

Case study: Inclusive hospitality work experience programme



THE CHALLENGE

Young people with learning difficulties often struggle to access meaningful work experience because of limited inclusive practices, lack of tailored support, and safeguarding concerns. Traditional placements frequently fail to provide the structure or flexibility needed to help these students succeed.

THE INITIATIVE

Bishop's Gate Hotel and Ardnashee School & College partnered to create a four-week Inclusive Hospitality Work Experience Programme for post-16 students.

The programme was built around a work-shadowing model. Students rotated through key hotel departments - housekeeping, kitchen operations, and food & beverage while receiving hands-on mentoring from hotel staff and in-situ support from school staff. Roles were adapted to individual needs, ensuring every student could actively participate and learn.

The highlight was a student-led "Takeover Day," where students planned and delivered an Afternoon Tea event for families, hotel staff, and community stakeholders, demonstrating the skills, confidence, and teamwork they had developed.

IMPACT

The programme delivered clear benefits for students, the hotel, and the wider community:

- For students: Increased confidence, independence, and practical workplace skills such as customer service, food preparation, and teamwork. Many left with a stronger sense of their own potential and clearer insights into career opportunities in hospitality.
- For the hotel: Staff gained experience in inclusive practices, strengthened relationships with the local community, and reported higher morale from contributing to a socially impactful project.
- For the community: Families, employers, and local employment agencies praised the initiative as a model for inclusive education-to-employment pathways.
- Feedback from students, parents, and hotel staff highlighted the programme's success in providing authentic workplace experiences within a supportive environment.

The insights presented have been developed as part of the EPIC Futures NI collaborative policy research project, undertaken in partnership with People 1st International, Ulster University, the NI Hotels Federation, the NI Tourism Alliance, and HATS Network.



- Ambassador partnerships with Springboard & employability programmes
- Careers fairs targeting diverse groups
- Work placement opportunities
- Mentoring young people through the Future Leaders Programme (Co-operation Ireland) & hosting residential and site visits to create meaningful career opportunities.
- Involvement in Linen Quarter bid initiatives from Litter picking, planting to supporting local events such as react festival and Health Week.

Skills development & promotion

Developing talent from within ensures that inclusion translates into progression. voco Belfast invests in training and leadership pathways that allow employees to grow their skills and careers.

- Apprenticeships to boost internal talent
- Investment in trainee management and leadership development programme at hotel and group level.

Inclusive recruitment practices

Recruitment processes have been redesigned to be transparent, consistent, and accessible.

- Structured interviews, diverse panels, and behavioural questions
- Manager training on bias, reasonable adjustments, and inclusive recruitment



Culture & wellbeing

Creating a genuinely inclusive culture is seen as an ongoing process. The INUA Collection has achieved silver accreditation from the Irish Centre for Diversity, with policies and support systems that promote dignity and wellbeing at every level.

- Dignity & Respect & Equal Opportunities policies embedded in onboarding and annual training tailored to team member and leadership levels.
- Health & Wellbeing partnership with NICHs through their work well live well programme with trained health champions in business and monthly themes.
- Menopause policy, management training and team member toolkits to support employee wellbeing
- vocos Voice – employee committee with representatives from each department aiding communication and strengthening employee voice and fairness

THE IMPACT

The outcomes of voco Belfast's inclusive recruitment strategy have been both practical and cultural. By rethinking how people are hired, supported, and developed, the hotel has created measurable business benefits while fostering a stronger, more connected workforce. Key results include:

81% retention rate

at leadership level— reducing turnover and recruitment costs

- Improved engagement and diversity across teams
- Greater confidence in disability inclusion and accessible hiring
- More inclusive leadership pipeline through internal progression



CONCLUSION

Hospitality employers can unlock new talent by rethinking traditional recruitment approaches. For voco Belfast inclusive recruitment has led to lower turnover, higher engagement, and stronger progression pathways all while supporting broader business resilience. Key takeaways from this approach include:

- Prioritise retention – it's your best recruitment strategy
- Embrace flexible working – it attracts and retains diverse talent
- Partner with organisations that support underrepresented groups
- Train hiring managers and embed inclusion across the employee journey
- Challenge outdated perceptions of hospitality careers

“When inclusion is authentic and aligned with business goals, it delivers real value.”