



Basic Guide to Starting Self-Catering Accommodation



tourism
northern ireland

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

Self-catering accommodation is often deliberately chosen by visitors, especially for longer stays. Families can enjoy the relaxed atmosphere of a self-contained unit rather than a more formal setting of a hotel. Sports groups, couples, groups of friends sharing a similar interest and dog owners make a deliberate choice of comfortable, well equipped premises which offer the flexibility they require.

What is Self-Catering Accommodation?

In essence, a self-catering establishment offers clean, comfortable, furnished accommodation where visitors have the ability to cater for themselves. Self-catering holiday houses offer real living space, instead of just a place to sleep and adding little extra touches such as a welcome pack, flowers, dvds or books will help to create the right impression.

It can be a cottage in a rural setting, an apartment in a city centre, a house in a suburban location, a log cabin or a chalet. It is a flexible base for exploring all that Northern Ireland has to offer.

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 accompanied by a fee. £40 is payable for every unit you intend to let, subject to a minimum fee of £40 and maximum of £350.

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 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



Units should be of substantial and durable construction, structurally safe and in good repair throughout, and of suitable design. They should be in good decorative order and kept clean and well maintained. Access roads, paths, gardens and surrounding areas should be well maintained.

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.

Arrival

The owner/local agent needs to make arrangements for the arrival and departure of guests at the property.

Display of Certificate and Charges



Your Tourism NI Certificate and scale of charges for accommodation in each unit must be prominently displayed and easily seen by visitors before, or immediately after, they enter. Charges for extra facilities such as electricity, tennis court, hire of bikes or fishing tackle, etc, should also be displayed unless these are included in the rate. 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 and Inventory

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. A guest information folder is a useful way to relay information and can be provided on guests' arrival. This should also contain copies of instructions on operating equipment and other items.

Guest Areas (Lounge and Dining)



The guest lounge, dining area and kitchen can be open plan or individual rooms.

All areas must be clean and in good decorative order. The furniture should be in good condition and of good quality. There should be sufficient seating in both the lounge and dining areas for the number of guests catered for in the unit.

The flooring must be of good quality and in good condition: wood, carpet or laminate.

There should be good lighting and the area should be of sufficient size to cater for the number of guests staying in the accommodation.



Kitchen



We would recommend that the kitchen floor is washable i.e. tiles, wood, laminate or vinyl. The kitchen should be fit for purpose, ideally with fitted units in good condition, a cooker with ventilation, refrigeration and a washing machine (if a utility room is not provided separately). The kitchen should be equipped with crockery (matched), cutlery, saucepans and kitchen equipment. All should be in good condition with no cracks, chips or damage/scratches.

Bedrooms



The bedrooms should be clean, in good decorative order and have sufficient beds for the number of guests staying in the unit. The bedrooms should contain sufficient furniture for the hanging and storage of clothing. Ideally each bedroom should contain good quality furniture, including a bed with a headboard, locker and lights on both sides of a double or in between the beds for a twin.

A dressing table or a chest of drawers with a mirror, and wardrobe/hanging space and a chair are also ideal.

The flooring should be of good quality carpet, wood or laminate. Some units may have vinyl flooring in the bedrooms.

Bedroom windows must have curtains or blinds which exclude light i.e. black-out blinds or curtains with black-out linings so that when the curtains are closed during the day, there is very limited light getting into the room.



Bathrooms



The bathrooms must be clean and should contain a bath or shower facility with a toilet and sink, all in good condition with no chips or cracks. The bathroom must contain a toiletries cupboard and towel rail. Ideally the walls and floors should be tiled or have a suitable alternative finish e.g. PVC wall covering and vinyl flooring.

Most properties will provide a disposal bin (with lid), toiletries, towels, toilet roll holder and paper. There should be no discolouration on bathroom tiles or grouting, or on bath and shower seals.

General Criteria



Each unit should have sufficient lighting in all areas, ideally all light fittings should have shades and there should be reading lamps and bedside lights.

The unit should be cleaned after each letting or on a weekly basis where a letting is for more than one week.

There should be a heating system in the unit capable of heating the unit to 18.5°C; this can be oil, electric, solar, gas or any other method of heating.

There should be storage provided in the unit for clothing and bed linen and other household articles i.e. ideally vacuum cleaner and ironing board storage, a linen cupboard, wardrobe and dressing tables etc. in bedrooms.

The accommodation should be under the supervision of a person capable of the efficient management of the unit, this would include the management of bookings etc.

Additional Recommendations



Welcome Pack

A welcome pack may be provided which could include essential items (e.g. milk, tea, coffee, salt, pepper, cooking oil, tin foil and cling film), ideally some local home-made produce, possibly a starter pack for an open fire, a supply of towels, hand soaps and toilet rolls in the bathrooms, cleaning materials for the bathrooms and kitchens, and a supply of washing-up liquid and dishwasher tablets sufficient to get them started.

Information Pack

This should provide emergency numbers (doctor, dentist, hospital, and police station, plus the phone numbers for the property owner/manager), information on working the equipment in the unit, a full copy of the terms and conditions for the property rental, an evacuation procedure, local/regional tourist information and information on local amenities including visitor attractions and restaurants and shops etc.

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 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, Guesthouses, 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

If you have any queries or would like an application pack, please contact our office by emailing 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 coordinate 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/ (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 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 10 images can be supplied to 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 for consideration. Similarly, if you have a special offer, you will be able to submit your accommodation offers for placement on 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:

- Provision of a welcome pack as detailed earlier
- Provision of fuel for a 'real' fire
- Children's safe play area
- Interesting gardens or nature trails in grounds
- Hire of bikes, fishing tackle, boat, golf clubs, etc
- Guided tours of the locality
- Provision of services such as additional cleaning, food delivery, etc
- Central games room, books and board games, etc

Guests will be encouraged to stay longer if you have something special to offer. Read the promotional literature from self-catering 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 self-catering in Northern Ireland are available on 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 (see Grow Your business/Sustainable Tourism).

Useful Websites

Tourism Northern Ireland - Further Information
www.tourismni.com/accommodation

Tourism Northern Ireland - Online Certification
www.tourismni.com/forms

Tourism Northern Ireland – Star Rating Schemes
www.tourismni.com/grading

Tourism Northern Ireland – Facts and Figures
www.tourismni.com/factsandfigures

Tourism Northern Ireland - Signage Policy
www.tourismni.com/touristsigning

Discover Northern Ireland Website
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

Divisional Planning Office
www.planningni.gov.uk

HM Revenue & Customs
(for implications of starting a business and VAT considerations)
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 and www.prsformusic.com

Northern Ireland Fire & Rescue Service
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

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

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 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.