

Quality Update



News from your National Tourist Board



Future of quality schemes secure

Contrary to media reports earlier this year, VisitEngland's quality assessment schemes are not in danger of being 'scrapped'. VisitEngland remains committed to championing quality in England. All of our consumer research shows the importance that visitors place on the quality of accommodation and how much it influences overall satisfaction.

Despite a budget cut of 34% over the next four years, VisitEngland is investing in research to ensure that the industry is well-informed about consumer expectations and trends. This will ensure a successful and sustainable future for the accommodation sector.

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The key changes summarised following the extensive scheme review

› The Government has announced that the small public subsidy for the assessment service must end. As the current contract with Quality in Tourism is due to finish in March 2012, this presents an opportunity to repackage the service.

VisitEngland has therefore made the decision to re-tender the contract over the next few months.

VisitEngland will take this opportunity to reshape its accommodation assessment service, building on its strengths and improving weaker areas. The current contract has brought stability, with efficient administration systems in place and a strong assessment team with many years' experience. VisitEngland will focus on the two main functions of its assessment services: awarding robust star ratings that consumers can trust and delivering sound advice to businesses. These are areas where the national tourist board can have the greatest impact on the growth of the businesses that choose to subscribe.

VisitEngland recognises the significant contribution the 25,000 participants make to its quality assessment schemes and will work closely on the tender specification with representatives from trade associations whose members have a vested interest in the shape of the new licence. As the Tourism Minister John Penrose has stated, it is the industry that must decide how to take the schemes forward. ■

**Email: feedback@visitengland.org
to have your say**

Ratings that consumers can trust

During the past 18 months, VisitEngland has worked with the other assessing bodies to modernise the hotel, guest accommodation, parks and self-catering schemes to reflect changing customer expectations and industry standards and trends. Fundamental to improving the consumer perception and value of the ratings will be the implementation of the new criteria and marking schemes.

The shape of the new contract will be informed by feedback received from VisitEngland scheme participants, representatives of trade associations, destination and TIC managers and consumer complaints.

Key areas for consideration will include:

- making more use of complaints received from

consumers, especially when challenging a rating

- reviewing the frequency of assessment to target resources when ratings are 'borderline'
- building on the benefits of 'mystery shop' visits and considering spot checks for self-catering on changeover day if complaints arise and/or rating is questioned
- stronger guardianship of the VisitEngland quality rose marquee
- more stringent independent moderation of the ratings awarded by assessors to ensure consistency
- communicating better to consumers the difference between an 'official' star rating and one that is 'self-awarded'
- working with commercial online booking sites to improve accuracy of official star ratings

"I feel I gained so much from the experience and started work immediately on implementing some of the assessor's ideas in order to improve and move my business forward"

Nicola Downhouse, Old Joinery, Wiltshire

 ★★★★★ Guest Accommodation



"I cannot see us operating without some kind of quality rating system alongside our customer reviews"

Andrew Pumphrey, Managing Director, LateRooms.com

Delivering best practice and advice

Research among VisitEngland participants shows the value placed on the visit, advice and guidance from the assessor. Learning from the success of VisitEngland's Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance scheme (VAQAS), which is promoted primarily as a consultancy and business support service, the new contract awarded will require the licensee to focus on developing an experienced team that can tailor visits and reports to suit each individual business.

This work will be backed up by the development of the AccommodationKnowHow website and the well-respected *Quality edge* magazine. VisitEngland will improve

its support role for businesses by:

- providing regular opportunities for assessors to share expertise with each other and the wider industry
- improving access to marketing advice via assessors and other VisitEngland resources, signposting to commercial and destination-led marketing opportunities.
- developing 'best practice' advice in areas such as PR, sustainability and accessibility
- signposting to a range of training and development opportunities, where appropriate

Good practice

Accessibility and sustainability good practice is being added to all the standards booklets, starting with the hotel scheme. Existing and new operators will find useful suggestions to help make their accommodation more welcoming to all their guests and ideas for reducing the carbon footprint of their business and working closer with the local community. The new hotel standard will be printed in August and mailed out to all VisitEngland Hotel Scheme participants.

Changes to the self-catering

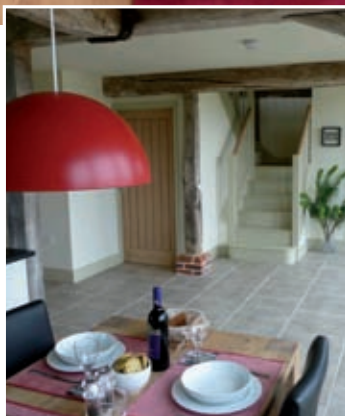


standard

The official assessing bodies are finalising some small changes to the common standard for self-catering. It is unlikely that there will be changes to the scoring, but to reflect guests' expectations, some updating of the criteria at each star rating is expected. The biggest change will be increasing the ratio of bathrooms to guests, as the research revealed that there is a big gap between consumer expectations and the current standard.

Self-catering operators can expect to receive confirmation of the changes in late autumn. As with the other schemes, your assessor will allow time for any major physical changes to be implemented.

The criteria for VisitEngland's self-catering Gold award, which was introduced two years ago, will also be reviewed once the updated standard has been agreed by the other assessing bodies. Four-star Gold properties should have elements of five-star quality and the five-star Golds should be the 'very best of the bunch'. Remember that if you



"I think it can definitely be a five-star experience to stay in a three-bedroom cottage with three 'mega' en-suite shower rooms. Why should this be held at a maximum of four stars?"

Beth Bailey, Kernock Cottages, Cornwall



Likely changes

- An increase in the ratio of bathrooms to guests at three-, four- and five-star
- Dropping the requirement for a bath at five-star, as long as the shower room is of a very high quality
- A less-prescriptive kitchen inventory
- A freezer required at four-star
- Inclusion of WiFi on selection list of extras for five-star

Your Quality in Tourism assessor will explain the details of these changes at the next visit and, as with the introduction of Common Standards in 2005/06, time will be given when physical changes are planned.

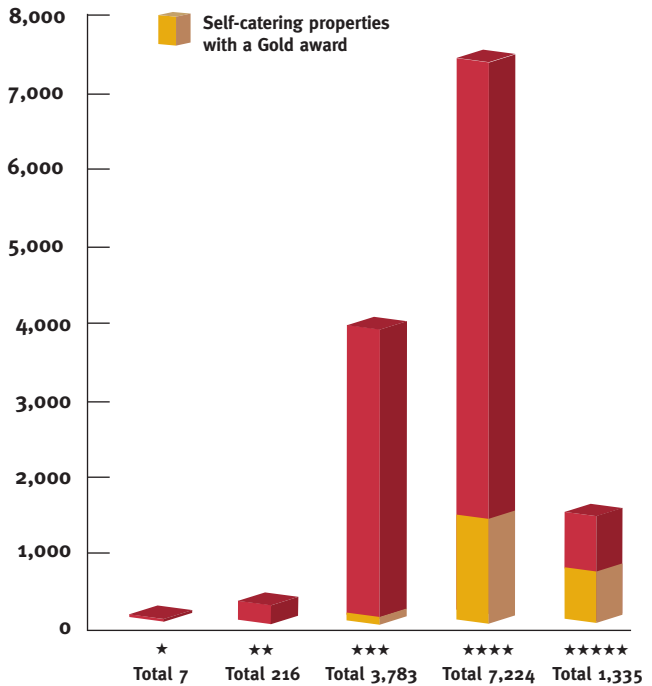
have one or more self-catering units on the same site, all must be assessed by VisitEngland. Therefore, your assessor will need to see every unit of your accommodation, even if guests are staying. Once you have confirmed the date of the assessor’s visit, please advise your guests that the assessor will need to walk through the unit, but will not be opening drawers or disturbing guests’ possessions. Of course, you should accompany the assessor. Ratings will not be confirmed if the assessor cannot view all the units and a fee will be payable for a further visit. ■

“How can six guests sharing just one bathroom be a four or five-star experience? This scheme rule needs to be brought right up to date”.

Jane Morelli, Corner Farm Barn, Suffolk



Split of self-catering ratings, as at April 2011





The new Holiday parks Scheme

From April 2011, your assessor will be scoring your park on the new British Graded Holiday Parks Scheme and giving advice on how to retain your existing rating. Your 2011/12 star rating is unlikely to change, and you will be given time to carry out any work required to retain your rating or to meet the new standards

Key changes

- Assessors will now be using marks of 0–5, rather than 0–10
- Marks will no longer be awarded for the range of your shower and laundry facilities, but for the quality of what you provide instead
- Caravan holiday homes for hire are now included as part of the assessment – previously only seen as part of the Rose Award Scheme
- Rose Award assessments are as usual this year for 2012, but without the extra fee. 2012 plaques and stickers can be purchased from Alpen Signs towards the end of this year
- VisitEngland will review the potential for a new award from 2013 for parks, once the new standard has bedded down
- Cleanliness now has a scoring section of its own, rather than being included in each area of assessment
- The extra requirements for five-star parks have been revised – for example, the requirement for a public telephone has been removed
- Some additional requirements for four-star parks have been introduced, such as a dishwashing facility (under cover), with hot and cold water where camping pitches are provided



The new scheme will help holiday parks to keep up with changing customer expectations and industry trends. Other changes include:

- amending the requirement for replacement gas bottles to be available on site where all units are supplied with piped gas
- increasing hook-up provision
- the need for motor vehicle waste-disposal points on larger parks that accept motorhomes
- providing recycling facilities wherever possible
- accessible shower and toilet facilities must be of a comparable range and quality to other shower and toilet facilities on the park
- baby change facilities, if provided, to be available for both male and female use

“This year, park providers should take the opportunity to talk to their assessor, who will be offering advice about the new standards. There is no need to panic, as some changes will only require tweaks and plenty of time will be given to make any major alterations. We will also be reviewing operators’ feedback in the autumn and refining the standard with VisitEngland before the start of next season”

Michael Hudson, Quality in Tourism Area Manager



Photograph: Britain on View

Photograph: Britain on View/Troutbeck Head Caravan Club site, near Penrith, Lake District

Split of VisitEngland park ratings, as at April 2011

These figures represent VisitEngland quality-assessed camping, touring and holiday parks



Changes
to the
Guest
accommodation
Scheme





Photograph: Riding Farm

Guest accommodation



New standards for B&Bs, guest houses, inns, farmhouses and restaurants with rooms

Popular television programmes such as *Three in a Bed* and *The Hotel Inspector* have raised the profile of guest accommodation and shown how professional this sector now is. Guests are increasingly demanding, especially when staying in four- and five-star properties.



The consumer and industry research has not flagged up any serious issues with the scheme criteria, but the statistics show that some adjustments to the minimum scores are needed to ensure that four-star properties really are above average – as this is what guests will expect.

Our research has also shown that customers do not always understand the term ‘Guest accommodation’, so assessors will take a more relaxed view on the use of the designator ‘Bed and Breakfast’. If you would like to make the change, discuss it with your assessor, who will be able to give you advice. If you decide to change over, contact Quality in Tourism for free electronic logos, or you can buy a new exterior sign from www.alpensigns.co.uk. >



Breakfast Award

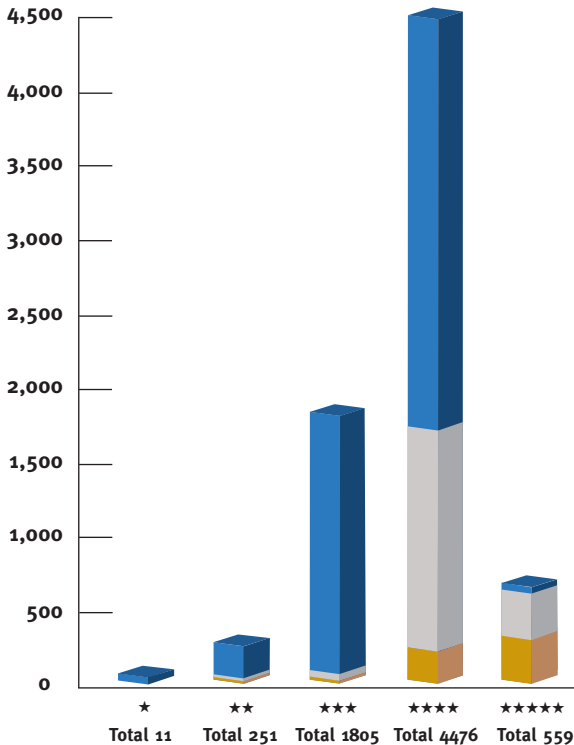
The breakfast scoring has been updated, going from two to three marks. This will affect the Breakfast award criteria.

See insert for details.



Split of VisitEngland guest accommodation ratings, as at April 2011

-  Guest accommodation properties with a Gold award
-  Guest accommodation properties with a Silver award



Key changes

- Dropping the requirement for rugs on laminate or wood floors
- Removal of references to dressing tables – a writing table/desk or equivalent instead
- More flexibility when double beds are against a wall – it is now acceptable up to three-star (instead of two-star), as long as guests are always informed and the website pictures make this clear
- Fewer coat hangers required
- ‘Sectional consistency’ will be applied in the five key areas: Bedrooms, Bathrooms, Cleanliness, Food and Hospitality. This means, for example, that a four-star property must achieve four-star quality in all five areas. The previous rule stated that two areas could score one rating below, as long as the overall score met the four-star target of 70%

While there are no changes to the ‘overall’ scores, there are a few significant changes to some sections:

- An increase of the score for Bedrooms and Bathrooms from **63%** to **70%** for four-star
- An increase of the score for Bedrooms, Bathrooms and Breakfast from **80%** to **85%** for five-star
- An increase of the score for Hospitality from **85%** to **90%** for five-star



Gold and Silver awards

VisitEngland's unique Gold and Silver awards are given in recognition of exceptional quality within a property's star rating. Previously, a five-star Guest accommodation property aiming for a Gold or Silver award had to achieve the same scores as a four-star, which meant that the five-star Golds were not necessarily the highest-scoring five-star properties.

Now, with the slightly higher individual section scores required for five-star under the new standard, the Silver award will become obsolete from January 2013, as with the Hotel Scheme. The scores necessary to retain the Gold award have been adjusted to ensure that they are awarded to those establishments that really are at the top of the five-star tree.

At four-star, the main change is to the Silver award, bringing the requirements in line with the higher minimum scores for Bedrooms and Bathrooms.



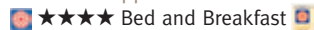
Photographs: The Stables Lodge, Gateshead

There is good news for properties sitting at the top of three-star in particular, with the immediate introduction of a Silver award for one- to three-star properties. With a new lower overall score for Silver of 68%, and lower scores for Bedrooms, Bathrooms and Breakfast, this will recognise the importance to the market of the well-run, welcoming three-star B&Bs and guest houses that offer good value for money. ■



“Introducing
a Silver award
for three stars will be
welcomed I’m sure,
as it will give these
properties something
to aim for”

Barbara Sleep, Chairman of Farm Stay UK
and owner of Copper Meadow in Cornwall



The Hotel Scheme reviewed

Photographs: Rockliffe Hall, County Durham (left), Langley Castle, Hexam (below right)



Find out how the Hotel Scheme will now focus more on quality and less on facilities

The extensive review of the Hotel Scheme has identified several areas for change to focus more on quality and less on facilities. The new scheme will embrace all types of hotels, and accommodate changing styles and trends in hotel keeping.

When your VisitEngland assessor begins using the new standard in the summer, he or she will be reviewing the guest experience first and foremost, taking into account the style, location and market that your hotel targets. Certain





facilities are still important, but your assessor will be able to recommend a dispensation if a service or facility is not offered, provided this does not detract from the overall quality of the stay.

For example, a VisitEngland hotel assessor will no longer mark down a four-star quality hotel to three-star if the night porter is not sitting at his desk all night, (but just contactable in case of emergency), when guests at a country house hotel are typically tucked up in bed by 11pm.

Similarly, a small quality hotel will not be held at two-star if the restaurant closes one night a week so the chef can have a night off.

This fresh approach will remove some of the barriers that prevent small and medium-sized hotels from moving up the star ratings. As a result, many high-quality two-, three- and four-star hotels may find that they have the opportunity to move up to a higher star rating.

Your environmental policy will also be recognised by your assessor. The new standard will not dictate, for example, how often bed linen should be changed. However, the services you provide should meet or exceed guests' expectations for your star rating.



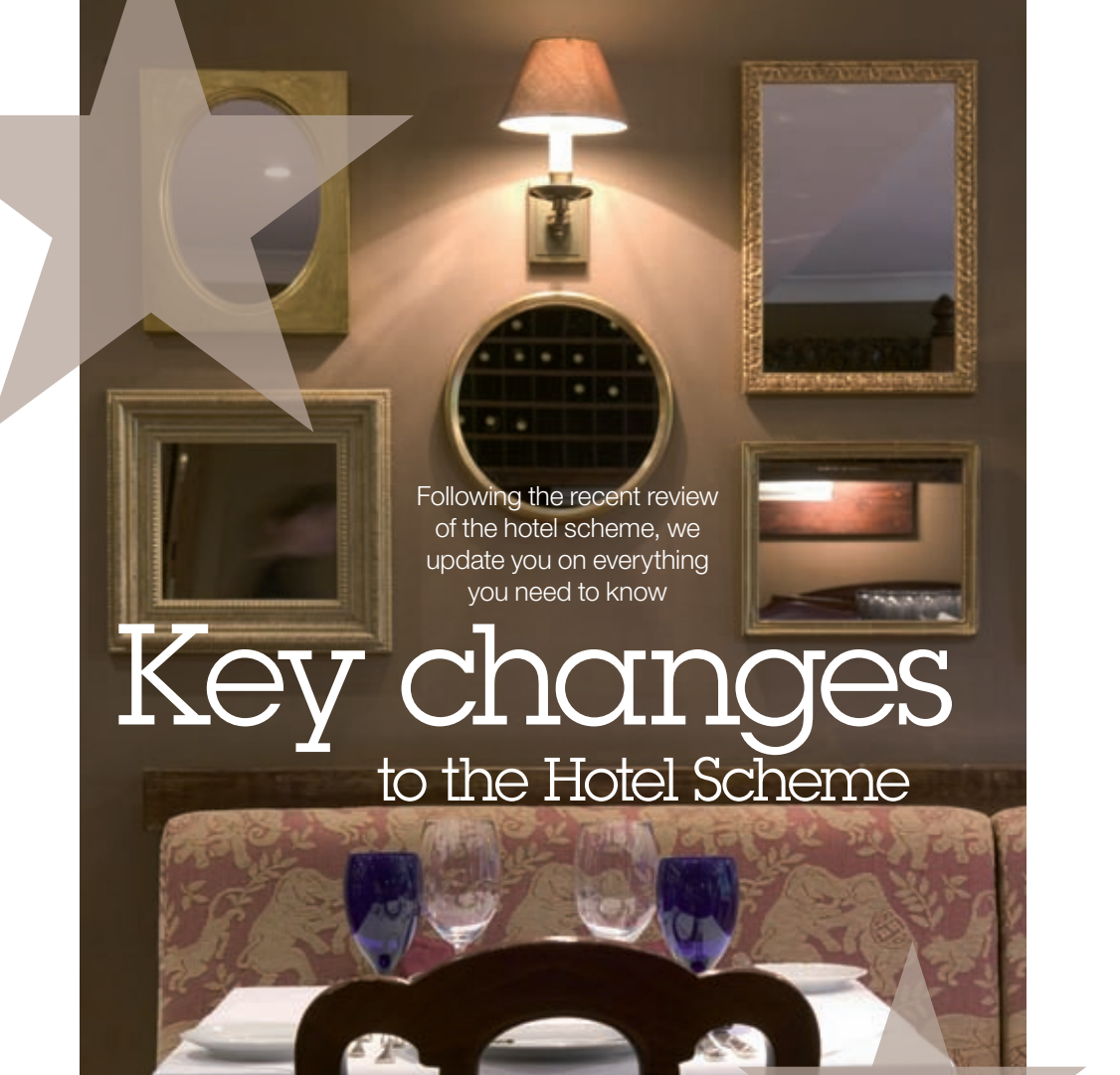
“The four-star rating underpins and justifies the amount we charge for our product. We got four stars because we have invested not only in the physical product, but also the people side – training and recruitment – resulting in higher standards”

Mike Bevans, Linthwaite House, Cumbria



The old hotel star rating scheme tended to favour the larger hotels offering the full range of guest services, but if these services are not delivered to a consistently high standard, lower star ratings will be awarded. Hotels will be given time to raise their game and invest in staff training where needed. Over the next couple of years, hotel guests should find that the star rating of a hotel reflects the quality of the welcome and overall guest experience, rather than the range of services and facilities offered. ■

Turn over for a summary of Key changes >



Following the recent review
of the hotel scheme, we
update you on everything
you need to know

Key changes to the Hotel Scheme

“Five-star guests expect the
very best. Here at Lucknam,
it’s about anticipating what
each guest might need
or like, and always being
one step ahead”

Claire Randall, MD, Lucknam Park



“At three-star, you might have to go to the service, but at four-star, it should always come to you”

Andrew Walker, Quality in Tourism, Area Manager



One-/two-star

Dinner can be served only five days a week, with a snack alternative available when the restaurant/dining room is closed.

Continental breakfast only is acceptable.

Three-star

Dinner should be served six days a week, with a snack alternative available on the seventh.

Phones in bedrooms can be internal only.

Restaurant need not be open to non-residents.

Opening hours of restaurant/dining room to suit the market.

Laundry service optional.

WiFi/internet connection required in public areas and recommended in bedrooms where service is available.

Four-star

Requirement of 50% of en-suite bathrooms to have a bath has been dropped: now 100% shower-only is acceptable.

Night porter can be on call and does not necessarily need to be on duty all night, unless city centre location.

‘Enhanced services’ no longer specified. Hotels should demonstrate a range of additional services to suit their market.

Writing paper/stationery is no longer required – just notepad and pencil or pen.

Laundry service required, but dry cleaning service now optional.

A minimum of one easy chair in each bedroom, plus an additional chair providing comfortable use of a writing table.

WiFi and/or internet connection required in all bedrooms.

Bedroom TV to measure at least 24 inches.

Majority of rooms must be large enough to eat room service meals in comfort (previously all).

No requirement for a suite.

Five-star

Requirement for 100% of en-suite bathrooms to have both a bath and shower reduced to 80%.

Writing paper/stationery is no longer required – just notepad and pencil or pen.

A minimum of one easy chair in each bedroom, plus an additional chair providing comfortable use of a writing table.

All stars

Minimum of five bedrooms instead of six.

Removal of all set times for meals.

Rugs no longer required on wood or laminate floors.

No need for dressing table, but should provide writing table or equivalent.

Provision of shoe cleaning equipment or service now optional, except at five-star.

Sufficient coat hangers per room (previously six per person).



Hotel in the name



If your establishment promotes itself as a hotel, your business will now be assessed under the hotel standard.

Some hotels have previously chosen the guest accommodation scheme because they do not meet the minimum entry requirements of the hotel scheme, or so they can achieve a higher star rating. Some guests feel misled by this and other hotel operators may suffer from the unfair competition, so the revised minimum standards should now avoid this.

For example, at one- and two-star, you may now choose to offer only a continental breakfast, while dispensations will be considered if not quite all rooms are en-suite or with private bathrooms. Replacing the minimum requirement for direct dial telephones in

“NOT AS ADVERTISED – the hotel is advertised as a four-star, but it is so obviously not”

Guest review of a four-star guest accommodation establishment in London that has ‘hotel’ in its name, May 2009

bedrooms with at least an internal system at three-star, may also encourage ‘boutique’ hotels to choose the hotel scheme rating.

Metro Hotels

Our research shows that the ‘Metro Hotel’ designator, which is aimed at the bed and breakfast hotel, is confusing for guests.

Therefore, these establishments may now choose to use the designator ‘hotel’ – as long as it is clear in all communications with customers that an evening meal is not offered. ■



Blue Hayes: hotel or not?

“Under the new common standards in 2006, we moved to five-star Gold Guest accommodation. But problems arose: a national radio station inadvertently described us as “the Blue Hayes five-star hotel”, and neighbouring three-star hotels found their guests querying their room rates, saying they could get a five-star down the road for the same price.

The introduction of the Metro Hotel scheme was our saving grace, and we have been a three-star Metro Hotel since March 2011. We welcome the news that we can now drop the term ‘Metro’ and simply be a three-star hotel. One guest saw the sign outside the hotel and asked “Is it an underground hotel?”

Malcolm Herring, Blue Hayes
Hotel, Cornwall

 ★★ ★ Hotel 

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