



Oxfordshire data mining

Ben Gray, MD of venue-finder, CYE Group, crunches his data for CN to reveal booking trends for Oxfordshire. The county is outperforming the meetings business levels it achieved last year, says Gray. "Comparing search data from the first quarter of 2016 and the first quarter of 2017, our figures show businesses in the region are searching for event venues more frequently and venues are receiving more enquiries."

"CYE website search data shows that searches for events and venues conducted from within Oxfordshire rose by 135% over the period."

Gray says the region is attracting meetings and events business from other parts of the UK at an increasing rate, with Abingdon venue enquiries trebling in frequency. In Oxford, the increase was 98%, Banbury 55% and Bicester 134%.

The Holiday Inn Oxford told Gray that two-day residential conferences and training programmes for 40-80 delegates were among the hotel's most common events.

Meanwhile, Keeble College has seen a 3-5% increase in commercial revenue over the year. Residential conferences and gala dinners with, typically, 150-200 delegates, are most common. Senan Simmons, conference and events manager at Keeble, notes a shift towards international conferences and more demand for accommodation. "We have noticed a decrease in organiser confidence, although they are looking more closely at contract price. Despite this, business remains positive," he adds.

some bedrooms are available all year round.

Mike Naworynsky OBE, chair of Conference Oxford comments: "Conference Oxford represents spectacular college venues perfectly placed to meet the growing demand for conferences, dinners and events of all types and sizes".

Marie O'Connor, manager of Conference Oxford, adds that around 60% of enquiries come from Oxfordshire, 15% from London and 25% from overseas. "Of the overseas enquiries, a third are from the US, mainly University study programmes. With emerging markets, particularly China, the enquiries tend to come from companies in the UK acting on Chinese companies' behalf," she says.

O'Connor reveals that from March 2016 – February 2017 Conference Oxford handled 2,518 enquiries, of which 43% were Day Events; 30% Dinners; 24% Residential Conferences and 3% Weddings. In terms of market segments, the enquiries were: Academic (49%), Corporate (23%), Individual (8%), Charity (5%), Association (5%), Agency (5%), Government (2%), Summer School (2%) and Group Travel (1%).

Experience Oxfordshire Conferencing, meanwhile, lists over 18 top venues in the county, and offers ideas for delegates to consider after hours, including booking walking tours; hiring a punt; having a drink at the Morse Bar in the Randolph Hotel; or enjoying dinner at the Quod or a visit to nearby Blenheim Palace. And, if your delegates are after branded clothing, try Bicester Village. For golfers, a round at Heythrop Park, a popular conference venue, could fit the bill.

School of meeting science

Conference@OxfordSaïd offers two unique venues run by the Business School. Egrove Park offers a secluded setting for board discussions and residential conference facilities for larger events.

The West Wing, meanwhile, opened in 2012, has three oak-panelled lecture theatres each seating 76, three large classrooms, and 18 boardroom style seminar rooms which can be hired by the

hour. Catering ranges from buffets to full gala dinners.

"Oxford is a brand destination city because of the association with the University and stunning architecture. The proximity to London, with strong transport links to other areas in the UK makes it an ideal destination," says Conference@OxfordSaïd conference business coordinator Verity Donovan.

The Business School's core conference clientele is mostly corporate clients with occasional association bookings, Donovan adds.

Shorter lead times are more apparent compared to two years ago and an increase in smaller meetings, with clients reporting a lack of meeting space in-house, are two trends Donovan picks out. "Event organisers are now typically letting delegates book their own accommodation rather than centralising the process," she adds.

Nevertheless, the business school reports a 50% increase in events business in just two years.

Saïd Business School has also invested heavily in sustainable conferencing and flushing and garden irrigating water can be 'harvested' from the West Wing roof, where there are also solar-thermal panels. The balance of the flat roof is sedum planted to aid biodiversity.

All food waste at the Business School is recycled for composting and the venue holds the Soil Association's Food for Life Catering Mark.

There is probably still not quite enough accommodation to meet business events demand in Oxford, so organisers may need to look outside the city limits. A Hilton Garden Inn is set to open in Abingdon in 2018 following a multi-million-pound redevelopment, which will transform the old Oxford Abingdon Hotel, adding a four-story extension.

One last jewel in the Oxfordshire conference crown is Eynsham Hall. Set in 3,000 acres of parkland, the hotel offers stately charm and 40 meeting rooms for up to 170 delegates and corporate days available for up to 500 guests. Eynsham Hall Hotel plans to launch a new healthy food offering, Brain food. It's academic, after all. **CN**