



**Consumer Council Report on Special Assistance Service Provision  
provided by Stena Line between Belfast and Cairnryan**

**December 2017**

## Contents Page

<b>Section</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Executive Summary</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Findings:</b>	<b>6</b>
	BELFAST TERMINAL	6
•	Arriving at the terminal	6
•	Waiting area, ticket desk, signage, loop system and accessible toilet	7
•	Boarding the ferry as foot passengers	9
•	Boarding the ferry by car	10
	ON-BOARD	11
•	Information announcements	11
•	Signage	12
•	On-board information desk	12
•	Lounge areas	13
•	Shopping and restaurant areas	14
•	Toilets	14
•	Other facilities	15
	CAIRNRYAN PORT	16
<b>5</b>	<b>Conclusions</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Next steps</b>	<b>19</b>

## **1. Executive Summary**

- 1.1. In 2012, EU Regulation 1177/2010 came into force legally protecting the rights of ferry passengers. Included in the regulations were a number of obligations on port operators and ferry companies to provide assistance to sea passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 1.2. This report provides the findings of a site visit with Stena Line for a journey between Belfast and Scotland to examine the special assistance available at the ports and on-board a ferry.
- 1.3. In October 2017, The Consumer Council arranged the visit, in partnership with Stena Line, for a group from a range of organisations representing consumers with a disability or reduced mobility. It involved staff guiding the group through the entire passenger process of arriving, boarding, a tour on-board and disembarking at both ports.
- 1.4. Overall, participants commented it was a positive experience with the assistance provided being beneficial for passengers. Participants made a number of comments in the key areas of boarding the shuttle bus, availability of information/signage for passengers with a visual impairment, facilities for assistance dogs, seating and making passengers aware of the assistance that is available.
- 1.5. While some of these suggestions involve small adjustments with no or minimal costs, others would require more resource. The Consumer Council

has provided the suggestions to Stena Line and will continue to work with the company to ensure that services meet passengers' needs.

## **2. Introduction**

2.1. Ferry travel provides important services to passengers travelling to, from and within Northern Ireland (NI). In 2016 there were over 1.2 million passenger journeys between Belfast and Cairnryan making it the busiest UK domestic sea crossing route<sup>1</sup>.

2.2. In 2012, EU Regulation 1177/2010 came into force legally protecting the rights of ferry passengers. These rights mean that most ferry ports and ferries must offer assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

2.3. The Consumer Council is the recognised complaints handling body in NI for these regulations. It is important to ensure that these services meet passengers' needs. Therefore, The Consumer Council, in conjunction with Stena Line, conducted a site visit at the Belfast terminal, on-board a ferry and at the Cairnryan terminal. The site visit involved participants from organisations who represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility. This is the first time a site visit examining the full passenger ferry journey has been conducted by the Consumer Council. The Consumer Council wishes to thank everyone who took part in this event.

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<sup>1</sup> Department for Transport – UK domestic sea passenger  
[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/661337/spas0201.ods](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/661337/spas0201.ods)

2.4. The overall aim of this work was to conduct a site visit for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility at the Stena Line passenger terminals and on-board the ferry to examine the special assistance provided.

2.5. The objectives of the visits included:

- To gain a better understanding of the support available;
- To become more aware of the specific needs of sea passengers with a disability or reduced mobility; and
- To identify possible changes that could further assist sea passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

The overall intended outcome is to work with Stena Line to ensure that special assistance services meet passengers' needs.

### **3. Methodology**

3.1. The Consumer Council arranged the group visit beginning at the Port of Belfast on 12 October 2017. Organisations represented included Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), Parkinson's UK, Age Sector Platform, Guide Dogs NI, Prosthetic User Forum and the Cedar Foundation. Stena Line and Consumer Council staff were also involved.

3.2. Stena Line staff guided the group through the boarding process from arriving at the passenger terminal in Belfast as a foot passenger through to

the point where a passenger boards the ship. The majority of the group boarded the ferry as foot passengers using the shuttle bus service. Two passengers boarded using the foot passenger walkway and two participants boarded the ferry as car passengers and met the group on-board.

- 3.3. When on-board Stena Line staff facilitated a tour of the vessel, including the restaurant/shopping area, lounges, cabins and spa facilities. A number of passengers who had a particular interest in boarding via the car deck had the opportunity to view the deck with staff.
- 3.4. On arrival at Cairnryan the group disembarked the ferry as foot passengers and toured the passenger facilities at the terminal before boarding the ferry again and returning to Belfast.
- 3.5. Consumer Council staff took notes and recorded the suggestions that were made by participants. A short paper survey was also completed by participants on the day to pick up on any points missed during the tour.

## **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 chronological order of the journey taken by participants on the day.

### **BELFAST TERMINAL**

#### *Arriving at the terminal*

4.2. Members of the group travelling as foot passengers arrived at the terminal building by car, bus and taxi. Members commented that it was good how close the car park was to the terminal building and there were accessible parking bays available. A group member noted that there was tactile paving at either end of the zebra crossing from the car park. The member explained that this was a welcome addition as it had been suggested at a previous site visit.

4.3. The group member that arrived by bus explained that the bus stopped close to the terminal entrance and the taxi rank was also directly outside the entrance.

4.4. While arrival points were close to the terminal building the group highlighted that there were no assistance buttons to notify arrival at the port. This means that passengers requiring assistance have no way of contacting staff to request help, for example if a passenger arrives at the car park with luggage.

- 4.5. When passengers entered the terminal there was a large special assistance sign directing people to the travel centre. While the presence of the sign was a welcome addition the group explained that it was only clearly visible when entering the first of two doors into the building.
- 4.6. Two participants travelled together by car and boarded the ferry as car passengers. They commended the help provided by staff while driving onto the ship.

#### Suggestions

- Install assistance points which connect with the travel desk in the terminal building so passengers can request help entering the building.
- Move the location of the special assistance sign or consider installing an additional sign beside the internal doors so it can be seen by passengers.

#### *Waiting area, ticket desk, signage, loop system and accessible toilets*

- 4.7. Some participants noted that there were no armchairs, meaning it may be difficult for some passengers with reduced mobility to get into or out of a seat. Interestingly, other passengers explained that having arms would be a hindrance to them. This clearly identifies the varying needs of passengers.
- 4.8. The travel centre desk had a lowered desk meaning that it was accessible for a passenger using a wheelchair. However, in front of the travel centre desk and entrance to the check-in area there were barriers in place. The group understood that this was to help with queuing but explained that the system made it difficult for different members of the group to manoeuvre.

A guide dog user explained that they would need to be guided by a member of staff through this area.

- 4.9. A loop system was available at the desk area, however the group believed that the signage for this could be clearer to ensure passengers were aware of it.
- 4.10. There were accessible toilet facilities. It was highlighted that the emergency alarm cord was tied up meaning if a passenger was to fall they would not be able to reach the cord to alert staff that they required help.
- 4.11. It was noted there was no dedicated spending area for assistance dogs. Stena Line staff explained that if requested, assistance dogs can be taken to a concrete area behind the terminal.

#### Suggestions

- Stena Line should consider providing a range of seating in all seating areas e.g. higher seating with arms and seating without arms.
- Review the barriers around the travel centre desk and approach to the check-in area to ensure that they do not restrict access for passengers trying to manoeuvre through the space.
- Reposition the loop system sign to ensure it is clearly visible for passengers.
- Ensure that emergency cords in toilet areas are not tied up so that passengers can use them in an emergency.

- Consider introducing a dedicated spending area outside the terminal building. Guide Dogs NI has produced guidance on the provision of spending facilities for guide dogs and assistance dogs<sup>2</sup>.

### Boarding the ferry as foot passengers

#### *Using the walkway*

- 4.12. A number of participants boarded the ferry on foot from the terminal building via a walkway. Passengers requiring assistance were called to board the ferry first which participants found useful as it gave them time to walk to the ferry without feeling rushed. There was a long walkway to reach the ferry doors but it was noted that this was wide which was helpful for guide dog users. Other positives included the provision of folding chairs throughout to allow passengers to take a break and the provision of disposable bags for dogs.
- 4.13. It was discussed that passengers with a reduced mobility who have not used the walkway before may not know of the considerable length before beginning to walk and find it difficult to reach the ship.

#### *Using the shuttle bus*

- 4.14. A shuttle bus with two spaces for wheelchair users was available to transport foot passengers requiring assistance on-board the ship. This was welcomed by group members, especially participants who were not aware that this was available and therefore had avoided travelling as foot passengers.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/media/7794429/guide-to-spending-facilities.pdf>

- 4.15. When boarding the bus a ramp was deployed to allow access. However, it became apparent that as passengers were boarded from the road surface it meant that there was a steep gradient to the ramp. This caused particular difficulties and concern for a wheelchair user and rollator user. One participant also commented that when the ramp was deployed it left a lip on the floor which could be a potential tripping hazard.
- 4.16. Participants welcomed the fact that the shuttle bus had two spaces available for wheelchair users. One participant highlighted that there was a steep step to access the back area of the bus, limiting the seats available to passengers with reduced mobility who would not be able to access these.

#### Suggestions

- More information should be made available at time of booking, in the terminal building, at check in and on the Stena Line website about the length of the walkway and the availability of the shuttle bus;
- Stena Line must address the gradient of the ramp access to the shuttle bus. A suggestion was to board the bus from a raised foot path area that was close terminal door if it was safe and possible to do so; and
- When replacing the shuttle bus in the future consider vehicle options that are step free.

#### Boarding the ferry by car

- 4.17. Passengers that boarded by car on the day found staff very helpful. There is a large step from the car deck to the lift area. A portable ramp can be put in place to ensure passengers requiring assistance can access the area. On the day it was demonstrated that the ramp is installed with handrails

to assist passengers using it. A participant discussed that on previous occasions the ramp had been put in place without the handrails (Appendix 1) making it difficult for them to use it.

#### Suggestion

- Ensure that there is a protocol when deploying the ramp that the handrails are also put in place.

### **ON-BOARD**

#### *Information announcements*

- 4.18. When on-board the ferry a series of audio announcements were made explaining the procedures in the event of an emergency. It was explained by Stena Line staff that if there is an emergency each crew member has a specific role that they must perform, including assisting passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. It was discussed that passengers with a visual impairment may be unclear of where they are in relation to the exit points and procedure to assist them during an emergency.
- 4.19. It was also identified that there was no on-board loop system for a passenger using a hearing aid to connect to.

#### Suggestion

- Stena Line should develop a procedure to inform passengers requiring assistance what the process is during an emergency; and
- Investigate the possibility of installing a loop system on-board or purchase a portable loop system that can be used.

### *Signage*

- 4.20. The majority of participants arrived on the passenger deck by lift. Some participants noted that as soon as they came out of the ferry they were unsure where to go and felt that signage was difficult to locate.
- 4.21. Participants with a visual impairment explained that no on-board signage was available in Braille. This was specifically concerning for participants with a visual impairment in the following areas:
- Emergency signage and exits;
  - Differentiating between the blue and red lift;
  - Accessing lifts and using lift buttons;
  - Identifying the toilet facilities, including the accessible toilet;
  - Menus for the restaurant; and
  - Dog litter signs in the terminal building and on the walkway to the ship.

### Suggestion

- Ensure signage, especially emergency signage throughout the ship is also available in Braille; and
- Consider having ship maps available to passengers before or as they board so that they can find their way around the ship.

### *On-board information desk*

- 4.22. An information desk was available on deck seven in the middle of the ship. The group felt that it was excellent that this facility was available. At this point the group discussed that it is important that all customer-facing staff should complete disability awareness training.

### Suggestion

- Ensure customer-facing staff complete disability awareness training.

### *Lounge areas*

- 4.23. The group noted that there were a number of lounges available on-board that provided a number of options for passengers to use. There were also a range of seating options available.
- 4.24. The group discussed that there was a raised area close to the bar at the front of the ship and at times when the crossing was busy it would be difficult for some passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to access seating in this area. Stena Line has explained that this raised area was necessary to give height to the deck below to allow larger vehicles. It was also advised that during very busy crossings if no suitable seating is available for passengers requiring assistance in the lounges there are 'over-flow' areas that can be opened for them.
- 4.25. One guide dog user highlighted that the restaurant floor area was clean and free of food. The participant explained that had there been food on the floor it could have been difficult when navigating the dog through it.
- 4.26. A number of the group noted that it was positive that the televisions had subtitles displayed on screen and some had a news channel on with sign language.
- 4.27. The group was also shown the Stena Plus lounge which had a range of seating options. It was noted that there was a keypad access code to gain

access to this lounge which could prove difficult for passengers with a visual impairment.

#### Suggestion

- Stena Line to advise of the protocol should a passenger with a visual impairment wish to use the Stena Line Plus lounge.

#### *Shopping and restaurant areas*

4.28. The group noted that the walkways through the restaurant area were wide and free from clutter making them easy to manoeuvre. Group members highlighted that there was no low counters at the restaurant and retail areas. Stena Line explained that passengers requiring assistance can place orders with staff who will then bring items to where passengers are sitting.

4.29. A prosthetic user identified that there was a small rise in the doorway of the restaurant on deck seven and explained that while this bump was very small it could lock prosthetics on the foot or leg if pressure is applied.

#### Suggestion

- Place tape/line across the bump to alert passengers to the change in surface gradient.

#### *Toilets*

4.30. The group expressed that while the accessible toilet was excellent it was disappointing that there was only one accessible toilet available on the ferry. This was also used as a baby changing facility. It was highlighted that

there was no Braille on the toilet door entrance or exit, or on the lock/unlock button.

#### Suggestion

- Investigate the possibility of including braille on signage and buttons in the accessible toilet; and
- Consider options to increase the number of accessible toilets on-board the ship.

#### *Other facilities*

- 4.31. The group commented that the cabin and spa areas were excellent but expressed disappointment that these were not wheelchair accessible due to narrow doorways and high steps.
- 4.32. A guide dog user discussed that there was not a dedicated spending area on-board.
- 4.33. The group commented that it was good to have handrails available throughout the ship. On the tour a participant noticed that on two of the decks the handrails appeared to be loose and was unclear if this was a design feature of the ship.
- 4.34. There was some discussion about the narrow space between the lift and the stairways leaving little space for a passenger using a wheelchair or a passenger with a visual impairment. While it is recognised that there is little that can be structurally done to alter this, passengers should be alerted to it.

### Suggestions

- Can Stena Line advise if there are any plans in the future to make changes to the cabin/spa area that could include improving accessibility?
- Consider having a dedicated spending area for assistance dogs on-board away from other passengers;
- Ensure handrails are secure throughout the ship; and
- Investigate an audio message when the lift door opens to alert passengers that there is a stairwell directly ahead.

### **CAIRNRYAN PORT**

- 4.35. In order to facilitate disembarking the group at Cairnryan Port all participants used the shuttle bus. Participants accessed the car deck by lift and there was a ramp from the doorway to the car exit straight onto the bus. When re-boarding from the terminal building similar issues were experienced by participants regarding the ramp used to board the bus that have been discussed earlier in the report (4.15).
- 4.36. The group commented that the Cairnryan port had good facilities. It was noted that on arrival the travel centre was closed. There was a bell on the counter but this was obscured by the closed sign and there was no signage indicating to ring the bell for assistance. The bell was placed on a high counter meaning that passengers using a wheelchair may not be able to reach it.
- 4.37. Beside the travel centre was a list of local taxi telephone numbers. However, it was unclear from the sign which taxi company would have an accessible taxi available.

- 4.38. There was an accessible toilet available in the arrivals area. However, there were no assistance door buttons and the door was found to be heavy and difficult to close by a wheelchair user. A participant commented that there was no mirror available in the accessible toilet and this would be a welcome addition for users.
- 4.39. It was highlighted that while a grass area was available some distance from the terminal building, there was no dedicated dog spending area at the terminal building before and after check-in.
- 4.40. Following the check-in desk there was a large spacious waiting lounge. The group highlighted that the seating available was not ideal for everyone. Metal armchairs could prove difficult for passengers with a visual impairment to easily access. One participant discussed the metal 'table' connected onto the end of a row of seats at the walkway area, explaining that they could be hazardous as the colour and style meant that they were difficult to see.
- 4.41. Some members of the group believed that when the waiting area was full it was difficult to hear the audio announcements.

#### Suggestions

- Stena Line must address the gradient of the ramp access to the shuttle bus. A suggestion was to board the bus from a raised foot path area that was close to the terminal door if it was safe and possible to do so;
- Ensure there is clear instruction on what passengers requiring assistance should do if the travel centre is closed;

- Any assistance points for passengers to announce their arrival should be accessible and within reach;
- Update the sign with taxi contacts to indicate which companies have accessible taxis available;
- Investigate the possibility of making the accessible toilet door easier to open and use, and consider installing a mirror for users;
- Consider introducing a dedicated spending area outside the terminal building. Guide Dogs NI has produced guidance on the provision of spending facilities for guide dogs and assistance dogs<sup>3</sup>;
- Stena Line should consider providing a range of seating in all seating areas e.g. higher seating with arms and seating without arms. Seating and adjoining tables should not obstruct walkways and be clearly visible; and
- Ensure public announcements are loud, clear and slowly enunciated for those who have a hearing impairment.

## **5. Conclusion**

- 5.1. The group expressed their gratitude to Stena Line for facilitating the site visit and providing them with a tour of both the terminals and on-board. Participants were very positive about the assistance that was available throughout the sea journey and provided a number of suggestions on how this could be improved for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 5.2. One of the key issues identified during the visit was the accessibility of the ramp when boarding the shuttle bus. This was recognised by Stena Line

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid 2

on the day and suggestions were discussed on how this can be addressed. Another area highlighted was the provision of information/signage for passengers with a visual impairment in order to orientate them around the ship.

- 5.3. Some participants had not travelled by ferry for some time and were impressed by the vessel, the facilities on-board and the assistance available. A number commented that now they had this knowledge they were encouraged to travel by ferry again, and others explained that they will inform other friends and family of how it may be possible to travel by ferry using the special assistance provided. This highlights the need for further work to be done by Stena Line and The Consumer Council to promote the assistance available to passengers requiring it.

## **6. Next Steps**

- 6.1. The comments made by participants will be shared with Stena Line. The Consumer Council will continue to work with Stena Line to support it as it implements the suggestions to ensure its services continue to meet passengers' needs.

**Appendix 1 – Photograph of car deck ramp**





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](mailto:info@consumercouncil.org.uk)

