

## Businesses need to be more 'disability confident' to tap into a wider pool of guests and employees

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A recent forum comprising people living with disability, hospitality leaders, and accessibility advocates highlighted the urgent need for the hospitality industry to become more inclusive, with a powerful call for businesses to build “disability confidence” across every level of operations.

Held on 11 June 2025 at the Urban Farmer Project in the City of London, the sold-out and 100% fully attended event, The aha Forum, in partnership with Thomas Franks was hosted by [Accessible Hospitality Alliance](#).

The afternoon brought together employers, people with lived experience of disability, senior hospitality leaders, HR teams, sector champions and a global music star Emmanuel Kelly to drive forward the conversation around accessibility in the industry.

The event included an in-conversation session with industry leader and Bespoke Hotels founder Robin Sheppard, a keynote from EU commissioner for justice Michael McGrath, MBE, Founder and CEO of experiential muscular dystrophy family charity, Muscle Help Foundation, and a number of panel discussions led by Kellie Rixon MBE, General Manager, The Marcliffe Hotel & Spa, and former chair of the Institute of Hospitality; James Dixon-Box, Operations Director, Marsham Court Hotel; Shelley Cowan, disability researcher and advocate; and Ross Calladine, Accessibility and Inclusion Lead for VisitEngland. All discussions focussed on building inclusive workplaces.

Seven themed round-tables enabled all attendees to dive deeper into issues such as accessible leadership,

workplace culture, recruitment, customer confidence, and the business case for inclusion.

The message throughout the day was clear: despite some efforts, fear and discomfort still dominate conversations around inclusion, with many organisations feeling unsure of how to initiate conversations and action or concerned about the long-term implications of change.

“There is a fear, a fear of getting it wrong, of saying the wrong thing. But we can’t let fear be the barrier anymore,” said Kellie Rixon MBE, a leading contributor to the forum.

“Hospitality by definition should be accessible and inclusive. But we’re not. There are pockets, but we need to do much more.”

Rixon called for better conversations in structured spaces: “Where are the opportunities to have these conversations? Induction programmes? Regular training?”

One recurring theme was that accessibility improvements don’t have to be overwhelming. Even small actions, like training team members to ask, “What can we do to make your day better?” can create more welcoming environments.

Shelley Cowan added: “Small changes. That’s all we need. We don’t need to revolutionise anything but take meaningful small steps every day to bring about change.”

Ross Calladine, from VisitEngland, challenged the myth that demand for accessible services is low. “This simply isn’t true,” he said. “People may introduce a service or solution, but if it’s not promoted, it won’t be used.”

He also emphasised the importance of HR training and the need to build confidence among teams who may not have lived experience of disability.

Paul Vaughan, business development director, Accessible Hospitality Alliance, forum MC and round-table facilitator, addressed commercial discomfort directly: “It’s OK to make money out of people who have a disability. Why do we need to apologise about this?”

He noted that while government incentives could help, the sector cannot wait. He said: “Government is slow. So how do we leverage people to act now?”

Further takeaways from the event included:

- Start small, think big, manageable changes can pave the way for broader transformation.
- Clear communication matters don’t just introduce accessible services; promote them.
- Upskill your people, training is vital, especially where lived experience is limited.
- Profit and purpose can coexist, it’s right to serve all guests well, and profitably.
- Support exists, speak to charities, advocacy groups, and your local council.
- We’ve done it before, mental health campaigns proved that bold, clear messaging works.

As Rixon concluded: “Disabled people deserve to travel like anybody else. It’s time for hospitality to live up to its name.”

Robin Sheppard, chair and co-founder of the Accessible Hospitality Alliance, and President and co-founder of Bespoke Hotels, the UK's largest independent hotel group, said: "Today has been hugely significant as it has brought together some vital components of the hospitality sector to discuss, debate and develop ideas that can help ensure accessibility is taken more seriously in our sector.

"Whilst the conversations are critical in terms of how we develop our strategy, we know that the time for action is now and urge more businesses to take a deeper look at how they deliver their accessibility activity."