

IMPROVING WINCHESTER

In Issue 1, *Locum Destination Review* introduced the destination benchmarking scheme rolled out in a pilot study across 14 UK tourist destinations in 1998 and 37 destinations in 1999. Clive Wyatt, former Head of Tourism at Winchester City Council and now Head of Marketing at Southern Tourist Board, was instrumental in the establishment of the project in 1996. Here, he explains how Winchester conducted its own pilot study and put the results to use in beneficial ways.

Rank Xerox defined benchmarking as 'The continuing process of measuring products, services and practices against the toughest competition of those recognised as leaders.' The benchmarking scheme pioneered by Winchester City Council and the Southern Tourist Board in 1996 sought to apply this process for the first time to the tourism sector. The bottom-line objective of the scheme is to help destinations continuously improve performance in key areas contributing to good perceptions and experiences for visitors – and residents. And what produces a positive visitor experience? The satisfaction of the visitor's basic needs.

Maslow's hierarchy of social motivational factors can be used as a conceptual model for tourism destination managers.

By satisfying basic visitor needs, destinations succeed in offering good experiences and motivating their guests to return.

Methodology

So often the drive towards improvement is analysed in quantitative terms. The benchmarking scheme initiated in Winchester has defied convention by basing its analysis on a qualitative approach, which allows for a clearer understanding of visitor experience. Face-to-face visitor surveys which were conducted in 1994 and 1996 focused on four key areas contributing to the quality of visitor experience: shops/places to eat and drink; toilets/signposting; feeling of security/cleanliness/

friendliness; and accommodation. The results of both years were set against average results of nine surveys which had been conducted by the city council in the years before the introduction of the benchmarking initiative.

1994 results and next steps

In the 1994 results, some areas, such as accommodation, scored lower than the average from earlier surveys. Other areas, meanwhile, scored higher. From this mixed bag of findings, the tourism department of Winchester City Council was able to embark on a series of initiatives aimed at continuing the upward trend of those areas which were performing well and to bring about a reversal in fortunes for the under-achievers. It was clear that things would not improve unless direct, proactive measures were introduced, aimed at transforming facilities and, just as significantly, attitudes.

The benchmarking process and its various initiatives brought about a major change in the political status of tourism within Winchester City Council



Maslow's social hierarchy - a possible model for the benchmarking process

Accommodation

One of the first measures introduced by Winchester City Council in the wake of the 1994 findings was the Welcome Host initiative for local hoteliers and others in the accommodation sector. As well as aiming to encourage local hoteliers to invest in new facilities, the scheme made clear the benefits of partnership in promoting the range of accommodation available in the city to visitors.

It was also at this time that the Hotel du Vin opened for business in Winchester, bringing with it new standards of excellence in customer service. Soon to open hotels in other UK city destinations, the Hotel du Vin's arrival in Winchester instantly set a new benchmark of its own for service in accommodation, giving the city's accommodation providers something to live up to and boosting Winchester's overall reputation. Things were starting to happen.

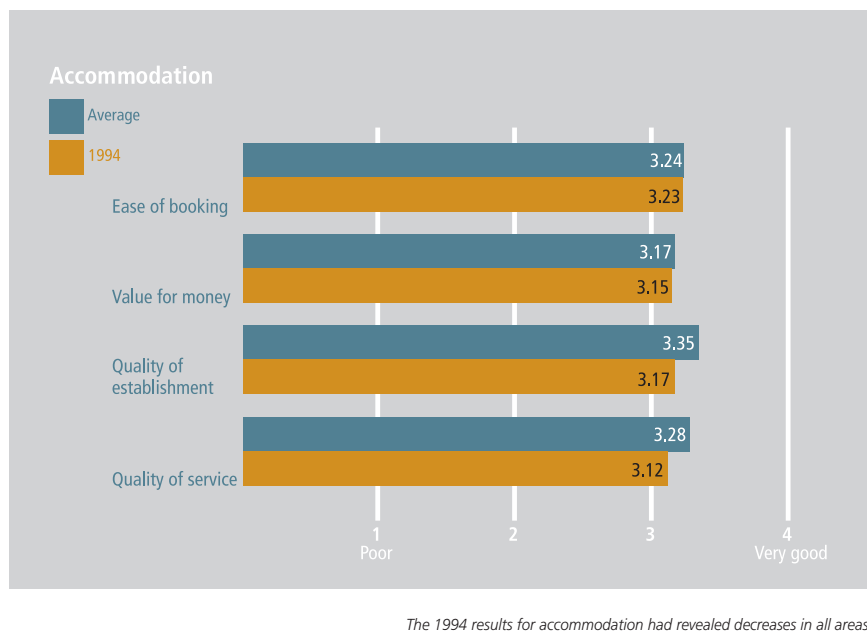
Public toilets

Traditionally a low-scoring field in any visitor survey, the 1994 results showed that the availability and cleanliness of Winchester's public lavatories had scored lower than the previous average. This called for immediate action. On an organisational level, the results were taken to the city council's department of environmental health, who were made aware of the findings. Asking for the department's assistance thereby involved environmental health directly in the effort to improve the city's facilities and profile.

Also on the strength of the benchmarking results, Winchester City Council granted £250,000 of its capital programme towards improvement of the city's public toilet facilities. This gave a great boost to the growing momentum towards achieving measurable change for the good of the city's visitors and residents alike. Now Winchester has, arguably, the best public toilets in Britain, and serves as a quality benchmark for other cities initiating improvement of their own facilities.

Local attitudes

Changing facilities is one thing, changing minds is entirely another. Improvements in primarily visitor-facing areas help matters, but this effect is somewhat negated if the local population is not as friendly towards outsiders as it might be. Having attained a reasonable score of just over 3 on friendliness towards visitors both in the average and 1994 results, it was clear that there was some room for improvement. Winchester needed to reach its residents with the clear message that tourism is vital to the city's economic structure and that a



basic shift in attitude towards visitors was required to improve its profile in the minds of its guests. The results of the 1994 survey were released to the local press and instantly made headlines, designed to show residents that, while they were considered reasonably friendly by visitors, there was a little way to go before scoring a really good result with visitors.

This press strategy was designed as an encouragement to residents' civic pride: did they really want visitors to leave with the impression that they weren't really welcome, and that there was no particular reason for them to return?

1996 results and success markers

The 1996 benchmarking results, when compared with those of 1994, made highly encouraging reading across the vast majority of areas. This spider diagram shows which areas had experienced an improvement since 1994 and where ratings had slipped behind the previous score.

The diagram is a highly effective means of viewing the results for Winchester as a destination in a holistic sense, as well as looking at the individual components which constitute its qualitative visitor offer. The scale runs outward from the centre of the diagram, with 1 representing poor and 4 very good. The diagram makes excellent reading for the most part: the bigger the gap between the red and blue lines, the bigger the improvement since 1994.

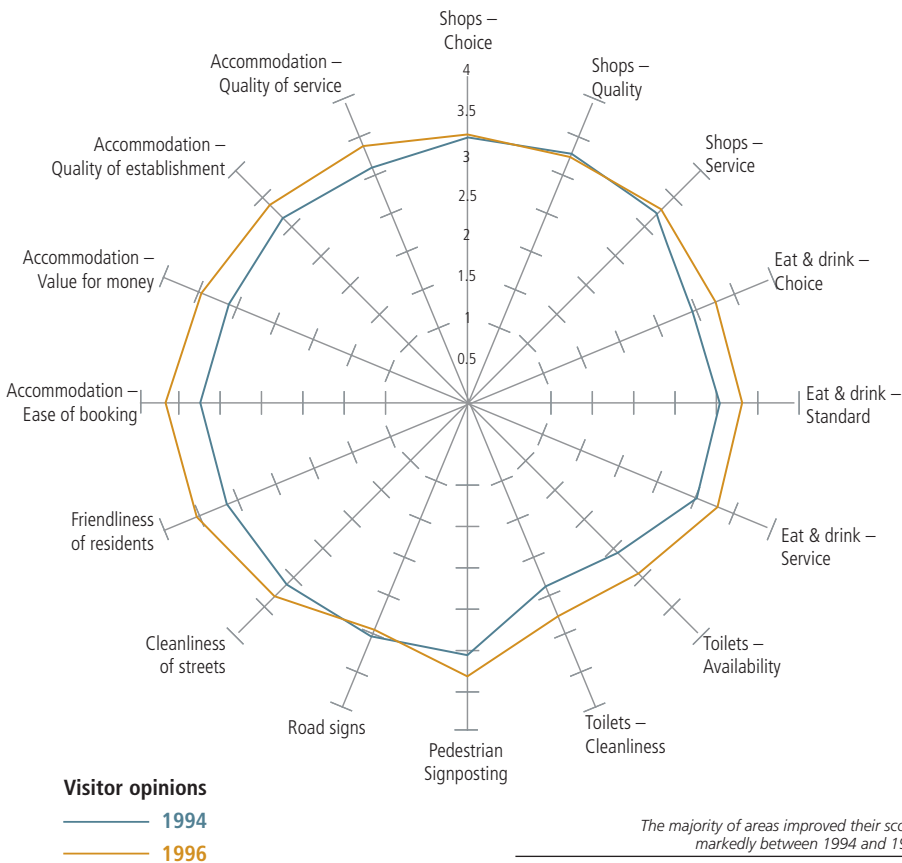
Tourism climbs political ladder

The improvements which took place between 1994 and 1996 were by no means restricted to the services contributing to visitor experiences. Equally importantly, the benchmarking process and its various initiatives brought about a major change in the political status of tourism within Winchester City Council. No longer was tourism confined to the box called 'marketing and promotion': it had broken free of its shackles.

The targeted use of visitor experience surveys succeeded in promoting a wider view of the tourism function, placing it at the heart of the visitor management programme for Winchester. The introduction of the benchmarking scheme illustrated the need for a whole range of parties – both within and beyond the council – to contribute to the effort to improve the scores of areas under analysis.

Through its involvement across departments and wider dealings with local commerce and residents, the tourism function increased its own significance in the lateral planning process. A Tourism Working Party was formed, which included the Chairs of all the service committees: environmental health, planning, leisure and external relations. Recently, the Tourism Development Strategy drawn up by the Working Party was given an important role in the city's development over the next three years. For the first time, tourism was prioritised in Winchester City Council's Corporate Strategy for April 2000-March 2003: 'To promote a thriving local economy in the district we will strengthen Winchester's position as a centre for administration, tourism, industry, research and education! This recognition at the strategic political level has been the most significant individual change brought about through the benchmarking process, and the biggest single achievement. Tourism is no longer seen as a promotional process but as the valid, complex profession it is. Benchmarking was the indisputable catalyst for such radical change.

Things would not improve unless direct, proactive measures were introduced, aimed at transforming facilities and, just as significantly, attitudes



Better facilities, higher standards

The city's accommodation scores improved on all levels: value for money, ease of booking, quality of service and quality of establishment. Hoteliers responded to the Welcome Host scheme with great enthusiasm and the Hotel du Vin arrived with its exemplary customer service and high profile. Additionally, a new partnership initiative, the Discover Winchester Group, was formed by representatives from the city's key hotels and tourist attractions as well as city traders. The idea behind the partnership was to put Winchester on the world map by, for example, launching a website containing information about the city and its district, expanding the literature and brochures available on the city and making some of them available in five different foreign languages.

One of the biggest changes demonstrated through the 1996 benchmarking results was the improvement in availability and cleanliness of public toilets. Scores for these areas had risen from 2.56 to 2.9 and 2.41 to 2.79 respectively. This was due in no small part to the response to the initial findings by the council's department of

environmental health. As well as aiding the improvement in toilet facilities, the department was pivotal in setting new standards of cleanliness. For two years running, Winchester achieved second place in the competition to find Britain's cleanest town.

The good people of Winchester responded admirably to the press tactics first employed in 1994. Realising through the media campaign both that visitor-generated income was vital to the local economy and that, in any case, they didn't want guests leaving the city believing its inhabitants to be less friendly towards their visitors than they could be, Winchester's residents improved their attitudes and responses to visitors very significantly between 1994 and 1996, a change reflected in the rise in this benchmarking element's score from 3.17 to 3.51. Through the press campaign, residents had been made aware of just how important they were to civic pride.

As a result of the benchmarking scheme and Winchester City Council's response to it, Winchester had clearly become a better-equipped, friendlier place to visit, offering higher standards of hospitality in all but a few areas.