



Fitness for Purpose

**Driving up standards
in serviced tourism
accommodation**

**Position Statement
February 2003**





Dr. Kim Howells MP Sir Ron Watson CBE

In order to drive up standards in the important area of tourism accommodation, and to help aid recovery for English tourism after the adverse effects of the foot and mouth outbreak and 11 September 2001, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Local Government Association (LGA) joined forces to define what was needed for better consumer protection and business support under the banner of a new "Fitness for Purpose" initiative. In Summer 2002, a comprehensive set of recommendations was widely endorsed by Ministers, the tourism and hospitality industry, and local government tourism leaders.

We are delighted now to launch the next phase of Fitness for Purpose. From Spring 2003, leading local authorities will carry out pilot studies of the initiative in major English tourist destinations. The lessons from these pilots will form the basis of a full set of proposals which DCMS and the LGA will produce next year. We then hope to see Fitness for Purpose adopted across England from 2004. Ultimately, Fitness for Purpose should give the customer a firmer assurance that any hotel, or the restaurant within it, they enter in England will be a suitable place for customers to patronise.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Kim Howells".

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ron Watson".

Dr Kim Howells MP
Tourism Minister
Department for
Culture, Media and Sport

Sir Ron Watson CBE
Chairman, Tourism Executive
Local Government Association

What is “Fitness for Purpose?”

Good standards in quality and safety are a top priority for the English tourism industry. Inevitably, the experience that visitors have of their hotel accommodation is a major part of their impression of this country. A disappointing experience will create a negative image of England and can significantly harm the country’s reputation as a leading tourist destination.

Fitness for Purpose is an initiative promoting better inspection and regulation of tourist accommodation as a way of tackling poor safety and trading standards and ensuring that minimum legal requirements are met. It is targeted at hotels, guesthouses and Bed and Breakfasts which are failing to meet minimum legal requirements on health and safety, food hygiene, trading standards and fire safety, in order to help them to improve. It aims to give those businesses the support they need to raise standards in those areas, while also taking a lighter regulatory enforcement touch to well-run businesses that are already complying with the necessary regulations.

The intention was to create an initiative which would be one part of the drive for better overall quality in the industry, and under Fitness for Purpose, well thought out legislation which is fully complied with should ensure a minimum level of quality that is safe. But the customer focused objective of Fitness for Purpose is essentially about consumer protection at the lowest end. Therefore Fitness for Purpose is

not primarily concerned with “cosmetic” or subjective quality issues. Those issues – including appearance, levels of service, and cleanliness – are dealt with as part of the National Quality Accommodations Standards scheme which grades English tourist accommodation. The underlying premise of Fitness for Purpose is that to address such instances of poor quality, then first the basic minimum standards dictated by regulation need to be got right. If we start by ensuring that in every case, businesses are complying with minimum legal requirements, then we have a firm basis from which to build quality beyond that.

What changes are needed?

The Fitness for Purpose working group identified that improvement is needed in five key areas:

- providing better consumer protection
- making regulatory standards clear for businesses and consumers
- educating businesses better about their obligations
- co-ordinating inspections more effectively
- allowing more self-assessment for well-run businesses

What is being proposed?

The Fitness for Purpose proposals which have been developed are essentially about formalising a more risk-based approach to

inspection and enforcement which will allow more targeting of resources towards those premises that do not meet the minimum safety standards; about more sharing of best practice by the enforcers of regulation; and about promoting joined up working between tourism and enforcement officers in local authorities.

What are the advantages for consumers?

Every customer should have a strengthened assurance that the tourist accommodation they use in England is fit to be trading. They should be able to walk through the door of any establishment and be confident that at the very least the minimum fire, food, health and safety, and trading standards are being met. Under Fitness for Purpose, a more clearly publicised complaints procedure for when poor standards are encountered in these areas, will ensure that problems are promptly investigated and properly dealt with.

What are the advantages for tourism businesses?

One of the major aims is to enable local authorities to take a lighter enforcement touch with well-run businesses and to co-ordinate better the existing inspection regime for all accommodation providers. For many businesses, compliance with regulations should become much easier and less costly.

How will tourist destinations benefit?

Fitness for Purpose will enable all tourist destinations to target their resources at those accommodation providers which are failing to get even the basics right. Ultimately, by helping those businesses to improve, destinations can achieve a better overall standard of accommodation across the board, from which to build further improvements in tourism quality.

Who will take the lead on Fitness for Purpose?

Local authorities will take the lead, with both tourism and environmental health departments working much more closely together to co-ordinate their monitoring and inspection of local accommodation businesses. They will also work in partnership with local business networks to promote best practice.

Why not introduce statutory registration?

Government and the tourism industry have made it clear that neither is keen to introduce statutory registration for all tourist accommodation in England until other approaches to improving standards have been pursued. Fitness for Purpose is a common sense approach which makes full use of existing legislation and resources. It promotes joined up working and less red tape – two common aims of government and business.

Who has been consulted?

The working group not only consulted widely across central Government and the tourism and hospitality industry to form its proposals, but also drew heavily on the expertise of those involved in the day to day realities of inspecting hotels and enforcing legislation. The recommendations which have emerged are more robust and more practical as a result.

What happens next?

The LGA has convened a task force of lead local authority officials in enforcement and tourism to oversee pilot studies of the initiative. Six pilot authorities will test out the Fitness for Purpose model from Spring 2003, over the summer holiday period, and concluding in the late autumn. Following evaluation of those studies by the task force, the Fitness for Purpose working group will produce final proposals for adoption across England from 2004. The Pilot areas which will be announced shortly, include studies in London, seaside resorts and rural areas.

A summary of the Fitness for Purpose Working Group report outlining the full recommendations published in July 2002 is available from the "Our work – tourism" page of the LGA website at www.lga.gov.uk, and from the Tourism section of the DCMS website at www.culture.gov.uk.

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