



**City of Derry Airport Site Visit and Belfast Airport Update on
Special Assistance Provision**

December 2016

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 This report details the findings of a site visit to the City of Derry Airport (CODA) in July 2016 that examined the special assistance services provided at the airport.
- 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 The Consumer Council, in partnership with CODA, arranged for a group of passengers with a disability or reduced mobility and their representatives to visit the airport. The visit involved guiding the group throughout the airport from arrivals to the point of boarding the aircraft. Participants made comments on the services provided and suggested how these could be improved.
- 1.4 The group was positive about the services that were offered by CODA. Participants made suggestions for improvements in relation to car parking, the check-in area, security, the departure lounge and travelling with an assistance dog.
- 1.5 The CODA event mirrors visits that were carried out at George Best Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport in 2015. During these visits similar suggestions for improvements were made. This report provides an update on the proposals that were made.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Northern Ireland consumers rely on air travel to access destinations in Great Britain and further afield. NI has three airports: George Best Belfast City Airport; Belfast International Airport and CODA. In 2014/2015, there were over seven million passenger journeys to and from NI¹.

2.2 For some passengers with a disability or reduced mobility travelling by air may seem like a stressful or daunting experience. In 2006 European Regulations² came into place that requires all airports and airlines in the European Union to assist passengers with a disability or with a reduced mobility (PRM)³ when travelling. Airlines licensed in the EU operating flights from a non-EU country into the EU must also assist passengers.

2.3 The Consumer Council is the recognised complaints handling body for these EU Regulations⁴ relating to an airport in NI or a flight departing from an NI airport. The Consumer Council works alongside the NI airports to ensure that these services continue to meet passengers' needs.

2.4 In July 2016, the Consumer Council joined with CODA to arrange for passengers to visit the airport. The aim of the visit was to examine the

¹ <https://www.economy-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/deti/Northern-Ireland-Air-Passenger-Flow-Bulletin.pdf>

² EC Regulation No 1107/2006

³ People of Restricted Mobility (PRM)

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

special assistance provided and provide a users' perception on the services offered at the airport and any improvements that could be made. In 2015, we conducted similar site visits at the two Belfast Airports to examine the services offered there.

2.6. The objectives of these visits are to:

- To gain a better understanding of the support available for PRM passengers;
- To become more aware of the specific needs of PRM passengers; and
- To identify possible changes that could further assist PRM passengers.

2.7 Overall participants were complimentary of CODA and the assistance that was available. They made a number of suggestions surrounding the car parking, signage, security screening, toilet areas and facilities for assistance dogs.

2.8 In addition to the above, this report provides an update on the changes that have been made at the Belfast Airports since our 2015 visit.

2.9 The intended outcome is to work with NI airports to ensure that special assistance services meet PRM passengers' needs.

2.10 The Consumer Council would like to take this opportunity to thank all those that took part in the site visits.

3. METHODOLOGY

- 3.1 The Consumer Council arranged a group visit at CODA on 26 July 2016. Organisations represented included North West Forum of People with Disabilities, Disability Action, Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), Action on Hearing Loss, Guide Dogs NI and Prosthetics Users Forum. There was also a CODA passenger who has a child with autism. CODA and Consumer Council staff were also involved.
- 3.2 CODA staff guided the group around the airport beginning with a discussion on the facilities when arriving at the airport. Participants were shown the arrivals hall, special assistance desk, taken through security into the departure lounge and taken to the point where passengers board the aircraft. At this point boarding arrangements were explained to the group.
- 3.3 Consumer Council staff took notes at the visits and recorded the suggestions that were made by participants.
- 3.4 In order to ensure all the participants' comments and suggestions were captured, a short questionnaire was distributed and returned to the Consumer Council following the visit.

4. FINDINGS

Car parking

- 4.1 Participants discussed their experiences when they arrived at the car parking barrier at the entrance to the airport. It was noted that the ticket machine itself was high and presented difficulties for a passenger with reduced mobility to reach the button for the ticket dispenser and help button. The call button was tested and found to be fully operational. One participant asked about the procedure if a passenger with a hearing impairment was to press the help button on arrival at the car park. It was explained that the call button connects directly to an intercom located at the customer service desk that should always be staffed. Customer service staff have a clear line of vision to the car park barrier and if a passenger does not respond a staff member will go out to the passenger to provide assistance.
- 4.2 It was noted that a dropped kerb beside the ticket machine would be beneficial to allow PRM passengers to easily access the footpath.
- 4.3 Participants commented that in places the paintwork for walking areas was faded; this may be difficult for passengers with a visual impairment to follow.
- 4.4 The group commended CODA on the number of disabled parking bays that were available and their proximity to the airport. However during the visit participants missed the assistance points located in the car park. It was suggested that the signs identifying assistance points could

be higher and at a suitable height for wheelchair users. It was also suggested that the colour of the signs should be different to other car park signage.

- 4.5 Airport staff advised that there is a two-hour free period for people dropping off passengers requiring assistance to the airport. Participants agreed that this was good practice and suggested that this service should be proactively promoted to PRM passengers.

Recommendations

- Provide a telephone number for the customer service desk on the ticket machine to assist passengers that may not be able to reach the call buttons. In addition, the airport should consider the possibility of a staff member greeting PRM passengers on arrival at the car park barrier at a pre-arranged time;
- Refresh tarmac paintwork, especially on pedestrian walking areas;
- Install a drop kerb near the entrance of the car parking area close to the ticketing machine;
- Make the assistance point signage more visible by adjusting the height and changing the colour (black on yellow was one suggestion); and
- Promote the two-hour free car parking period to PRM passengers e.g. through the special assistance section on the CODA website.

Check-in area

- 4.6 The customer service/special assistance desk was well positioned and easily located in the arrivals hall. Participants commented that the sign for the desk was too high for some PRM passengers to view clearly.
- 4.7 Staff were asked about the availability of a loop system for passengers with a hearing impairment. It was advised that a loop system was available at the customer service/special assistance desk. Participants noted that the signage for this service was small and not clearly visible.
- 4.8 Participants made a general point about the importance of staff checking the individual type of assistance that each PRM passenger requires, so their specific needs are correctly met. It was also explained that a passenger with a visual impairment may need the support of two assistance staff – one to assist and guide the passenger, and another to handle their luggage if appropriate (e.g. if they have an assistance dog).
- 4.9 An accessible toilet was available in the check-in area. A participant explained to CODA staff that due to the size of some wheelchairs it may be difficult to access and manoeuvre within the current facility. This problem was further compounded by the location of a large waste bin that blocked the available turning space.

Recommendations

- Lower the special assistance sign above the special assistance desk to increase its visibility to PRM passengers;

- A more prominent sign for the loop system should be placed on the customer service desk/area;
- Provide training to customer service staff in basic sign language and guiding visually impaired passengers; and
- Ensure accessible toilet floors are free from obstacles to improve access for wheelchair users.

Security

- 4.10 During the visit a participant with a visual impairment had their metal cane removed from them at the security screening process and was given a wooden walking stick to pass through the security scanner. This substitution was not appropriate to their specific needs, as the stick was for guiding purposes and was not being used as a walking aid.
- 4.11 Another participant highlighted their difficulty in removing a belt to proceed through the security screening. The participant understood why the belt had to be removed and was reassured that staff would assist with the belt once through security.
- 4.12 A private screening area was available and there was signage within it to advise passengers of this facility.

Recommendations

- An agreed protocol should be introduced for guiding or instructing blind or visually impaired passengers through a security scanner. This protocol should be accompanied with appropriate staff training.

Departure lounge

- 4.13 During the visit, one participant highlighted that metal threshold strips installed to join two areas of flooring were slightly raised. This meant that it was difficult when using a cane as it caught on the edge of the strip.

Recommendations

- Ensure that floor threshold strips are as flush to the ground as possible. In addition, it was suggested that threshold strips should be marked with yellow tape to alert visually impaired passengers of a possible trip hazard.

Seating area

- 4.14 A dedicated area for special assistance passengers was present at CODA with clear signage showing where this is located. Visit participants discussed that while it was good that the seating had handles, they were too low and could cause difficulties for some PRM passengers to comfortably get out of.
- 4.15 Participants asked about the possibility of a seat in this area with a fold out table as it may be beneficial for passengers with a visual impairment.
- 4.16 It was additionally noted that there was no space alongside the special assistance seating area for a passenger with a wheelchair to sit. Airport staff explained that there is normally space available and discussed ways to prevent other seating being pushed into this space.

4.17 An assistance point was available in CODA beside the special assistance seating area allowing PRM passengers to contact special assistance staff if necessary. Participants suggested that the height of the assistance button could be lowered and enquired about the possibility of a second assistance point being installed at the other side of the pillar and for a further assistance point being provided at the boarding gate.

Recommendations

- Ensure the assistance points throughout CODA are of an appropriate height for PRM passengers.
- Investigate the possibility of installing additional points within the departure lounge (on the other side of the pillar and at the boarding gate);
- Have higher arm rests on the seating in the special assistance area; and
- Provide a distinct wheelchair space in the special assistance seating area to ensure other seating does not encroach into this area and therefore blocking the space for wheelchair users.

Toilets

4.18 Due to the layout of the departure lounge, it was difficult to see the sign for the toilet facilities. When a PRM passenger approached the main entry door to the toilet area there was no signage at eye level.

4.19 The toilet facilities themselves were small but it was recognised that at present it would be difficult to alter this. In the interim participants

discussed some ideas that would make it easier for PRM passengers to manoeuvre. It was highlighted that the floor should be free from obstacles, and if possible the hand dryer should be positioned beside the sink so that a passenger does not have to turn to use it. This particular accessible toilet also doubles as a baby changing facility, unfortunately this causes the fold down changing table to take up even more space in this small area.

- 4.20 It was noted that the emergency pull cords were currently tied up and it was explained that if a passenger fell on the floor they would not be able to reach this cord to alert staff that they needed assistance.

Recommendations

- Install more signage for direction to the toilet facilities, including a sign on the entrance door to the area;
- Ensure that the accessible toilets are free from large obstacles;
- Investigate the possibility of moving the hand dryer in the accessible toilet;
- Investigate an alternative, appropriate location for the baby changing facilities; and
- Emergency assistance pull cords should not be tied up in toilets and ways to prevent this should be investigated. They need to meet the required safety standards whilst remaining visible and accessible to all passengers in the event of an emergency.

Quiet Room

- 4.21 The group was impressed by the quiet room which was available for those who needed that particular facility, such as a passenger travelling with a child with autism or a passenger travelling with an assistance dog.
- 4.22 It was observed that access to this room is through a shop area which may have been congested with merchandise stands.

Recommendation

- Ensure there is a clear entry path to the quiet room, free from obstruction.

Boarding gate

- 4.23 CODA staff explained the procedures and mechanisms for PRM passengers boarding an aircraft, including the use of an ambulift.
- 4.24 Visit participants discussed the distance at CODA from the boarding gate to the aircraft. A participant enquired, if a PRM passenger who had not pre-requested assistance required it from the boarding gate, would the airport be able to provide it at that point. It was advised that special assistance may be requested at any stage during the boarding process and, if required, CODA will also notify the destination airport so assistance is available on arrival. The Consumer Council also highlighted the importance and benefit of pre-booking special assistance in advance of travel.

Recommendation

- The Consumer Council to continue to raise awareness of passenger rights, including the benefits to PRM passengers of pre-booking special assistance.

Travelling with an assistance dog

4.25 CODA staff advised that if a PRM passenger was travelling with an assistance dog they can have access to the quiet room.

4.26 Participants discussed the provision of dog spending⁵ facilities, especially when a passenger is airside. The airport suggested a suitable area could be made available and agreed to consider this issue further. Participants stressed the importance of being able to stay with their trained assistance dog.

Recommendation

- Introduce a procedure and area where a passenger with a trained assistance dog can be escorted to spend. It was suggested that a dog fouling facilities bin should also be installed in this area; and
- Install a dog fouling bin outside the arrivals area.

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

Airlines

4.27 While booking air travel falls out of the responsibility of CODA a participant explained there are limited selection categories for indicating what type of PRM assistance is required. This means the passenger has to contact the airline directly to explain their requirements further.

Recommendation

- The Consumer Council to highlight this feedback to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) while also being mindful of the CAA's website guidance and IATA's agreed categories for PRMs codes.

5. UPDATE ON 2015 AIRPORT VISITS

5.1 Site visits were conducted in the two Belfast Airports in January 2015. Overall, participants were positive about the services provided to PRM passengers. A number of suggestions were made on areas that could be changed to enhance the experience of those needing to use the services. Further details can be found in the Consumer Council's report on airport special assistance provision (December, 2015)⁶.

5.2 Since the visits both Belfast Airports have taken steps to implement a number of the suggestions made by participants. The following paragraphs provide an update on some of the changes that have been made at the airport.

Communication

5.3 The airports recognise that communication is a vital part of the service for PRM passengers especially during times of disruptions. Special Assistance staff are trained to communicate with passengers and will provide PRM passengers with up to date travel information when it becomes available. Public service announcements are regularly monitored.

Information boards and announcements

5.4 Special assistance areas are clearly signposted and in some areas signs have been suspended from the ceilings. Flight information screens are close to the special assistance areas and a large screen is available in

⁶http://www.consumercouncil.org.uk/filestore/documents/Consumer_Council_Report_on_Airport_Site_Visits_December_2015.pdf

the departure lounge. Signage is kept under review when airport development work is being carried out to ensure there is maximum visibility for PRM passengers.

Car parking

- 5.5 George Best Belfast City Airport offers free parking for up to two hours in the short stay car park for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. It also allows PRM passengers to park in the short stay car park for long stay rates. Information on car parking for PRM passengers is available on the airports' websites.

Security

- 5.6 Seating has been introduced around the security areas to facilitate PRM passengers to prepare for the security screening process. Security staff have received training on assisting passengers with a disability or reduced mobility, including passengers with a visual impairment through the security process.

Seating

- 5.7 The airports have reviewed seating areas and made alterations to ensure walk ways allow clear passage for wheelchair users. Seating areas have been extended to facilitate room for wheelchair/mobility scooter users.

Assistance points/call buttons

- 5.8 Assistance points are available at the main areas throughout the airport. Call buttons either connect to the special assistance desk or

divert to a mobile telephone carried by the special assistance team leader. Where there is no call button available airside the airports are considering making them available as part of future developments.

Toilets

- 5.9 Both Belfast airports now have a 'Changing Places' facilities⁷ in place. Toilet facilities are regularly checked, including access to assistance cords.

Other information

- 5.10 The airports have been working with groups and organisations that represent passengers with different needs. This has included completion of autism and dementia awareness training, arranging airport familiarisation days for groups of passengers, providing information for passengers who are ostomy users and introducing a wrist band identification system as part of an airport specific Autism Awareness Pack.
- 5.11 Both airports link to the Consumer Council's report on their website as a demonstration of consulting with organisations representing disabled passengers and passengers with reduced mobility, a requirement under the European Regulations⁸.

⁷ 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)

⁸ Article 9, Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 Overall, visit participants were positive about the special assistance services provided at CODA. The group discussions highlighted some areas where changes could be made in order to make air travel more convenient for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 6.2 The main suggestions centred on the visibility of special assistance signage in various areas throughout the airport, facilities for assistance dogs and ensuring small walkways and toilets are free from obstacles.
- 6.3 In August 2016, the CAA published findings from its first annual review of the performance of the assistance services at UK airports. Belfast International Airport, George Best Belfast City Airport and CODA all received a 'very good' ranking, the highest ranking awarded, based on the CAA's regulatory framework⁹.

7. NEXT STEPS

- 7.1 Since the site visit CODA has taken steps to implement the suggestions made by participants such as improving signage and ordering smaller bins to create more space in the toilet area. All other recommendations are also being progressed. The Consumer Council will continue to work with all the NI airports to support them as they implement changes to help ensure that special assistance services continue to meet passengers' needs.

⁹ <http://publicapps.caa.co.uk/modalapplication.aspx?appid=11&mode=detail&id=7499>



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