

Ramp it Up

Ensuring your property is open to all will pay dividends, but are you doing enough to cater to disabilities?

The Journey

Judy Russell, associate at Tuffin Ferraby Taylor LLP

Hotels and guest houses that are designed to be as accessible as possible will not only assist managers in meeting their duties under the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA), but will enable them to successfully market the hotel to the ten million disabled people in Britain who have a combined annual spending power of £50 billion.

Although the DDA does not directly require buildings to be accessible to disabled people, it does require hotel and guest house managers, as service providers, to anticipate the potential needs of disabled customers and to carry out the necessary adjustments to ensure that disabled people can access the hotel or guest house and use its services.

It is therefore important to not only know how accessible your hotel or guest house is – particularly to people with a mobility or sensory impairment and wheelchair users – but also know what you can do to greater meet the needs of disabled guests.

To get an idea of where the access difficulties may be, it is helpful to consider and trace a guests' journey to and around the hotel, asking yourself questions such as; can I park close to the entrance? Are footpaths even and safe? Can I access the building easily without having to climb steps? Could step-free access be provided through the entrance? Is the reception desk highly visible from the main entrance? Is there an induction loop at the desk? Are some bedrooms and en-suite bath/shower rooms

designed to be wheelchair accessible? Can all facilities be accessed without fuss by everyone? Are escape procedures robust and do they take into account the assistance required by disabled people?

Understanding the specific requirements of many disabled people in order to answer the above questions can be complex. It is therefore advisable to employ the services of an accredited consultant who can identify barriers to access for disabled people and also provide practical, cost effective solutions for removing or overcoming those issues. With sound access advice you can meet your commitment to providing good access and a great service for all.



Customer Service

Christopher D. Berry, partner at HOGAN & HARTSON



The general principle is simply stated: hotels are under a legal obligation to provide equal access, facilities and services to all members of the public. A refusal to provide equality of service to disabled persons is unlawful. If appropriate, reasonable adjustments must be made. From a practical standpoint, hotels need to be mindful not only of those with physical disabilities, but also of the needs and sensitivities of those with hearing, oral and visual impairments. From a hotelier's standpoint, those with disabilities (in the wider sense) comprise a significant proportion of the potential market.

According to one study, almost 20% of the overall population can be regarded as having some element of disability; of these, more than 50% tend to book a hotel stay during any given consecutive two year period. If the needs of this sector of the market can be accommodated, the scope for repeat business is obvious. The concept of "customer service" in this context falls into two broad categories.

First, and notwithstanding the nature and adequacy of the hotel facilities as such, there is a staff element. A hotel's reservations office, be it centralised or otherwise, should be staffed by personnel knowledgeable and trained in how the hotel's facilities can be made suitably accessible to the disabled. If concerns and sensitivities are handled properly and appropriately at the point of reservation, this can go a long way to avoiding awkward situations arising at the time of arrival. The issues do not cease with the disabled guest

being happily introduced to his room.

Housekeeping, central foyer and restaurant staff should be made aware of the guest's disability or impairment and trained to be sensitive to his needs. However unwittingly this might occur, a wheelchair-bound guest will almost certainly be embarrassed and inconvenienced by finding that the housekeeping staff, as part of their daily routine, have left the TV remote on a high-level shelf or have replaced the hairdryer in the top section of the wardrobe. To a large extent, these issues fall into the common-sense category, though anecdotal evidence suggests that without adequate training, such incidents do regularly occur.

Second, a well-managed hotel should regularly review the accessibility of its facilities. Aside from the obvious need for clear and unobstructed wheelchair access through the public areas of the hotel, the hotel manager should review the in-room facilities to ensure that these are appropriate and accessible – particularly in the context of wheelchair transfer – and that functionality, in terms of bathroom facilities, thermostats and telecoms, are suitable. A similar range of issues and sensitivities apply to the restaurant and other public areas.

Best customer service requires that any restaurant is suitably designed, not only from the standpoint of physical access, but also in terms of ambient lighting and Braille menu provision for the visually impaired. In conclusion: the law provides the regulation, but it is the customer service that will most likely bring repeat business and with it, enhanced profitability.

Open to All

Amanda Griffiths, sales manager at St Michaels Hotel and Spa, in Cornwall



In terms of facilities, we have a disabled room which we actually asked a person in a wheelchair to help us with. Everything was fitted out with those personal concerns in mind and, consequently, we have found that our guests have never experienced any problems with that room.

In addition to a bell, it has a large wet room with a shower at one end and all the usual pieces of equipment, such as hand rails and bathing seats. We also have a number of rooms on the ground floor and provide disabled access through one side of the hotel, which is all on the flat.

In our public areas, all of our counters have a lower part

to them, so our reception desk, for instance, has a section at the ideal height for a wheelchair user. We have disabled facilities in the way of restrooms throughout the hotel, and also provide facilities in the spa.

Mobility isn't the only issue, of course, so we have the option of large text on the televisions and by request we will always print menus in a larger font. The other thing we are doing to be proactive, is we have plans in place at the moment to have a hearing loop installed. And when it comes to refurbishing the hotel, we're always aware that we need to ensure we do as much as we can for people with disabilities.

From a safety point of view, all of our team – especially night

porters – are informed of disabled guests in-house, right from physical issues, to customers who are deaf – which is of particular concern regarding fire bells. The key is to be aware, be open and welcoming, and attend to disabled guests as they would like to be attended to.

That's not to say we should be treating them differently, but if the guest does have a special need, I think it's important to talk to them and ask whether they would like anything changed or amended. We ask the question and wait to see what they say, because we should attend to them as an individual, not a disability.

