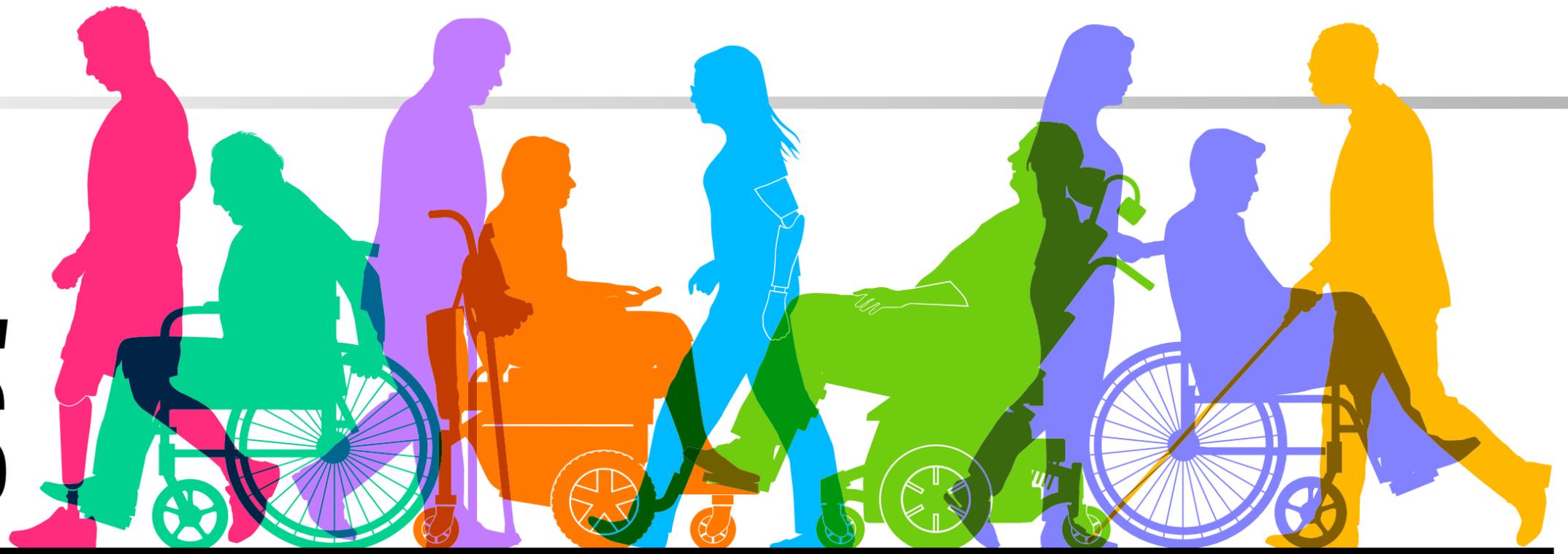


EQUAL MEASURES



Making hotels more accessible for people with disabilities makes business as well as moral sense – so why aren't more of them doing it?

WORDS JENNI REID

When Fiona Jarvis wanted to book a stay at a five-star hotel in London recently, she was told there would be a wait to get into her room. The problem? Despite being an “accessible room”, there were no handrails in it. Once she arrived, someone would come to install them.

As a wheelchair user, the inconvenience was not an isolated incident for Jarvis, who founded the website bluebadgestyle.com to provide a guide to properties around Europe. At a similarly high-end hotel in Luxembourg, she was advised not to put any weight on the so-called “grab rails”. On other occasions, flimsy rails have simply fallen off the wall. “And there are always problems with showers,” she explains. “For some reason, there is only ever one or even no rail in there.”

Examples of poor accessibility in hotels abound, whether in big chains or boutique properties. Often these are things that many travellers wouldn't notice: kettles placed far away from a water source, mirrors too high for a wheelchair user to see, or toiletry bottles that are difficult to distinguish from one other.

What's more, the design in accessible rooms is frequently overly medicalised, points out Robin Sheppard, co-founder of hotel group Bespoke Hotels, so much so that some guests will request not to stay in one. And staff interactions can leave much to be desired.

Sheppard was paralysed from the neck down in 2004 and although he has since largely recovered, he still requires use of a stick and an accessible room. On arrival at a hotel recently, he was presented with a form

that required him to say it was his own responsibility to evacuate himself in the event of a fire. “It was just badly managed as a sense of welcome and could have been handled with more emotional intelligence,” he says.

PAYING THE PRICE

Then there is the issue of cost. “More often than not, especially in higher-end hotels, standard-entry rooms aren't accessible. They will be suites, or one or two levels up, so you may get priced out,” says TV presenter Sophie Morgan, who travels regularly for work and uses a wheelchair. This happens a lot since, the hotel calculation goes, accessible means bigger, and bigger means more expensive.

A few years ago, Morgan was quoted £150 above the basic rate at one of London's top properties for an accessible room, and then sent around to a back door surrounded by bins to get into the hotel. This comes on top of the additional costs faced by people with disabilities in everyday life – charity Scope puts this “disability price tag” at £583 a month, factoring in costs such as therapies, transport and insurance.

In fact, Morgan says it is often budget hotels such as Travelodge and Premier Inn that are her preferred choices, since accessibility is more likely to be built into the everyday hotel experience and rooms don't jump so much in price.

Also frequently overlooked is adequate provision of information. “Even in a digital age, you still have to enquire about accessibility by phone,” Jarvis says. “I recently spent hours on the phone to find out where

the accessible entrance and toilet were located in a workspace in Shoreditch. I was transferred and put on hold to the US office twice and still got incorrect information. It cost me £84 in calls and wasted my time as well. It's easy to put information on a website about how ‘cool’ the place is, and I can only assume accessibility information is ‘uncool!’”

A lack of photos and detailed information makes it harder to plan ahead, Jarvis explains, while reservation staff may not be based in the hotel so are unaware of what it provides. “More often than not it's the booking process that is most laborious,” agrees Morgan. “Places don't specify what an accessible room means so you have to contact the hotel directly.” Worse than that, if there's a miscommunication and the hotel can't actually meet your needs, a disabled traveller may be left stranded, particularly as accessible rooms are prone to sell out.

That so many hotels are still falling short is surprising since there is not just a moral but also an economic case for them to be more inclusive. A 2014 Department for Work and Pensions report put the value of the “purple pound” – the spending power of people with disabilities and their families – at £212 billion a year within the UK economy. Scope's 2015 Extra Costs Commission found that three-quarters of disabled people had left a shop or business because of poor accessibility.

There are 13.9 million disabled people in the UK, according to a 2017 government survey, a figure that includes 45 per cent of pensioners and up to 19 per cent of working-age adults. That's defined as anyone with a long-standing illness, disability or impairment

‘More often than not, especially in higher-end hotels, standard-entry rooms aren't accessible’

that causes substantial difficulty with day-to-day activities.

And yet accessibility is also important to the elderly, people with temporary physical impairments and those with progressive conditions, as well as the friends, families, employers and travel companions of all of those people. You're quickly talking about a subject affecting many more millions.

LEGISLATING FOR CHANGE

If it's clear that many hotels are still not entirely fulfilling their responsibility, should the law require them to? The Equality Act of 2010 protects against discrimination based on disability, as well as age, sex, sexual orientation, religion, gender reassignment, pregnancy and marriage. Replacing the Disability Discrimination Act of 1995, it added employment protections and a new threshold for the duty on premises to make “reasonable adjustments” for disabled people.

Baroness Thomas of Winchester became the Liberal Democrats' disability spokesperson in 2015, and has campaigned on the issue for decades. Now 73, she developed limb-girdle muscular dystrophy in her forties. Thomas calls the Equality Act a “brilliant piece of legislation”, but says disability still frequently falls to the bottom in discussions about inclusivity, both in businesses and public spaces. She explains that the way to invoke your rights under the act is to take a premises or organisation to court, but that most of the time this →



would be using a “sledgehammer to crack a nut”.

Thomas was a member of a Lords committee looking at how the Equality Act was serving disabled people, which published its findings in 2016. This concluded that the phrase “reasonable adjustments” remains too vague and open to interpretation. “Obviously if you have a small restaurant which is up a flight of stairs, you can’t do anything about that,” she says. “But often it’s a place with one step or a high threshold that could be improved with a simple adjustment, and they don’t bother.”

She believes it should be mandatory for local authorities to have officers who give advice on accessibility to hotels, restaurants and shops in their local area, making sure as much as possible is done to accommodate those people who have physical and sensory impairments.

Robin Sheppard believes that while the current legislation hasn’t created a sufficient change in practice, strengthening it would be difficult since it’s hard to grade properties on how well they are doing. “It’s an optical trick,” he says. “Because the government has dictated what you had to do for disabled guests, there was box-ticking taking place. There was not enough thought about what happens to a person who stays in that room – their sense of style, their sense of self-worth.”

POSITIVE ACTION

Still, Sheppard believes that with enough awareness-raising around the issue, a shift will come about in terms of social consciousness, which will cause businesses to sit up and pay attention. The quickest and most significant progress is made, he says, when executives believe in the cause and push for change from the top down.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ridding Park; Hewi’s adjustable mirror; an accessible bathroom by Hewi; Sesame’s bespoke lifts blend into existing architecture; Accor’s Smart Room

“The next issue for me is to make more hoteliers put the word ‘access’ on the agenda, just as sustainability would never have been a mainstream topic ten years ago but is now something that every senior manager cares about,” he says. “I’m hoping we can get enough champions out there to do that.”

This year will see the inaugural Blue Badge Access Awards, a project between Fiona Jarvis’s Blue Badge Style, Sheppard’s Bespoke Hotels and charity Leonard Cheshire. They describe it as a “carrot not stick” approach to encouraging higher standards from architects, designers, staff and hotel proprietors (although one category, “Ludicrous Loo”, will name and shame).

Of course, it’s not all bad in the industry. One positive example cited by Sheppard is Ridding Park, a country house hotel in North Yorkshire (see “Estate of play” in our February 2019 issue). The property’s managing director, Peter Banks, was inspired by Arnold Fewell, a hotelier who had lost a leg to MRSA and who died earlier this year, to radically rethink his approach to accessibility. Fewell was a tireless campaigner in the field, and about ten years ago explained to Banks all the things he could change to make a big difference, and why it would make business sense to do so.

The hotel now has specially trained staff who call customers with additional needs ahead of their arrival to

note down their requirements. It has made its spa area, changing rooms and pool fully accessible, and lists measurements from the height of toilet seats to the width of doors on its website. Public spaces in its main Grade I listed house are also accessible.

“It’s the right thing to do, but lo and behold, as Arnold told me, we’re also making money from it,” Banks says. Guests with additional needs tend to stay for longer, use the hotel facilities more, and are likely to be repeat visitors after a good experience.

Sheppard also cites Edwardian Hotels London as an example of a company building properties that focus on what a “delightful experience” would be for a disabled person. Jarvis, meanwhile, appreciates the accessible rooms at the Edition in London, which she says are indistinguishable from the rest of the hotel.

Good design that maintains functionality is what ensures someone doesn’t feel relegated to a lesser room. Sea Containers London has grab rails that can be added or removed as needed – guests may have different requirements depending on whether they are left or right handed, for example – while One Aldwych has rails that can be recessed into the wall when not in use.

The most progress is made when executives believe in the cause and push for change from the top down

Accor has introduced a new Smart Room concept in two Ibis properties in Paris, describing them as “rooms for everyone,” appealing and practical whether someone has a mobility issue or not. Doors have an assisted opening and closing system – “if it’s convenient for someone, it’s convenient for everyone,” notes Jacques Bolze, the group’s head of standard and product design. Beds can be adjusted for different needs, sofas come with pillows with various levels of back support, and grab rails are in a black finish that matches towel rails and toilet roll holders. A touchscreen tablet can be used to control all room functions, while in the near future it’s likely that voice assistants will play a role, too.

“Sometimes, when accessible rooms were designed, people would take the regulations of a country and create something very technical, with no soul,” Bolze says. “Now we have made design completely integrated with function.” The team is now working on an adaptation for Novotel. The plan is to convert the accessible rooms across its whole portfolio to Smart Rooms, a project likely to take some time – “but everybody is very enthusiastic about it because it promotes inclusion, it’s a good business model, and it’s something we’re proud to sell,” Bolze says.

Many companies are creating products that combine functionality with style. That includes Hewi, which makes rails, adjustable mirrors, accessible sinks and more with a sleek look; and Surrey-based Sesame, whose bespoke lifts are built into moving staircases, so lifts blend seamlessly into the front entrances of even listed buildings. A video of the mechanics in action at IHG’s Kimpton Fitzroy hotel in London has clocked up more than 200,000 views on a recent LinkedIn post.

The demand on hotels is clear. As Sheppard puts it: “Accessible rooms should be just as much of a sensory delight as any other – they shouldn’t mean bland and beige. At the moment you’re still having to apologise when you put some people into an accessible room. That doesn’t say much about human nature.” **BT**