

Common accreditation standards aimed at grading the UK's hotels are being phased in. But such a wide variety of accommodation is now on offer that critics say a tick-box system can never measure quality. *Christian Syllt reports*

How do you measure quality?

About a year ago a new era dawned in the UK hotel industry. For the first time, all the main accreditation bodies agreed on common standards to rate hotels and these were announced to the industry.

The scheme had been mooted for many years, but the eventual catalyst was London's successful Olympic bid. The games are expected to attract hundreds of thousands of international visitors, making clarity of hotel classifications crucial. Inspections under the new system began in January, but the jury is still out on whether we are any nearer to accurately grading a hotel's quality.

The theory behind the common standards is to do away with confusing systems which pervade the UK. Under the new standards, whether a guest stays at a four-star hotel in John O'Groats or a four-star in Land's End, the services and facilities should be the same. It's an admirable aim but a tricky one. The secret to this sweeping harmonisation is pigeonholing

The new system has categories which describe the type of accommodation such as hotel, guesthouse, budget and travel. Further subdivisions classify accommodation according to the characteristics of the individual property. So a small hotel has 20 bedrooms or fewer and a country house hotel has ample grounds or gardens, in a rural or semirural situation.

Such specific categorisation immediately proved contentious, particularly over borderline cases. For example, hotels not deemed to meet the new criteria drop down a



How will the standards affect boutique hotels like the Zetter in London?

classification and are assessed as guesthouses. But it's the exacting in-room criteria which have caused the most controversy.

ROOM SERVICE

Each star category has general standards such as at least six bedrooms with en suite or private facilities for a one-star property, and room service offering drinks, snacks and one meal (breakfast or dinner) in a three-star. Criteria are also set at the most minute levels such as specifying that one-star hotels can change sheets once a week but five-stars must change them every two days. The standards stretch right down to the type of carpets and china used.

Chains have been some of the scheme's most open advocates. Research carried out by Beacon, the procurement division of Best Western, which also provides its services to 1,800 independent UK hospitality businesses, showed that nearly three-quarters of these operators supported the new common standards. However, it's perhaps

Under the new standards the five-diamond Cottage hotel in the New Forest will not be classified as a hotel, but a "five-star guest accommodation"

no surprise that chains may be most at home with the new system since they can use their purchasing power to buy in bulk and easily achieve standardisation.

But critics complain that the quality of a guest's experience cannot be judged by specific amenities, and so the new scheme will add unnecessary costs. The tick-box system has been attacked as outdated and failing to take account of the varying rates charged across the country for different accommodation specifications.

The wide variety of accommodation types now on offer puts even greater pressure on a "one-for-all" system. The past 20 years have seen the birth of no-frills budget hotels, which may have as many facilities as old-fashioned three-stars but only minimal service. Design, boutique and theme hotels are





WHAT ARE THE COMMON STANDARDS?

They are criteria relating to all aspects of an accommodation property and determine its star rating from one to five.

When do they come into force?

Inspections under the new system started in January this year and the new ratings will be phased in by January 2008.

How do they work?

They determine the level of the accommodation to be graded as well as its star rating. Accommodation levels range from hotels and guesthouses to hostels. Properties which don't meet the standards of one level will be assessed under the lower tier and all will be recommended by VisitBritain on its website. This is a change from the previous system whereby non-accredited hotels were also promoted.

Who has created them?

The common standards have been agreed to and undertaken by all the UK's main accreditation bodies – the AA, RAC, VisitBritain, VisitScotland and the Wales Tourist Board. They will replace any systems of accommodation accreditation currently used by these bodies.

Must all hotels comply with the standards?

No. Properties may opt out of the grading system.

now also commonplace and attract guests for reasons other than their rating.

Outside the UK, even across countries which adhere to the five-star system, criteria aren't always consistent. In Italy, high levels of room cleaning are considered a key aspect of a top hotel, with rooms in five-star hotels being cleaned twice a day. The number of stars reflects the number of staff and facilities rather than the quality of service or furnishings. However, in Austria the levels of peace and quiet affect the grade, and so rooms must be solidly soundproofed to achieve top ratings.

OPPOSITION

It seems hard to imagine that such grading systems could ever be harmonised across Europe, let alone worldwide, yet this is exactly what was planned in the late 1990s. Predictably, the proposed scheme ended up being shelved after opposition from the International Hotel & Restaurant Association on the grounds of

being impractical and unfeasible.

Trevor Ward, managing director of the W Hospitality Group, agrees. "A product like a hotel cannot be commoditised and categorised, unless it's at the 'cookie-cutter' budget end of the market," he says. "The totality of the product is so complex, with many different tangible and intangible elements, that a hotel's quality is much more one of personal perception than of empirical measurement. And those perceptions will change across cultures, both between and within countries."

The consortium Leading Hotels of the World has created what many see to be a global standard based on quality. However, its members must pay for the privilege with a \$50,000 (£26,600) initiation fee and an annual marketing fee of \$325 (£173) per room (capped at 300 rooms) increasing 4% annually. The group even takes a "success fee" amounting to 10% of room reservation revenue. This month the AA launched an alternative called *The Guest List*, a guide

billed as containing 42 of the UK's best hotels and restaurants which crucially didn't pay for entry.

Ward proposes a different approach. "Being informed that it's three-, four- or five-star is less relevant than reading what people think about the hotel – see such sites as Trip Advisor, or Hotel Chatter – and knowing about the brand." Michael Hirst, former chairman and chief executive of Hilton International, agrees, adding that "in the end many hoteliers will argue that their brand conveys to customers most about their standards."

However, the star system has



The Grand hotel, Vienna: soundproofed for stars

become so ingrained that it would be tough to shake off. It's also a source of revenue, with many corporate travel buyers briefed to book groups into only four- or five-star properties. Nevertheless, the significance of stars seems to be waning.

CLASSIFICATION

"If a hotel doesn't like its rating it doesn't push it and uses marketing to promote its features regardless of star rating," says Hirst. "Some sub-rated hotels can still get away with prices above their classification."

Ward adds that the bottom-line impact of a star is negligible. "If the hotel is good, and has done its marketing correctly, I doubt the loss or gain of a star means that much any more," he says. But this still leaves unanswered the question of how to decide whether the hotel is "good".

No one doubts that common standards are far preferable to fragmentation and confusion, yet a system that can truly universally measure "quality" remains out of reach.