



INSTITUTE OF HOSPITALITY

WHITE PAPER

BREAKING BARRIERS IN THE HOSPITALITY PROFESSION

A Round Table White Paper on Disability in Wales

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by Katherine Price MIH



SAVOY EDUCATIONAL TRUST

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We've not once had a complaint about someone being put in an accessible room, because you probably wouldn't be able to tell. It's about making sure you do it at the design process in the first place, and then when you are refurbishing rooms now, as many places are, just get it done. Otherwise, you're neglecting a whole segment of the market.

Damien Martin MIH, general manager, the Parkgate hotel, Cardiff

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The background

Disability inclusion is a critical issue across industries, and in Wales, where hospitality is a significant economic driver, ensuring that people with disabilities have equal access to employment opportunities is both a moral imperative and a business necessity.

An estimated 16.1 million people in the UK have a disability – 24% of the total population (1) – and many people may experience some form of disability during their lives, whether due to health reasons, circumstances such as an accident, or simply age.

The Department for Work and Pensions last year reported a disability unemployment rate of 7.1%, compared to 3.5% for non-disabled people (2). And yet, according to a Mencap survey, 86% of people with a learning disability who did not have a paid job said that that they would like one (3).

At the same time, hospitality as a sector is struggling to attract and retain people. A Hilton survey found that almost nine in 10 (89%) people with a learning disability in the UK had experienced difficulties finding a job (4), with 60% saying they didn't think UK companies were doing enough to be inclusive.

Employers surveyed highlighted a perceived lack of suitable roles (30%), not believing they have the right infrastructure in place to support those with a learning disability (26%) and concerns about the cost of additional training (21%) as key barriers to recruitment.

Respondents with disabilities highlighted a need for more training among team members (39%) and managers (38%), which was echoed by employers. Nearly half (46%) said they received no training on how to hire or manage someone with a learning disability, and 36% admitted they had no ongoing support in place once an individual was hired.

Of the employers surveyed who had hired someone with a learning disability, 89% said that person had 'met or exceeded expectations', and the business had seen a subsequent increase in empathy amongst their teams (62%), stronger team bonds (48%) and improved understanding about the value of a diverse workforce (45%). Despite this, only 42% of businesses said they were likely to hire someone with a learning disability in the future.

Meanwhile, not welcoming disabled customers is also ignoring the spending power of the 'purple pound' community. Total expenditure on tourism trips in England by those with an impairment or a group in which a member has an impairment is estimated to be £14.6 billion annually (5).

This white paper seeks to outline barriers, highlight success stories, and propose actionable strategies to improve disability inclusion within the Welsh hospitality sector. It draws on insights from a round table discussion, with a focus on identifying barriers to employment for individuals with disabilities and sharing best practice for improving accessibility and fostering a more inclusive working environment.

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These people want to work. We want them in our business.

James Hayward MIH, cluster general manager, The Celtic Collection

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The challenge

According to Mencap, 23% of people with a learning disability who did not have a paid job but would like one identified inaccessible application forms as one of the things preventing them getting work (2). Of those who had found work but had left, reasons included a lack of understanding and support from management and colleagues, inaccessible buildings and IT systems, and workplace prejudice. Further barriers to recruitment and retention include:

Physical barriers

Many hospitality venues in Wales are located in older buildings that are not easily adapted for accessibility. Narrow doorways, stairs without ramps, and inaccessible restroom facilities can pose significant challenges and create an environment that may disable both employees and customers.

Attitudes and lack of training

A lack of awareness or understanding about the capabilities of individuals with disabilities often leads to discrimination or underestimation of their potential, and preconceived notions about what tasks a disabled person can perform may limit their job opportunities. Employers and staff also often lack adequate training in equality and inclusion, all of which can result in an unwelcoming or uncomfortable environment for both employees and guests with disabilities.

Technology

Although assistive technologies exist, their availability and implementation in the hospitality sector remain limited. Many companies do not invest in the adaptive tools that could empower disabled workers to perform their jobs more effectively.

Policy and regulation gaps

While there are laws in place to protect the rights of disabled individuals, such as the Equality Act 2010, enforcement and understanding of these regulations can be inconsistent. The financial and logistical implications of implementing some physical or technological changes may be challenging for some smaller businesses without government or local authority support.

Breaking Barriers in the Hospitality Profession: Disability in Wales

One of the biggest barriers that seems to be holding people back is the fear of getting it wrong. Employers fear having to invest large sums into changing their ways of working or physical premises, when instead the focus should be on the long-term benefit and opportunities. Some employees, meanwhile, may feel they lack the education and resources to welcome and support colleagues who may work differently or have different requirements.

Engaging with people who have the knowledge and lived experience to advise; ensuring employees are provided with adequate resources, support and information; and demonstrating a clear willingness to provide a positive working environment for a diverse range of employees will likely not only benefit disabled employees but help support your wider workforce, too.

This includes being open to feedback – one size won't fit all, but empowering guests and staff to feel the business is open to two-way dialogue is crucial, whether that's about physical accessibility or how technology and digital systems work. Rather than focusing on medicalising conversations, establish a people-centred approach to inclusion efforts.

Best practice

Several Welsh hospitality businesses have made significant strides toward inclusion and offer examples of best practice. These include:

Accessible hiring initiatives

Some hotels and restaurants in Wales have implemented inclusive hiring processes that focus on matching individuals with disabilities to roles based on their abilities rather than their limitations.

Physical accessibility upgrades

Businesses that have invested in structural upgrades such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restroom facilities report increased customer satisfaction and a more diverse workforce.

Disability equality training

Hospitality venues that provide regular disability equality training for staff have seen a positive impact on the working environment, leading to better customer service and improved team cohesion.

Assistive technologies

Some employers are leading the way by investing in technology, such as voice-activated systems and modified kitchen equipment, to support disabled staff in their roles.

Solutions

Centre accessibility in design and refurbishment

Accessibility of a space is something that ideally needs to be considered at the design stage. A room can be both accessible and stylish, and guests who are paying the same as non-disabled guests are entitled to the same luxury experience.

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We've not once had a complaint about someone being put in an accessible room, because you probably wouldn't be able to tell. It's about making sure you do it at the design process in the first place, and then when you are refurbishing rooms now, as many places are, just get it done. Otherwise, you're neglecting a whole segment of the market.

Damien Martin MIH, general manager, the Parkgate hotel, Cardiff

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Developments in design have made it possible for some adjustments to be removeable depending on the needs of the individual, while implementing adjustments incrementally can help spread the cost.

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Why would we say no to this whole section of people even if we just have to adjust our way of business slightly to make that happen?... [our] accessible room is booked constantly, and people come back because of that. I would just recommend it to everybody. It needs more companies and businesses that lead by example.

Karen de Koning MIH, hotel manager, Grove of Narberth, Pembrokeshire

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Offer inclusive outreach and onboarding

Outreach and onboarding that is welcoming to all should be the aim of every employer. The Celtic Collection, for example, has launched a one-year supported internship programme where interns are paired with a 'buddy', supported by onsite tutors who map out their tasks with them, and do departmental rotations like any other work experience candidate. Some changes have been made, for example the creation of a 'safe space' that can be used if individuals feel overwhelmed at any point. The aim is to give the cohort as much real life work experience as possible.

For younger employees, it can help to include the parents in the onboarding process by showing them around your premises and talking them through the tasks, which is itself good practice for any young recruit.

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What we need to get away from is this feeling that we have to do something extra. Our work processes should be restructured to enable it to happen seamlessly.

Tracy Israel MIH, director of talent & development, The Celtic Collection

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Ensure effective training



If you embed it in the learning across modules and programmes, it becomes the usual learning and not the exception.

Dr Jayne Griffith-Parry MIH, academic director hospitality & tourism management, University of Wales Trinity Saint David (UWTSD)



Accessibility should be embedded in all areas of hospitality training, education and development. With more Welsh hospitality students equipped with knowledge of accessible hospitality and exploring its opportunities in their projects and academic work,

not only will taking inclusion and accessibility seriously show you to be an employer of choice, but employers can also encourage employees to apply this knowledge to the business and even encourage them to do their own analysis and projects towards improvements.

Disability equality training, meanwhile, should be delivered by someone with lived experience of a disability. Local charities and academic institutions have a wealth of knowledge they can share with businesses. Training can be as simple as providing front-of-house teams with basic British Sign Language training.



Disability equality training should always be delivered by disabled people, because what happens sometimes with 'awareness training' is you get non-disabled people doing this training, putting people in wheelchairs, blindfolding them, putting ear defenders on. That's a huge no because it's out of context... It gives people the wrong impression.

Dr Victoria Richards, senior lecturer, Cardiff Metropolitan University



Be proactive



Let's talk about it more frequently and publicly... ethically and morally, you're doing the right thing, and that's something that will be respected by potential guests.

Christie Hayes MIH, hotel manager, Penmaenuchaf Hotel, Dolgellau, Gwynedd



Just like 'green hushing' – where a company may downplay or hide environmental efforts out of fear of criticism or backlash – a business that welcomes disabled job applicants but doesn't explicitly make this clear, or a hotel that doesn't advertise accessible rooms, is under-selling itself. Marketing should be inclusive and representative, whether that's in job applications or working with disabled influencers, and employers should be clear about what adjustments they can provide employees.

At the point of booking or pre-arrival, when reaching out to guests to discuss preferences or dietary requirements, businesses can use this touchpoint as an opportunity to discuss further needs or adjustments they may require to ensure a seamless guest experience.

Some operators keep notes on guests' preferences and requirements – consider asking guests themselves what those requirements are and what they would like mentioned in their notes to include them in that process so that decision-making is not only based on other individuals' perceptions of what that person may need. Be flexible and reactive, but remember disabled guests simply want the same hospitality experience as other nondisabled guests. Neatebox WelcoMe technology can assist with this, allowing disabled users to provide businesses with information about their requirements ahead of visiting their premises.

Next steps

- 1)** **Invest in training:** Employers should invest in comprehensive disability equality training for all staff. This should cover both the legal requirements and the practical aspects of creating an inclusive workplace.
- 2)** **Call for government incentives and support:** Policymakers should offer financial support and incentives for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to make their premises more accessible. Grants or tax relief could help businesses to invest in necessary upgrades.
- 3)** **Collaborate with others:** Hospitality businesses should partner with disability advocacy groups to gain insight into best practice for workplace inclusion and to assist in recruiting and supporting disabled people. Engage with other businesses and hospitality institutions to share knowledge and develop guidelines of best practice to raise industry standards.
- 4)** **Explore opportunities in technology:** Businesses should explore assistive technologies that can make the workplace more adaptable for employees with disabilities. These technologies can range from simple ergonomic tools to advanced software and devices.
- 5)** **Advocate for clearer policies:** There is a need for clearer, more accessible guidelines to help hospitality businesses navigate disability regulations and ensure compliance. Local councils could play a role in disseminating this information and supporting businesses. And businesses and individuals can play a role in advocating for and developing best practice policies and supporting disabled people's campaigns for regional and national change to improve the rights, quality of life and economic opportunities available to them.

The Welsh hospitality industry has the potential to become a model of inclusion for disabled individuals, but there is still much work to be done. By addressing physical, attitudinal, and regulatory barriers, and by embracing best practice and innovative solutions, the sector can break down these barriers and create an environment where everyone can thrive.

This white paper calls on all stakeholders – from business owners and employees to policymakers and advocacy groups – to work together toward a more inclusive future. The economic, social, and moral benefits of such efforts are clear, and the time to act is now.

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The conversation to a certain extent should shift to: how do we convince the rest of the industry about the value of integration, of different approaches to different learners and workers?

Dr Katarzyna Minor, senior lecturer in hospitality management, Cardiff Metropolitan University

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Methodology

This white paper has been produced following a round table discussion at the Celtic Manor Resort in Newport on 25 September 2024 and based on research by Sam Coulstock FIH.



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Tracy Israel MIH, director of talent & development,
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Damien Martin MIH, general manager,
the Parkgate hotel, Cardiff



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Cardiff Metropolitan University



Dr Victoria Richards, senior lecturer,
Cardiff Metropolitan University



Karen de Koning MIH, hotel manager,
Grove of Narberth, Pembrokeshire

Resources

Business Disability Forum

The Equality Act 2010

Disability Positive

Disability Wales/Anabledd Cymru

Blue Badge Access Awards

Access Wales

The Burnt Chef Project

WelcoMe by Neatebox

Ruthy Fletcher's 'Support the Deaf People' basic British Sign Language and deaf awareness courses for hoteliers

References

- (1) House of Commons Library: UK disability statistics: prevalence and life experiences (2024)
- (2) Department for Work and Pensions: Employment of disabled people 2023
- (3) Mencap urges more employers to recruit people with a learning disability (2023)
- (4) Nearly 9 in 10 adults with learning disabilities struggle to find employment, reveals Hilton study in the UK (2023)
- (5) Visit Britain: Discover the value of the Purple Pound (2023)