

Market Town Mystery Visitor Report

The following report was prepared by Tourism South East. The text is unchanged from that delivered to the Town Partnership, but it has been reformatted to fit with the style of this document.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The mystery shopping concept is widely used amongst service industry providers for checking and maintaining the quality of products and services being delivered against a consistent set of measures. It centres on measuring what is observable, using objective questions which can be answered with yes/no responses. As such, it removes subjectivity from the analysis, so the assessment should be repeatable no matter who undertakes the visit and reporting. This removes the need for volume response, which is the essence of the problem for market towns, which seek an alternative methodology to the Regional Tourist Board (RTB) market town benchmarking visitor satisfaction surveys.

The Mystery Visitor Town Evaluation was designed by the RTB's to be an objective alternative, a 'snapshot' way to measure how market towns appear to a visitor, who may be experiencing the town for the first time. The methodology is designed to measure the range of facilities on offer in a market town that a visitor might want to use during their visit, and the value for money that these offer, rather than evaluating one particular visitor attraction/ retail /service outlet. This is viewed as an alternative to the Market Town Benchmarking that although provides a much vaster wealth of detailed visitor information, is not always an economically viable methodology.

Methodology

An experienced TSE employed mystery visitor/ researcher uses a detailed checklist to evaluate the market town's facilities in an objective way and as a result the findings may be different to those recorded if completed by a resident, who may see the town very differently to a visitor.

The scoring system allows comparisons with quantitative data to be made between different towns having completed the same process. Qualitative information about the town is equally important and gathered through a series of comments noted on the day by the evaluator.

All of the thirty-one elements of the check sheet are scored with a maximum score of ten for each element. Scores are given for both the towns performance against the total possible as well as the total for those elements that it has been scored on. The results of the evaluation are set out in the same order below as on the check sheet. The detailed score sheet can be viewed at the end of this report in Appendix One.

NEW MILTON EVALUATION

The town evaluation was completed in New Milton by Tourism South East on Thursday 4 March 2004.

At the time of reporting 11 towns had been surveyed by a mystery visitor and the New Milton score is compared to the average of these towns.

SPECIAL FACTORS

To set the context in terms of weather, which has an influence on the visitor experience, the day in New Milton was misty and very damp.

There were roadworks on Old Milton Road causing tail-backs to Station Road.

There was no market on the day of the New Milton evaluation.

TRANSPORT FACILITIES

The aim with this element of the evaluation process is to record the total volume of transport facilities serving the town on any one day in time. Transport facilities include rail and bus and incorporates estimates of the number of routes serving the town centre. There is also an estimate given on the total number of car parking spaces provided in the retail centre of the town. Street parking which has been specially created, e.g. in a marked space in the centre of the road, or as head-on bays to the pavement, is included under 'off-street' car parking.

New Milton scored the maximum 30 well above 21 the average of the eleven towns.

The reasons include that the station is less than ½ mile from the town centre; 7 bus routes were noted and approximately 200 car parking spaces are available. There were however only a few long stay spaces.

ARRIVAL

With previous market towns and other destination research showing that visitors arrive at their destination by car, certain elements surrounding the use of a private vehicle in the town were incorporated into the check sheet. These elements included the cost of parking, cleanliness of the car park, and the ease of parking.

The town scored only 17 well below the average for the eleven towns of 28.

For Ease of Parking New Milton scored 0. The Mystery Visitor commented that on entering from Lyndhurst the only car park sign visible was for the station. This compares to a score of 7 for the average of the eleven towns.

The Cost of Parking scored 5 that is just below the average of 6.

The Osborne Road car park was assessed for cleanliness and scored 10, above the average of 9 for the eleven towns. There was no litter around the recycling area and the ticket machines were modern and 'unusual'.

With only 2 spaces for the disabled and no mother and toddler New Milton scored 2 well below the average of 6 for average of the eleven towns.

SHOPPING AND CATERING FACILITIES

The aim here was to record all the retail facilities open to the general public in the main shopping and catering area, which sell products and services. This is restricted to retail/ service outlets with a 'shop front', which can be entered from the street, including entrances to eating establishments, such as pubs and restaurants, which also have a street facing aspect. This excludes buildings such as churches, castles, visitor attractions, town hall, library, etc., unless the official Visitor Information Centre (VIC) is part of the building.

The name, the goods/ services/ form of catering provided, and type of outlet are all recorded as well as whether the retail/ service unit is a national or regional chain or whether it is a local independent.

Vacant outlets and charity shops are also recorded. Opening times including late opening and Sunday opening are also recorded – these are important elements to visitors but are also of benefit to residents.

The mystery visitor records whether there is a cash dispenser available in the town. The reason for recording this is the ease and convenience that this facility provides in terms of access to cash in market towns where banks typically may not be open at weekends or certain times during the week.

This raw data enables the following analysis of the facilities:

The Mystery Visitor counted 145 retail outlets well above the average of around 110 for the eleven towns.

The percentage of independent outlets compared to chain operations was almost the same as the average for the eleven towns – 72% independents, 28% chain owned.

Opening times

This element of the check list is intended to give a general impression whether the town is open for visitors in the evening and at weekends. For clarification, 'evening' is classed as being 5.30 pm onwards.

13 shops indicated Sunday openings and New Milton scored 5, just below the average of 6 for the eleven towns.

More were open after 5.30 pm and the town scored 10 compared with the average of 6.

Retail units selling goods and providing services

An analysis of the number of different shop types available was made using the following list:

- Adult clothing – men and / or women
- Antiques
- Bakers – bread, cakes
- Books – including maps and stationery
- Chemist
- Children's clothing
- Confectionery – including chocolate and ice cream
- Crafts – painting, sculpture
- Electrical goods – household, audio and video
- Fresh foods – meat, fish, vegetables, fruit
- Furniture
- Household goods – including hardware
- Music – CDs, instruments
- Newsagent/ tobacconist – newspapers, books, cigarettes, sweets
- Shoes
- Sports goods – including leisure, clothing, shoes and equipment
- Supermarket - Large – e.g. Tesco, Asda, Sainsbury, Waitrose, Co-op
- Supermarket - Small – e.g. Spar, Londis
- Variety Stores – Woolworth, Wilkinson
- Others

An analysis of the number of different service types was made using the following list:

- Banks and building societies
- Beauty salon – including keep fit studio
- Cleaners
- Estate agent
- Hairdresser – men and / or women
- Post office
- Shoe repair – including key cutting
- Video rental
- Other

A general assessment was made on the quality of shop fronts for all of these categories of outlets selling goods and services.

An assessment was made on the value for money offered by outlets selling goods in terms of the prices they charge. A shop which appears to be mid-price, rather than obviously cheap or expensive but not a national chain (since their prices tend to be the same in all their outlets) is selected for this purpose. An assessment of how prices compare with those in a city centre, or large town is then made.

Shops

New Milton scored the maximum 30 compared to the average of 24 for the eleven towns.

It has a wide variety of shop types, fronts were clean and well presented with some eye-catching window displays.

The Mystery Visitor commented that the fruit was much cheaper than a city centre and the value score was 10 compared to the average of 5 for the eleven towns.

Services

The town has a wide variety of service types scoring the maximum of 10 equal to the average.

All were clean and tidy, with good window displays and well maintained frontages. Scored 10 equal to the average for the eleven towns.

Strands was assessed to have similar prices to a city centre and New Milton scored 5 for value, equal to the average.

Catering Facilities

The number of different types of catering outlet available, were recorded using the following list:

- Burger bar
- Café – mainly open in the daytime, including tea and coffee shops
- Fish and chips – take away and / or eat in
- Public house serving hot food
- Public house serving mainly drink
- Restaurant – open during the evening as well as daytime
- Sandwich bar
- Other

An assessment of the quality of unit fronts and the value offered for all these categories of outlets providing catering facilities is made. Again a mid-price, rather than obviously cheap or expensive, outlet that is not a chain is selected and used for this comparison.

8 different catering establishments were noted scoring 10, above the average score of 9 for the eleven towns.

Entrances and displays scored 10 equal to the average.

Fish & Chips appeared to have similar prices to a city centre and New Milton scored 5 for value, that is below the average score of 8.

Vacant units and charity shops

The number of vacant units and charity shops is expressed as a percentage of the total outlets.

6 vacant units were noted which is less than 5%, gaining the maximum score of 10 above the average of 8.

8 Charity shops were listed and this scored 5 points below the average score of 9 for the eleven towns.

MYSTERY SHOPPING EXERCISE

This is not a detailed exercise that measures specific product knowledge and technical skills among retail staff. Instead, it is designed to give a broad picture of the warmth of response, and level of help, which a visitor to the town might find.

The exercise is carried out twice, in a shop selling products, and in a catering outlet. The exercise includes a small purchase (something costing less than £2), and a general question about the town.

An outlet is selected at random and an item of everyday use is purchased and a question about the town; is asked – for example

- Directions to the town hall, nearest toilet, the parish church.
- Where to find out about events in the town
- Whether the town has a farmers' market.

A score out of 10 (where 10 = excellent, and 1 = very bad) summarises the total experience.

The staff at Hodgkinsons were very helpful, had good eye contact and provided fast service. The Mystery Visitor scored this as 8 that is equal to the average for the eleven towns.

New Forest Bakery was the catering outlet surveyed and this had very friendly staff, quick service and good value for money. Scored 8, again equal to the average of the eleven towns.

THE MARKET

Ideally, the Mystery Visitor Town Evaluation should be completed on a day when the/ a town market is in operation. Where this is not possible, this section is not completed.

The total number of stalls in the market are estimated and the features are recorded. An assessment is made of the value offered by the market, in terms of the prices charged for food compared with those in the shops in a city centre, or large town.

There was no market on the day and none of the other towns surveyed have had a market on the day of the visit so no scoring has been possible.

VIC – MYSTERY SHOPPING EXERCISE

A mystery shopping exercise is normally completed in the Visitor Information Centre to establish the warmth of response and helpfulness of the staff. The exercise includes a small purchase (something costing less than £2) where possible, and a general question regarding information about the town.

If there is a Visitor Information Centre the following features are recorded:

- convenient location
- well signposted, and easy to find
- attractive display in the window
- window/notice board contained up to date information

- internal display was attractive
- good range of information on the area
- good information on local events
- greeted promptly
- knowledgeable about the area
- helpful in producing information
- leaflets provided on enquiry
- goodbye, or courteous

There was no Tourist or Visitor Information Centre and New Milton therefore scored 0. This compares to the average of 4 for the eleven towns which is low because others also do not have this facility.

OTHER FACILITIES

An estimate of the number of cash machines and public telephones available in the central retail/ service area is noted.

Most of the major banks and building societies provide cash machines and the town scored 10, above the average of 8.

2 Public telephones were noted – one for cards and coins, the other coins only. This scored 5 that is equal to the average.

TOILETS AND BABY CHANGE FACILITIES

This check only applies to facilities open to the general public, not those provided by an outlet for the use of its customers.

Features recorded for both the toilets and the baby change facilities (where available) include:

- Open every day
- Open during the evening
- Easily accessible to the disabled
- Clean
- Free from smell
- Hot and cold water available
- Soap provided
- Drying materials/ machines available
- All cubicles contain toilet roll
- Free from litter
- All lights working

- Sanitation/ rubbish bin provided

The toilet in Old Milton Road scored 7 that is equal to the average for the eleven towns.

No opening times were displayed, there were no lights in the individual cubicles and no bins for used tissues. The floor was wet from having just being cleaned.

The Baby Change in Old Milton Road scored 5 that is above the average of 3 that results from only a few towns providing this type of facility. As well as the issues listed above there was no bed liners available and the nappy changing unit was dirty.

GENERAL ASSESSMENT OF TOWN CENTRE

A list of features is used to assess the town centre (retail/ service core), these include:

APPEARANCE	Floral displays/ hanging baskets on view Wide and even pavements Low level of traffic congestion
CLEANLINESS	Generally free from litter Litter bins available and not full Street furniture clean and well maintained Walls free of graffiti and fly posters
ATMOSPHERE	People make you feel welcome Feels generally secure with low crime
SIGNAGE	Sufficient signs for people driving to find their way Sufficient signs for pedestrians to find their way Information boards to help pedestrians
PUBLIC SEATING	Sufficient supply of public seating All seating clean and well maintained Seating surrounded by litter free area

The Mystery Visitor's overall score for New Milton was 7 equal to the average for the eleven towns. Signage for pedestrians and drivers was generally poor.

OVERALL IMPRESSION OF THE TOWN

This section summarises the overall feelings about the town and is based on the three things which the mystery visitor feels are the best and the worst aspects of the town.

The mystery visitor to New Milton recorded the following:

Best

Very clean. Pavements - no litter, wide and no broken pavements

Good selection of national and individual shops

Floral arrangements in raised beds, local information board in black and gold

Worst

The car parking was atrocious. No signs as to where they were except on main road signage

Car parks were for 2 hours only and new clock-cards used

Unable to distinguish in Old Milton Road car park between 20 hour stay and 2 hours. Signs contradicted one another

TOTAL SCORE

New Milton scored 207 out of a possible score of 280 (73.9%) above the average of the eleven towns of 204 (72.9%) based on the same criteria.

Out of a maximum score of 310, if the market had been in operation, New Milton scored 66.8% a little above the average of 65.7%.

New Milton summarised score sheet

Town New Milton Date 04-Mar-04 No of towns

11

SECTION	FACTOR	FEATURE	Possible Score	Town Score	ALL TOWNS Average	
TRANSPORT AND ARRIVAL	TRANSPORT	Rail	10	10	4	
		Bus	10	10	8	
		Car Parks	10	10	9	
	ARRIVAL	Ease of Parking	10	0	7	
		Cost of Parking	10	5	6	
		Cleanliness	10	10	9	
		Facilities	10	2	6	
OUTLET OPENING TIMES		Days	10	5	6	
		Hours	10	10	6	
SHOPPING AND CATERING FACILITIES	SELLING GOODS	Shop Types	10	10	9	
		Shop Fronts	10	10	10	
		Value	10	10	5	
	PROVIDING SERVICES	Service Types	10	10	10	
		Shop Fronts	10	10	10	
		Value	10	5	5	
	CATERING FACILITIES	Catering Types	10	10	9	
		Shop Fronts	10	10	10	
		Value	10	5	8	
	VACANT UNITS	Percentage Vacant	10	10	8	
	CHARITY SHOPS	Percentage Charity	10	5	9	
	MYSTERY SHOPPING	SELLING GOODS	Mystery Score	10	8	8
		CATERING	Mystery Score	10	8	8
THE MARKET		Features	0		n.a	
		Value	0		n.a	
		Mystery Score	0		n.a	
TOURIST INFORMATION		Total Score	10	0	4	
OTHER FACILITIES		Cash Machines	10	10	8	
		Public Telephones	10	5	5	
TOILETS AND BABY CHANGE		Toilets	10	7	7	
		Baby Change	10	5	3	
GENERAL ASSESSMENT		Total Score	10	7	7	
		TOTAL	280	207	204	
		PERCENTAGE	100%	73.9%	72.9%	
TOTAL MAXIMUM SCORE WITH ALL SECTIONS COMPLETE			310	207	204	
PERCENTAGE			100%	66.8%	65.7%	