



Basic Guide to Starting a

Guest House Business



tourism  
northernireland

[tourismni.com](http://tourismni.com)

Operating a Guest House business can be a very positive experience. Aside from the financial benefits which can be derived from running a guest house property, many owners also enjoy the social aspect of the business, including the opportunity to welcome guests from all over the world.

Many visitors make a deliberate choice of comfortable establishments which have a home-from-home atmosphere with the added benefit of breakfast and evening meals. A friendly host, together with good quality facilities and value for money accommodation, are key elements for success in all sectors of tourism.

## What is a Guest House?

In essence, a Guest House offers comfortable overnight sleeping accommodation for visitors in separate en-suite bedrooms and must provide a cooked breakfast and evening meal. A Guest House differs slightly from a B&B in that it is usually larger and must offer at least 3 double en-suite bedrooms\*; it may also apply to be licensed to serve alcoholic beverages.

Most Guest Houses are run by people who have had no formal training but have a genuine flair for household management, good hygiene, simple cooking and good people skills – offering true Northern Ireland hospitality. From the hearty home-made breakfast and evening meal to the warmth of the welcome, it is the extra touches that really count.

Planning approval may be required if you decide to use more than 50% of your bedroom space. Refer to [www.planning.gov.uk](http://www.planning.gov.uk) for more information.

As breakfast and evening meals may be served at Guest House establishments, you will need to make sure that you are adhering to food safety legislation. All food establishments in Northern Ireland must be registered with their local council environmental health service. Refer to [www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk](http://www.nibusinessinfo.co.uk) for additional information.

## What is Certification and why is it required?

Tourism legislation requires all tourism/visitor accommodation to hold a current Tourism Northern Ireland (NI) certificate. This involves a visit to the property from a member of Tourism NI's certification team, who will inspect the property to ensure it meets certification requirements. Under current legislation, a statutory (legal) inspection of the premises is undertaken every four years. A certificate issued by Tourism NI, following this inspection, is also valid for four years.

## How do I Apply?

Applications can be submitted online at [www.tourismni.com/forms](http://www.tourismni.com/forms) accompanied by a fee. £20 is payable for every room you intend to let, subject to a minimum fee of £80 and maximum of £200.

Payment and application can also be made by post, or by visiting Tourism NI's offices. You can request an application pack by contacting the Quality & Standards team by email to [qa@tourismni.com](mailto:qa@tourismni.com) or telephone 028 90 441545. When a completed application form and fee are received, a member of Tourism NI's inspection team will contact you to arrange a suitable time and date for the visit.

## Minimum and Recommended Criteria

The requirements and recommendations set out here are intended for guidance; they are not comprehensive. During an inspection you will be advised on matters not specifically detailed here, however, inspections do not cover all aspects of tourist accommodation; it is the responsibility of certified premise operators/owners to make every reasonable effort to ensure that visitors enjoy a safe and secure stay. As part of your duty of care to visitors you should remain vigilant of potential risk to visitors and of how you describe your premises in marketing and promotion.



# About the Inspection

## The Exterior



The inspection process starts when the inspector arrives at the property.

They will look at the exterior appearance to make sure the paintwork is in good order and that the car-parking areas, paths and grounds are well-maintained and safe.

## Structural and Safety Requirements

Your establishment should be of substantial and durable construction, structurally safe, in good repair throughout and of suitable design. It should be in good decorative order and kept clean and well maintained throughout the property.

## Car-parking



Consider provision of parking with due regard to neighbours, traffic regulations and the fact that guests will not wish to carry baggage for long distances.

## Entrance Hall

This should be adequate for the reception of the number of guests. It must be well laid out and contain good quality furnishings, fittings and equipment and afford easy access to the public areas and bedrooms.

## Display of Certificate and Charges



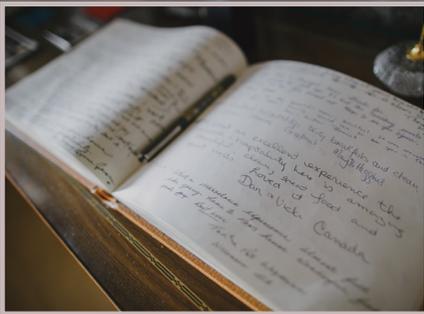
Your Tourism NI Certificate and scale of charges for accommodation must be prominently displayed, easily seen by visitors before, or immediately after, they enter. Where food other than breakfast and evening meals are provided, these meals should be identified and the charge shown. If your rates vary seasonally, or if there is any condition to be satisfied (e.g. age-eligibility for children's rates), or any other charges not included in the rate, then these must be displayed. All charges should be inclusive of VAT, where applicable.

## Tourist Literature

A selection of current leaflets, brochures, maps and other literature relating to your locality should be available.

## Visitors' Register

As well as the name, address and dates of arrival/departure, you are legally required to record each visitor's nationality.



Many establishments keep a book of comments for completion by guests on departure to record hints, recommendations and observations helpful to future visitors.

## Social Media

In addition to inviting guests to leave a comment in your visitor book, providers are encouraged to direct guests to online review sites or Social Media platforms to post a review of their experience. Customer reviews can highlight positive experiences; verified tips and useful observations. Generating positive feedback may influence potential customers when researching or booking accommodation.

## Instructions

Any house rules you wish to be observed or any other information which would be of interest to guests/potential guests e.g. WIFI code, should be brought to the guests' attention at the earliest opportunity. It is also a good idea to check guests' requirements at this time as some people may suffer from allergies (i.e. pets, nuts etc.). A guest information folder is a useful way to relay information and can be provided on guests' arrival.

## Breakfast and Evening Meals

A choice of what is offered for breakfast and evening meals should be given to all guests. Whilst many will look forward to the renowned Ulster Fry for breakfast, others will want a more continental offering of chilled fruit juices, breads, cheeses, fresh fruit and cereals, etc.



A menu for evening meals/snack options should be made available to guests with the option to pre-order. Specialising in home cooking and using local produce, along with choice, quality, excellent service and hospitality, will all serve towards creating a memorable stay. Treating the customer as a special visitor, ensures you and your Guest House will be remembered and recommended by all who visit.

## Dining Area



The dining area must be sufficiently large to cater for the number of guests at separate tables who may reasonably be expected to use it at any one time. It must also have sufficient cutlery, condiments, napkins and crockery for the number of diners who may be expected to use it at any one time.

This area must have solid tables, completely covered with a clean tablecloth, or surfaced with polished hardwood or veneer and comfortable, strong seats including high chairs (or suitably adapted chairs) for children. The ventilation must eliminate cooking smells from the kitchen. There must be carpeting or other suitable flooring and the area should be clean and in good decorative order.

## Kitchen Area



The kitchen should be adjacent to the dining area. It should contain facilities equipment and fittings which are of good quality and condition, constructed of

easily cleaned materials and adequate for the storage, refrigeration, preparation, cooking and service of food for the number of visitors and the storage and cleaning of all utensils. A separate laundry/utility room must also be provided in the establishment. Provision should be made for the speedy disposal of waste into bins or other suitable containers which are regularly emptied. Cutlery, utensils and dinnerware should be of good quality. A separate laundry/utility room must also be provided.

## Lounge Area



A Guest House should have one or more lounges of adequate size for the number of guests, physically separated from the dining area(s) and it should contain sufficient furniture, fittings and equipment of good quality and condition for the number of guests. These facilities may be shared by the host family, for watching television etc.

## Visitors' Bedrooms

Rooms must be numbered, lettered or otherwise designated to identify them easily and should be of sufficient size to cater for the number of visitors the room is intended to hold. Each bedroom should have separate access from a corridor, and the door must be lockable.



Each bedroom should have two power outlets for a heater, electric cleaner etc. The rooms must contain furniture, fittings and equipment for sleeping and toilet purposes, and for the storage of visitors' clothing.

In general, these furnishings should include: beds, complete with interior sprung mattress; a supply of clean linen, blankets or duvets and pillows; loose or built-in units comprising wardrobe or cupboards, dressing table with mirror, and drawer space for clothes; bedside chair and table; wastepaper basket; carpet, or, if the floor surface is suitable, a bedside rug and window curtains/blinds which should ensure privacy and exclude light. The room must also have proper lighting. Daily cleaning of rooms shall be carried out when visitors are resident.



Bedrooms are a vitally important area, since your guests will spend more time in them than in any other part of your premises and Tourism NI would encourage the provision of high quality en-suite facilities. Extra pillows and blankets should be made available on demand and you should provide a hospitality tray.

## Bathrooms & Toilets



Guest House establishments offering bedrooms which do not have en-suite bathrooms must provide at least one bathroom for every 10 visitors (or proportion of 10) and two suitably located toilets for the first 20 visitors, plus another toilet for every additional 10 people (or proportion of 10). The en-suite bathroom should contain a bath or shower, a toilet and a wash basin of good quality and in good condition.

It is worth investing in high-quality fixtures, towels and equipment such as hairdryers. All bathrooms should have plumbing in good working order to ensure a continuous supply of hot and cold running water and the disposal of waste water. They should also have an effective means of natural or mechanical ventilation. Bathrooms and toilets should be equipped with mirror, towel rails, clothes hooks, bath mat, plus an ample supply of toilet requisites, including towels, soap and toilet paper.

Hot water should be available at all reasonable times; you should have a system of water heating which copes with peak demands.

## Owners' Accommodation

Sleeping accommodation which is separate from that for visitors and clearly identified as such, must be provided for the use of the hosts, their family and any resident staff.

## Service

Other criteria, such as the need for the Guest House to be under the supervision of the proprietor, and to be adequately staffed to maintain appropriate standards of service at all reasonable times, must be observed.



High expectations among your customers will require the hosts to provide levels of service and attention appropriate to a modern Guest House establishment.

The statutory criteria relating to the need for the proprietor to be 'trained or experienced in management of a Guest House establishment' may not be strictly enforced, at the Board's discretion, as an encouragement to new start-ups.

However, hosts should make every effort to undertake training courses and gain experience as soon as possible.

## Inspection Outcome and Advice

Following the inspection of the property, there will be time to discuss the outcome of the inspection and where there are conditions on the certificate, they will be discussed with you and an agreed timeframe set i.e. not less than 30 days for the work to be completed.

The certification officer will also advise you on a number of other additional areas such as creating and maintaining your presence on the [www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com) website and other relevant sites, obtaining public liability insurance, best practice and operational standards.

## After the Inspection

In normal circumstances, a certificate will be posted to you within a few days.

Sometimes a follow-up inspection is required, usually within a month, where there are facilities yet to be provided. There may be a need for the adviser to return for this final check, but there is no charge for this.

## Grading

Grading refers to the rating of a property from 1 to 5 stars. Tourism NI offers a Quality Star Rating Scheme, which is operated by other UK National Tourist Boards and the AA. This scheme is open to Hotels, B&Bs, Guest Houses, Guest Accommodation, Hostels & Self Catering. The scheme focuses on enhancing the visitor experience across all visitor touch points. In addition to providing a star rating which helps visitor decision making, the scheme also provides businesses with advice and support.



Having a quality rating will give your premises credibility and visibility which is vital in today's competitive market. Further information on how the scheme works is available on [www.tourismni.com/grading](http://www.tourismni.com/grading)

If you have any queries or would like an application pack, please contact our office by emailing [qa@tourismni.com](mailto:qa@tourismni.com) or telephone **028 9044 1682**.

**Please note that this scheme is voluntary and you are under no obligation to apply for quality star rating.**

## Tourist Signage (White on Brown)

If you are interested in obtaining 'White on Brown' tourist signage, you should contact your local council Tourism Officer who can provide you with an application form. Local councils co-ordinate the application process for white on brown tourist signs which involves liaising with Tourism NI and Transport NI. You can also download a signage application form and a copy of the joint Transport NI – Tourism NI Tourist Signing Policy from [www.tourismni.com/BusinessSupport/LegalLicensing/](http://www.tourismni.com/BusinessSupport/LegalLicensing/) (see business support/legal and licensing/tourist signing).

## Advertising Signage

External advertising signage, either in the grounds of your facility or in any other public space, may require planning permission. Tourism NI recommends that you discuss any proposed external advertising signage with the planning team at your local council prior to erection. **Do not claim to be 'Tourism NI Recommended' or 'Approved'**; you may indicate that you have a Tourism NI Certificate, if you wish.

## Marketing

Successful marketing is important for every business and your accommodation business is no different. You could have the most desirable property in your area, but without marketing, no one will know about it.

It is important that the cost of marketing your business is considered early in the planning stage. It is unlikely that the cost of marketing your business will be a one-off payment, so consider marketing as a running business cost and build this into your business plan.



Once certified by Tourism NI, your premises will appear on our consumer website [www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com) at no additional cost. A short narrative about the property including facilities, nearby attractions, amenities, location and website as well as up to 9 images can be supplied to [qa@tourismni.com](mailto:qa@tourismni.com)

Whilst this website provides a great platform for going online, we recommend that you do not solely rely on this to drive business, but rather use it as part of your overall marketing plan.

Tourism NI also have a large following across a variety of social media platforms. If you have interesting or engaging content you would like to share about your business, you can send your stories to [digital@tourismni.com](mailto:digital@tourismni.com) for consideration. Similarly, if you have a special offer, you will be able to submit your accommodation offers for placement on [www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com)

## Aim for Excellence

Tourism NI encourages all operators to aim for excellence. By providing enhanced facilities, amenities and additional services, you are more likely to obtain a higher letting rate, be more assured of higher occupancy for longer periods and be more likely to generate profits. These need not involve great capital outlay, but can add considerably to your product.

Here are just a few ideas:

- Bedroom TVs and hospitality trays: kettle, coffee and tea, fresh milk, biscuits, etc.
- Provision of video/DVD entertainment, books/board games etc.
- Interesting gardens or farm walks
- Provision for special-interest groups or individuals e.g. picnics for walkers
- Children's safe play area
- Hire of bikes, fishing tackle, boat, golf clubs, etc.
- Guided tours of the locality
- Lessons in traditional farmhouse cooking
- Tea and coffee offered on arrival, and at other appropriate times
- Provide packed lunches and evening meals, for an extra charge

Guests will be encouraged to stay longer if you have something special to offer. Read the promotional literature from Guest House establishments elsewhere for cost-effective ideas which can be adapted for your establishment whatever its size. You should also look at the existing establishments in your intended area of operation, the facilities they offer and the rates charged. Facts about guesthouses in Northern Ireland are available on [www.tourismni.com/research](http://www.tourismni.com/research)

## Environmental Consideration

Tourism NI, in its promotion of sensible, sensitive and sustainable tourism, encourages 'good housekeeping' schemes such as recycling, energy conservation and waste minimisation.

For further information on addressing environmental impacts, download Tourism NI's 'Going Green' Guide from [www.tourismni.com](http://www.tourismni.com) (see Grow Your Business/Sustainable Tourism).



# Useful Websites

Tourism Northern Ireland - Further Information

[www.tourismni.com/accommodation](http://www.tourismni.com/accommodation)

Tourism Northern Ireland - Online Certification

[www.tourismni.com/forms](http://www.tourismni.com/forms)

Tourism Northern Ireland – Star Rating Schemes

[www.tourismni.com/grading](http://www.tourismni.com/grading)

Tourism Northern Ireland – Facts and Figures

[www.tourismni.com/factsandfigures](http://www.tourismni.com/factsandfigures)

Tourism Northern Ireland - Signage Policy

[www.tourismni.com/touristsigning](http://www.tourismni.com/touristsigning)

Tourism Northern Ireland – Alcohol Licensing

[www.tourismni.com/startup-advice/legal--licensing/alcohol-licensing-for-hotels-guest-houses-and-conference-centres/](http://www.tourismni.com/startup-advice/legal--licensing/alcohol-licensing-for-hotels-guest-houses-and-conference-centres/)

Discover Northern Ireland Website

[www.discovernorthernireland.com](http://www.discovernorthernireland.com)

World Host Customer Service Training

(for information about customer service training programmes which assist the industry in providing first class standards of service)

[www.tourismni.com/worldhost](http://www.tourismni.com/worldhost)

Divisional Planning Office

[www.planningni.gov.uk](http://www.planningni.gov.uk)

HM Revenue & Customs

(for implications of starting a business and VAT considerations)

[www.hmrc.gov.uk](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk)

Music License Information for Public Areas

(for details on how to obtain a music license when playing music in a public area)

[www.ppluk.com](http://www.ppluk.com) and [www.prsformusic.com](http://www.prsformusic.com)

Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service

[www.nifrs.org](http://www.nifrs.org)

Health and Safety Advice for Small Businesses

(to help manage health and safety in the workplace and relevant legislation)

[www.hseni.gov.uk](http://www.hseni.gov.uk)

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

(for information regarding the registration of private water supplies to holiday accommodation)

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/private-water-supplies](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/private-water-supplies)

The Tourism (Northern Ireland) Order 1992

(copies of all regulations can be obtained from The Stationary Office, Arthur Street, Belfast)

<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisi/1992/235/made>



## Contact details for further information

For more information/application forms for certification contact the Quality and Standards Department:

**Tel: 028 9044 1545**

You can also email this department at [qa@tourismni.com](mailto:qa@tourismni.com) or write to us at our offices at:

**Tourism Northern Ireland, Floors 10-12 Linum Chambers, Bedford Square, Bedford Street, Belfast, BT2 7ES.**

To request a copy of this document on disc or in other accessible formats, please contact the Quality & Standards Department.