

SERIOUS CONTENDER

THE ASSOCIATION OF SERVICED APARTMENT PROVIDERS (ASAP) IS IN THE PROCESS OF ROLLING OUT A QUALITY ASSESSMENT PROGRAMME. **COLETTE DOYLE** FINDS OUT WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PAs LOOKING FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO HOTEL ACCOMMODATION



SERVICED APARTMENTS HAVE SUFFERED IN THE PAST FROM SOMETHING OF AN image problem. They have often been viewed as the poor relation to hotels and seemed hampered by a lack of proper recognition. Yet, it is undeniably an important sub-sector within the hospitality industry; in terms of spending patterns, one in every eight corporate travel buyers (equivalent to 13 per cent) booked serviced apartment accommodation last year, according to the findings of the Business Travel Show's annual survey.

In fact, serviced apartments now account for more than 26 per cent of room nights for four per cent of buyers, and between 11 and 25 per cent of bookings for a further 12 per cent of buyers. Overall, 84 per cent of corporate travel buyers' accommodation programmes include up to 10 per cent of serviced apartment room nights.

ASAP has been at the forefront of change and has now launched a logo to accompany its quality assessment (QA) programme. The QA programme will allow all accredited members to display a kitemark that vouches for them having

complied with key legal, health and safety requirements, as well as being a proponent of best industry practice. The programme focuses on a set of core requirements, such as having public liability insurance and a robust health and safety policy, and measures the success of their delivery (see the full list on the website at theasap.org.uk).

"Members recognise the importance of legal and statutory obligations, health and safety and that any property is accurately and appropriately marketed, and this provides a high level of confidence for guests booking a serviced apartment," comments Managing Director James Foice.

He notes that the QA standard also has applications abroad and in fact a major serviced apartment operator in the Netherlands, Your Amsterdam Housing, as well as the Corporate Housing Providers Association in the US, both recently joined ASAP specifically to benefit from its rigorous QA initiative. In addition, Foice says he has been in touch with a number of booking agents, including Orbital Partnership, who wish to support the accreditation scheme by only offering ASAP-accredited apartments to their clients.

INSPECTION IN ACTION

ASAP's new quality assessment programme is nothing if not thorough, reports Colette Doyle. As he walks me through the process, MD James Foice is at pains to point out that this is not about the facilities available but "the quality of the guest experience". "The important thing to keep in mind," says Foice, "is that the property is marketed at the right level so as not to disappoint guests," adding that it's not about trying to get all members up to one uniform standard, but about meeting client expectation.

Scores are based on the entire procedure of booking and staying at a serviced apartment, from telephone enquiry, pre-stay literature, reservations and arrival greeting through to the physical make-up of the property itself. This examines such details as the type of flooring used in the apartment, as well as heating, ventilation, fixtures and fittings, bed linen, mattresses, pillows, furniture and cleanliness.

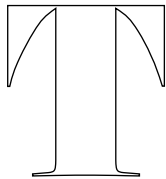
Additional factors such as an on-site gym, bar, or restaurant are also factored into the score, as are feedback sites such as TripAdvisor. "This is a great way to spot trends and also helps to demonstrate that we are impartial in our judging," comments Foice, who works alongside three full-time assessors.

The scores are then plotted on a graph and compared with competitors in the same price band based on the first Wednesday in October to allow for any seasonal fluctuations. "This way, operators can easily benchmark their product and see exactly where investment is needed," notes Foice.

For the moment, the QA scheme awards a kitemark rather than a star rating, but Foice confirms that ASAP is keeping the option of banding properties in mind for the future, so watch this space.

AN ASSURANCE OF QUALITY

WITH THE DEMAND FOR SERVICED APARTMENTS BOOMING, **JAMES FOICE** EXPLAINS IN GREATER DETAIL HOW THE SECTOR'S TRADE BODY IS WORKING TO PROMOTE THE INDUSTRY STANDARD OF QUALITY ASSESSMENT ACROSS THE BOARD



THE SERVICED APARTMENTS SECTOR IS INCREASINGLY

confident as we face 2015. Members of industry trade body the Association of Serviced Apartment Providers (ASAP) bolstered their total stock by 10 per cent last year, meaning it now operates around 14,000 serviced apartments across the UK. As a pointer to future growth, for instance, member StayCity expects to increase its inventory to 5,000 apartments across Europe in the next five years from its current base of 1,000 and this appears a speculative representation of the industry. In total, the sector generated three million nights of accommodation in 2014.

Some 12 per cent of London's accommodation is now accounted for by serviced apartments, a figure that is forecast to grow to 14 per cent by the end of 2015. It is estimated that serviced apartments represent well over three per cent of total UK guest room supply. These statistics describe a sector that is emerging as a powerful force in the world of hospitality.

Growth has been underpinned by a new focus by ASAP on giving a proper definition to the term serviced apartments and a special programme of

quality assessment, both of which aim to give buyers absolute clarity on what they get for their money. Users need to be sure about what they can expect and there have to be global standards.

This year will see ASAP promote the serviced apartment as an umbrella term for a type of furnished apartment available for short and long-term stays, providing amenities, housekeeping and a range of services for guests where taxes and utilities are included in the rental price. ASAP will begin the next phase of the programme in early spring and define a number of sub-categories that will include aparthotel, corporate housing, extended stay, residences, suites and studios, among others. Removing the confusion about the definition will improve understanding of the offer among customers.

ASAP's quality assessment (QA) programme has also proved to be a turning point in the fortunes of the sector in the UK. The association has completed more than 90 per cent of the assessments designed to create an internationally recognised standard that answers the question: "How do I know what I am buying?"

The new QA logo was unveiled at the ASAP annual conference in London in December last year and plans are now in

TOP TIPS FOR BOOKING A SERVICED APARTMENT

- Check to see that the operator is an ASAP member, as this will act as your guarantee of quality.
- Be aware of the location, familiarise yourself with how close to travel links the apartment is.
- Read the T&Cs carefully to be aware of any cancellation charges, extensions to the booking and departure dates. Know exactly what you are paying for.
- Ensure you have all the facilities you require in the apartment. Ask for an inventory of equipment in advance of your stay.
- Do your research. Has the apartment been quality assessed? Has it been accredited or are there any reviews worth reading?

place to roll out the programme abroad. The vision for ASAP is to establish a standard accreditation model throughout the industry, both in the UK and potentially around the world, so that any individual booking a serviced apartment will know they are getting the right accommodation product for them.

In today's global environment, customers requiring accommodation increasingly want safe, secure yet personal space, with all the necessary amenities, without the restrictions placed on them by hotels. Serviced apartments offer just this.

Another trend operators have cottoned on to is that an increasing number of executives are looking for accommodation that enables them to bring their friends and families over to stay with them outside the confines of their work schedule. Serviced apartments deliver on both counts and that is why they are booming, not just in London, but all over the UK.

James Foice is the managing director of ASAP; find out more about the non-profit association's activities at theasap.org.uk



SUPPLIERS' GUIDE

BRIDGESTREET



BRIDGESTREET

The Atrium, 74 Princess Street,
Manchester M1 6JD

bridgestreet.com

Rates: From £59 a night

Facilities: With a 24-hour front desk reception, guests' needs are attended to around the clock, from help settling in to additional cleaning services. With 34 studio apartments and 70 one-bedroom units, it offers an option for any budget.

Location: The Atrium is the perfect base within the city to work, shop, eat and play. Positioned between two major rail stations, it also makes the ideal jumping-off point for guests traveling across Manchester or into London.

CHEVAL PHOENIX HOUSE

1 Wilbraham Place, Sloane Street,
London SW1X 9AE

chevalresidences.com

Rates: From £290 a night

Facilities: Phoenix House offers 33 furnished residences ranging from studios to one and two-bedroom apartments and features a dedicated 24-hour concierge service. Each flat is air-conditioned, provides fully equipped kitchens and includes a Samsung Smart TV and wifi throughout. Plus, the premises are home to the Canvas restaurant, run by Head Chef Michael Riemenschneider.

Location: The property is nestled in the heart of London's Chelsea, with convenient transport links nearby and a wealth of boutiques and art galleries.



CHEVAL PHOENIX HOUSE



CLARENDON SERVICED APARTMENTS

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1 Durweston Street, London W1H 1PH

clarendonuk.com

Rates: Available on enquiry

Facilities: Clarendon's Marylebone location features newly refurbished studios and one and two-bedroom apartments. Specifically designed with the comfort of long-stay business guests in mind, the properties offer open-plan living spaces, modern interiors and fully equipped kitchens.

Location: This central London property is situated near excellent transport links, with Paddington and Marylebone's mainline and underground stations a short walk away, providing a convenient base for stays of a minimum of 90 nights.



FOUNTAIN COURT APARTMENTS

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Various addresses, Edinburgh

fountaincourt.com

Rates: Variable, depending on length of booking

Facilities: Fountain Court offers an ideal base for business visitors. All properties come equipped with a fully fitted kitchen, free wifi, daily housekeeping and 24-hour reception.

Location: Fountain Court offers 210 luxury serviced apartments at six central Edinburgh properties, including canal-side views at Fountainbridge (pictured) and the Stewart building in the heart of the New Town. Several options are also available in the West End, close to Haymarket Station, Edinburgh International Conference Centre and the Exchange Financial District.

GO NATIVE

8 India Street, London EC3N 2HS

gonative.com

Rates: From £199 a night

Facilities: The modern interiors of the studios and open-plan one-bedroom apartments are complemented by fully equipped kitchens, wifi, air-conditioning, a weekly housekeeping service and 24-hour guest support. Floor-to-ceiling windows flood each room with natural light.

Location: Situated on the doorstep of some of the busiest work places in the City of London, the property is positioned a short walk from both Aldgate underground station and national rail services at Fenchurch Street. Take a tour of the area and you'll discover some of the capital's finest restaurants and bars tucked away in courtyards and back streets.



GO NATIVE



MARLIN APARTMENTS



MARLIN APARTMENTS

58 Commercial Road, London E1 1LP
marlinapartments.com

Rates: From £95 a night

Facilities: The apartments at Aldgate can sleep up to six guests, with one and two-bedroom options, as well as penthouses that are perfect for entertaining corporate clients. Marlin also offers the exclusive At Your Service concierge. The company was recently named Industry Leader by the Association of Serviced Apartment Providers.

Location: The apartments are situated just 10 minutes from the nearest underground station and ideal for those eager to explore London, while maintaining easy access to the City.

OAKWOOD WORLDWIDE

Jerome House, 14 Lisson Grove,
 London NW1 6TS

oakwoodworldwide.com

Rates: Available on request

Facilities: This renovated, contemporary-style property offers a stunning collection of modern studios, plus one and two-bedroom apartments. Each option features fully equipped kitchens, underfloor heating in the bathrooms, smart TV and DVD players, free wifi and air-conditioning throughout. Additional amenities include an on-site concierge.

Location: The apartments are situated in the distinguished and trendy location of London's Marylebone Village. Marylebone and Baker Street underground stations are only a short walk away for a quick commute to the City.



OAKWOOD WORLDWIDE



STAYBRIDGE SUITES

STAYBRIDGE SUITES

100 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5AL
staybridgesuites.com

Rates: From £175 a night

Facilities: Staybridge's Vauxhall property is a 93-suite apart-hotel offering a "more home than hotel" experience. The spacious studio and one-bedroom options include fully equipped kitchens, LED TVs, large work areas and free wireless internet. Guests have use of the fitness room, business centre, laundry room and the brand's own convenience store, the Pantry, which is open around the clock. Complimentary drinks and snacks are also served three times a week.

Location: The hotel is superbly located, with stunning views of the Palace of Westminster and the London Eye. Plus, London's eclectic Southbank is just a short stroll away.

STAYCITY



STAYCITY

The Arcadian Centre, Hurst Street,
 Birmingham B5 4TD

staycity.com

Rates: From £75 a night

Facilities: Whether you're in town on business for a few days or a few weeks, Staycity's Arcadian Centre property offers an ideal selection of one and two-bedroom apartments. Providing a genuine home-from-home experience, all 79 options come furnished with fully equipped kitchens, a dining area and spacious rooms. Services include a 24-hour reception, on-site car parking and complimentary wifi.

Location: The property is conveniently located within a few minutes' walk from Birmingham New Street station and the Bullring Shopping Centre, as well as the Mailbox retail complex, the Hippodrome Theatre and the O2 Academy.

SUPERCITY APARTHOTELS

20 Rosebery Avenue, London EC1R 4SX
supercityuk.com

Rates: From £140 a night

Facilities: The Rosebery features a selection of studios, one and two-bedroom apartments, including an executive option, that come complete with a fully equipped kitchen and bathroom. The building also has a 24-hour reception desk, a coffee lounge and wine bar, a fitness centre, weekly maid and dry-cleaning service and lift access. Plus, Supercity offers the optional hire of a locally parked Zipcar.

Location: With Farringdon and Chancery Lane underground stations only a five-minute walk away, travel to all of the major business centres of London is quick and easy. Plus, nearby rail links make it ideal for those coming into the capital from other parts of the UK.

SUPERCITY APARTHOTELS

