



**Report on Special Assistance at George Best Belfast City Airport**

**January 2019**

## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 This report details the findings of a meeting in February 2019 of the George Best Belfast City Airport's Accessibility Forum which involved a tour of the airport building. The Accessibility Forum was established in November 2018 and is made up of a range of organisations who represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.2 European Regulation (EC) 1107/2006 provides rights for passengers with disabilities and reduced mobility when travelling by air. All airports and airlines in the European Union are required to provide assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 1.3 In 2014 the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued guidance requiring airports to consult with passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 1.4 Forum members were generally positive about the airport's facilities and the special assistance services that are provided to passengers. The main suggestions focused around improvements to signage, the future development of an airside quiet room and assisting passengers with a hearing impairment.
- 1.5 The findings of the visit will be shared with the airport. An update on the progress made against the suggestions will be reported by the airport to the Accessibility Forum.

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<sup>1</sup> IMTAC, Guide Dogs NI, Disability Action, Alzheimer's Society, Crohn's and Colitis UKNI, Urostomy Association, NI Assistance Dogs, NOW Group, PEAT and Action on Hearing Loss

## 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In 2006 European Regulations<sup>2</sup> came into place that require all airports and airlines in the European Union to assist passengers with a disability or with a reduced mobility (PRM)<sup>3</sup> when travelling. Airlines licensed in the EU operating flights from a non-EU country into the EU must also assist passengers.
- 2.2 The Consumer Council is the recognised complaints handling body for these EU Regulations<sup>4</sup> relating to an airport in NI or a flight departing from a Northern Ireland airport. The Consumer Council works alongside the Northern Ireland airports to ensure that these services continue to meet passengers' needs.
- 2.3 In 2014 the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) issued guidance requiring airports to consult with passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. This *'should, as much as possible, include practical inspections of airport services (generally using 'walk throughs')*. *Airports should also consider convening regular forums containing representatives of disability groups and individuals'*
- 2.4 In 2018, The Consumer Council worked with George Best Belfast City Airport to establish an Accessibility Forum at the airport. Membership of the Accessibility Forum consists of a range of organisations that represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility. The aim is to provide a forum for users of the Airport's Special Assistance services or their representatives to share their knowledge and experiences of services at the airport.
- 2.5 The second meeting of the Accessibility Forum took place on 31 January 2019 and involved a tour of the airport facilities. The purpose of the visit was for forum members to provide feedback on the current facilities and

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<sup>2</sup> EC Regulation No 1107/2006

<sup>3</sup> People of Restricted Mobility (PRM)

<sup>4</sup> Civil Aviation (Access to Air Travel for Disabled Persons and Persons with Reduced Mobility) Regulations 2007 (SI 2007/1895)

services and to identify possible changes that could further assist air passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

- 2.6 The airport has recently redeveloped its security search area and departure lounge area and this was the first time many of the participants had viewed the new facilities. Overall, participants were positive about the airport and the special assistance services that are provided. A large amount of suggestions focused on signage throughout the airport. Other discussion points included comments about the colour contrast of the flooring, walls, ceiling and equipment and noise levels in the security screening area, the availability of a quiet room, a dog spending area and the carriage of medical equipment in hand luggage.
- 2.7 The intended outcome of this visit is to work with the airport to implement the suggestions made by forum members. The airport will provide feedback on actions taken from the guidance and suggestions made at the next forum meeting.
- 2.8 The airport and The Consumer Council would like to thank those participants who took part on the day.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

- 3.1 The airport arranged for the Accessibility Forum to meet at the airport on 31 January 2019. There were over 20 participants on the day from a range of organisations that represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 3.2 The forum was split into three groups and airport staff guided each group through the airport beginning at the check-in area and finishing in the arrivals areas. A brief round-up discussion with the whole forum was held at the end of the tour.
- 3.3 Staff from The Consumer Council took notes at the visit and recorded the suggestions that were made by the group.

## **4. FINDINGS**

4.1 The following section provides a summary of the key discussion points that were recorded with corresponding suggestions. The findings are set out in the order of the various stages of moving through the airport.

### Arriving at the airport

4.2 At the beginning of the tour the group discussed the various ways that a passenger could arrive at the airport and the assistance points that were available. A participant noted that taxi drivers do not assist passengers into the terminal building. It was explained that assistance staff will meet passengers at the drop off area and there is an assistance button to notify the airport of your arrival.

### **Suggestion**

- It was suggested that the signage should be reviewed at the drop off areas to ensure they were visible to passengers.

### Check-in

4.3 The tour began in the check-in area where the special assistance desk is located. Participants said that when entering through the airport main doors it is not obvious where the special assistance desk is located. Given the busy nature of the airport the desk can be obscured for example by passengers/trolleys/airport equipment making it difficult to see.

4.4 The importance of the availability of an operational 'hearing loop' system at the special assistance desk and corresponding signage informing passengers of its availability was highlighted by group members.

4.5 The group commended the airport for the availability of a Changing Places facility in the check-in area but believed that the signage for the facility could be improved.

## **Suggestions**

- Improve the signage for the special assistance desk. Suggestions included directional signage at eye level when entering the main doors and a sign above the desk that protrudes from the wall. The example, of the protruding 'Currency Exchange' signage was cited as a possible solution.
- Ensure there is an operational 'Hearing Loop' system available at the special assistance desk.
- Review the signage of the 'Changing Places' facility so that it is highly visible.

## Security Screening

- 4.6 The airport has recently renovated the security screening area. On the day of the visit it was the first time for many of the forum members to use it and views were generally positive. Some participants highlighted that in the new security hall there is little colour contrast between the flooring, walls, ceiling and equipment in the area making it difficult for some passengers with a visual impairment to navigate.
- 4.7 It was recognised that the security screening area is a busy part of the airport and can often be very noisy. This can be disorientating for passengers with dementia. On the day of the site visit the group used the fast track security lane and it was highlighted that this would be helpful for passengers with dementia as it was quieter than the main area.
- 4.8 It was discussed that passengers with a reduced mobility may find it difficult to use the new tray system as it would be difficult to lift the trays onto the belt. The airport explained that either assistance staff or security staff would be available to assist passengers.
- 4.9 One participant who is an assistance dog user explained that at times there was not a consistent approach when going through the security screening process as sometimes staff ask for the dog's harness to be removed. The participant also explained that assistance dogs are not able to use the escalators and airport staff should be aware of this.

- 4.10 Another participant explained that passengers with a disability or specific medical condition may have medical equipment in their hand luggage, and having security personnel open their bags to search in the presence of other passengers can cause embarrassment.

### **Suggestions**

- The airport should consider if there is a way that colour contrasting could be introduced into security hall area;
- Ensure a consistent approach is taken by all staff when assisting passengers with assistance dogs. Consider including information about processing through security with assistance dogs on the airport's website; and
- Investigate the possibility of introducing an alert system e.g. lanyard system so airport staff are aware that bags may contain medical equipment and to be discrete when searching these.

### Departure Area

- 4.11 After leaving the security area participants used either the escalator or lift to gain access to the departure lounge. Participants positively noted the large departure screen at the top of the stairs but believed directional signage in this area could be better, for example, by having it at eye level.
- 4.12 The group moved through the new retail area and participants commented that it was wide and free from obstruction making it easy to navigate. It was highlighted by a participant that the floor tiles felt 'slippy' under foot despite not being wet. Again, participants noted the spacious layout of the restaurant area allowing for ease of movement throughout.
- 4.13 Airport staff explained that further work was being carried out to introduce a 'quiet room' in the departure lounge. The group believed that this was a welcome development. The size of the room was discussed as participants believed that it was important the room was not cramped. It was suggested that there should be flight information boards available in the quiet room.

4.14 A participant queried if there was a dedicated spending<sup>5</sup> area for assistance dogs. The airport advised that currently there was not a dedicated area and the participant suggested that the airport consider having one.

### **Suggestions**

- Introduce directional signage at eye level on the wall opposite the top of the escalator from the security hall;
- Ensure surfaces are 'slip free';
- When developing a quiet room consider the size to ensure it feels as spacious as possible;
- Consider the installation of flight information screens within the quiet room; and
- Consider a dedicated assistance dog spending area at the airport.

### Assisted Travel Seating Area

4.15 There is a dedicated seating area for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility and this is clearly marked. It was noted that this was a popular area of the airport and passengers who do not require assistance also use it. Participants noted that there was a help button located in the area but highlighted that this was not easily noticeable or accessible as on the day a passenger was sitting in its way.

4.16 Participants commented that passengers are given details of boarding times and gates, a question was raised if it was possible to consider a buzzer notification system which could remind passengers it was time to make their way back to the assistance area if they had been using the facilities. It was felt that this would be particularly useful for passengers with specific learning needs.

### **Suggestion**

- Ensure the assistance button within the seating area is not blocked by seating so that it can be easily accessed; and

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<sup>5</sup> A spending facility is a sectioned area where a guide dog and other assistance dogs can relieve themselves.



- Investigate the possibility of a buzzer alert system for passengers.

#### Gate area

- 4.17 The group noted that there were no toilet facilities in the gate area downstairs and highlighted that this could be problematic for passengers with a disability if they were required to remain in this area for an extended period of time.
- 4.18 Participants noted that there was limited directional signage for the baggage reclaim and exit which could be confusing for arriving passengers.

#### **Suggestion**

- Consider installing signage at the boarding gates advising passengers there are no toilets beyond that point;
- In the event of a delay in boarding the airplane ensure airport staff are aware of toilet facilities that passengers can access close the boarding area; and
- Improve directional signage throughout the airport, including having signage at eye level.

#### Baggage Reclaim

- 4.19 The group discussed the availability of staff at the baggage enquiries desk. It was noted that there was a sign that states that passengers can use the telephone to request assistance. A participant explained that passengers with a hearing impairment would not be able to use the telephone to contact staff.

#### **Suggestion**

- Investigate alternative ways that passengers can alert baggage staff that they may require assistance.

### General Comments

- 4.20 Some participants were not aware that the airport was 'JAM Card' friendly therefore the airport could do more to promote that airport staff are trained to recognise this initiative.
- 4.21 There was discussion about the systems in place at the airport if there was an emergency and how passengers with a hearing impairment are alerted. It was explained that fire wardens are trained to identify passengers who require assistance and that areas such as toilets will be checked in the event of an alarm. It was also advised that the ceiling lighting flashes at the same time as the audible fire alarm. A participant questioned if there was a possibility of having a clear visual alarm alongside the audible one as flashing lights could happen as a result of an electrical fault.
- 4.22 The airport operates a lanyard system, similar to other airports across the UK, for passengers with hidden disabilities. There was a discussion that each airport uses a different lanyard meaning passengers can end up with multiple lanyards. It was recognised that this was not an issue specifically for the airport but could be raised with the Civil Aviation Authority who is the industry regulator.

### Suggestions

- Promote that the airport is 'JAM' card friendly throughout the building, specifically at customer facing areas;
- Investigate the possibility of an alternative 'visual fire alarm'; and
- The Consumer Council to raise the issue of multiple lanyards with the Civil Aviation Authority.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

- 5.1 Overall, participants were very positive about the special assistance services available at the airport. The group were complimentary about the airport's new updated facilities and the future development of an airside quiet room. Suggestions made on the day mainly focused around improvements to signage and ways to improve assistance for passengers with a hearing impairment.

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

- 6.1 The comments made by participants will be presented to the airport. The Consumer Council will work with the airport to support it as it implements the changes to ensure that services continue to meet passengers' needs. An update on the progress made against the suggestions will be shared with the Airport's Accessibility Forum.

Floor 3  
Seatem House  
28-32 Alfred Street  
Belfast  
BT2 8EN



Freephone: 0800 121 6022  
Switchboard: 028 9025 1600  
Fax: 028 9025 1663