

Criteria for visitor experiences quality grading

Contents

Section	Description	Page
1.1	Introduction	3
	1.1.1 The Scheme	3
	1.1.2 The Benefits	3
1.2	How the Scheme Works	4
	1.2.1 The Awards	4
	1.2.2 Fees & Procedures	4
	1.2.3 How to Apply	4
1.3	The Visit	5
	1.3.1 The Assessment	5
	1.3.2 Brown Tourism Signage	5
1.4	Designators	6
1.5	Grading Bands, Riders & Sectional Consistency	7
	1.5.1 Grading Bands	7
	1.5.2 Riders	7
	1.5.3 Sectional Consistency	7
1.6	Criteria	8
	1.6.1 Pre Arrival	8
	1.6.2 Arrival	9
	1.6.3 Experience	10
	1.6.4 Catering	11
	1.6.5 Retailing	13
	1.6.6 Toilets	14
2.0	Code of Practice	15

1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 The Scheme

For Northern Ireland Tourism to reach its potential as a destination, quality has to be a common goal for all stakeholders in NI Tourism PLC. Tourism Northern Ireland (Tourism NI) is committed to increasing visitor numbers and expectations through developing a quality experience.

Tourism NI is operating a Quality Grading Scheme for Visitor Experiences. The Scheme gives operators an independent Quality Assurance Award.

Scheme participation consists of a visit by a Quality Advisor to make a qualitative assessment of the condition and standard of facilities and services provided and that the Code of Practice is being fulfilled. Feedback is given on the findings during the visit and advice of other sources of business support.

The Scheme has been developed with 4 primary objectives:

- To provide visitors with the means to identify Visitor Experiences which provide the desired quality of facilities and services
- To help operators market themselves more effectively by providing an official independent endorsement of their Visitor Experience.
- To encourage and acknowledge improvements in standards throughout the industry.
- To improve the performance of the Visitor Experience.

1.1.2 The Benefits

The award is an assurance to visitors that Tourism NI has independently verified your Experience. In addition to providing a Quality Grading assessment for the visitor, the Scheme will direct you to those bodies or individuals able to provide development advice and other support services.

For Visitor Experiences achieving an award, Tourism NI will provide a web logo, plaque, written report, full debrief, award certificate, priority listing on discovernorthernireland.com and a range of other benefits.

Information regarding all of the Quality Schemes can be found on the industry website tourismni.com.

1.2 How the Scheme Works

1.2.1 The Awards

There are five quality grades awarded for the standard of facilities and services following the assessment of the appropriate areas. The five grades are represented by 1 – 5 stars and convey the following standards:

- ★★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★ Very Good
- ★★ Good
- ★ Acceptable

1.2.2 Fees & Procedures

Visitor Experiences and attractions will be invoiced annually with the visit taking place on an annual basis.

A procedure exists for Visitor Experiences that are dissatisfied with the award given. A second visit can be requested. If the operator is still dissatisfied with the result of the second visit an appeal can be made.

1.2.3 How to Apply

You can either email qa@tourismni.com and request an application pack or contact the Quality & Standards unit on **+44 (0)28 9044 1682**.

An incognito visit will take place, taking into account any noted periods when a visit would be unsuitable such as refurbishment or closed periods.

1.3 The Visit

1.3.1 The Assessment

Incognito visits are carried out every year and are undertaken by one Quality Advisor. However, in the event that Tourism NI in its absolute discretion deems it necessary, assessments (whether incognito or not) may be carried out by more than one person.

The Quality Advisor will visit the Experience without prior notice to sample an authentic customer journey. While at the Experience, verbal feedback will be offered to the owner, manager or other appropriate staff member. Following the visit a full written report will be prepared and the award will be advised in writing.

There are six key areas of assessment. These include Pre-Arrival and Arrival, which are assessed for all Experiences, followed by Attraction/Presentation and a further three areas: Catering, Retail and Toilets which are included in the assessment if they form part of the visitor experience. Where an Experience does not include these facilities, they are not included in the calculation of the award and have no impact on the result. The assessment of the visitor experience specific to each Experience is tailored to reflect the nature of the designator.

Quality Advisors undertake a rigorous training programme. Assessments are objective and draw on extensive experience of the visitor attraction sector.

1.3.2 Brown Tourism Signage

Brown Tourism signs are not obligatory for participation in the Scheme, but it is recommended that these are in place. Where permission has not been granted for road signs, this will be taken into account.

1.4 Designators

As shown, the Quality Grading award can be a combination of star grade and designator. The designators give clear information to visitors on the type of facility or experience. Current Tourism NI designators are:

Visitor Attraction

A range of attractions and experiences including visitor centres, churches, distilleries and steam railways.

Activity Centre

Centre based activities, including soft play, arts & crafts and horse riding.

Activity Provider

Adventure activities and extreme sports, including abseiling, kayaking and mountaineering

Arts Venue

Theatres, art centres and performance venues. The assessment does not take into account the content of performances or events as this will vary.

Castle

May be inhabited or ruined

Garden

Gardens open to the public.

Garden Centre

Retail outlets specialising in the sale of plants and gardening supplies.

Historic Attraction

An experience of historical significance. May relate to a period of pre-history or early-history.

Historic House

Houses or palaces of historic significance.

Leisure Centre

Leisure pools, swimming pools and sports centres.

Museum

Displaying artefacts of historical or other significance.

Tour

Guided walks, bus and boat tours.

Tourist Shop

Retail outlets with an emphasis on local crafts, produce and products.

Wildlife Experience

A variety of experience types including wildlife visitor centres, boat trips and walking tours which offer a nature-based experience with possibilities of viewing flora and fauna in a natural or protected environment.

Each applicant should indicate on the application form the designator they feel would be most appropriate for their experience. This can be discussed at the time of the visit, where the Quality Advisor's advice may be that another designator is more appropriate.

1.5 Grading Bands, Riders & Sectional Consistency

1.5.1 Grading Bands

During the assessment each of the elements will attract a score between 1 and 10. These are used to calculate an overall percentage which will place the Experience in one of the grading bands listed here.

1 Star 55%-63%

2 Stars 64%-70%

3 Stars 71%-77%

4 Stars 78%-84%

5 Stars 85%+

1.5.2 Riders

In addition at 3, 4 and 5 stars, key elements of the Experience must achieve a minimum score before these awards can be confirmed. These are called riders and the minimum scores are:

3 Stars 7/10

4 Stars 8/10

5 Stars 9/10

These are identified against the relevant elements throughout the guidance notes.

Please read the guidance notes carefully to ensure you are aware of all the relevant riders which relate to your specific designator.

1.5.3 Sectional Consistency

Visitors will have an expectation that all areas of a Visitor Experience displays a similar degree of quality. This expectation is reflected in the grading by **sectional consistency**.

The areas that must achieve sectional consistency are **Arrival, Experience (Core), Catering, Retail and Toilets**.

All of these areas must achieve the minimum percentage of the relevant grading band for that award to be confirmed.

The single exception to this is that one of **Catering, Retail and Toilets** can sit one grading band below the overall award.

For example at three stars the overall score will have to sit within the 3 star grading band i.e. between 71% and 77%.

Pre-arrival is exempt from sectional consistency.

The **Arrival** and **Experience (Core)** sections must also sit within the 3 star grading band; 71-77%.

Of the following three areas **Catering, Retail and Toilets**, one may score below the minimum percentage for 3 stars (71%) but not below the minimum percentage for 2 stars (64%).

1.6 Criteria

Visitor Attraction/Castle/Museum/Historic House/Historic Attraction/Garden

Includes castles, ancient monuments, visitor centres, museums, galleries, heritage centres, unmanned historic buildings, churches, steam railways and gardens.

The following sections will be assessed at all Experiences. Where elements such as catering and retailing are not part of the visitor experience, these will not be included in the overall assessment.

1.6.1 Pre-Arrival

1. Brochure/Leaflet/Website

- Appropriate information given including opening times, charges, activity details, pictures, directions
- Ease of use
- Accurate description of experience
- Use of foreign languages

2. Brown and White Tourist Signposting

- Appropriate advance signage
- Content and accuracy
- Distances and consideration of seasonality where appropriate

3. Appearance of Grounds

- Condition of access roads, driveways, paths, steps
- Maintenance, upkeep and tidiness
- Overall appearance

4. Car Park

- Quality of parking area and surface
- Indications of where to park
- Differentiation between cars, coaches, accessible parking and parent/children areas
- Demarcation of bays
- Adequate provision for level of use
- Lighting
- Landscaping

1.6 Criteria

1.6.2 Arrival

5. Signage

- Directional signs
- Clarity and prominence
- Up-to-date information
- Cleanliness and maintenance
- Language versions
- Use of corporate identity/branding/images

6. Appearance of Buildings/Ticket Office

- General décor and maintenance
- Inviting first impression

7. Price Display

- Relevant price display with full range of prices and concessions
- Location of price display – website, brochure, on-site
- Quality of display
- Transparent pricing structure

8. Welcome/Attitude/Efficiency of Staff (rider)

- Warm, friendly, welcoming attitude, professional manner, good customer care
- Information given on prices and guide books
- Capability to cope with variety of languages
- Anticipating client needs
- Positive attitude
- Willingness to answer questions
- Good product knowledge
- Readily expanding on detail
- Inspiring confidence

9. Appearance of Staff

- Corporate clothing and name badge, where appropriate
- Staff distinguishable and suitably dressed
- Smart and presentable appearance

10. Interior Layout (not assessed for Historic Attraction / Historic House / Castle)

- Adequacy of entrance area
- Ease of access/egress
- Clear where to enquire/pay
- Unimpeded visitor flow
- Accommodating differing needs including wheelchair users and children

1.6 Criteria

11. Décor/Maintenance

- Quality and condition of entrance, pathways, ticket area
- Good decorative order in keeping with the Experience
- General maintenance

12. Cleanliness (rider)

- Overall level of cleanliness and tidiness

1.6.3 Experience

1. Orientation

- Gives visitors overall understanding of Experience and sets expectations
- May utilise all forms of media or verbal scene setting from staff
- Can be repeated at various points throughout the customer journey from pre-arrival to departure
- Allows visitors to get their bearings on site during their visit
- May incorporate branding, foreign languages, reinforcement by repetition throughout large sites
- Unmanned sites are likely to require a high level of orientation

2. Layout (not assessed for Historic Attraction / Historic House / Castle)

- Unimpeded visitor flow
- Accommodating differing needs of visitor mix, including wheelchair users and children
- Logical or intuitive route
- Layout facilitates visitor access to all areas of the Experience

3. Audience Level

- Recognition of visitors with varying needs including children, elderly, specialist interest, groups, families and foreign visitors
- Experiences engaging with a wide visitor mix are likely to attract a higher score

4. Interpretation/Information (rider)

- Sufficient accurate and significant information to meet or exceed expectations
- Informative interpretation with a strong link to the theme of the Experience
- Knowledge and experience of guides
- Suggestions for follow-up information
- Excellent quality interpretation will educate and inspire

5. Presentation (rider)

- Engages effectively with a wide audience through use of differing sensory experiences
- Use of different presentation formats to encourage investigation and enquiry
- Professional execution of presentation including all media formats and guides
- Maintenance
- Effective use of corporate themes and branding
- Lighting used for practical and ambient effect

1.6 Criteria

6. Décor/Maintenance

- Quality and condition of all interior and exterior elements
- Good decorative order in keeping with the Experience
- General maintenance

7. Attitude/Efficiency/Knowledge of Staff (rider)

- Warm, friendly manner, general attitude, professional style, good customer care
- Efficiency and expertise to deal effectively with visitors
- Actively seeking to enhance the visitor experience

8. Appearance of Staff

- Corporate clothing and name badge, where appropriate
- Staff distinguishable and suitably dressed
- Smart and presentable appearance

9. Guides/Other Staff (rider)

- Provision of guide services
- Range of languages and communication skills
- Knowledge and quality of presentation
- Enhancement of visitor experience
- Awareness of special needs

10. Internal Signage

- Clear comprehensive system of directional signs
- Effective use of graphics and foreign language
- Use of corporate identity
- Professionally produced

11. Cleanliness (rider)

- Overall level of cleanliness and tidiness including interpretation panels and display cases

1.6.4 Catering

12. Layout (not assessed for Historic Attraction / Historic House / Castle)

- Unimpeded visitor flow
- Effective queue management
- Ease of use with clear indication of customer route
- Logical presentation of self-service elements
- Style of service effective within establishment
- Clear circulation and sight lines for staff
- Space between tables allowing for ease of movement and degrees of privacy

1.6 Criteria

13. Menu Presentation

- Professional presentation including daily specials menu
- Style and quality including the use of corporate branding
- Visibility and access
- Clear indication of price
- Helpful descriptions and information

14. Food Presentation & Quality

- Freshly prepared dishes are more likely to achieve a high score
- Temperature, flavour and presentation
- Use of local and seasonal ingredients
- Balance of choice available including healthy options, special dietary requirements and children's menu
- Visual appeal

15. Attitude/Efficiency of Staff (rider)

- Warm, friendly welcome and attitude
- Professional style and good customer care
- Efficient and consistent standard of service appropriate to style of operation
- Prompt attention to requests
- Regular cleaning of tables
- Sufficient levels of staff and competent supervision
- Active interaction with visitors to enhance their overall experience

16. Appearance of Staff

- Corporate clothing and name badge, where appropriate
- Staff distinguishable and suitably dressed
- Smart and presentable appearance

17. Ambience/Atmosphere

- May range from tranquil and relaxed to energetic and vibrant experience
- Use of natural light and views to the outside or other areas within the Experience
- Atmosphere conducive to eating with thoughtful use of lighting, décor and heating
- No intrusive noise
- Styling linked to the overall themes of the Experience
- Use of music

18. Décor/Maintenance

- Quality and condition of décor, flooring, furniture and furnishings
- Good decorative order in keeping with the Experience
- General maintenance

19. Cleanliness (rider)

- Overall level of cleanliness and tidiness

1.6 Criteria

1.6.5 Retailing

20. Layout

- Unobstructed retail area allowing relaxed and comfortable visitor flow with maximum appreciation of merchandise
- Unimpeded visitor flow
- Clearly identified retail area
- Sufficient space to browse and purchase merchandise
- A dedicated retail area will generally attract higher scores
- Retail area well positioned to enhance customer journey

21. Merchandise

- Use of corporate branding and identity with products linked to the overall theme of the Experience
- Range of products to suit the visitor mix
- Quality of merchandise
- Attempts made to recognise local manufacturers

22. Presentation

- Merchandise attractively and conveniently displayed
- Quality of display units and lighting
- Clarity of pricing
- Themed products displayed together and stock levels well maintained
- Innovative presentation and bespoke display units are likely to score well

23. Décor/Maintenance

- Quality and condition of décor, flooring, furniture and display units
- Good decorative order in keeping with Experience
- General maintenance

24. Attitude/Efficiency of Staff (rider)

- Warm, friendly welcome, general attitude, professional style, good customer care
- Efficient and prompt service
- Sufficient level of staff and supervision
- Active interaction with visitors to enhance their overall experience
- Good level of product knowledge, ability to deal with enquiries

25. Appearance of Staff

- Corporate clothing and name badge, where appropriate
- Staff distinguishable and suitably dressed
- Smart and presentable appearance

26. Cleanliness (rider)

- Overall level of cleanliness and tidiness with attention to displays

1.6 Criteria

1.6.6 Toilets

27. Layout

- Conveniently located
- Unisex access to baby changing facilities
- Well laid out and easy to use
- Effective lighting to enhance use of all areas

28. Fixtures and Fittings

- Quality of all fixtures and fittings including cubicles, basins, toilets, dryers, locks, taps, hooks, dispensers and light fittings

29. Décor/Maintenance

- Quality and condition of décor and flooring
- Good decorative order in keeping with Experience
- General maintenance
- Condition of sealed surfaces
- Maintenance of fixtures and fittings

30. Adequacy of Provision

- Sufficient toilets to meet demand
- Range of fixture and fittings to suit visitor mix including unisex baby changing, children's and accessible facilities
- Sufficiently stocked sundries such as soap, towel and toilet paper
- Ratio of toilet and washing facilities to enable good visitor flow
- Thoughtful provision of additional features to enhance ease of use

31. Cleanliness (rider)

- Overall level of cleanliness and tidiness with close attention to detail
- Cleanliness of surfaces around wash basins, urinals and toilets
- Evidence of regular attention throughout the day

Tourism Northern Ireland Code of Practice for Visitor Experiences

The Owners and Management of all participating businesses have undertaken:

1. To display this Code of Practice to comply with the following provisions of the code.
2. To describe accurately to all visitors the amenities, facilities and services provided in any advertisement, brochure or any other means, and to indicate any significant restrictions on entry.
3. To display clearly at public entry points any charges for entry (including service charges and taxes where applicable) and whether there are any additional charges for individual Experiences, and hours of operation (opening and closing).
4. To manage and, where appropriate, staff the Experience in such a way as to maintain a high standard of customer care, cleanliness, courtesy and maintenance to ensure visitor safety, comfort and service. All staff who meet visitors should be recognisable as employees.
5. Where appropriate to the nature, scale and location of the Experience, to provide adequate toilet facilities, coach and car parking and catering arrangements.
6. To give due consideration to access and other provision for people with special needs, and to make suitable provision where practicable.
7. To deal promptly and courteously with all enquiries, requests, reservations, correspondence and complaints from visitors.
8. To provide public liability insurance or comparable arrangement including cover for any activities provided and to comply with all applicable planning, transportation, safety and other statutory arrangements.
9. To adhere to a relevant environmental Code of Conduct where an outdoor/wildlife element is offered as whole or part of their experience. This must be clearly displayed for visitor reference and may be included in promotional literature.
10. To commit to ensure staff are trained in WorldHost
11. To ensure a fair and balanced picture is presented when portraying Experiences of a political/historical nature
12. To commit to participating in customer satisfaction surveys and incorporating the feedback for continuous improvement.



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