



**The  
Business  
of Events**  
by **dt.**

**ICC**  
WALES

# **Access All Areas**

**Closing the Accessibility  
Gap in Events**

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## Foreword

The business events sector is a vital source of growth, jobs, and wealth creation. However, we must ensure that these opportunities are available to everyone. That is a moral principle. But it's also in our interest to open up our sector to anyone who shares our passion for face-to-face engagement and experiences.

For too long, it has been too easy to tell ourselves we have done enough, that simply not actively discriminating is sufficient. But this report makes clear that it is not the case; people with disabilities still face discrimination in many different ways. We must actively work to combat that discrimination and eliminate the barriers that prevent people with diverse needs from accessing venues and events.

We are fortunate that we now understand disabling barriers much better than before. We recognise that many disabilities are not visible or are present in ways that aren't immediately obvious to everyone. However, it's equally important to proactively include and welcome people with those disabilities.

To that end, open discussion and constructive proposals are vital contributions to the transformation we need to see. I commend The Business of Events and ICC Wales for carrying out this research and for their various recommendations. My colleagues and I in the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Events, and in Parliament, look forward to advocating for this long-overdue change.



**Martin Rhodes MP**  
APPG for Events and Member of Parliament  
for Glasgow North

## Executive summary - Dr Shani Dhanda

Accessibility in events is not a “nice to have”. It is a fundamental right, a legal requirement, and a business advantage.

This report, commissioned by **The Business of Events** and the **International Convention Centre Wales (ICC Wales)**, provides an honest assessment of where our industry stands and where it needs to go.

The findings are stark: while venues often believe they are doing enough, delegates' lived experiences reveal persistent barriers. ***That disconnect is not accidental***; it comes from treating accessibility as optional rather than essential and must be addressed.

The research shows that nearly **one in three delegates** identifies as having a visible or non-visible disability, and **93%** report encountering barriers at events.

Venues point to accessible toilets, ramps, and training programmes, but delegates describe inaccessible layouts, overstimulating environments, and a lack of clear communication. Too often, accessibility is still treated as an optional extra rather than a standard.

The case studies in this report demonstrate that progress is achievable. **ICC Wales** shows what can be accomplished when accessibility is integrated from the beginning.

The **Edinburgh International Conference Centre** highlights how neurodiversity can be incorporated into operational practices.



### About Dr Shani Dhanda

Dr Shani Dhanda is a global authority on inclusion and accessibility, driving measurable impact across brands, events, media, and customer experiences.

Recognised as the UK's most influential disabled person and a BBC 100 Women Laureate, she has advised 400+ organisations on embedding accessibility into strategy and innovation.

A global speaker and broadcaster, she's shared stages with Michelle Obama and Hillary Clinton and sits on eight advisory boards, contributing to national disability policy.

Shani co-founded the Accessible Events Show, Asian Woman Festival, and Asian Disability Network, championing systemic inclusion across industries.

Featured in Forbes' Accessibility 100 and winner of 30+ awards, she's celebrated as a transformative leader redefining representation and creative impact.



**Glastonbury Festival** exemplifies how detailed pre-event communication can reduce stress and foster trust.

Meanwhile, **Cvent CONNECT Europe** sets a standard in digital accessibility by aligning with WCAG 2.1 AA; a requirement now further supported by the **European Accessibility Act (EAA)**, which came into force in June 2025.

Quiet rooms, hybrid participation, captions, wider aisles, and facilities for service animals – none of these are out of reach for planners and venues. They simply require dedication.

The lesson is clear: accessibility benefits everyone. It fosters richer, more engaging, and inclusive events. It opens doors to a broader audience and boosts the UK’s reputation on the global stage.

This report provides both evidence and solutions. It outlines my practical recommendations for venues and organisers, along with a clear pathway to comply with the EAA.

The message is straightforward: the era of optional efforts is over. Accessibility must be integrated from the start, communicated effectively, and delivered consistently.

The UK events sector has an opportunity to lead by example. If we embed accessibility as our standard, not our afterthought, we won’t just remove barriers, we’ll unlock the full potential of events and future-proof our industry.

**Dr Shani Dhanda**  
*Disability campaigner and events industry inclusion and accessibility consultant*



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## Introduction

Accessibility is fundamental to how events are designed, delivered, and experienced. Accessible events signal that your organisation values all people.

This builds brand trust, strengthens reputation, and demonstrates social responsibility, which matters to attendees, sponsors, and stakeholders alike.

However, this report, commissioned by The Business of Events and ICC Wales, highlights a disconnect between what venues believe they provide and what delegates actually experience.

By examining these gaps, our research advocates for practical change and makes the case for accessibility as a core standard, rather than an optional add-on.

Why does this matter? Events drive growth, employment, and cultural exchange.

However, nearly one in three delegates has a visible or non-visible disability, and 93% encounter barriers to participation.

In practice, the industry is excluding a large portion of its audience, as well as their family and friends. This exclusion is not only a moral failure but also a missed opportunity.

Inclusive events attract wider audiences, encourage engagement, and provide planners and venues with a competitive edge.

**It is also a legal requirement.**

In the UK, disability is classified as one of nine “protected characteristics” under the Equality Act 2010, making it illegal to discriminate against individuals with visible or non-visible disabilities.

Additionally, from June 28, 2025, the EAA has introduced new obligations for any organisation providing event websites, ticket sales, apps, or other digital services to residents of the EU or Northern Ireland.

For UK venues and organisers to avoid costly legal cases and remain attractive to European event planners, it’s essential that they review and update their digital offerings to meet EAA standards. The recommendations in this report will help you achieve this.

The findings presented here are based on two complementary surveys and qualitative analysis.

A delegate survey was conducted in June 2025 with 1,000 attendees, aged 18-65, who had participated in workshops, conferences, conventions, exhibitions, award ceremonies, or corporate events in the previous six months.

It was carried out by market research agency 3Gem using their in-house panel of double opt-in, pre-recruited respondents, in accordance with the Market Research Society’s and ESOMAR’s Codes of Conduct.







This initial survey reveals the lived realities of barriers, ranging from physical access to communication and representation. It features verbatim testimonies that convey frustrations, hopes, and practical ideas for meeting the needs of disabled delegates.

A venue survey was subsequently conducted in July 2025, involving 103 organisations, and documented policies, provisions, and perceived challenges in delivering accessible events.

All surveys were compliant with the latest Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG 2.2).

Dr Shani Dhanda, our accessibility consultant, consulted on the survey questions and provided recommendations based on 12 themes that emerged from the findings.

Overall, the research paints a compelling picture: venues are making progress, but delegates still face barriers.

Bridging this gap is urgent and achievable, but it demands collective action now.

Effective accessibility requires collaboration between venues, accessibility specialists, and disabled people with lived experience.

**Expertise ensures compliance; lived experience ensures relevance.**

## The accessibility gap

Our research reveals a significant disparity between how venues perceive their accessibility provision and how delegates actually experience it.

### Venues report progress:

- 82% say they provide step-free access, and 91% report having accessible toilets
- 75% claim their staff have disability awareness training
- More than half have a formal or developing accessibility policy

### Delegates tell a different story:

- 93% of delegates with disabilities report experiencing barriers at events
- 28% have experienced inaccessible layouts; 24% reported a lack of accessible toilets
- 25% experienced untrained staff; 27% found environments overstimulating
- Communication is inconsistent: 52% say accessibility information is only sometimes clear, while 17% report it missing altogether



# 75%

of venues claim their staff have disability awareness training



# 52%

say accessibility information is only sometimes clear, while

# 17%

report it missing altogether





**The disconnect:** Venues often believe they are meeting requirements, but lived experience reveals ongoing shortcomings. Sensory and neurodiversity needs, communication clarity, and digital accessibility are specific areas of weakness.

Cost, meanwhile, remains a key point of contention, with nearly half of venues occasionally charging for adjustments, whilst delegates regard accessibility as a fundamental right.

The result is frustration and exclusion. Delegates describe quiet zones as **“essential, not a luxury,”** and repeatedly emphasise the anxiety caused by poor communication: **“Please send everything in advance. I get anxious when I don’t know what to expect.”**

This gap between reported provision and lived experience is not just an oversight; it weakens trust, reduces participation, and risks harming reputations. Addressing it involves moving beyond compliance checklists to embed accessibility throughout every stage of event design and delivery.

## Insights

The headline findings above reveal a clear gap between venue provision and delegate experience.

To understand where and why this disconnect occurs, the research explored a series of themes, including policies and legislation, physical access, sensory needs, communication, training, and technology.

Each theme shows a similar pattern; venues often report confidence in their measures, while delegates continue to encounter barriers that prevent full participation.

After each disconnect is explained, Dr Shani Dhanda provides recommendations for bridging the accessibility gap.

### 1. Policies and confidence

#### Venue perspective

More than half of venues (57%) say they have a formal accessibility or inclusion policy, with a further 31% reporting an informal or in-progress approach.

Yet only 35% of venues describe themselves as *‘very confident’* in meeting the needs of disabled delegates.

#### Delegate perspective

Nearly one in three delegates identifies as disabled, and 93% of them have experienced barriers at events. Their lived experiences suggest that venue policies are not being effectively implemented.

Delegates frequently report that basic accessibility questions are not asked at registration, forcing them to share their needs repeatedly or risk being overlooked.



# 57%

of venues say they have a formal accessibility or inclusion policy, yet only

# 35%

describe themselves as *‘very confident’* in meeting the needs of disabled delegates.





## The disconnect

Venues tend to overestimate how effective their policies are, while delegates still face systemic barriers.

Having a policy doesn't guarantee it will be applied consistently, nor does it ensure staff know how to implement it.

Some policies might be made with an accessibility consultant, while others are developed by listening to the experiences of disabled people.

Both approaches are essential; one ensures compliance and best practice, the other ensures it actually works in reality.



## How to bridge the gap

- Clear ownership of accessibility within the organisation.
- Clear understanding of what accessibility means and work with experts to embed accessible practice.
- Have a dedicated accessibility budget
- Conduct and share venue and pre-event accessibility audits.
- Make policies visible and actionable by publishing them online, with an accessible website.
- Enquire about and preempt access requirements at the earliest stage of venue hire and integrate the responses into your event planning.
- Provide regular accessibility training for all staff, including front-of-house and contractors, to ensure consistent delivery.
- Work directly with disabled people to review facilities, signage, and customer journeys, ensuring lived experience shapes improvements.
- Collect feedback from disabled delegates after events and use it to refine facilities, services, and policies.
- Align suppliers and partners (such as caterers and AV teams) with your accessibility standards.
- Monitor progress and publish updates to demonstrate transparency and ongoing commitment.

## 2. EAA compliance

## Venue perspective

Only 15% of venues claim to be already compliant with the EAA, and 24% are working towards achieving compliance.

A further 39% admit they are “possibly” working on it but are unsure of the requirements, while 19% are not familiar with the legislation at all.

## Delegate perspective

Delegates expect clear, consistent standards across all venues.

For international attendees in particular, accessibility is regarded as a fundamental requirement, not an optional extra.

Their experiences reveal frustration with inconsistency: some venues are proactive, while others seem unaware or unprepared.

## The disconnect

Despite the EAA coming into force earlier this year, many venues are either behind on compliance or unaware of its scope, despite delegates expecting it to be fully implemented.

For organisers aiming to attract international conferences, especially from Europe, non-compliance risks losing business and harming reputations.

It could also lead to lengthy legal cases and potential fines.



# Only

# 15%

**of venues claim to be already compliant with the European Accessibility Act (EAA)**





### How to bridge the gap

- Raise awareness of the EAA 2025 through industry briefings, training, and sector-wide guidance.
- Assign clear internal responsibility for compliance, with a named lead or team to coordinate actions and track progress.
- Conduct a formal EAA gap analysis to identify where the venue currently falls short and create an action plan to address priorities.
- Work with accessibility and legal experts to interpret requirements accurately and embed them across venue operations.
- Integrate EAA compliance into procurement and supplier management, ensuring all partners, systems, and digital platforms meet standards.
- Treat compliance as the minimum, not just a legal requirement, but a route to improved reputation, competitiveness, and delegate experience.
- Introduce benchmarking or accreditation schemes to demonstrate compliance to organisers and delegates.
- Report progress transparently to clients and delegates, showing active commitment rather than reactive compliance.
- Review and update compliance regularly to reflect changes in legislation, technology, and best practice.

### 3. Physical access

#### Venue perspective

Venues report high levels of provision, with 82% stating they offer step-free access throughout and 91% providing accessible toilets.

Many also highlight features such as reserved seating, ramps, or staff support. On paper, this suggests strong compliance with basic physical accessibility standards.

#### Delegate perspective

Despite these claims, significant barriers persist. Nearly 28% of delegates have encountered inaccessible layouts, such as steps with no lifts or narrow spaces unsuitable for wheelchairs.

A quarter (24%) reported a lack of accessible toilets, directly contradicting venue claims.

#### Delegates also describe the stress of uncertainty:

“

*I always have to email to ask if the toilets are accessible. Just tell me up front.*

”

#### The disconnect

While venues focus on reporting the presence of infrastructure, delegates continue to find that provision is either inconsistent, poorly maintained, or not clearly communicated. The perception of “we have it” does not match the lived reality of “I can’t use it.”



Nearly

**28%**

of delegates have encountered inaccessible layouts, such as steps with no lifts or narrow spaces unsuitable for wheelchairs





### How to bridge the gap

- Conduct regular audits to ensure facilities are fully operational and accessible in practice.
- Include accessibility maintenance in routine venue checks, with clear responsibility for repairs and reporting.
- Provide detailed, accessible floorplans and videos showing entrances, toilets, and routes online and in pre-event materials.
- Build accessibility checks into the earliest stages of event planning to ensure layouts accommodate needs.
- Train all staff and contractors on accessibility awareness, equipment use, and how to support delegates with different requirements.
- Ensure consistent accessibility across all rooms and event spaces, not just main entrances or auditoriums.
- Involve accessibility experts and disabled people in reviewing layouts, signage, and navigation to identify and fix hidden barriers.
- Communicate emergency evacuation procedures that include safe options for disabled visitors.
- Have a clear Personal Emergency Evacuation Plan (PEEP) system in place for visitors who may need assistance, and make sure staff understand their roles in implementing it.

## 4. Sensory and neurodiversity

### Venue perspective

Only 35% of UK venues currently offer quiet or sensory rooms. Most accessibility efforts remain focused on physical infrastructure, with far fewer resources directed toward sensory-friendly environments.

### Delegate perspective

For many delegates, overstimulation is a significant barrier: 27% cited noise, lighting, and crowding as reasons they were unable to participate fully in events and exhibitions.

Verbatim comments underline the need:

“

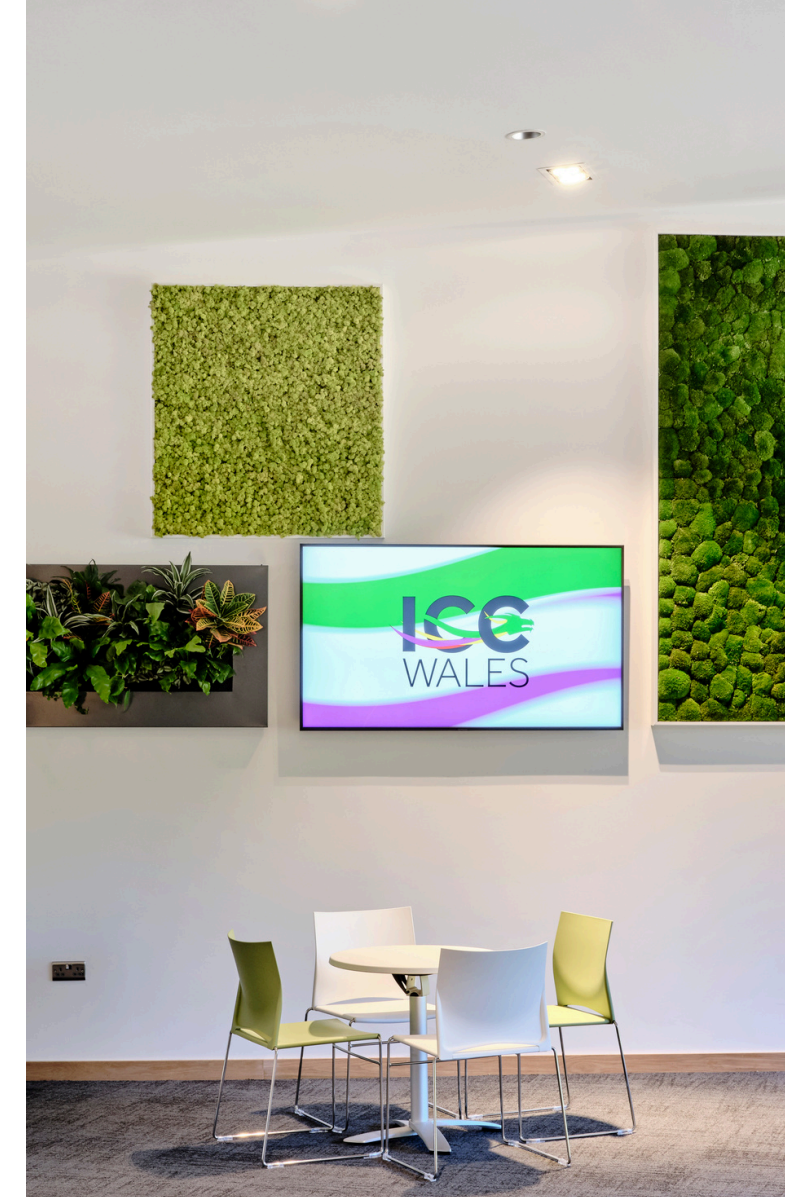
*Quiet zones should be standard, not a luxury and noise, lights, and people all at once? It's overwhelming.*

”

### The disconnect

Delegates strongly emphasise sensory needs, while venues rarely prioritise them.

The absence of quiet spaces or neurodivergent-friendly design means that many attendees are excluded not because of physical access, but because the event environment is overwhelming.



For many delegates, overstimulation is a significant barrier:

**27%**

cited noise, lighting, and crowding as reasons they were unable to participate fully in events and exhibitions





### How to bridge the gap

- Provide clearly signposted quiet or sensory rooms with soft lighting and minimal background noise.
- Mark these spaces on event maps and include them in welcome materials.
- Allow flexible re-entry so attendees can step out when needed without losing access.
- Use adaptive technologies (e.g. crowd monitors, adjustable lighting) to minimise overstimulation whenever possible.
- Design wider venue spaces with sensory accessibility in mind, consider lighting, sound, temperature, colour contrast, and visual clutter.
- Work with neurodivergent people to review layouts, signage, and sensory environments.
- Train staff to understand sensory and neurodiversity needs, and how to communicate supportively with delegates.
- Provide clear sensory information in advance, such as noise levels, lighting conditions, and quiet space locations.
- Ensure sensory-friendly spaces and adjustments are a permanent feature of the venue, not only provided when organisers request them.

## 5. Communication and information

### Venue perspective

Nearly two-thirds of venues (64%) say they allow delegates to request access support, and 58% provide accessibility information online. From the venue's perspective, these measures demonstrate openness and transparency.

### Delegate perspective

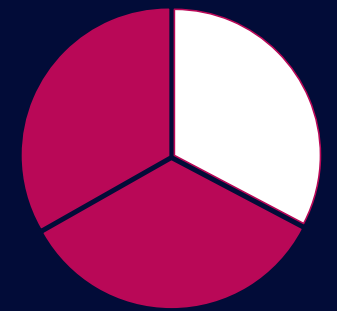
Delegates describe a different reality: 52% say accessibility information is communicated only 'sometimes' clearly, and 17% report it is often missing altogether.

This creates stress and uncertainty. As one attendee put it: *"Please send everything in advance. I get anxious when I don't know what to expect."* Another added: *"No more last-minute surprises – it's exhausting."*

### The disconnect

Venues assume information is easily accessible, but delegates often struggle to find or trust it.

Accessibility details are frequently hidden in websites, inconsistently formatted, or shared too late. This lack of clarity causes delegates to repeatedly ask for basic information and discourages participation.



Nearly two-thirds of venues (64%) say they allow delegates to request access support, and

# 58%

provide accessibility information online



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How to bridge the gap

- Share pre-event accessibility packs with maps, FAQs, agendas, and precise details on facilities.
- Provide information in multiple accessible formats (British Sign Language, Captions, Audio Description, Digital, Easy Read).
- Standardise how accessibility information is published across websites, booking systems, and event materials.
- Appoint a clear point of contact for accessibility queries and ensure responses are timely and informed.
- Regularly review and update accessibility information to keep it accurate and complete.
- Review communications and websites with user testing for clarity and usability.
- Be transparent about any limitations in facilities or services so delegates can plan with confidence.
- Train all staff to respond promptly, accurately, and empathetically to access-related queries.



6. Staff training and hospitality

Venue perspective

Three-quarters of venues (75%) state that their staff have received disability awareness training. Many view training as a core part of their accessibility provision and assume this translates into delegate confidence.

Delegate perspective

Despite these claims, a quarter of delegates (25%) reported encountering untrained staff as a barrier to participation.

Verbatim feedback stresses that interactions matter as much as infrastructure:

*“Being welcomed with a smile really sets the tone and if the space feels too formal or clinical, I shut down.”*

The disconnect

Venues assume that training delivered equals training embedded. In practice, training quality, frequency, and staff confidence vary widely.

Delegates notice when staff are unsure, unprepared, or overly formal, which can heighten exclusion even in otherwise accessible environments.







### How to bridge the gap

- Deliver regular, practical training in inclusive hospitality, not just compliance.
- Co-design and deliver training with accessibility experts to ensure it reflects lived experience and real-world scenarios.
- Embed inclusive behaviour into all customer service roles and make them part of performance expectations.
- Use “accessibility champions” or greeters to ensure delegates feel supported on arrival.
- Encourage staff to personalise their welcome (e.g. name cards, simple greetings) to build trust and comfort.
- Measure training impact through delegate feedback and staff confidence, not just attendance records.
- Refresh training regularly and include it in induction for all new staff and contractors.
- Foster an inclusive culture led by management, where accessibility is seen as integral to hospitality, not an add-on.

## 7. Digital and hybrid access

### Venue perspective

Half of venues (50%) say they offer accessible digital platforms for hybrid events. For many, providing a livestream or online platform with basic accessibility features (such as captions on request) is considered enough.

### Delegate perspective

Delegates see digital access as critical, not optional. Fourteen per cent reported encountering inaccessible digital platforms, leaving them excluded from online or hybrid participation.

Verbatim feedback underscores the impact: *“Sometimes I just can’t travel – but I still want to be part of it”* and *“If I could watch online with captions, I wouldn’t miss out.”*

### The disconnect

While venues may believe they are meeting digital needs, the reality is different. Captions are not consistently available, recordings are not always shared, and platforms vary in accessibility features.

Delegates want hybrid and digital access promoted equally with in-person, while venues often treat it as secondary.

### How to bridge the gap

- Ensure all hybrid platforms meet recognised accessibility standards (e.g. WCAG), with captions, screen reader compatibility, and adjustable font/contrast.
- Offer livestreams with captions enabled as standard and include sign language interpretation where possible.
- Promote digital participation equally with in-person attendance, and share on-demand recordings and transcripts afterwards.
- Assign clear responsibility for digital accessibility within the venue’s AV or events team.
- Train staff and suppliers to use accessible tech features confidently and troubleshoot live issues.
- Plan accessibility from the outset of hybrid event design, not as a last-minute add-on.
- Test platforms and event formats with disabled users to ensure genuine usability and inclusion.
- Ensure online delegates have equal access to Q&As, networking tools, and event resources.







## 8. Communication supports

### Venue perspective

Many venues report offering communication aids: 63% provide hearing loops, 35% offer BSL interpretation on request, and 32% provide live captioning.

These services are typically positioned as optional extras, available if requested explicitly by organisers or delegates.

### Delegate perspective

The demand for communication support far exceeds what is available. More than half of delegates (53%) expressed a desire for live captions at events, and nearly half (49%) want real-time language translation.

A common frustration is that these tools are offered inconsistently or at additional cost.

As one delegate said:

**“**  
*Live captions mean I can actually follow what's happening.*  
**”**

### The disconnect

Venues highlight hearing loops and 'on request' services, while delegates want consistent, proactive provision of captioning, translation, and signing.

This gap leaves many excluded from following the content in real time, undermining participation.

### How to bridge the gap

- Provide live captioning by default for all presentations, both in-person and online.
- Ensure captions, interpretation, and translation are accurate, reliable, and consistent across all sessions.
- Normalise BSL interpretation at major events, and promote interpreters as part of the event experience rather than a special request.
- Expand the use of real-time translation tools (e.g. Interprefy, KUDO) to support multilingual audiences.
- Integrate communication support into standard event planning, budgeting, and contracting processes, rather than offering them only upon request.
- Train AV and event teams to set up and monitor communication support effectively.
- Work with Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and multilingual delegates to review the quality and usability of communication tools.
- Market these supports clearly and early, so delegates know what's available and who to contact for adjustments.
- Keep accessibility features (such as captions and interpretation) in all post-event recordings and materials.







# 46%

of venues admit they sometimes charge organisers for accessibility-related modifications, such as temporary ramps, captioning, or BSL interpreters

## 9. Cost and charging for accessibility

### Venue perspective

Almost half of venues (46%) admit they sometimes charge organisers for accessibility-related modifications, such as temporary ramps, captioning, or BSL interpreters.

A small proportion (around 4%) say they always charge, while others pass costs on when external suppliers are required.

From the venue's perspective, accessibility is often seen as an added service with associated costs.

### Delegate perspective

Delegates view accessibility as fundamental, not optional. The expectation is that access should never come with a price tag.

When asked, many expressed frustration at the idea of paying extra to participate equally. One delegate captured the mood:

“

*Quiet zones should be standard, not a luxury.*

”

### The disconnect

Venues often see accessibility measures as 'add-ons' or 'extras' linked to budget decisions, while delegates view them as basic rights.

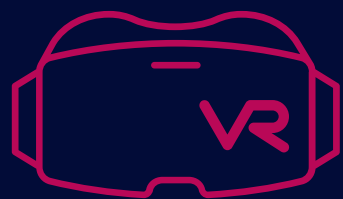
Charging for adjustments risks alienating disabled attendees and undermining trust in the industry.

### How to bridge the gap

- Treat accessibility features as standard inclusions, not optional extras.
- Acknowledge that accessibility benefits everyone, not just disabled delegates.
- Remove incremental charges and build accessibility into core venue and event budgets.
- Publish a clear policy stating that accessibility adjustments will not incur extra costs for organisers or delegates.
- Ensure transparency in contracts and pricing so accessibility provision is clear from the outset.
- Assign internal responsibility for accessibility funding within the venue's operational budget.
- Explore shared supplier models, partnerships, or grant funding to offset costs and improve consistency.
- Factor accessibility needs into long-term capital investment and maintenance planning.
- Clearly communicate that accessibility is included to reassure organisers and delegates alike.







81%

want live captions or real-time translation, and

65%

are keen to use VR tours to familiarise themselves with venues before attending

## 10. Technology and AI

### Venue perspective

Few venues are currently using AI-driven accessibility solutions. While 18% are actively exploring tools such as AI-generated captions or real-time translation, most (63%) describe themselves as “*open but unsure*” about feasibility. Barriers cited include cost, lack of expertise, and uncertainty about demand.

### Delegate perspective

Delegates show far greater enthusiasm. While 81% want live captions or real-time translation, and 65% are keen to use VR tours to familiarise themselves with venues before attending.

Verbatim comments highlight both practicality and dignity:

“

*ChatGPT helps me ask for help without feeling embarrassed, and Real-time translation would open so many doors for me.*

”

### The disconnect

Delegates are prepared to adopt AI and technology-driven solutions as a standard part of accessibility, while venues remain cautious.

This disparity risks leaving venues behind audience expectations, especially among international and younger attendees who consider technology essential for participation.

### How to bridge the gap

- Pilot AI captioning and translation tools (e.g. Otter.ai, Rev AI, Zoom/Teams live captions) to improve real-time accessibility.
- Offer VR or AR venue tours to help delegates familiarise themselves with layouts and facilities before attending.
- Explore adaptive technologies such as sensory management tools (lighting, noise monitoring) to improve comfort and inclusion.
- Develop a clear digital accessibility strategy that includes responsible use of AI and emerging technologies.
- Work with accessibility experts and disabled users to test and refine AI-driven solutions
- Train staff to understand and confidently use these tools, ensuring they can support delegates effectively.
- Ensure ethical and secure use of AI tools, protecting delegate privacy and maintaining data transparency.
- Monitor and evaluate AI performance regularly to ensure accuracy, reliability, and accessibility benefits are sustained.





## 11. Representation and belonging

### Venue perspective

Venues often focus their accessibility reports on infrastructure such as toilets, ramps, and policies. However, they give less emphasis to representation. Few explicitly mention diverse speaker line-ups or inclusive imagery in their surveys.

### Delegate perspective

Delegates consistently emphasise that accessibility is not just about physical or digital access, but also about *'feeling seen and included'*.

Representation matters deeply: *"Seeing someone like me on stage makes me feel like I belong"*.

The absence of diverse voices and inclusive communication signals to many delegates that events are not designed with them in mind.

### The disconnect

Even when physical access needs are met, a lack of representation can leave delegates feeling excluded.

Venues equate accessibility with compliance, while delegates see it as a broader culture of inclusion.

### How to bridge the gap

- Curate speaker line-ups that reflect a wide range of lived experiences. Use a diversity monitoring form to ensure your speaker lineup is representative and evidence-based, rather than assumed.
- Use inclusive language and imagery in all communications, event branding, and signage.
- Embed accessibility and inclusion into programming decisions from the outset, not as afterthoughts.
- Create visible signals of belonging, from marketing materials to on-site signage and staff representation.
- Work with diverse and disabled communities to co-create content, visuals, and event experiences.
- Ensure diversity is reflected not only on stage but across staff, hosts, and contractors.
- Collect and review data on representation and inclusion to track progress and identify gaps.
- Share delegate stories and feedback to highlight inclusion in action and build a sense of belonging.

## 12. Barriers and challenges to progress

### Venue perspective

When asked about obstacles to improving accessibility, venues most frequently mentioned budget constraints (70%), lack of internal expertise or training (52%), and historic or architectural limitations (30%).

Some also noted a perception of "low demand" from organisers, implying accessibility is not always prioritised unless specifically requested.

### Delegate perspective

Delegates reject the idea that demand is low. In fact, 93% of individuals with disabilities report encountering barriers at events.

Verbatim responses highlight that delegates want clearer guidance, better-trained staff, and consistent access features: *"I need to know where to go, what time, and what the space looks like"*.

Delegates view accessibility not as an optional extra but as an expected standard.

### The disconnect

Venues often cite limited budgets, heritage restrictions, or a lack of visible demand as reasons for slow progress.

Delegates show that demand is real and urgent, and that not meeting it excludes many attendees.

The challenge is less about finding the barriers and more about overcoming outdated attitudes and making accessibility a standard practice.



Venues most frequently mentioned budget constraints

70%

lack of internal expertise or training

52%

historic or architectural limitations

30%



93%

of individuals with disabilities report encountering barriers at events







### How to bridge the gap

- Embed accessibility into core budgets rather than treating it as an add-on.
- Develop training programmes and “accessibility champions” to address internal expertise gaps.
- Appoint clear leadership accountability for accessibility within senior management.
- Share industry-wide best practice for adapting heritage sites, supplemented by digital tools where physical changes are limited.
- Engage disabled people in identifying priorities and co-designing realistic solutions.
- Collaborate with other venues and industry bodies to share resources, suppliers, and innovation.
- Set measurable accessibility goals and track progress annually to maintain momentum.
- Shift from a reactive, demand-led approach to a proactive model that assumes diverse needs will be present at every event.
- Align accessibility commitments with wider organisational strategies, such as EDI or sustainability, to strengthen long-term investment.

## The delegate voice: lived experiences

The survey results reveal the scale of the challenge, but the verbatim testimonies express the frustrations, hopes, and practical ideas of disabled delegates. Their own words demonstrate the emotional impact of inaccessible events. Their stories show how barriers arise in real situations and why change is urgent.

### Physical access

Many delegates describe basic frustrations:

*Step-free access is essential. I've turned down events I couldn't physically get into.*

*It's not just about ramps, it's space to move easily in a wheelchair.*

These barriers cause stress before events even begin, highlighting the persistent uncertainty surrounding fundamental facilities.

### Booking and needs assessment

Attendees reported that access requirements are not asked for at the booking stage. One in four said their needs were ignored even after being submitted.

*Please send everything in advance. I get anxious when I don't know what to expect.*

*The longer I have to wait before my needs are acknowledged, the less I want to spend my money on the event.*



## Communication and information

Unclear or missing pre-event information was a recurring theme, while some respondents spoke about the exhaustion of constant last-minute surprises.

*No more last-minute surprises, it's exhausting.*

## Quiet spaces and sensory support

Neurodivergent delegates described the overwhelm of overstimulating spaces.

*Quiet zones should be standard, not a luxury.*

*Noise, lights, and people all at once? It's overwhelming.*

## Signage and wayfinding

For some, even reaching the right room was a barrier: 17% reported poor signage or wayfinding. In large or historic venues, unclear directions or inaccessible signage undermined independence, leaving delegates feeling invisible.

*I need to know where to go, what time, and what the space looks like.*

## Atmosphere and culture

Delegates emphasised that how they are welcomed matters just as much as physical access. Atmosphere and human warmth are integral to true inclusion.

*Comfy chairs and quiet corners help me feel more present.*

*Being welcomed with a smile really sets the tone.*

*If the space feels too formal or clinical, I shut down.*

*Small groups and icebreakers help me feel less invisible.*

*A warm invitation with my name on it makes me feel thought of.*

## Technology for inclusion

Attendees celebrated the potential of tech to improve their experience. Others valued AI tools for dignity and independence. However, privacy concerns still exist.

*Live captions mean I can actually follow what's happening.*

*If I could watch online with captions, I wouldn't miss out.*

*ChatGPT helps me ask for help without feeling embarrassed.*





“

*I don't trust facial recognition or tracking. Give me the option to say no.*

”

“

*Don't make me use tech if I don't want to.*

”

### Food, breaks and social inclusion

Simple measures around food and breaks also mattered. Informal networking opportunities, rather than forced interactions, were also seen as crucial to inclusion.

“

*Free snacks go a long way, especially when you're on a budget.*

”

“

*Comfy chairs and quiet corners help me feel more present.*

”

### Representation and belonging

Finally, delegates emphasised that accessibility is about culture as much as it is about compliance. Representation creates belonging and signals that events are designed for everyone.

“

*Seeing someone like me on stage makes me feel like I belong.*

”

### In her own words

Jade Spencer, Director of Operations at BCD Meetings & Events, is partially deaf. She shares her experiences as an events professional with a hearing impairment.

Every day involves assessing and adjusting to environments that weren't built with people like me in mind. For example, at networking events, background noise makes it nearly impossible to hear the person next to you, while at a conference, even with excellent AV, you can lose the thread if you sit at a noisy table or if the speaker turns their back. Although our industry often discusses sustainability, wellness, and compliance, accessibility is frequently overlooked. When I do raise this, I often feel guilty or I'm made to feel difficult for asking for what I need.

Deafness doesn't have a single face or sound. Some people sign, others speak. Some wear hearing aids, while others don't. I personally don't wear my hearing aids because they amplify sounds around me, making it harder to catch direct conversations. Video captions, therefore, help me feel included.

Inclusion involves recognising that diversity is broad, often invisible, and always worth designing for. Luckily, my company, BCD Meetings & Events, is deeply dedicated to fostering a diverse and inclusive workplace and industry. To learn more about our approach, visit our [DE&I homepage](#).

These voices emphasise the urgency of change and the frustration of facing the same barriers year after year. However, they also point towards solutions. Across the events industry, there are venues and organisers already demonstrating that accessibility can be approached differently.

The next chapter highlights some of these best practice examples, showing that inclusion is possible when it is integrated into the core of event design.







## Spotlight on best practice

While this report highlights ongoing gaps between venue provision and delegate experience, it is equally important to demonstrate that progress is both achievable and already in progress.

Across the UK, an increasing number of venues and organisers are showing how accessibility can be integrated into event planning, rather than added as an afterthought.

These examples show that accessibility takes many forms: designing inclusively from the start, gaining independent accreditation for neurodiversity, publishing detailed access information that empowers attendees, or developing digital platforms to recognised accessibility standards.

What unites them is a commitment to go beyond compliance and to treat accessibility as a mark of quality, culture, and care.

The case studies over the following pages - SQLBits at ICC Wales, NatWest at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, Glastonbury Festival, and Cvent CONNECT Europe - demonstrate different routes to success and offer practical lessons for the wider industry.

### 1. SQLBits at ICC Wales: Venue versatility

Data conference, SQLBits has a special relationship with ICC Wales.

Renowned for its strong inclusivity agenda, the four-day event requires a venue that maintains high accessibility standards, while providing an environment suited for everyone, including those with neurodivergence.

As SQLBits' founder Simon Sabin explains, ICC Wales' capacity, modern design, and collaborative spirit have always aligned perfectly with SQLBits' inclusivity goals: "The venue has so much natural daylight, which makes a huge difference," he says. "The woodland at the rear of the venue also adds to a sense of wellbeing, and together with the daylight that floods most of the meeting rooms and large atrium, it creates an excellent learning environment.

"The ICC Wales staff are also excellent," he continues. "They genuinely want to make event design more inclusive and accessible, rather than creating barriers like charging for facilities that should be standard, such as gender-neutral toilets and accessible signage. This desire to put accessibility at the heart of everything they do extends to the venue's partners as well. We worked with ICC Wales' team in our first year, who put measures in place to help a delegate with mobility needs travel from the Celtic Manor Resort each day and ensure smooth access to our event."

SQLBits' broad range of inclusive and accessible initiatives further includes:

- **Quiet rooms and non-sensory spaces**, giving delegates space to decompress away from the bustle of the show floor and networking areas.





- **Live streaming of conference session rooms** onto a white wall in a relaxed space filled with beanbags, allowing attendees to use headphones. These streamed sessions are also available online for anyone unable to attend the conference.
- **A multifaith room**, enabling delegates from all backgrounds to participate fully.
- **On-site counsellor**, helping delegates by offering one-to-one appointments.
- **Flexible ‘grab ’n go’ catering**, aimed at reducing queuing stress, with dietary requirements recorded at registration.
- **Spacious corridors and clear signage**, improved navigation and eased overcrowding.
- **Supportive services**, including childcare provision to ensure more parents can attend and “Bits Buddies” - volunteers who assist attendees with navigation and social connection.
- **Activity evenings**, to reduce attendee networking anxieties and to cater to all neurodiversities. Examples include board game evenings and a giant pub quiz.

The four-day SQLBits conference will return to ICC Wales in April 2026.

For the organiser, accessibility was a key factor in their decision to return to Newport: “Our aim is to identify UK venues that SQLBits can rotate between, but the emphasis on inclusivity and accessibility must match the high standard set by ICC Wales. The venue demonstrates that large-scale, complex events can be delivered inclusively without compromise,” Simon says.

### Lesson for the wider sector

The partnership between ICC Wales and SQLBits demonstrates how venues and organisers can collaborate to make accessibility a core part of event planning. SQLBits’ decision to return highlights ICC Wales’ position as a preferred venue for organisers who see accessibility not just as an addition, but as vital to success.



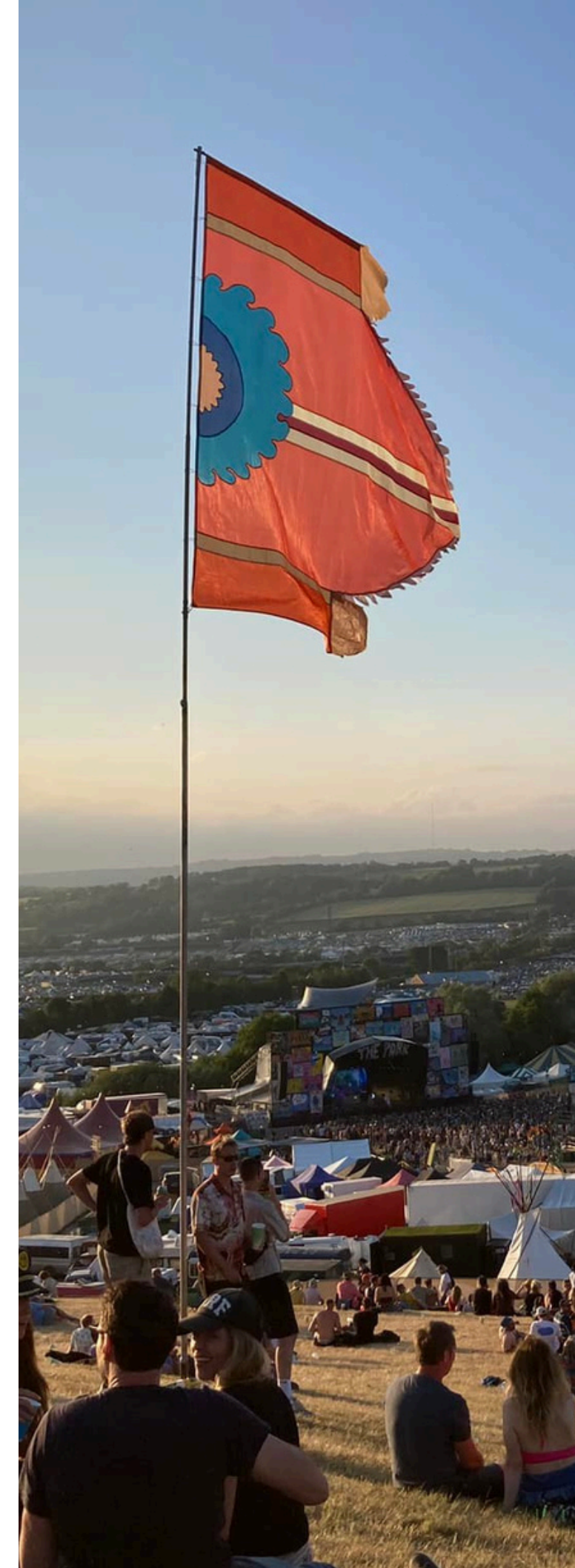
## 2. Glastonbury Festival: Clarity through communication

Glastonbury Festival is among the largest and most complex live events globally, drawing over 200,000 people to a 1,000-acre site most years. Despite its size and difficult terrain, the festival has become a standard for accessibility planning.

Clarity and communication are central to its approach. Its Customer Accessibility Guide 2025 exceeds 40 pages, detailing everything from travel and arrivals to on-site medical support, viewing platforms, BSL provision, sensory calm spaces, accessible shuttles, and audio description. The guide is sent out beforehand so attendees are well-informed about what to expect, reducing stress and uncertainty.

Key festival features include:

- **The Spring Ground accessible campsite.** It features secure stewarding, accessible showers, high-dependency toilets, and medical storage
- **BSL provision through DeafZone**, including interpreters at main stages, roaming interpreters, and subtitled films
- **Sensory calm spaces**, designed with autism specialists, offering low-stimulation environments, weighted blankets, and ear defenders
- **Accessible viewing platforms**, available at all stages, along with companion passes and accessible toilets
- **Innovative technology**, such as Give Vision headsets to support visually impaired festival-goers and virtual experiences for quieter participation





What makes Glastonbury stand out is not just the scale of its accessible facilities, but also its welcoming tone. The guide emphasises that not all disabilities are visible and reminds all attendees to be respectful. This people-first ethos makes accessibility a shared cultural responsibility, not just a set of services.

*“Please be courteous and kind towards other access users. We’re all here to have a good time.”*

**Lesson for the wider industry:** Even in the most complex, high-pressure environments, proactive planning and transparent communication can eliminate barriers. By sharing detailed information in advance, investing in sensory, mobility, and communication supports, and fostering an inclusive culture, Glastonbury shows that accessibility is possible on a large scale.



### Accessibility Guide 2025



### 3. NatWest’s Internal Audit Academy at EICC: Event excellence:

When NatWest held its Internal Audit Academy at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC) on 21 May 2025, inclusivity wasn’t an afterthought; it was incorporated into the event design from the very start.

Guided by the [Welcome Brain Neurodiversity in Events Checklist](#), the event became the first in the UK to earn Welcome Brain’s Gold-level accreditation, recognising not just physical accessibility but also inclusive planning, team training, and communications that support neurodiverse needs throughout.

From early planning stages, EICC and NatWest agreed on a shared vision for inclusion. Both organisations recognised that traditional event design can unintentionally exclude people with sensory sensitivities, communication differences, or other neurological needs.

The question wasn’t whether accessibility mattered; it was how to incorporate it meaningfully into the experience. That commitment fostered a collaborative approach, blending EICC’s venue expertise with NatWest’s internal inclusion priorities.

A key aspect of this was NatWest’s development of a dedicated event website, which offered clear accessibility information and introduced features such as quiet spaces, inclusion champions, and accessible route planning.

Other design features included a low-stimulation environment, allowing neurodiverse attendees to decompress or recharge; real-time voice-to-text transcription across main sessions, with captions displayed on large screens; sensory-friendly signage and breakout zones; trained staff and accessible communication materials.





Importantly, inclusion extended beyond the day itself. Pre-event communications encouraged attendees to share accessibility needs beforehand, allowing the team to respond proactively.

Attendees received detailed route maps and were offered the option of quiet route tours upon arrival to minimise anxiety and support autonomy.

While Welcome Brain's Gold-level accreditation was a significant milestone, the most valuable feedback came from attendees. The quiet space was described as "a game-changer" and "the first time I've felt considered at a corporate event."

One attendee shared that, thanks to the calm space, they were able to stay for the whole day - something they'd never managed before.

**Lesson for the wider industry:** What happened at EICC was not just a successful event but a demonstration of what's achievable when inclusion is incorporated at every stage of planning and execution.

The partnership between NatWest and EICC shows that neuroinclusive design is a standard we should all strive for, rather than a mere niche feature or add-on. Elements such as quiet spaces, live captioning, and clear communication create more adaptable, welcoming environments for everyone.

#### 4. Cvent CONNECT Europe: Conference compliance

Digital accessibility is often overlooked in event planning. However, it is a crucial aspect of the delegate experience and now falls under the scope of the **European Accessibility Act (EAA)**, which came into force in June 2025. The Act requires that event websites, ticketing systems, apps, and digital platforms serving EU residents comply with recognised accessibility standards.

Cvent CONNECT Europe 2025, which takes place annually in London, has set a commendable example by publicly committing to WCAG 2.1 Level AA compliance across its website, registration platform, and event platform. This demonstrates that the event is designed to be accessible for users of assistive technologies, such as screen readers, and to adhere to internationally recognised accessibility standards.

By promoting inclusivity in the digital experience, Cvent CONNECT Europe guarantees delegates can register, access content, and interact with event information without unnecessary barriers. This approach is noteworthy because most events have yet to publish or compare their digital accessibility against

formal standards, despite the EAA now requiring it.

The explicit reference to WCAG 2.1 AA sets a transparent benchmark for accountability, signalling that accessibility is not just a behind-the-scenes adjustment but a public promise.

**Lesson for the wider industry:** Showing a clear commitment to recognised digital standards reassures delegates, enhances compliance with the EAA, and positions organisers as leaders in inclusive event delivery.

#### From progress to transformation

These examples demonstrate that accessibility is not only achievable but can also enhance reputation, draw a wider audience, and safeguard venues and events against legislative and cultural changes.

From purpose-built convention centres to major festivals and European conferences, progress is being made. The challenge now is to shift from isolated examples of excellence to a sector-wide transformation.





# Sector recommendations

To bridge the accessibility gap and meet legal and audience expectations, venues and organisers should prioritise the following actions:

**1. Publish accessibility information upfront.**

Share detailed access guides online and in pre-event communications, including floorplans, toilets, entrances, quiet rooms, and transport links. Have a dedicate webpage for accessibility

**2. Embed accessibility into booking systems.**

Ask about access needs at the point of registration and/or venue hire and integrate this data into event planning and delivery

**3. Standardise training across staff teams.**

Provide regular, practical training in disability awareness and inclusive hospitality for all staff and suppliers

**4. Invest in sensory and neurodiversity supports.**

Create quiet rooms, reduce overstimulation, and provide flexible re-entry policies as standard

**5. Ensure digital and hybrid inclusion.**

Use accessible platforms, offer captioning by default, and promote online participation equally with in-person

**6. Expand communication supports.**

Provide live captions, BSL interpretation, and real-time translation tools at events

**7. Eliminate cost barriers.**

Absorb the cost of accessibility measures into core budgets, avoiding extra charges to organisers or delegates

**8. Adopt inclusive technologies.**

Pilot AI tools, VR/AR venue tours, and adaptive sensory technologies to enhance accessibility

**9. Showcase representation and belonging.**

Curate diverse speaker line-ups and use inclusive language and imagery throughout events

**10. Plan for compliance and beyond.**

Treat the European Accessibility Act (EAA) and Equality Act (2010) as baselines and use industry-wide accreditation schemes to demonstrate leadership

# A pathway to EAA compliance

The **European Accessibility Act (EAA)** came into force on 28 June 2025. For venues and organisers offering services to EU residents (or Northern Ireland due to its post-Brexit ties with the EU's single market), compliance is now a legal requirement.

The following steps provide a practical pathway:



**Understand the scope**

- The EAA applies to event websites, ticketing systems, mobile apps, digital communications, and customer support channels
- It covers any organisation serving EU residents, regardless of where the business is located



**Conduct a digital audit**

- Review websites, apps, and ticketing platforms against recognised standards (WCAG 2.1 AA)
- Identify gaps in compatibility with screen readers, captioning, and navigation



**Upgrade platforms and services**

- Ensure online ticketing and payment systems are fully accessible
- Provide multiple contact channels (chat, phone, email) that meet accessibility standards



**Train staff on EAA requirements**

- Raise awareness across sales, marketing, and customer service teams
- Create accountability for accessibility compliance within leadership structures



**Document and demonstrate compliance**

- Publish an accessibility statement on all digital platforms
- Keep records of audits, improvements, and staff training as evidence for regulators and clients



**Go beyond the minimum**

- Use EAA compliance as a foundation to innovate: AI captioning, VR tours, multilingual translation tools, and proactive customer communication



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# Conclusion: A call to action

Accessibility at events is now an essential issue. The evidence in this report highlights a significant gap between what venues offer and the experience of delegates.

Venues often think they meet accessibility standards, yet delegates still encounter barriers, such as the lack of quiet rooms, unclear information, untrained staff, and inconsistent digital platforms. This gap is not just inconvenient; it excludes nearly one in three potential attendees and damages the credibility of our industry.

The case for action is threefold.

- Morally, it relates to fairness, ensuring that everyone, regardless of their disability, can participate fully
- Legally, it is a requirement: the Equality Act 2010 protects disabled people in the UK, and the European Accessibility Act, in force since June 2025, extends digital responsibilities to any organisation serving EU residents
- Commercially, accessibility provides a competitive edge. Inclusive events draw larger audiences, improve delegate satisfaction, and position venues as future-ready destinations

The examples of ICC Wales, Glastonbury Festival, NatWest at the EICC and Cvent CONNECT Europe prove that accessibility is achievable, whether by designing it in from the outset, embedding neurodiversity frameworks, or publishing detailed access information at scale. The task now is to move from isolated good practice to sector-wide transformation.

The events industry must embrace accessibility not as an add-on, but as the standard by which it measures quality. By embedding inclusive design, listening to delegate voices, and committing to continuous improvement, the UK can lead globally in shaping events that truly welcome everyone.

## Further resources

- The Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC), in partnership with Welcome Brain Consulting and the Association of British Professional Conference Organisers (ABPCO), has launched the [Neurodiversity in Events Checklist](#)
- The Meetings Industry Association (MIA) has also published an [Accessibility Guide](#) in partnership with Diversity Alliance

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**ICC Wales**

[www.iccwales.com](http://www.iccwales.com)

**The Business of Events**

[thebusinessofevents.co.uk](http://thebusinessofevents.co.uk)