, given via the annual inspection, for businesses to up their game and invest will be lost.

These are just a few of the arguments on both sides. Our speakers today will explore these issues at greater length.

4. Our Options

Assuming our objective remains **To improve the quality and competitiveness of Northumberland's offer to visitors**, our options are to:

- Option 1:** **Status Quo:** Restrict promotion to accredited accommodation
- Option 2:** **Promote all** accommodation
- Option 4:** Introduce a lower cost **entry level** accreditation option

Related options:

- **Better promote** benefits of choosing accredited accommodation
- Develop a **local customer complaints policy** and procedures
- Option for businesses to **add 'review ratings'** to their listings