

# UNDERSTANDING DISABLED EXPERIENCES AT THE BAR: LAUNCHING THE BSB DISABILITY TASKFORCE

7BR was pleased to host the launch of the Bar Standards Board's (BSB) new Disability Taskforce on Wednesday 7 December 2022. The new Taskforce is part of the BSB's work to ensure that the Bar is inclusive, reflects wider society, harnesses talent and is strengthened by diverse living experiences. The panel was co-chaired by Mark Neale, Director-General at the BSB and Diane Lightfoot, Chief Executive at the Business Disability Forum.

## Hosts



**VICTORIA CARNE**  
Chief Operating Officer



**CHRISTIANAH BABAJIDE**  
Marketing and Events Executive

## Panelists



**DR GREGORY BURKE**  
Barrister, 7BR and  
Founder of AccessAble



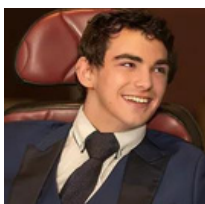
**HALEEMAH FAROOQ**  
Barrister, Office of the Police and  
Crime Commissioner



**MARK HENDERSON**  
Barrister, Doughty  
Street Chambers



**CHRISTINA WARNER**  
Barrister, 33 Bedford Row,  
Vice Chair of  
Disabled Lawyers



**DANIEL HOLT**  
Future Pupil Barrister at 39  
Essex Chambers and Chair  
Association of  
Disabled Lawyers

# PANEL DISCUSSION

The event was led by 7BR's Dr. Gregory Burke, who specialises in employment law and handles complex and varied discrimination claims. Dr. Burke is also the founder of AccessAble, a leading provider of access information for disabled people in the UK. The work of the Taskforce was introduced to lawyers and experiences were gathered on disabled experiences at the Bar from participants.

Chambers provided a safe and welcoming space that encouraged open speech about the challenges disabled barristers face, the positive developments they are part of, and their hopes and fears for the future of disability at the Bar.

Dr. Burke and the panellists discussed the physical, digital and human barriers faced by disabled people coming to the Bar and working as barristers, as well as the opportunities for progress.

## Physical and digital barriers

Chambers are often housed in Georgian buildings, and some attendees regarded the inertia to stay in such buildings as both restrictive and unnecessary. Others believed we should not have to choose between inclusive design and attractive design, and highlighted the many practical adjustments now available for these older buildings. For example, 7BR has barrier free access throughout its buildings including an innovative Sesame Steps mechanism, enabling seamless wheelchair access via the original front steps and front door. Some of the barriers faced by neurodivergent attendees during COVID were discussed, highlighting that digital barriers must also be considered and addressed for inclusivity.

## Human barriers

By far the biggest barriers reported by disabled attendees are human in nature. For example, Dr. Burke first became aware he had impairments when still in hospital after his accident, but it was only when he was discharged that he realised he was disabled.

The panel considered a range of excuses for failures to make reasonable adjustments for disabled people, and compared them to the historic failings to make adjustments accommodating female workers. Disability should not be seen as a footnote, or as the one aspect of inclusivity that is just 'too hard'. Meanwhile, cultural barriers enabling silence around the issue should be addressed, as should the lack of role models, and the assumption that disabled candidates should have to be exceptional to be worthy of consideration.

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These issues hold back confidence and feed into non-disclosure – where the fear of discrimination stops disabled people disclosing invisible disabilities, and in turn cuts off access to much needed support.

## What can be done?

Three aspects came to light in the discussion on what can be done.

Foremost, being an ally and taking action to make reasonable adjustments in Chambers are key for inclusivity. Under BSB regulations and the Equality Act, Chambers and Bar schools are required to have a reasonable adjustments policy to support disabled clients, workers, students and any temporary visitors. Moreover, reasonable adjustments typically cost around 7% of the cost of rehiring, and should be seen as a human right.

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Secondly, policies matter. Without proper support and information, disabled people can see their dignity stripped away by unnecessary difficulties and prejudice.

Last but not least is recognising that enforcement, investment and training are all needed for the sector to move forward. An open, inclusive culture is key, as are the personal emotional networks of support the panel richly described.

These changes are being enabled by a growing number of disability related associations at the Bar, which includes the Taskforce as well as Bringing [Dis]Ability to the Bar, the Barristers and Advocates Disabled Society, and Neurodiversity in Law.

You can learn more about Dr. Burke's practice and read about his about his book on his journey to the Bar via 7BR's website. To find out more about the taskforce, please refer to the BSB's press release on their website.

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