**Helen Dolphin**

Hi, I’m Helen Dolphin and I work as a paralegal at Fry Law, helping other disabled people bring discrimination claims, and the reason for that all started several years ago.

I had to have a meeting in London with someone that I’d not met before and they asked me to choose the lunch venue. So, wanting to find somewhere that was accessible, I thought well, I’ll go for a large chain because they’re generally much more accessible than other restaurants.

I thought, oh, I’ll go to Pizza Express because I’d been to them several times in Norwich and always found them really accessible and I like the menu as well. I used to the internet and I booked it online to find the table and everything was okay.

My taxi drops me and my PA and my assistance dog off just outside. To my utter horror I notice that there’s a flight of steps leading up to the entrance to the restaurant and I noticed at the top of the steps, not the bottom, was a bell to ring for assistance.

So I send my PA up to ring the bell and out pops one of the waiters to ask what help he can give us. So I was like, “Well, is there a side entrance?” and he replied “No.” I said, “Do you have any ramps?” although that probably would have been a pretty long ramp if that was the case. He said, “Oh, no, I get the chef and we’ll lift you in,” and I didn’t really want to be lifted in my chair because if I’d been dropped it could have been, you know, really quite dangerous.

I said “I’ll get out of my chair,” because I can just about manage if I’ve got someone on either side going up the steps. Between us we all managed to get me into the restaurant where I met the chap that I was meeting for lunch.

After lunch I said, like most people do, “Do you have an accessible toilet?” and he was like, “No, sorry and our only toilets are down this… another flight of stairs,” it was significantly large, there was no way that I would have got down or up. I had to say that I was going to end the meeting really quickly and go off somewhere else to find another loo.

I had to repeat the rigmarole of going down the steps to the restaurant and then getting my taxi and off I went. When I got home I thought, you know, it’s really not acceptable for a big chain like that not to have done anything at all to make itself accessible.

So I wrote a letter to Pizza Express explaining what happened to me and how I felt that they could improve the situation … and nothing happened. I waited several months and still nothing happened. I even wrote a second letter and didn’t get a response.

After that, I was like, well, I’m going to contact Fry Law and see what they can do to help me. I spoke to Chris Fry and agreed this shouldn’t be happening and they took the case on for me. Then it transpired that my letter had been sort of sent to the wrong department and had got lost, I think that was their explanation, but once they (Pizza Express), had got my letter and Fry Law were on the case then things were starting to get sorted out really quickly. Pizza Express actually dealt with the complaint really well, you know, very apologetic to me, what could they do to make amends for my ruined lunch and also looking at their policy across their chain of restaurants and implementing changes.

No one should have the same situation. In fact what happened was, we found out there was actually a completely accessible restaurant just half a mile away.

So what they probably should have done was to say to me, “We’re terribly sorry, you shouldn’t have booked this and we’ll put you in a taxi and sent you off to the accessible one,” but no one really thought to do that. If that had happened it would have been a much better experience and I believe that is now kind of one of things they do at that particular restaurant, although I think most Pizza Express’ are pretty accessible.

Well, I’ve just put some draft letters together for Disability Rights UK and people can get them off the website and there’s various different scenarios for people to look at, situations, and you can literally just put in your own details, your own description of what’s happened to you and send it off to the business or the company who you feel has discriminated against you and see what they come back with.

It might be that you don’t hear anything and you want further advice from us at Fry Law or it might be that you get a response which you’re really happy with and it might be that they change their policy because of the letter that you’ve written.

So it’s really a good way for people that are feeling that something negative has happened to turn that into a real positive, get them to change their policy. You’ll probably get an apology, you can always ask for the damages if that’s what you want and you’ll make somewhere accessible, not only for you, but for other people in a similar situation and just help to make places a lot more accessible for everyone.