

Airport accessibility report 2016/17

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Enquiries regarding the content of this publication should be addressed to: James Fremantle, james.fremantle@caa.co.uk

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Executive summary

Improving the accessibility of air travel, so that greater numbers of disabled passengers and those with mobility restrictions are able to travel by air, is a key priority for the CAA. In this, the second of our annual reviews of accessibility at UK airports, we are pleased to be able to report that the number of disabled people and those with mobility restrictions using air travel has again increased in the past year, with over 3 million people requesting extra help at UK airports in 2016, up from 2.7 million the previous year, easily outstripping general passenger growth.

The increase in numbers is good news and something the UK aviation industry should be rightly proud of. We believe that the higher number of people using assistance is often a direct result of the high quality service generally found at UK airports and onboard UK originating aircraft. Our own indicators consistently show satisfaction levels with the assistance service at well above 80%. And other research bears this out; for example easyJet, in its own surveying of its passengers, found that at its airports those passengers who requested assistance consistently rated their airport experience higher than that for passengers overall. We have noted that the focus from airports has sometimes been more on operational efficiency rather than customer service. But we are encouraged by a recent general trend that is rebalancing this emphasis at many airports. Our performance framework is designed to achieve a consistent and high quality assistance service, carried out by friendly, approachable and dedicated staff, who are able to understand the needs of the passengers using the service and who can provide help with a minimum of delay. The vast majority of UK airports provide just this. The satisfaction ratings received through passenger surveys indicate this, but we also hear positive feedback directly from passengers telling us of the kindness, understanding and patience shown by individuals. This feedback shows that the impact of the human element to the service should not be underestimated.

It is no coincidence that those airports that we classify as 'very good' and 'good' in this report are those which demonstrate that they value this aspect of the customer service. They have regularly consulted with people that use the assistance service,

asking them what they need to do to design it to meet their needs; their staff are regularly praised by passengers for their understanding and patience; and the assistance is efficient and well organised, meaning delays are minimal. In contrast, for those airports that we have classified as 'poor' in this report, namely London Heathrow, Manchester, East Midlands and Exeter airports, attention to this aspect of the assistance service has been lacking. In relation to Heathrow, for example, the results of its own passenger survey show that a substantial proportion of respondents rate the quality of the assistance service as unsatisfactory. Further, there have been instances of unacceptable levels of customer service where passengers' needs have not been met and, in some instances, where passengers have not been treated with dignity and respect. In relation to Manchester, East Midlands and Exeter airports, each of these airports failed to consult with organisations and groups representing disabled people over the course of the reporting year. In addition, East Midlands failed to be effective in seeking feedback from users of the service directly, for example via a passenger survey. In each case we have secured commitments from the airport concerned that it will make the necessary improvements so that it is able to deliver a consistent and high quality assistance service.

Overall we continue to be pleased with how the performance framework is driving continued improvement across the UK's airports and, where necessary, is identifying issues at those airports where standards have dipped. In last year's report we expressed concerns that a number of airports had been slow to embed the framework. We are pleased to be able to report that we are now satisfied that every airport understands what is required of it and is clear that it will be held to account for any shortfall in performance. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all those involved at airports for helping to make the performance framework a success. Further, we would like to thank the groups and organisations that represent the interests of disabled people, as well as individuals themselves, who, often on a voluntary basis, have travelled to meet with airports, and also with ourselves, to provide invaluable feedback to support this process.

Introduction

This is the second annual review of the accessibility of UK airports carried out by the CAA. This report covers the period 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017. The results of this review are based on a framework set up by the CAA in 2014. Background information to the framework is at Appendix A, whilst more information on the criteria we use to assess airports can be found at Appendix B.

Review of the year

Ranking results

	Aberdeen	
	Belfast City	
	Belfast International	
	Bournemouth	
	Bristol	
	Cardiff	
	City of Derry	
	Doncaster Sheffield	
	Edinburgh	
	Leeds Bradford	
	Liverpool	
	London City	
	London Gatwick	
	London Luton	
Birmingham	London Southend	
Glasgow Prestwick	London Stansted	
Glasgow	Newcastle	East Midlands
Humberside	Cornwall Newquay	Exeter
Inverness	Southampton	London Heathrow
Norwich	Sumburgh	Manchester
Very Good	Good	Poor

Very good

This group of airports has been classified as 'very good'. All these airports have provided not only an excellent service to disabled passengers and those with mobility restrictions, but have also shown a general commitment to seeking out disability organisations to consult with in order to help them to improve their assistance service and enhance facilities. As with last year, **Norwich** and **Humberside** are again classified as 'very good'. Norwich, in particular, has created excellent partnerships with local disability organisations, especially those representing people with 'hidden disabilities'. **Glasgow Prestwick** is also in this group, having hosted successful familiarisation and feedback events with charities representing people with sensory impairments and with learning disabilities; as is **Inverness**, whose staff attend numerous local access panels. We have also classified **Glasgow** and **Birmingham** as 'very good'. These two airports, with passenger numbers of 9m and 10m respectively, have provided a high quality assistance service throughout the year. At both airports, waiting times have been minimal, and users of the assistance service have consistently rated it as 'good' or 'excellent' across a range of aspects of the passenger journey.

Good

We have classified the majority of airports as 'good'. This group includes **London Stansted, Liverpool, Southampton, Newcastle, Aberdeen, London Southend, Sumburgh, City of Derry** and **Belfast City**. All these airports have provided a high quality assistance service throughout the year. **London Luton**, through its service provider CCS, has also provided a high quality service against a backdrop of significant disruption caused by terminal renovations. It also includes **Leeds Bradford, London City** and **Cardiff**, who, in last year's report, we said needed to do more to ensure that they met an acceptable standard. We are pleased to be able to report significant improvement at these airports for this year.

This group also includes **Edinburgh**. In last year's report we classified Edinburgh as 'poor' and therefore we are particularly pleased that there has been significant progress at the airport over the year. We have been impressed by how the airport has made accessibility a priority and how its management and that of its service provider, Omniserv, have worked hard to not only bring the service up to an

acceptable standard but to aspire to achieve a 'very good' rating. We note that it has focussed particularly on improving the information available to its passengers and has produced an in depth accessibility guide. It has also hosted an accessibility 'open day' where, in conjunction with the Queen Elizabeth Foundation charity, it met with disabled individuals, carers and representatives of support groups to discuss how the airport can better help disabled passengers. We will now be looking to the airport to keep this focus and ensure that current standards are maintained.

Also in this group is **London Gatwick** which, with its service provider OCS, has maintained a high quality service throughout the year, whilst developing innovative new services for people with 'hidden disabilities' such as autism and dementia. However, as with some other airports, feedback through passenger surveys has been limited. We have discussed with the airport ways to enhance its surveying of disabled passengers and we are pleased to report that Gatwick has committed to expanding its existing surveys to better capture feedback from users of the assistance service. We also discussed with it how it could seek to get additional feedback from disability organisations. Our view is that regular and structured consultation is best, so we are also pleased that the airport is to set up a regular forum, to be attended by representatives from a number of disability organisations.

Although we believe the service at **Bristol, Belfast International and Doncaster Sheffield** to be satisfactory, we were disappointed to encounter issues that we identified over the year with management oversight at these airports, in particular in regard to recording against 'waiting time' standards. Although airports can contract out the assistance service to a third party, it is important that airport management remember that the legal responsibility is still theirs, and that they must ensure that contracted providers accurately record their performance in providing the assistance service. Issues with oversight were also found at **Bournemouth and Cornwall Newquay**, although at these airports the service is provided by the airport and therefore the identified issues were more concerned with oversight by airport management of its own staff. All five airports were quick to rectify issues once we raised them. We also identified issues at **London Stansted, Liverpool and Leeds Bradford** with the extent of surveying of users of the assistance services. It has been inadequate and we will be requiring them to make efforts to increase response rates over the coming year, so that they can get better information on whether

passengers with a disability or reduced mobility are satisfied with the different aspects of the service that they receive.

Poor

We have classified four airports as ‘poor’, including **London Heathrow**. We acknowledge that Heathrow has certain challenges, in particular long walking distances and high numbers of passengers that need assistance at the airport, which puts pressure on it to deliver a consistent and high quality assistance service. We acknowledge too that, following last year’s report, in which we highlighted a number of issues with the service at the airport, Heathrow has worked with Omniserv, the company it contracts to provide the assistance service, to try improve the service for users. We also welcome the airport’s commitment to ensuring that, when issues do arise, the passengers affected can take their complaint to an independent adjudication body approved by the CAA, where they can receive a binding decision on their complaint.

Unfortunately, substantive issues still exist with the quality of the assistance service provided at Heathrow. Heathrow regularly asks for feedback from users of the assistance service through a passenger survey and the results of its survey show that, of those passengers that completed the survey, just over 60% rated the quality of the assistance service as unsatisfactory.¹ We note from feedback from a number of respondents to the survey, from our own monitoring of the service, and from feedback from airlines operating at the airport, that there are instances of unacceptable levels of customer service by Omniserv staff, where passengers’ needs have not been met and, in some instances, where passengers have not been treated with dignity and respect, in particular when arriving at the airport on a flight, disembarking, and then moving through the airport. A number of respondents to the passenger survey have also highlighted dissatisfaction at the regular breaks in the assistance service, particularly on arrival, meaning that it can take significantly longer for passengers with mobility issues to exit the airport on arrival than other passengers. We have also observed instances where Omniserv staff have

¹ 724 out of 1177 respondents that answered the question “How would you rate your overall experience of the passenger assistance at Heathrow airport?” rated the airport as either “poor” or “very poor”. The survey is open to all users of the assistance service.

encouraged passengers to make their own way through the airport because of a lack of staff or equipment to provide timely onward assistance.

Having raised these issues with senior management at Heathrow, the CAA has secured commitment from the airport, in the form of written undertakings to the CAA, that it will develop and implement a performance improvement plan to ensure that it is able to provide a consistent and high quality assistance service to disabled people and people with reduced mobility. The performance improvement plan will include the provision of a continuous assistance service for passengers arriving on inbound flights, ensuring that there will be no breaks in the service for these passengers and reducing the waiting times for assistance. The plan will also include a comprehensive disability awareness and equality training program for passenger facing staff at the airport including, but not limited to, the staff providing the assistance service as well as airport security staff. The plan will also include a robust system of oversight to ensure that any issues in the quality of the assistance service, whether with waiting times or with how passengers using the service are treated, are identified and addressed in a timely manner. In developing this plan, Heathrow has committed to consulting with organisations and groups representing disabled people.

East Midlands has had a challenging year. Some users of the assistance service have experienced unacceptably long waiting times when arriving at the airport on a flight, particularly last summer. In addition, the airport has failed to consult with organisations and groups representing disabled people and it has failed to be effective in seeking feedback from users of the service directly (for example via a passenger survey). We have therefore classified East Midlands as 'poor'. Recent discussions between the CAA and airport management have, however, been constructive. The airport has put in place a comprehensive action plan committing it to making improvements across a number of aspects of the assistance service, underpinned by an increase in its budget for the service. The airport has also committed to setting up focus groups with passengers and local and national support groups and will soon create an 'airport forum' to help shape continuous improvements to the service.

Carrying out effective and meaningful consultation with organisations and groups representing disabled people and those with reduced mobility is a key requirement of

the CAA's performance framework. Regular consultation with such bodies not only helps to ensure that an airport operates a service that meets the needs of disabled people but also, through establishing a regular two-way dialogue, ensures that airports are held to account directly by users for the quality of the assistance. Unfortunately, **Manchester** has failed to carry out any consultation with disability organisations or groups this year. It is unacceptable for an airport the size of Manchester to have failed to perform any consultation over the year. For this reason, we have classified the airport as 'poor' for 2016/17. We expect senior management at the airport to place a particular focus on this area next year. Discussions since the end of the reporting year between Manchester and the CAA have been constructive and the airport has committed to setting up a regular dialogue with disability organisations through a newly formed quarterly focus group, which will consider the assistance services at the airport. In addition, Manchester has committed to hold an accessibility expo in November. We will closely monitor the effectiveness of Manchester airport's consultation over the course of this reporting year.

Exeter has also failed to carry out consultation with disability organisations this year, and so we have also classified this airport as 'poor' for 2016/17. It had claimed to have engaged with organisations but following our own investigations it was clear that those organisations did not accept this and said that Exeter had not engaged with them. As with Manchester, discussions since the end of the reporting year have been positive and we note that it plans to set up an 'accessibility forum' next year.

Appendix A

Background

Regulation EC 1107/2006 concerning the rights of disabled persons and persons with reduced mobility (referred to hereafter as ‘the Regulation’) provides a set of rights that apply when departing from, and returning to, UK airports and also on board all flights from the UK and, if a European airline, to the UK. The aim of the Regulation is to ensure that such people have the same opportunities for air travel as those of others, in particular that they have the same rights to free movement, freedom of choice and non-discrimination.

In relation to airports, the requirements of the Regulation deal mostly with the assistance that airports are required to provide to disabled people and people with reduced mobility to help them move around the airport and embark and disembark the aircraft (usually through a contracted service provider). The Regulation also obliges airports to set ‘quality standards’ for the assistance provided to disabled people and those with mobility restrictions.

To ensure disabled people and people with reduced mobility are confident that they can travel and that their assistance needs will be met, it is important that the assistance provided to them is of a consistently high quality. Given this, it is imperative that airports set appropriate quality standards for this assistance to ensure that it is delivered to a high standard.

The CAA is responsible for enforcing the Regulation in the UK. We have put in place a performance framework for airports to set, monitor and publish a range of quality standards relating to the assistance service. [Guidance](#) for airports on the obligations under this framework was published in October 2014. In addition to ‘hard’ metrics relating to the amount of time that people have to wait to receive assistance both on departure and arrival, we have also incorporated a number of ‘soft’ metrics: first, that airports consult with disability groups and charities in the setting of the quality standards, enabling others with a close interest in disability issues to hold airports to account; and second, through surveying users of the service, that passengers with a disability or reduced mobility are satisfied with the different aspects of the service

that they receive, enabling issues such as staff attitudes to be measured and reported on. Airports are required to make public their performance against these metrics and also with whom they have consulted and the outcomes of this consultation.

This report reviews the performance of 30 airports² over the financial year 2016/17 and is based on performance data recorded and published by airports on their websites, data submitted to the CAA directly by airports, and data collected by the CAA itself. (More information on this can be found in the CAA [guidance](#).) The information taken into account by the CAA includes:

- Monthly performance against 'waiting time' standards for the periods 1 April 2016 to 31 March 2017.
- Levels of satisfaction with the quality of the assistance service at each airport, gathered through a CAA survey. (The CAA survey asks users of the assistance service to rate the quality of the service provided at the airport on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is extremely poor and 5 is excellent.)
- If applicable, responses to airports' own surveys.
- Information on the consultation undertaken with disability organisations, including the methods used for consultation, actions decided, and any follow up action taken.

² Under Regulation EC 1107/2006 only airports with more than 150,000 passengers per year must set quality standards.

Appendix B

Definition of rankings

Good

This means the following:

- The airport publishes on its website monthly information on its performance (by a specified time and in the correct format).
Submission to the CAA of the same data.
- The airport has robust processes in place for overseeing how it measures its performance; or, where relevant, the airport has committed to strengthen this oversight.
- The airport consistently meets, or is close to meeting, monthly 'waiting time' performance targets.
- The airport pro-actively promotes the satisfaction survey of users of the service.
- The airport scores a rating of 'acceptable' or better in the satisfaction survey of users.
- The airport engages with disability organisations.

Very good

In addition to those set out for 'good', this means:

- The airport consistently exceeds, meets, or is very close to meeting, monthly 'waiting time' performance targets.
- The airport scores a rating of 'good' or better in the satisfaction survey of users.
- The airport engages very effectively with disability groups.

Poor

- Over the course of the reporting year the airport has failed to substantively meet the criteria for a 'good' performance standard. Further, the airport has not taken the necessary steps during the year to address in a timely way the failings and to improve its performance.