



When your guests' wellbeing is your business

Whittlebury Hall and Spa, the hospitality sector winner of the International Safety Awards 2016, faces unique health and safety challenges, like the rest of the industry.

Anna Ryland
British Safety Council

While managing a workforce that comes from every corner of Europe, the company is responsible for the safety and wellbeing of its guests. Richard Payne, fire, health and safety officer at Whittlebury Hall and Spa, explains how they deal with this challenge.

Whittlebury Hall and Spa is an independent business located in Northamptonshire, next door to the famous Silverstone racetrack. The 254-bedroom hotel has three restaurants and one of the largest day spas in the country, as well as a leisure club, a swimming pool and a gymnasium.

Whittlebury Hall operates a two-tier business model, receiving around 130,000 guests annually. "From Monday to Friday, we are a conference and events business and at the weekend, we focus on leisure and spa," explains Richard Payne.

"The corporate business presents different health and safety challenges than our leisure business. Corporate companies have increasingly high expectations in terms of health and safety. When considering various suppliers, they benchmark them on their health and safety record. They're booking a couple hundred guests with us and they need reassurance that we will look after them and, if there is an emergency, we will know how to handle it.

"Weekends and our leisure business has a very different set of health and safety risks. When you've got water in the leisure and spa facilities, you will always have slips and trips. Our staff are well trained to handle these situations but we have also invested over £75,000 in a new CCTV system to monitor the site and prevent potential accidents.

"The hotel has a good system in place designed to identify and reduce the risk of accidents. For example, our customers taking spa treatments have to complete a medical questionnaire. If we identify potential health risks, we recommend them alternative treatments or equipment.

"These efforts have produced good results. When I began working at Whittlebury Hall in April 2014, we had 118 accidents in a year. Last year, this figure had come down to 51. The occurrence of serious accidents such as broken bones was reduced from 12 to 3. This is proof that we can train our staff to take good care of our guests."



An international challenge

Another significant health and safety challenge for Whittlebury Hall, common to most businesses in the hospitality sector, is its international staff. "Our staff come from all corners of Europe: Romania, Poland, Italy. The standard of health and safety in those countries is often very different from what is accepted in the UK and we have to teach them our industry standards, making sure that they understand what we are trying to convey.

"So where do we start? We begin by teaching them health and safety during the hotel induction. I spend three hours with them teaching the basics, including legal requirements. I believe that if I can instil in them the right attitude to health and safety from the start, they will not be complacent about risks and dangers and their role in managing them. Then, they get a departmental health and safety induction."

"I begin by asking them to tell me something about themselves. In this way, I judge the standard of their

English and how much explanation they may require. Once they understand the message, they take health and safety very seriously."

The result of the Brexit vote made our international staff very anxious. "Many of them are worried about their future in this country.

"We get young people from Romania, Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic who want to better their lives by coming to Britain. Throughout the hospitality industry, front-of-house staff, kitchen porters, kitchen staff and housekeepers are nearly all from different corners of Europe. Many of them have degrees in electronics or engineering but they apply for the post of housekeeper or waiting staff at Whittlebury Hall."

Other risks

Food safety and fire risks remain the most significant safety hazards in the hotel business. "Bearing in mind that at all times the hotel is approximately 80% full, food safety is of paramount

importance for us. In fact, in terms of food safety, we are ahead of the game. We are currently trialling ionised water, which is usually utilised in operating theatres. It is going to be used as a sanitiser in the kitchen, both for cleaning food and equipment.

"Fire risk is always at the forefront of our minds. Every morning when I come into the building, I check every fire exit. When the managing director comes in, he does the same. Between him, me and the hotel manager, we walk through the hotel perhaps five or six times every day."

A duty of care

Richard believes that strong leadership in the company is a cornerstone of its successful health and safety strategy. To ensure that the health, safety and welfare of employees and guests are safeguarded, all senior managers are trained to a minimum of IOSH Managing Safely standard.

He has also reorganised the accident reporting in Whittlebury Hall. "When



Richard Payne at Whittlebury Hall.

I began working for Whittlebury Hall, every department had an accident book. I started from introducing one accident form for everybody, guests and staff, and it included near misses, dangerous occurrences or suspicious events. Once they were completed, we were able to aggregate the figures, to look at the causes of accidents and plan remedial actions.



When winning the ISA, we felt as if we had won the lottery and we brought many members of the staff to the gala dinner



“Next I have introduced an accident register and started examining the root causes of accidents and what further actions could be taken. I also assigned the responsibility for health and safety actions to managers at different levels. We are examining these issues over and over again and that’s how we’re able to improve our accident record.

“I have been working hard to teach our staff that health and safety is a shared responsibility. I am encouraging them to report their observations and concerns and to ask questions. I told them that there’s no such thing as a stupid question. The only stupid question is the question you have never asked.”

Whittlebury Hall’s ‘culture of care’ also applies to the way the company looks after its staff. Every month,

Richard prepares a Health and Safety at Work and Home newsletter. “In winter, for example, it contains warnings about dangers on the roads and pavements. In summer, we have messages about the need to drink plenty of water to keep yourself hydrated.

“There is a staff canteen in the hotel, with a salad bar and a hot food bar, where all the food is free. We also provide free fruit and drinks. Staff benefits also include free access to the gym, the swimming pool and the steam rooms. Our personnel can use these facilities at lunchtime, early in the morning or until 10 o’clock at night.”

The International Safety Award

“Health and safety has become a business indicator for many of our clients and an increasing number of them ask for risk assessment certificates and information about our membership of relevant bodies.”

Whittlebury Hall and Spa became a member of the British Safety Council in 2014. “Wishing to benchmark ourselves globally, we entered the International Safety Awards in 2014 and received a pass. That result has given me an incentive to speed up the improvements in the company and when we entered the ISA application in 2016, we received a distinction. Whittlebury Hall was one of only 30 organisations to be awarded a distinction, the highest available accolade in the International Safety Awards.

“We felt as if we had won the lottery. We went to the Awards night as a team, bringing with us the kitchen porters and members of the spa team who work very hard to keep the guests

happy. On the night, we were delighted and overwhelmed to hear that we were also the sector winners in the hospitality and catering category.”

From the police to health and safety

Richard’s professional background in the Northern Irish Police Force prepared him well for a career in health and safety. “I worked in the police in Northern Ireland at the height of the troubles. Managing health and safety is very similar to what I did before because you’re always trying to prevent accidents.

“My first challenge at Whittlebury Hall was the Bio Mass Project, where we converted all our food waste into bio fuel. Once I was offered the post of health and safety officer in 2014, I undertook an IOSH management course, to refresh my skills. I am currently doing a level 3 NEBOSH Certificate with the British Safety Council. My role is quite broad; as well as health and safety, I am responsible for the security of the site and logistics.

“I was successful as a police officer because I learnt to anticipate troubles. Here, I’m always looking for things that may lead to problems and investigating their causes to prevent them reoccurring in the future. In the police, many things are classified as black and white, those being within the law and those outside the law. A good policeman works within the grey area and that grey area is called common sense. Also in health and safety, not everything is black and white. That’s why you need to use your common sense to deal with these grey areas.”



The leisure and spa facility faces safety risks such as slips and trips. Photograph: Whittlebury Hall