

Supporting Business Travellers With Visible & Hidden Disabilities

Is the business travel industry doing enough?

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Introduction



Fred Stratford, Reed & Mackay Group CEO

“We must call for a more focused approach across our industry”



One in six people now live with a disability¹, according to the World Health Organisation. And, of those, the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Scheme² – a scheme that operates in the UK, USA, Australia, Ireland, Canada, Brazil, Denmark, Belgium, Latin America and the UAE – has estimated that 80% live with a non-visible disability. These ‘can be temporary, situational or permanent... neurological, cognitive and neurodevelopmental as well as physical, visual, auditory and including sensory and processing difficulties and include respiratory, rare diseases and chronic conditions such as asthma or diabetes’.

It’s therefore a reasonable assumption that a good proportion of people living with a disability will embark on travel at some time in their lives for either leisure, business or both. Yet do travellers with visible and invisible disabilities have their needs met in the way they should expect or does the travel industry still have a long way to go to ensure their journeys are as seamless as possible?

“People are recognising the challenges travellers with visible and hidden disabilities face but I feel the approach to solutions so far is, firstly, inconsistent and, secondly, needs a co-ordinated response. We must call for a more focused approach across our industry to deliver what these travellers need,” Reed & Mackay Group CEO Fred Stratford says.

It’s a belief shared by both the Business Travel Association’s (BTA) CEO Clive Wratten and the Institute of Travel Management’s (ITM) Head of Programme Kerry Douglas. Wratten agrees there is a general feeling of disconnect among buyers and suppliers when considering travellers with visible or invisible disabilities. “We’re seeing that a traveller with either visible or hidden disabilities may not be supported at every stage of their journey,” BTA’s Wratten explains. “We need to stop being isolationist and join up the whole management of the journey. For that to succeed, co-operation is needed across the board.”





This joined-up thinking from the industry as a whole is steadily becoming more integral, as the conversation has shifted around traveller needs in the last few years, especially since the pandemic, adds ITM's Douglas. "There's now greater awareness that travellers may have hidden or neurodiverse needs," Douglas says. "This is a topic increasingly discussed by our travel buyer members. We need to consider the whole business trip, not just the flight or hotel needs of these travellers, but also how are they going to get around to meetings and home from the airport or the train station".

In this report, Reed & Mackay aims to generate further discussion on how and where the travel industry can better support travellers with visible and invisible disabilities. We explore whether

those challenges are the same faced by business travellers with disabilities as those without; ask key industry stakeholders where they think the sector can improve the travel experience for everybody; take a look at what the travel industry is already doing to improve journeys; uncover ways to help meetings and events delegates; and discuss what role travel management companies can play to better help deliver duty of care to travellers.



Connect



A business traveller's perspective



Sonja, who is both a traveller and a Booker for a global investment management firm, has worked with Reed & Mackay for nearly 10 years. Here she speaks candidly about the challenges she faces as a traveller with mobility issues and where she believes the business travel community and industry could help.

“I try to be well prepared, always booking travel far in advance. Travelling with a disability can be stressful because accessibility is not standardised across travel suppliers.

“There are particular challenges; getting from the car to a check-in desk can be some distance. The car is where I need assistance from, especially now you can't be dropped off right in front of the terminals anymore at some airports. And, while it's generally easy to book assistance with airlines, the responsibility of the airline stops with boarding and landing and ground assistance steps in – the two aren't always connected.

“With hotels, simply stating you need an accessible room, for example, is not enough, and those rooms vary in standards from property to property, as well as across different countries. Plus there aren't that many accessible hotel rooms available. Booking way ahead is essential – which isn't always easy with business travel – and then it's a constant follow up to make sure everything is in place. And, even after all that, I've occasionally arrived at a hotel – once after a 14-hour trip – to be told an accessible room wasn't available.

“I recently travelled on Eurostar from Amsterdam to London. Reed & Mackay Operations Team Leader Adam Lang stepped in to help and was extremely helpful and patient. Both Adam and I spent a lot of time determining if what Eurostar was offering in terms of assistance would work for me – they did find me a solution.





There's still so much to change. I would 100% advocate for an industry taskforce between all suppliers



“My most recent trip to New York proves a lot of effort is still needed. Airport assistance didn't show up at the confirmed booking time. You cannot call them so you need to email and hope it gets answered promptly. Airport assistance eventually arrived but the person responsible said I was not even on the original schedule.

“On arrival, even though a sedan car had been booked and confirmed several times – emphasising that I needed a sedan because I cannot get into a higher car – you can already guess what type of car appeared. And, at the hotel, although I had an accessible room, the bed was so high I could hardly get on it.

“Even if all these elements are in place, what the entire travel industry needs to understand is that meeting the needs of travellers with disabilities is not a one-size-fits-all. My requirements as a traveller with mobility issues are different to others with mobility issues.

“What would I like to see the travel industry do? Detailed information and communication are key throughout all parts of the journey. And that starts

with information on suppliers' websites, so TMCs can sort out everything from the home car service pick up to the check-in desk. Plus I would like to see even smaller things done, such as images of an accessible room on hotels' websites.

“There's still so much to change. I would 100% advocate for an industry taskforce between all suppliers, associations and TMCs but this taskforce would absolutely need to include people with disabilities – both visible and hidden – to explain what they need. What I would say to other travellers with disabilities is you don't have to tell TMCs or suppliers what you have, just what you need. The traveller needs to be very precise on this if using an intermediary to help with their booking.”



Connect



Getting from A to B

Transport for disabled travellers

If you have a disability or reduced mobility, you have the right to access air, train, bus, coach, or boat travel like anybody else.³ And the journey to equity for all travellers should start at the top.

Encouragingly, some governments have introduced inclusive transport strategies over the last few years. In the UK, the government's Inclusive Transport Strategy's⁴ goal is to 'create a transport system that offers equal access for disabled passengers by 2030'. The US Department for Transportation (DOT) released a five-year strategic plan in 2022, stating 'Incorporating equity into US DOT's decision-making processes will result in a more robust and equitable transportation system that expands access and opportunities for all Americans'.⁵ And, in Australia, its government developed a ten-year Disability Strategy, which includes key work around accessible public transport.⁶

So, on paper, it looks like equity in transport is on governments' agendas. But how far has it really come?

A quick scroll through online media⁷ soon reveals multiple stories from travellers with disabilities who have experienced stressful journeys, from their wheelchairs being damaged in the hold to being left stranded on planes for hours after other passengers have disembarked.



The journey
to equity for
all travellers
should start
at the top



↘ The Need For Contingency Plans

Reed & Mackay client, law firm Clyde & Co, which has a dedicated diversity and inclusion (D&I) team and an employee network to support anyone with visible and hidden disabilities, believes transport is still a complex issue for this demographic of traveller.

Clyde & Co Senior Diversity & Inclusion Advisor Jess Franklin (she/her) says: “Elements, such as not being able to easily get on the Underground to work social gatherings, to having to rely on cabs to get around, can be incredibly tiring. For any distance of travel, pre-empting all the requirements a traveller may need is so important.

“This also applies to people who are neurodiverse,” she adds. “Some individuals with autism, for example, can find it quite

stressful travelling by train, especially if it’s been booked by someone else. We can’t control delays or cancellations but travel managers and TMCs can put in aspects so the travellers feel safe and comfortable and make sure there are contingency plans. There is importance to the actual travel but the lead up to it can also be a stressful process. Therefore creating an inclusive and accessible process to book and be informed by the travel managers is just as important as the travel itself.”

Improving transport accessibility and providing a better travel experience for travellers with disabilities has been slower since the pandemic, believes Carolyn Pearson, CEO of Maiden Voyage, a company specialising in diverse traveller safety. “When wheelchair assistance works as planned, it’s

great, but if there’s a diversion or a delay, communication needs to be seamless from the airport to the airline to the special assistance teams – and that’s sometimes missing,” Pearson says. “It’s no secret a lot of good people left the industry during and after the pandemic and airports, in particular, have had a difficult time recruiting. Even once recruited, there’s the training issue around assisting passengers with visible or hidden disabilities.”



↘ Balancing Commercial Costs

The UK's Aviation Strategy for 2050⁸ states 'one in five UK adults has a limiting disability or health condition and over half of those with such conditions say they find accessing or using airports difficult and/or find flying difficult in general. In addition to being the right thing to do, there is a clear commercial case for the industry to do more to make it easier for disabled people to fly.

Understandably, direct flights are better for disabled travellers but that may come with additional costs that travel managers will need to incorporate into budgets. Could airlines be doing more to deliver a regular and standardised service for this demographic?

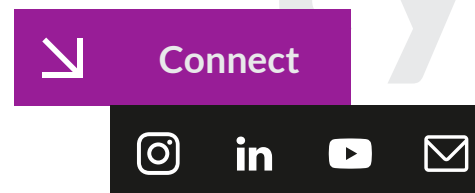
Wratten explains why he believes this standardisation across airlines hasn't quite yet received the momentum it deserves. "It's hard to spend a lot of money adapting seats

for more permanent wheelchair space when it may not be used for every flight," he says. "That doesn't mean it's right but it's a big financial investment for airlines. However, more progress is needed."

Stratford agrees: "The reality is, airlines are individual, commercial businesses – they were really tested through the pandemic, so space on an aircraft is at a premium," he adds. "If the space for wheelchair users can be converted to a regular seat when not in use, that's an opportunity. It's the holy grail of being accommodating but not at any cost and with a holistic view to cater for all travellers."

The good news is, while there's still more to be done, airlines are introducing and incorporating initiatives to support more travellers with disabilities, particularly hidden disabilities.

One in five UK adults has a limiting disability or health condition



At a glance: Airline initiatives

While the following doesn't cover all airlines and what they're providing, this is a snapshot to demonstrate there is movement to better support travellers in this space.



Virgin Atlantic

The airline has a long-term partnership with Guide Dogs, aimed at creating a more inclusive air travel experience for those with sight loss⁹. Guide Dogs provides each cabin crew member with online resources incorporated into its wider training programme, in a bid to improve accessibility for those travelling with sight loss, such as navigating narrow or busy spaces, stairs and doorways, to taking a seat. It also focuses on the best position on the aircraft for guide dogs to rest on their long journeys.

Virgin Atlantic has also designed a special symbol to alert any Virgin Atlantic staff if a passenger needs extra assistance. Any passenger with a hidden disability can download the symbol, including a bookmark that can be slipped into a passport or pick up a badge to wear at the airport. Staff have been specially trained to recognise the symbol and assist customers with hidden disabilities at airports where Virgin Atlantic flies to across the globe.



British Airways

Among other initiatives, British Airways was the first airline to be awarded an Autism Friendly award from the National Autistic Society and the first airline to partner with Hidden Disabilities Sunflower and formally recognise the Sunflower Lanyard scheme. It's also trialling a new video service transforming the experience for customers that use British Sign Language and has updated its training for all customer-facing staff to understand the challenges customers face, with a focus on hidden disabilities.

And, at the end of last year, British Airways pledged to improve its customer experience for travellers with additional assistance requirements by working with a disabled people's charity to assess and pre-approve seat support devices recommended for use on flights.¹⁰



easyJet

The airline has had an accessibility specialist role since 2018 and launched the easyJet Assisted Travel Advisory Board (EATAB) more than a decade ago, which is supported by a number of accessibility and disability specialists. It has a dedicated special assistance customer service team and recently invested in additional resource to support customers who have enquiries about special assistance.

Assistance options include an onboard wheelchair designed specifically to fit down the aisle and help customers reach the toilet onboard, and crew are provided with continuous training on supporting passengers with disabilities. It also recognises and encourages the use of sunflower lanyards and has a guide for autistic travellers on its help pages.

Emirates

With concerted efforts to further enhance support services for travellers with hidden disabilities including autism, Emirates has rolled out specialised training to more than 24,000 global cabin crew and ground staff. The airline has collaborated with Dubai Airport on a useful travel planner and autism friendly route to make the pre-boarding experience more seamless and implemented additional measures to ensure passenger comfort onboard.¹¹

Delta

In May 2023, Delta debuted a full prototype of a first-of-its kind airplane seat that allows customers who use a powered wheelchair to remain in their own wheelchairs for the entire journey, developed by Delta Flight Products (DFP), a wholly-owned subsidiary of the airline. Delta works closely with its long-standing Advisory Board on Disability in creating experiences pertaining to aircraft, airport renovations and procedures. The seat has been sent for final design and validation. Testing and certification programmes to install the seat will begin once certified.¹²

United

United became the first US airline to add Braille to aircraft interiors, to help travellers with sight loss navigate the cabin independently more easily. The airline has currently equipped approximately a dozen aircraft with Braille markings for individual rows and seat numbers, as well as inside and outside the lavatories. United expects to outfit its entire mainline fleet with Braille by the end of 2026.¹³

American Airlines

As part of its Accessibility Plan 2023-2025, the airline is improving its wheelchair/scooter tag to facilitate better communication with customers about their needs and the specific features of their mobility devices. This includes working with its airport teams to streamline scanning and loading wheelchairs; conducting in-person mobility device training for its teams; and installing wheelchair movers and lifts at airports across its system.¹⁴

Airlines for America

Airlines for America (A4A), the industry trade organisation for US airlines, along with seven of its passenger airline members – Alaska, American, Delta, Hawaiian, JetBlue, Southwest and United – pledged, at the end of last year, to improve accessible air travel for all passengers with disabilities, including those with mobility, cognitive and social disabilities.¹⁵



Connect



Rail – Improving the disconnection?

It's important that, as an industry, we listen and respond accordingly to the needs of all our customers, not only a select few.

Rail Delivery Group spokesperson

Two years ago, the UK's Rail Delivery Group (RDG) launched an app to help passengers with accessibility needs.¹⁶ As it marked the anniversary of the launch in June this year, '61% of passengers stated they would have been unable to complete their journeys without Passenger Assist, underscoring its vital role in ensuring equal access to transportation'. Yet despite its rapid growth, the Passenger Assist app¹⁷ remains relatively unknown among the disabled community, with only 30% of those who could benefit from it currently aware of its existence.

The RDG says it recognises the importance of raising awareness about this invaluable service, and its commitment to enhancing the accessibility of train travel for all. How is it doing this?

"We're working with our partners to ensure everybody is aware of the different options

available to them. Whether it is through social media, the National Rail website or simply word of mouth, we're always looking at new ways to spread the word about the Passenger Assist App, turn-up-and-go and the Disabled Persons Railcard (DPRC)," a RDG spokesperson says.

The rail industry is committed to ensuring everyone can travel when and how they want to and, to ensure this is possible, train operating companies routinely train staff to work with passengers with a range of disabilities.

"If a passenger has booked the Passenger Assist service for an entire journey and that passenger's journey includes using different train operators, the operators work closely to ensure the passenger receives the assistance they need throughout their entire journey," the RDG spokesperson adds.

The train operators recognise customer tools such as the Sunflower Lanyard or Just A Minute (JAM) cards, which customers – especially those with a non-visible disability – may choose to use. In addition, the industry has begun to install British Sign Language (BSL) information screens at major stations, is piloting live lift availability status on the National Rail Accessibility Map and is investigating how to install 'speech to text' within onboard customer information screens so that, should a verbal announcement be made, the announcement is available in text as well.

"The railway has a diverse customer base and it's important that, as an industry, we listen and respond accordingly to the needs of all our customers, not only a select few," the RDG spokesperson explains. "RDG regularly engages with its external accessibility and inclusion stakeholders but





also holds weekly forums with accessibility and inclusion leads from each of the train operating companies, who bring their customers' views and comments to the industry table. These leads hear first-hand from frontline colleagues on the different challenges and barriers customers with disabilities face when travelling on the network, which, in turn, helps to underpin future decision making and plans."

The rail industry is collaboratively working to produce a long-term accessibility strategy, which is being led by the Great British Railways Transition Team (GBRTT) and combines the voices of Disabled People, the industry and other key stakeholders to help set out a customer-focused strategy for a more accessible, inclusive railway.

Navan and Reed & Mackay Director, Rail Partnerships, Stephanie Weaver believes more assistance will come down the pipeline as RDG and GBRTT have this high on their radar and are listening to their customers. "Accessibility is very important to the UK rail industry," Weaver says. "RDG ensures we're kept up to speed on its latest developments to

share with our customer base and feed back to the suppliers. Passenger Assist is a great tool, but it isn't widely adopted yet. With 28 train companies¹⁸ across the UK, that's where TMCs' knowledge and expertise can step in to organise or make changes to special assistance requests as required," Weaver adds.

Meanwhile in the US, Amtrak has been stepping up its offering, proposing to improve the accessibility of its long-distance trains to deliver more than the current regulations mandate¹⁹. It has proposed accessible pathways between all parts of the train, accessible rooms in all sleeper cars and accessible spaces in all seating cars, lift access to the top level of bi-level cars, accessible toilets and easier access from the trains to the stations.²⁰



Connect



Ground transportation – A travel consultant's perspective


 Connect


Reed & Mackay US Corporate Travel Consultant Susan Calandrillo works regularly with a legal sector client who is a wheelchair user and travels extensively, both domestically across the US and internationally. In certain instances, the traveller can drive and is accompanied by a helper. While Calandrillo advises on key elements to consider when booking ground transportation for a wheelchair user, what is clear, she explains, is no two trips are the same – and to keep this in mind.

“What I’ve learnt with booking ground transportation, especially if a client needs a vehicle with special hand controls, is you can’t just call and rent one, you need to know specifics, such as whether the wheelchair can be folded up. I ask if the van is accessible to drive; if it’s not, can the traveller’s helper drive and can the front seat be taken out so my client can sit in the front, which he prefers. So be armed with all the information from the start – as for every client, it’s about providing a bespoke, personalised service.

“It can be a little more complicated if he’s travelling internationally and travelling with another of his wheelchairs. If we’re arranging a car service, it can’t be an SUV, it has to be a low vehicle so he can get in by himself. We’ve had issues where we’ve called and reconfirmed several times that it has to be a particular type of car and it hasn’t turned up as booked. It’s not always easy to get what you need in some cities or countries and with business travel – which tends not to be booked far in advance – it can be difficult securing the right vehicle if the rental companies don’t have it in stock.

“Having a dedicated service mindset where consultants go above and beyond for their travellers is essential. I’ve updated his profile with all the companies that offer accessible vans and cars so we have those to hand but it initially takes a while to research and know which ones to trust.”



**Susan Calandrillo, Reed & Mackay
Corporate Travel Consultant US**

Accessible accommodation

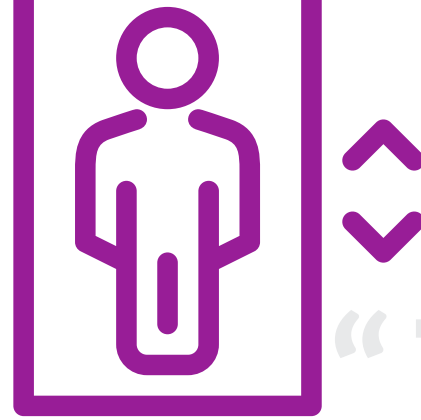
As a vital component in business travel and meetings and events, hotels need to be as engaged with supporting travellers with visible and hidden disabilities as transport. In the UK, the Equality Act 2020 builds on the Disability Discrimination Act 1995²¹ (DDA), which gives disabled people rights of access to facilities, including accommodation, where hotels are required to provide a 'basic access provision'.

This basic access provision could be interpreted in many ways. As Wratten points out, while hotels are required to provide a certain quota of rooms available for disabled guests, there's no current overriding standard. "There should be a minimum standard across the globe and if that isn't reached there should be some recourse around it," he argues.

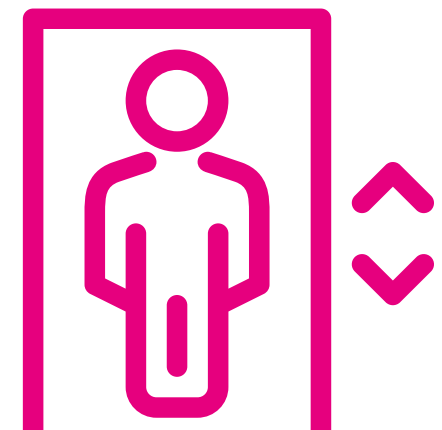
It's clear accommodation is another area where connection is required. Travel managers and TMCs can check places such as the Global Business and Disability Network²², that hospitality companies such as Accor (which includes Sofitel, Mondrian, Fairmont, Raffles and Banyan Tree hotels in its portfolio) have signed up to.



Clive Wratten, Business
Travel Association CEO



“There should be a minimum standard across the globe and if that isn't reached there should be some recourse around it”





And, on a positive note, the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance announced this year that it's partnering with the European Network for Accessible Tourism (ENAT) to increase disability inclusion and promote universal access in the hospitality industry.²³

This partnership will see both the Alliance – which represents more than 50,000 properties globally – and ENAT share information and collaborate, with the potential to set up commissions and advisory bodies. The Alliance will encourage stakeholders to engage in ENAT programmes and activities including training. ENAT already has ACCESSIBILITY PASS, a hotel certification scheme that classifies hotels' accessibility level based on their infrastructure, services offered and personnel skills.

And hotel chains ranging from Hilton – which has partnered with disability information providers AccessAble²⁴ – to Premier Inn – which adopted the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower²⁵ and its training to team members – are taking the initiative to improve knowledge and their offering.





“Every supplier with a policy that says it supports disabled guests must adhere to it”



It's initiatives like these that Reed & Mackay Operations Team Leader Adam Lang welcomes, hoping they will begin to fix part of the disconnect for travellers with disabilities.

“While these are the right steps to take, as a TMC, we should be able to confirm that, if booking a client an accessible room, what does that mean exactly?” he says. “What an accessible room offers differs from hotel to hotel. On one occasion a client required a walking aid but the hotel wasn't able to provide one. I rang round to find one and had it delivered to the hotel. If there was a central system with all this type of information that all the major hotels and chains contributed to, that would further drive business efficiency.”

Maiden Voyage CEO Carolyn Pearson suggests another way accommodation could improve the experience for its guests with disabilities. “Every supplier with a policy that says it supports these guests must adhere to it,” she says. “One traveller I spoke with, who had hearing loss, booked a hotel because it stated it had the right evacuation procedures in place for disabled guests. Yet when there was a fire alarm, they didn't have the alarm that flashes and vibrates to notify her. There needs to be some proper adherence to policy; it's critical if the industry is going to move things forward in this space.”



Carolyn Pearson,
Maiden Voyage CEO

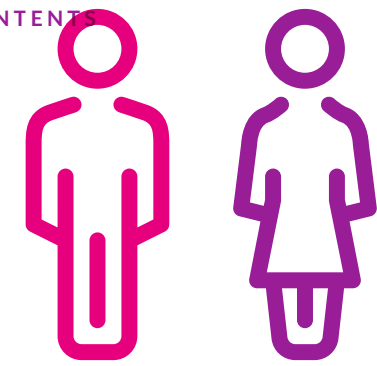


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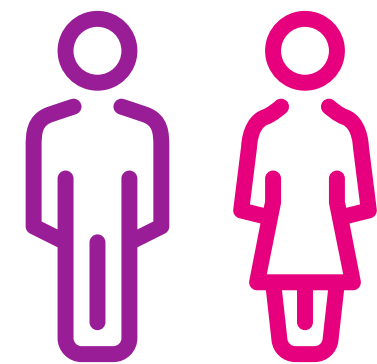




Does the meetings &
events industry meet
delegates' needs?



“With the increasingly raised profile of DEI... people are more open to sharing their vulnerabilities and talking about neurodiversity”



As the events industry is expected to experience significant growth from now until 2028 – with a projected compound annual growth rate of nearly 23.1% through 2028²⁶ – the need to address whether it’s meeting the needs of delegates with visible and hidden disabilities is increasingly vital.

ITM’s Head of Programme Kerry Douglas believes there are signs of improvement towards disabilities in the MICE arena and strives to focus on this at its own events. As well as hosting a webinar exploring the experiences of neurodivergent people and providing practical strategies for attending meetings and events, the organisation carried out a confidential Wellness Survey among members to gauge levels of comfort, enjoyment or anxiety when attending all sizes of events.

“We then stepped up our focus on wellbeing and inclusivity at our own annual conference,”

Douglas adds. “This included a Wellbeing Hub, managed by social enterprise charity EventWell®, which provided space where delegates could recharge and switch off if they were experiencing sensory overload.

“We also set up a meeting point especially for first-time attendees when entering a networking event; avoided having a seating plan for plenary sessions so people chose where to sit (some people feel anxious if they’re seated near the front); and we used an event app for delegates to ask questions anonymously of speakers/panellists during conference sessions.”

Anticipating all requirements event delegates might have – and working in tandem with suppliers to deliver them – is essential, Reed & Mackay Operations Manager Events UK Gill Newman agrees, citing an event Reed & Mackay organised where a delegate needed to have her specially designed bed in the hotel.



Kerry Douglas, Institute of Travel Management Head of Programme



“We worked closely with the hotel to ensure it fitted in the lift, doorways and bedroom,” Newman explains. “It’s crucial at the outset to ask clients where their delegates might need support and also consider delegates with disabilities when sourcing a venue or activity. This gives us the best opportunity to have conversations with venues to understand how they’ll support the person upon arrival and throughout their stay.”

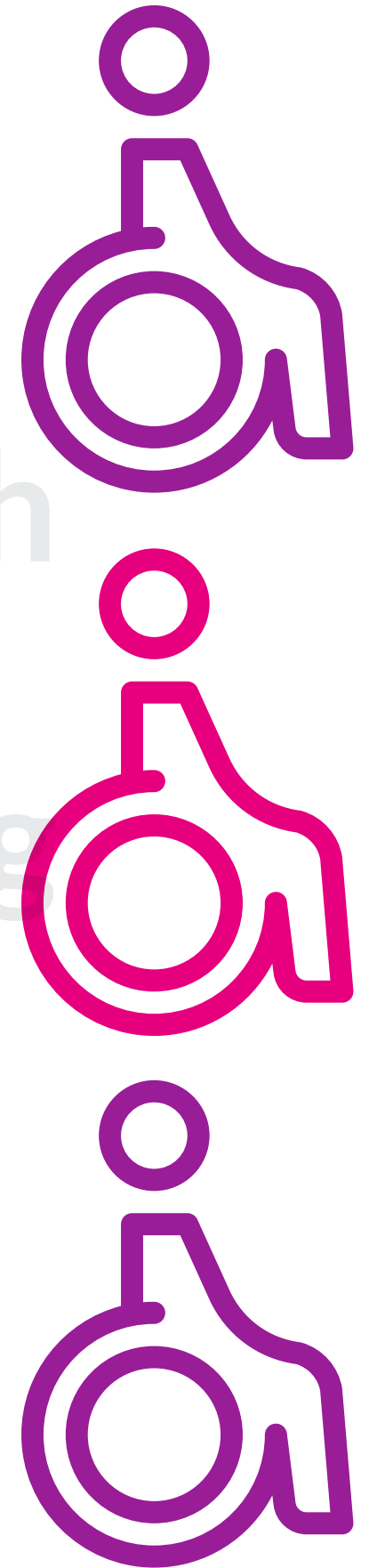
Newman points out that the right requirements for guests with disabilities have been taken into consideration at build stage with newer properties. For example, bedrooms often have hard flooring rather than carpet, which helps with walking aids; reception staff are equipped with iPads to help people check in away from a desk. “A more traditional hotel may not be best suited due to the age of the building,” she adds, “so we’d suggest a site visit to give the client reassurance all delegates will be accommodated safely and comfortably.”

Again, the call for consistency is clear, with Newman stating this remains one the largest challenges for agencies planning events that include delegates with visible and hidden disabilities. “If all hotels and venues signed to one Disability Charter that included a standard requirement this would help agencies propose meeting space with absolute confidence,” she says.

“Consider delegates with disabilities when sourcing a venue or activity”



**Gill Newman, Operations
Manager Events, Reed & Mackay**





Points to consider for Meetings & Events

While this is certainly not an exhaustive list of check points, Reed & Mackay's dedicated Groups, Meetings & Events team advises considering these elements when planning inclusive events to deliver the best possible experience for all.

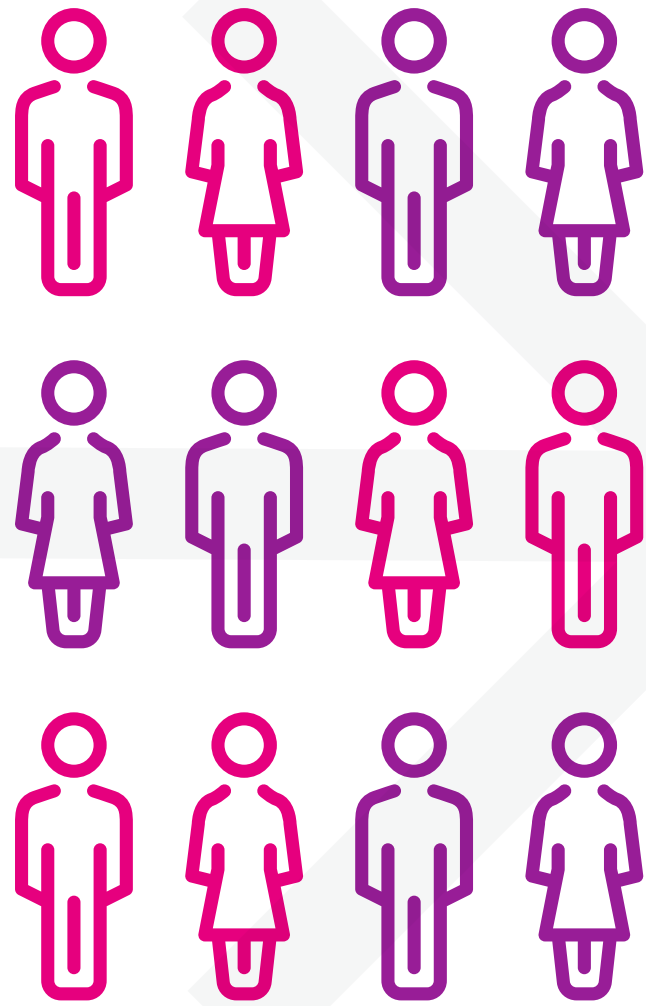
- Awareness is key. Consult communities prior to the event so support is in place without those delegates with disabilities having to ask for it on arrival.
- Ensure the hidden disability lanyard is available at event receptions.
- Consider the marketing material – be careful around language, colour contrasts, font type and size. And say on the registration form what you'll be providing at the event so people feel ready to attend and can make the choice if they want more help.
- Ensure there are close caption subtitles and/or sign language interpreters at the event. And, when holding virtual events, captions should be standard.
- Are the stewards at events trained to help anyone wearing a disability lanyard? Have all the people working at the event had neurodiversity training and/or mental health first aid training?
- At busy conferences, offer quiet spaces and noise-cancelling headphones.
- Ensure meeting rooms are fitted with Loop systems for delegates with hearing loss and the ability to adjust the lighting.
- Ensure signage is clear with easy-to-see colours and a colour-coded floor plan.
- Have a meet-and-greet person at the door of an event, available to escort them around facilities.
- Use terms such as accessible toilets rather than disabled toilets.
- When venue finding, ensure the space is DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant – giving disabled people a right of 'access to goods, facilities, services and premises'.



Connect



The next steps:
a collaboration
across industry?



Travel buyers are already discussing how travellers with visible and hidden disabilities need to be better supported in corporate travel.

“The increasingly raised profile of diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I) within organisations, plus the fact that, within society in general, people are more open to sharing their vulnerabilities and talking about neurodiversity, is also driving progress from a supplier perspective,” ITM’s Douglas explains.

ITM has hosted Buyer Knowledge Exchange sessions where buyers seek peer-to-peer advice on DE&I travel policy considerations. Recommendations they have highlighted include:

- Establishing a bespoke programme for individuals who need additional support, which can be authorised outside of the main policy.
- Reaching out to groups within the organisation to support their specific considerations.
- Conducting country-specific risk assessments for certain groups of travellers.
- Introducing a pop-up in TMCs’ online booking tools to drive travellers to conversations about their requirements.

- Consider whether travellers will feel comfortable including personal information about their disability in their traveller profile.

Diversity and inclusion is already integral to many of Reed & Mackay’s clients, including international law firm Simmons & Simmons. Its D&I Manager Eliz Arkut explains: “Our team’s role is to move the dial on supporting people with disabilities; our core focus is that everyone feels included, no matter what role they do here,” Arkut says. “We’re confident Reed & Mackay can support us if one of our colleagues with a disability is travelling, yet having standards across the travel industry would be beneficial.”

Clyde & Co’s Senior Diversity & Inclusion Advisor Jess Franklin (she/her) believes industry collaboration is hugely important and, therefore, TMCs should lead on lobbying for better support for travellers with visible and hidden disabilities.

“TMCs can hold the travel industry to account if they’re not doing enough in this area, plus it demonstrates they are supporting the clients they work with,” Franklin says. “Within the inclusion space, we’re telling the travel industry all the time that certain elements need to be in place; so if the industry is doing these things before we ask – because of effective lobbying from TMCs and travel associations – it can have a positive impact on individuals when travelling.”



“There categorically needs to be an industry taskforce, traveller representation and government collaboration to make a truly seismic shift”

Fred Stratford, Reed & Mackay Group CEO



Wratten agrees this connectivity should help drive change and indicates that while the BTA hasn't yet worked on an industry standard, it's considering how to do so in conjunction with other travel associations. “We do need to publicly professionalise our industry with best practice and charters in this area, working on behalf of the sector and bring everyone along on it at the same time,” he says. “And the TMC world can definitely help drive demand for connectivity from suppliers simultaneously.”

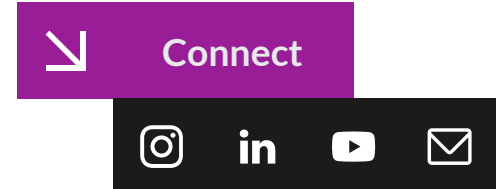
What TMCs should avoid, however, is pigeonholing people with visible and hidden disabilities with a one-size-fits-all approach. “Isn't equity about people being accepted for who they are?” Reed & Mackay Client Lead for Clyde & Co Glenn Castles asks. “All clients are VIP; it's about delivering a dedicated service and knowing your client and what they need.”

This is where, adds Reed & Mackay Group CEO Fred Stratford, a critical part of the journey to improving travel for people with visible and hidden disabilities is involving them at every stage.

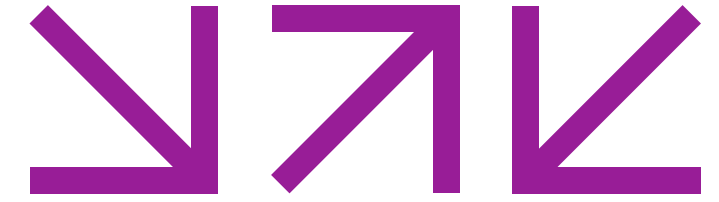
“They have the deep understanding of what those challenges are and any representative body must have them on board to be an integral part of the solution,” Stratford says. “There are so many good things being done by the travel industry already to help remove some of those obstacles, which is really positive, even at one step at a time. From employers' points of view, it's important their staff can progress and travel and that's where TMCs can go above and beyond.”

“But there categorically needs to be an industry taskforce, traveller representation and government collaboration to make a truly seismic shift; a combination of legislation, lobbying and creating travel policies that deliver for this demographic of travellers.”

The travel industry doesn't have all the answers yet. Yet it's clear there is ample opportunity, and need, for critical discussion to progress even further, to connect all the key elements sufficiently so everyone can travel safely and comfortably.



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We'd love to hear your thoughts to keep the conversation going.



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