



**Consumer Council Report on Airport Special
Assistance Provision
December 2015**

A) Introduction

In 2008, Regulation (EC) No.1107/2006: 'Rights of Disabled Persons and Persons with Reduced Mobility when travelling by air' (the Regulation) came into force placing a requirement on all airlines and airports within the European Union (EU) to provide assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility when travelling by air.

The Regulation states that airports in the EU are responsible for providing assistance to passengers with disabilities and reduced mobility from arrival at the airport, through to boarding the plane and leaving the plane until they exit the airport. EU owned airlines and airlines operating from an EU airport are also required to provide certain assistance on board the aircraft.

In Northern Ireland (NI), the Consumer Council is the designated complaint handling body for this Regulation. We handle complaints relating to an airport in NI or a flight departing from an airport in NI. Since the introduction of the Regulation a lot of work has been carried out by the NI airports to provide assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility as they travel by air. The Consumer Council has worked closely with NI airports in the promotion of air passenger rights and our complaint handling role.

In January 2015, we organised 11 people with a range of disabilities and mobility needs to take part in a site visits. Organisations represented included the Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), the Prosthetic Forum NI and Age Sector Platform. The airports, their assistance staff and Consumer Council staff were also involved.

The then Junior Minister Jonathan Bell MLA and Junior Minister Jennifer McCann MLA attended the visit at George Best Belfast City Airport. In addition Linda McAuley, from BBC Radio Ulster's On Your Behalf consumer rights programme, joined the Belfast International Airport visit and spoke to attendees for the show that was broadcast on 31 January 2015.

The purpose of the visits was to examine the special assistance provided; to help participants gain a better understanding of the support available and to provide the airports and Consumer Council with an insight into some of issues faced by passengers using the service.

The Consumer Council wanted to consider what the NI airports¹ are providing in terms of special assistance; how they are meeting their obligations under the Regulation; and identifying other areas where further changes or improvements could be made. The site visits included a briefing from airport management and assistance staff and a tour of the airport facilities and services.

¹ Following the site visits Consumer Council staff met with the City of Derry Airport and provided suggestions for improvements based on participants' feedback.

These site visits were primarily intended to focus on the specific services provided by the airports. However, during the course of the visits, service issues relating to airlines and tour operators were also mentioned, in terms of bookings, transfer of information and travelling on-board the aircraft, and these findings have also been reflected in this report.

The Consumer Council would like to thank the participants, Belfast International Airport and George Best Belfast City Airport for their co-operation in attending and facilitating the airport site visits at the end of January 2015.

The Consumer Council would also like to thank then Junior Minister Jonathan Bell MLA and Junior Minister Jennifer McCann MLA and BBC's Linda McAuley for attending the events, helping raising the profile of these important services.

B) Findings from the site visits

1) Good Customer Service Standards

Participants expressed the view that special assistance services at any airport should be firmly built around a foundation of good customer service standards. This included treating people with respect and dignity and speaking to them appropriately.

Participants had all travelled regularly from both airports in Belfast. They highlighted that the special assistance service and treatment that participants received from the NI airports was of a very high standard.

During the site visits, participants explained that:

- a) Many people with disabilities do not want their disability to be focused on as a difficulty, or problem. However, it was recognised that some people do not have visible disabilities and may not receive the assistance required if they have not pre-notified the airport or airline. It was therefore felt to be important that a balance was needed between a passenger's individual needs whilst ensuring their dignity is preserved was very important to participants;
- b) Passengers should be actively encouraged by the airports to book special assistance and there should be no embarrassment about using this service.

Airports should also remind disabled passengers, or those with a reduced mobility, that they can go to the assistance desk and be helped through check-in and fast tracked through security, making their journey potentially easier and less stressful;

- c) Some passengers have found it difficult to book assistance and to have their disability correctly categorised when filling out booking forms online for example; and
- d) Participants also commented that some airlines' special assistance telephone numbers are charged at high cost or premium rate and they felt that this was not fair or equitable.²

Participants' suggestions for improvement for good customer service standards:

- Special assistance should be easy to book whether in person, online or via the telephone.
- Within the booking process passengers should be afforded plenty of time and space to specify what sort of assistance they require; and
- It should be clear that special assistance telephone numbers are charged at a local or low cost rate.

² This is participants' perception. All UK airlines offer low/local cost telephone numbers for Special Assistance passengers.

2) Communication

Participants strongly emphasised that communication was the most important part of the special assistance service and process. They highlighted that how they were spoken to, and the information they received from airport and airline staff through all stages of their journey, was critical in their passenger experience.

Information boards and announcements

Participants advised that:

- a) It is generally very difficult for passengers to see the flight information screens without having to move very close to them, or strain their eyesight; and
- b) Many of the special assistance seating areas do not have large flight information screens beside them. This often forces disabled passengers, or those with reduced mobility, to get up and down from their seat to see the nearest screen, which can be tiring and frustrating.

Participants' suggestions for improvements for information boards and announcements:

- Introduce larger print flight display units or screens, and ensure they are placed near special assistance seating areas;

- Ensure all flight announcements are loudly, clearly and slowly enunciated for those who have a hearing impairment; and
- Ensure assistance staff inform special assistance passengers of all important flight announcements, especially those relating to delays or cancellations.

Signage

Participants thought that:

- a) Generally facilities and services were well sign posted throughout the airports; and
- b) Small sandwich board signs (often called pavement signs) or small plastic display signs can very easily be obscured by someone standing in front of them.

Participants' suggestion for improvement for signage:

- Special assistance seating areas could also be signposted from the ceiling, alongside their current signage, to ensure visibility.

3) Consistency

Participants commented that:

- a) They expected and valued a certain degree of consistency of approach from airport and airline staff. A seamless handover from

one set of staff to another when they were boarding the plane was especially welcomed; and

- b) The quality of their travel experiences varied depending on what time of day and year they travelled, what airport/airline they had used, and the staff who were working.

Participants' suggestion for improvement for consistency:

- Airports should continue to engage with the Consumer Council, and disabled passenger groups, to look at practical ways of achieving greater consistency across the special assistance services.

4) Car parking/Arrival and Departure points

Arrival and departure points

Participants highlighted that:

- a) The walking distance from the car park or drop off zones into the terminals and then on to the assistance area was just about manageable for disabled or reduced mobility passengers. However, some participants felt that it was painful to walk this distance, or they were exhausted afterwards. They highlighted that this unfortunately would have a knock on effect on the remainder of their journey. Participants understood that nothing could be done about moving the car parks closer but would welcome any additional steps that

could be taken to make this journey less physically demanding for them;

- b) Covered shelters and walkways were welcomed. They kept passengers dry when they get out of their vehicle, or get left off at drop off zones;
- c) Some special assistance users like and find it convenient to use their car, but they need assistance to access the airport from their car. The majority of the participants were unaware that airport assistance could be provided once they had parked their car. They also did not know that they could press the intercom button when entering the car park to advise staff they had arrived; and
- d) Only some special assistance users were aware that at both the Belfast airports they can park in the short stay car park (which is a shorter walking distance) and be charged at long stay rates on production of their booking confirmation and blue badge at the information desk.

Participants' suggestions for improvement in car parking/arrival and departure points:

- Airports should consider increasing the charge free "grace period" for dropping off and picking up passengers with a disability or reduced mobility in the short stay car park. Where this is already

available this should be promoted to special assistance passengers before travelling; and

- Airports should make it clearer to passengers who require special assistance that support is available from when they arrive at the car park. Airports could for example provide pre-travel information and make information notices clearer in the car park and on the entrance barrier ticket machine's call button.

5) Security Screening

Participants highlighted that:

- a) Security screening was the most daunting stage of passing through an airport and they had often had problematic experiences. Participants understood that in accordance with Department for Transport security regulations all passengers must undergo a full screening process. However, they felt that during the security check process staff needed to be professional and treat disabled and reduced mobility passengers with dignity. In doing so security check process staff need to communicate clearly and effectively with the special assistance passenger at all stages of the screening, and be sympathetic to their needs;
- b) Security check areas are often busy and space is limited. Participants felt that often they believe other passengers are listening to them, and the security check process drew attention

to their disability, or allowed their personal and medical details to be discussed.

Some participants highlighted that they preferred to explain their needs to assistance staff when they arrived at the airport, and wanted the assistance staff to pass this information onto security check staff who could then tailor the screening process appropriately;

- c) Training for security check staff on special assistance passengers and their communication with special assistance passengers should be something that is regularly undertaken and monitored by the airports' management.

Participants' suggestions for improvement of security screening:

- Clearer information should be provided on the private search facilities which are available on request (eg signs and notices);
- A seating area situated before the hand luggage scanners should be provided to help special assistance passengers who need to sit down to remove their shoes, belts, and jackets;
- An agreed protocol should be introduced for guiding or instructing blind or visually impaired passengers through a security scanner;

- A consistent approach to communicating security procedures to special assistance passengers. Participants felt that greater consistency in the approach used by security staff and clear communication will help alleviate feelings of anxiety from special assistance passengers.
- Develop an agreed and clear approach to security screening and the information provided regarding the carrying of medical equipment and medications. For example:
 - Are all medications under 100 millilitres that are displayed in regulation bags permissible?
 - Are epi-pens allowed, or do they need a doctor's certificate?
 - Should passengers pre-notify the airline or airport when they are going to be carrying medication in their hand luggage?

6) Seating

Participants commented that:

- a) Seating in many of the special assistance seating areas is not suitable for their needs as they are too low. This is especially a problem for elderly people and those passengers with a reduced mobility.

The angle of the seats also makes them very difficult to get in and out of and the lack of arm rests often exacerbates the accessibility problem;

- b) In some of the special assistance seating areas there is not enough room for wheelchairs or scooters. Participants highlighted that they would prefer to have spaces for scooters or wheelchairs instead of lines of fixed seating; and
- c) Special assistance passengers would like to know where they are likely to be seated onboard the aeroplane as soon as the airline knows so that they can make the necessary preparations for the flight.

Participants' suggestions for improvements for seating:

- Special Assistance seating areas should be modified to provide spaces for wheelchairs and scooters;
- Seating in the dedicated special assistance areas should be higher, and have armrests, so that it meets the needs of users with a disability or mobility problem and makes it easier to get in and out of; and
- Airlines should advise special assistance passengers as soon as practically possible where they will be seated on the aeroplane.

7) Equipment and facilities

Participants commented that:

- a) They found access at the NI Airports to equipment needed to assist passengers around the airport and to board and disembark the plane was good.
- b) Participants highlighted that at both George Best Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport there are plenty of airport wheelchairs, and those who have used them have never encountered a problem with them.
- c) Generally, special assistance passengers only have to wait for an ambulift during particularly busy times.
- d) Special assistance passengers would like airlines to provide further information on the handling and storage of their mobility or medical equipment as well as any prosthetics they may have on board the aeroplane.

Participants' suggestions for improvements to equipment and facilities:

- Provision of information to special assistance passengers on how equipment and prosthetics would be handled and stored prior to and during the flight; and

- Airlines should prioritise hand-luggage space for essential equipment in overhead lockers.

Assistance points/call buttons

Participants felt that:

- a) Assistance points and telephone points located throughout the airport at different stages of the passenger journey are essential to ensure the experience of special assistance passengers is smooth and it provides them with confidence that help is never too far away.
- b) Many special assistance passengers were unaware of the assistance points/call buttons located in the drop-off zones or the car park. These help points were seen as extremely helpful as special assistance passengers would often need assistance from this point.

Participants' suggestions for improvements to assistance points/call buttons:

- Assistance points should be clearly signed and free from obstruction. These should be regularly checked by airport staff to ensure they are functioning ; and
- Assistance point/call button should be placed just after the security check area to help special assistance passengers proceed to their gate.

Toilet facilities

Participants advised that well maintained, accessible toilet facilities are essential to special assistance passengers as often they may not be able to use the toilets on board the aeroplane itself.

Participant's suggestions for improvements in toilet facilities:

- Assistance pull cords should not be tied up in toilets. They need to meet the required safety standards whilst remaining visible and accessible to all passengers in the event of an emergency.
- As part of their routine checks, airport cleaning staff should check the disabled toilets to ensure the facilities are correctly maintained and to ensure special assistance passengers' safety and accessibility;
- The flush handle on disabled toilets should be able to be easily reached by special assistance passengers;
- Disabled toilets within the airports should have a sliding door or a pull bar on the inside of the toilet door. This would help passengers with a disability or mobility needs to open and close the door more easily;
- Airports should ensure that pathways are not obstructed and passengers have clear access to the disabled toilet facilities; and

- ‘Changing Places’³ facilities would be welcomed at all NI airports. Where they exist, they should be promoted and signposted in order to highlight to special assistance passengers that they are available.

³ Fully accessible toilets with enough space and special equipment to meet the needs of users (all disabled people and their carers particularly those with profound and multiple learning difficulties)

C) Next steps

The airport site visits allowed the Consumer Council and the other participants to look specifically at the special assistance provided by the Belfast airports. It also provided an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the support available to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

Through these visits participants were able to share their insights and experiences of travelling by air with a disability or reduced mobility to both the Consumer Council, and the airport representatives.

While participants highlighted the positive experiences they have using the Belfast airports, the Consumer Council hopes that the findings from this report will help to further improve services for those passengers requiring assistance when travelling by air to and from NI.

The Consumer Council is committed to working with the airports and airlines to review the findings from the site visits and to look at the specific areas identified where improvements could be made.

The Consumer Council also looks forward to continuing our work with IMTAC, Prosthetic Users NI and Age Sector Platform as well as other groups representing consumers with a disability or reduced mobility, to improve the experiences of disabled people and others with reduced mobility travelling by air to and from NI.



Making the consumer voice heard and making it count

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

Freephone: 0800 121 6022
Switchboard: 028 9025 1600
Fax: 028 9025 1663
E-mail: info@consumercouncil.org.uk
Website: www.consumercouncil.org.uk

