

National accommodation standards and why we need them

In these days of increased consumer awareness many services promote a recognised national standard. It denotes professionalism, a guarantee of minimum standards, a code of business practice and an independent means for resolving any dispute.

What is the task in hand?

East Midlands Tourism is tasked with driving up quality standards across the region. Encouraging accommodation businesses to participate in national quality schemes and achieve a star rating is fundamental to raising standards.

Every year, public sector organisations across the East Midlands are responsible for booking thousands of bedrooms. For VIPs, trainers, delegates, media, buyers, staff etc. the list goes on. EMT wants to use the collective purchasing power of the public sector to encourage greater take-up of star ratings by accommodation businesses and progress towards the 80% target set by central government.

When employing someone to do a job of work, we're told to look for and check membership of professional bodies and trade associations. 'Trustmark' and the Office of Fair Trading's 'Consumer Codes Approval Scheme' identify reputable tradespeople and encourage businesses to abide by appropriate voluntary codes of practice. Most professional standards are not statutory. However, the service provider wants customers to know that they embrace minimum standards and are committed to delivering a quality service.

Some national standards go further and differentiate the level of quality service consumers should expect.



Accommodation is no different

The National Quality Assurance Scheme, more commonly known as star ratings, covers most types of accommodation, from the largest hotel to the smallest B&B and everything in-between.

Since 2006, the same criteria apply across England, Scotland and Wales so a two star hotel in Edinburgh offers the same levels of cleanliness, hospitality and quality as a two star hotel in Derby.

Accommodation with a current star rating says clearly that consumers are assured of minimum standards; not because the owner or manager says so but because an independent trained assessor with years of experience says so.

There is general awareness that a "five star hotel" means the height of luxury whereas a "one star hotel" will be simple, clean and comfortable. The important part is that the consumer understands what is being offered, be it top end luxury or simple accommodation.

The AA has used star ratings for over 100 years. In fact so established is the idea of star ratings that similar schemes are used to denote quality levels from restaurants to hospitals.

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Isn't all Accommodation star rated?

Across England 30,000 accommodation businesses have a star rating. That's a lot to choose from but nationally it represents only 50% of the total. In Scotland the percentage of accommodation with a star rating is nearer to 80%. The East Midlands is committed to matching and exceeding national levels of accommodation quality.

The region's five Destination Management Partnerships* (DMPs) are delivering a focused Quality Improvement Programme. Accommodation quality standards are so important that each DMP has committed only to feature star rated accommodation in marketing, brochures and websites from 2008 onwards.

How does this affect me?

As the person responsible for arranging accommodation bookings you understand that both the required standard and the available budget vary. Knowing when to book a three star hotel is part of your job. But without a confirmed star rating are you confident of that booking? Can you afford to get it wrong by booking squalid or badly run accommodation? That is the risk you take unless you book accommodation with a genuine star rating. Star ratings make your job easier.

The hotels I book claim three star standards, surely that's OK?

But are they really what they claim? Says who? Website listings can be out of date and some 'consumer' reviews are written by staff. Take this real example of a hotel which claimed to be 'of three star standard' but no logos were visible. Imagine how you would feel if you booked it on behalf of your organisation.

What the promotion says...

Charming 16th century coaching inn with Tudor beams and log fire, magnificently extended to include 53 bedrooms and a leisure complex with swimming pool, sauna, steam room and gym. Enjoy historic public rooms, carvery restaurant, bars and terrace overlooking the surrounding countryside. The hotel offers the convenience of a prime historic town centre location with private parking.

What the customers say...

The room was filthy; I would not have wished my cat to stay in there. I went down for breakfast and found the only table available covered in tea stains, had no cutlery and crockery on it. I had to find my own utensils to eat and drink and to retrieve butter and milk from another table.

I had a look at the breakfast buffet, but decided I would like to survive the day. The hotel is in desperate need of refurbishment, however this should not stop the hotel being clean which should be a priority.

The carpet was filthy, the pink bathroom was mouldy with cracked tiles and we had one hot shower all weekend due to plumbing problems. The room was neither dusted nor vacuumed all weekend. Despite our complaints nothing improved.

* The region's five Destination Management Partnerships (DMP's) Explore Northamptonshire, Experience Nottinghamshire, Leicester Shire Promotions, Lincolnshire Tourism and Visit Peak District and Derbyshire are responsible for promoting their destinations to visitors and delivering a focused Quality Improvement Programme to all tourism-related businesses.

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The way forward is?

In Scotland it is a requirement for all civil servants to book star rated accommodation only. Plans are in place to extend this national policy to cover Scotland's regional and local level agencies in the future.

EMT seeks the support of all regional public sector agencies and government bodies to implement a similar policy. *emda*, the Government Office for the East Midlands and East Midlands Regional Assembly recently changed their procurement policy to the following:

All UK accommodation booked by staff on Agency business should normally be quality assured accommodation; that is, be part of one of the national 'star rating' schemes. This extends to conference and training events wherever practicable. In the circumstances where no suitable star-rated accommodation is available, then staff may book alternative properties'

There are unlikely to be financial implications arising from the adoption of this policy.

Can I be sure of reliable, accurate and up to date information about accommodation in the East Midlands?

Both the AA and VisitBritain have teams of independent, impartial assessors. Their star ratings (backed by official logos) are based on fact not wishful thinking.

All East Midlands accommodation – including most branded hotel chains – with a bona fide, up to date star rating can be found at:



www.enjoyengland.com

www.theAA.com

How can you assist?

1. Adopt an accommodation procurement policy similar to that agreed by *emda*. (This may mean amendments to existing contracts with business travel agents).
2. Agree to fulfil the role of quality champion in your organisation to make sure that 'inspected first' is the preferred option.

Please support the drive towards 80% star rated accommodation for the region.

east midlands **tourism**

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