

Subject:	ACCOMMODATION CHARTER FOR DOVER DISTRICT
Meeting and Date:	Cabinet – 12 June 2017
Report of:	Roger Walton, Director of Environment and Corporate Assets
Portfolio Holder:	Councillor Keith Morris, Portfolio Holder for Skills, Training, Tourism, Voluntary Services and Community Safety
Decision Type:	Non-Key
Classification:	Unrestricted
Purpose of the report:	For Cabinet to approve working with non-graded accommodation providers through a new Accommodation Charter.
Recommendation:	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. That Cabinet adopts The Accommodation Charter to enable working with district wide non-graded accommodation. 2. That Cabinet allows Visitor Information Centres within the District to book customers into non-graded accommodation through The Accommodation Charter. 3. That Cabinet delegates authority to the Head of Museums and Tourism to exclude a property from the Accommodation Standards Charter where it is considered necessary following investigation.

1. Summary

- 1.1 White Cliffs Country is the official tourism organisation for the district and was launched by Dover District Council some twenty years ago. It was set up as a membership scheme with local businesses in the tourism industry as a means of marketing and booking their properties with the Visitor Information Centres in the Dover District.
- 1.2 Current Council policy reflects the historic government one, in that Local Authorities and their Visitor Information Centres (VICs) should not work with or promote non-accredited/graded accommodation providers. This changed in 2012 when DCMS stated that “the Government will stop trying to corral tourism firms in England into joining an official rating scheme. We will leave decisions on whether and how to modernise, shrink or close the existing state-sponsored scheme to the industry itself through the newly formed Visit England”. As a result the scheme is no longer effective and excludes some excellent providers from accessing marketing through the District Council.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 The way in which accommodation providers market and promote their businesses has changed, with some investing in their own websites or signing up to other commercially driven websites to deliver their online activity. Additionally the growth of review sites like Trip Advisor, and the booking site AirBnB offers the consumer a different way to check and book accommodation, adding to the dilution of the current star rating system.

- 2.2 Revenue from industry advertising for the annual visitor guide has steadily declined over the last few years and a decision to remove advertising from the White Cliffs Country visitor guide was taken two years ago. The accommodation section within the guide wasn't reflective of the whole offer within the District and gave a negative image of the amount of accommodation available to the prospective visitor. This decision was supported by research carried out by Lifestyle Group, the company who currently handle our brochure leads and fulfilment. This research enabled us to understand our visitor demographic and profile better and see that the brochure is requested as an inspirational and information tool rather than a list of graded accommodation.
- 2.3 Districts throughout Kent, including Dover, have historically adopted an assessed only approach to working with accommodation providers, only promoting those which have been quality assessed by Visit England or the AA to ensure quality. However a large number of accommodation providers choose not to be graded for a number of reasons, including the cost which is around £500 for the average property. The opportunity to work with these businesses will increase the amount of accommodation visible to tourists on our website and take the model beyond a traditional 'membership' offering.
- 2.4 A large number of UK destinations are following this business model and are working with accommodation providers from outside the traditional accredited route. Within Kent, Canterbury City Council, Swale and Gravesham local authorities have all adopted Accommodation Charters and work with non-accredited providers.
- 2.5 Like other UK destinations, Dover District has seen a steady decline in the number of registered hotels and bed and breakfasts. With the rise and trend in budget accommodation, many providers are struggling to compete in this market. Coupled with the brisk growth in AirBnB listings, some are selling their businesses to convert into residential properties. Since 2014 serviced (hotels and B&B's) properties have declined from 361 to 121(DPUK) representing a loss of around 1000 rooms.
- 2.6 Dover Visitor Information Centre regularly struggles to find accredited accommodation during July and August and often has to resort to booking into Folkestone and Canterbury leaving good, but non accredited, accommodation in the District empty. It should further be noted that accreditation levels across Kent and nationally has fallen.

3. Dover District Accommodation Providers Eligibility for website promotion and VIC booking

- 3.1 The Councils current terms and conditions follow the historic grading schemes run by AA and Visit England which the former South East England Tourist Board set up some twenty years ago.

Minor changes were introduced a couple of years ago and currently accommodation providers are eligible for promotion by Dover District Council if they meet any of the following standards:

- Visit England/Quality in Tourism National Quality Standards (star ratings)
- AA Hotel Services Quality Standards (star ratings)
- Kent Accommodation Scheme

- Alistair Sawday Guide
- Michelin Guide
- Good Hotel Guide
- An externally managed standards audit system e.g. Abode Hotels
- Other guides, which are well-established and have evident consumer credibility and carry out a regular inspection against a set of standards.

3.2 To replace the above accreditation, Dover District Council, working with Visit Kent and Tourism South East has developed an Accommodation Charter (see draft attached) as the basis for accepting ungraded accommodation providers into the White Cliffs Country marketing. This will open up the market and remove any barriers to entry. The Charter sets out the minimum requirements for eligibility and would not attract any annual fee or regular inspections. The Council will not work with or market Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMO's) for the tourist market.

3.3 The many non-graded properties in the district can often represent a high quality offering and presents Dover District Council with a significant opportunity to work, communicate and engage with these small businesses, particularly in Deal and Sandwich and in the rural areas, where the proportion of non-graded properties is generally higher than in Dover. The proposed change of policy would remove the current barriers to entry and provide the opportunity to develop our relationships with those who often work in isolation.

3.4 Under the new policy, Dover District Council would monitor on-line reviews and any complaints relating to members that have signed The Charter. After proper investigation and consultation with the proprietor, should the complaints be deemed legitimate and sufficiently serious, Dover District Council would reserve the right to withdraw the providers' membership without liability. The decision would be final with no right to appeal.

4. Relevant Council Policy

This proposal supports the Corporate Plan Strategic Priority 3 – Serving our communities effectively.

5. Resource Implications

There are no direct resource implications with this proposal.

6. Identification of Options

Option 1. Adopt The Accommodation Charter to allow non-graded accommodation in the district to work with Dover District Council. (Recommended)

Option 2. Continue to work with district wide accredited only accommodation providers. (Not recommended)

7. Evaluation of Options

Option 1. The proposed change in policy is important to the growth and sustainability of Dover District's future working with the accommodation sector. We are approached regularly by ungraded businesses who have expressed interest in joining under revised terms.

Option 2. The ongoing fragmentation of the accreditation schemes is projected to continue, ultimately impacting on the visitor whilst trying to find accommodation from a trusted source like our website and Visitor Information Centres.

8. Consultation Planned or Undertaken

The Town Councils and White Cliffs Country Tourism Alliance have been informed about the proposal. The Dover Guest House and Hotelier group has been consulted and are supportive of the proposal.

9. Resource Implications

There are no direct resource implications as a consequence of the approval of The Accommodation Charter.

- a. Comment from the Section 151 Officer “The Equality Officer has been consulted on the report and have no further comments to add. (LS)”
- b. Comment from the Solicitor to the Council: The Head of Legal Services has been consulted during the preparation of this report and has no further comment to make.
- c. Comment from the Equalities Officer: ‘The Equality Officer has been consulted during the development of this report and has no further comments to make other than to remind members that in discharging their responsibilities they are required to comply with the public sector equality duty as set out in section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15>’
- d. Other Officers (as appropriate):

10. Appendices

Appendix 1 – The Accommodation Charter

11. Background Papers

None.

Contact Officer: Debbie Dainton, Tourism Officer.