



Report on Special Assistance at Belfast International Airport

February 2019

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report details the findings of a meeting in February 2019 of the Belfast International Airport's Accessibility Forum which involved a tour of the airport building. This was the first meeting of the Accessibility Forum, which is made up of a range of organisations which represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 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 The Forum was 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, seating, customer information and future development at the airport.
- 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 at the next meeting.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 In 2006 European Regulations¹ 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)² 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 Regulations³ relating to an airport in Northern Ireland 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'*

¹ EC Regulation No 1107/2006

² People of Restricted Mobility (PRM)

³ Civil Aviation (Access to Air Travel for Disabled Persons and Persons with Reduced Mobility) Regulations 2007 (SI 2007/1895)

- 2.4 In 2019, The Consumer Council worked with Belfast International 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 mobility⁴. 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 first meeting of the Accessibility Forum took place on 7 February 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 services and to identify possible changes that could further assist air passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 2.6 The site visit began with a brief introductory meeting followed by a tour of the facilities. A member of staff that works in the airport's car park talked members through the process for passengers wishing to park at the airport. Participants were positive about the special assistance team at the airport and shared a number of examples of how the team assisted them when travelling. Suggestions for improvement surrounded car parking, passenger information, seating and signage.
- 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 Belfast International Airport and The Consumer Council would like to thank those participants who took part on the day.

3. METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The Forum met at the airport on 7 February 2019. There were 17 participants on the day from a range of organisations that represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 3.2 The Forum began with an introduction from The Consumer Council and airport including a discussion on airport car parking. The Consumer Council and airport staff then guided the 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 IMTAC, Guide Dogs NI, Alzheimer's Society, Age Sector Platform, Parkinsons' UK, Cedar Foundation and Crohn's & Colitis UK and Muscular Dystrophy

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 The airport informed the group of the five stage process for booking car parking that allows blue badge holders to avail of car parking in the short stay car park at the cheapest car parking rate. This information is available on the airport's website⁵ or contacting it by telephone. Many of the participants were not aware that this facility was available.

4.3 A participant explained that due to reduced mobility it can be difficult for some passengers to reach the help button on the car park barriers to announce their arrival. Another participant explained that passengers with a hearing impairment may not be able to hear the person through the speaker. The airport advised that passengers can contact the airport in advance and agree a time for a member of staff to meet them. If a passenger presses the button on the ticket machine and does not respond a member of staff will go to the barrier to assist them.

4.4 A frequent user of the airport discussed the issues that they have encountered in relation to the length and position of some of the accessible car parking spaces. The designated spaces were not long enough for vehicles used by a wheelchair user who accessed their vehicle via a ramp at the back. The airport advised that if it had advance notice it can block two zones.

4.5 The airport advised that there are assistance help points in all the passenger drop off areas outside the terminal building. Participants explained that it can be difficult at times to get stopped at the accessible drop off points due to these being blocked by other vehicles such as taxis.

4.6 It was highlighted that the gradient and angle of the access to the footpath at the drop off area causes difficulties for some wheelchair users and some people with luggage trolleys.

4.7 A participant who was a guide dog user explained the difficulty they face at airports is finding their way from drop off points into the terminal building and they often rely on the kindness of strangers. The airport explained that there are assistance points at all drop off areas that link directly to the special assistance desk. The airport also stated passengers can telephone in advance to agree a time for staff to meet them.

4.8 It was noted that the assistance points can be located at different areas within the shelters, for example, some on the left, some on the right. It was explained that for consistency these should all be on the same side as it helps passengers with a visual impairment to locate them.

⁵ <https://www.belfastairport.com/special-assistance/blue-badge-holders>

Suggestions

- Review the airport website and pre-travel information to ensure passengers who are blue badge holders are informed about the process for booking airport car parking;
- Review the accessible parking bays to ensure there is adequate space to allow users to safely exit and enter the vehicle, including from the rear of the vehicle;
- Consider a sticker on the car park barrier alerting passengers that once pressed staff will assist them;
- Make signage clearer around the accessible drop off area to deter other vehicles from stopping there;
- Investigate if access to the pavement at the accessible drop off area could be improved; and
- Review position of assistance points and ensure consistency of location.

Check-in

- 4.9 On entering the airport there is a large sign above the OCS desk in the check-in which says 'Special Assistance'. Participants explained that passengers may relate more to the recognised symbols for disabilities. These symbols were present behind the desk, however, it was discussed that the symbols may be obscured by staff standing in front of them and suggested that the recognised symbol for disability could also be on the signage above the desk.
- 4.10 A number of participants discussed their experiences of using special assistance at the airport and there was general agreement that they staff are very helpful, including introducing themselves to passengers by their first names. This is good practice and especially useful for a passenger with a visual impairment.

Suggestion

- Investigate the possibility of adding the recognised symbol for disability above the assistance desk.

Security Screening

- 4.11 At the time of the visit the security area was undergoing renovation to increase the number of lanes. Due to the work there was no private screening room available but the airport stated that if this was requested an office within the area would be made available to facilitate the passenger's request.
- 4.12 A 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 with other passengers in close consistency can cause embarrassment.
- 4.13 A general comment was made that security staff need to be aware of the needs of passengers with disabilities and how to handle assistance dogs. It was stressed that patience and clear communication is key in assisting with a disability or reduced mobility passengers.

4.14 Passenger information signage regarding the security process was described as small and difficult to read. An example of this is the sign through the archway advising passengers about the full body scan.

Suggestions

- All security staff should undergo regular disability awareness training;
- Ensure a consistent approach is taken by all staff when assisting passengers with assistance dogs. Consider including information about the security screening process when travelling with an assistance dogs on the airport's website;
- 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 discreet when searching these; and
- Review the size and positioning of passenger information signs to ensure they are clearly visible.

Departure Area

4.15 When exiting security, passengers are directed through a food outlet area. It was felt that the route through to the main departure lounge could be made more obvious, which would help those passengers with a learning disability or with a visual impairment.

4.16 Currently, there are some seats marked for passengers requiring special assistance throughout the general seating areas. There were mixed views within the group on whether there should be a dedicated assistance seating area. However, the group did comment some of the dedicated seating in the middle rows may be difficult to access as the pathway could be blocked by other passengers and luggage. Other dedicated seating was positioned at the end of seat clusters which was viewed by the group as more accessible.

4.17 Generally, it was stated that seating was limited and participants questioned if there is an adequate amount of dedicated seating for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility, especially during busy periods.

4.18 Additionally, it was discussed if it would be possible to have a reserved space beside the seating for a wheelchair user. This would be beneficial as it would avoid blocking the aisles and mean that passengers would not feel alienated in a separate area.

4.19 Participants highlighted that there was a need for more visible staff within the departure area. This would not only benefit passengers requiring assistance but other passengers who may require help. The airport explained that there are telephone help points but the group commented that these were difficult to identify.

4.20 The airport explained that it does not have a quiet room airside but there is a quiet area away from the main lounges that can be used. Participants commended this initiative and believed that the airport could do more to promote its availability, including improving the signage in the vicinity of the seating area.

4.21 There were flight information screens throughout the departure lounge. Participants commented that the accessibility of the information was not very clear due to the small font size and the large number of flights displayed. Participants stated that there are not enough screens throughout the departure lounge and it was highlighted that passengers sometimes congregate around the screen outside the main toilets blocking access to the toilets.

Suggestions

- Improve way-finding through the airport departure lounge, for example, by using bright coloured flooring and clear signage, including signage at eye level;
- Review the location and amount of dedicated seating for passengers with a disability, including reserved spaces for wheelchair users;
- Work with service delivery partners to investigate the possibility of a staffed passenger information point airside;
- Improve the signage promoting the quiet area and develop passenger information, including on the airport website highlighting its availability; and
- Investigate the possibility of increasing the font size of the current flight information screens.
- Explore the installation of additional flight information screens, including screens at eye level.

Gate area

4.22 The group were taken to a boarding gate that was at ground level which involved going down stairs and using a lift. Once downstairs passengers pass through the airline's boarding process. It was noted that there were no toilet facilities available in the downstairs waiting area. The airport advised that should passengers need access to toilets they can ask staff to be 'de-boarded' and assistance staff can take them up to the departure lounge. It was discussed that the unavailability of toilets at the boarding gate should be made known to passengers before passing that point.

4.23 The group noted on entering the waiting area that the sun was particularly bright, this combined with lack of colour contrast between walls, seat and flooring could create difficulties for passengers with a visual impairment.

Suggestion

- Place a sign in advance of the stairwell to alert passengers there are no toilet facilities at the boarding gate; and
- The airport should consider if there is a way that colour contrasting could be introduced.

Arrivals/Baggage Reclaim

4.24 On entering the arrivals hall through the double doors it is not automatically apparent that there is a ramp to the right for passengers who may not be able to use the stairs.

4.25 On the day of the visit it was noted that the arrivals hall was quiet. Members who had travelled through the airport on previous occasions explained that when flights arrive it can be

extremely busy and noisy. This combined with the bright lights and the mirrored ceiling can be disorientating or cause anxiety for some passengers with a visual impairment or for those passengers with autism.

4.26 A participant commented that signage is essential for all passengers, but especially for those requiring assistance, and felt that it was difficult to identify passenger information signage amongst the large amount of product advertising.

4.27 It was noted that there is a quiet room available in the arrivals hall and it was believed this was a good idea. It was suggested that a similar room in departures would benefit passengers.

Suggestions

- When re-developing the airport consider the levels of lighting and construction materials used and consult with passengers with a disability in design work;
- Review the balance of advertising and airport signage to ensure that passenger information signage is clearly visible;
- Consider if it is possible to introduce a 'quiet route' to assist passengers through arrivals; and
- Consider the possibility of a quiet room for passengers within the departure lounge area.

5. CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Overall, participants were positive about the special assistance services available at the airport. Participants were able to make suggestions based on their experiences of travelling as a passenger and on issues they identified during the visit. Suggestions included improving passenger information and awareness of services available, seating, signage and considerations for future development of the airport building.

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 at the next meeting.



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