



# **Report on Special Assistance at George Best Belfast City Airport**

April 2023

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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1 European Regulation (EC) 1107/2006 (the Regulation) provides rights for passengers with disabilities and reduced mobility when travelling by air. This has been retained in United Kingdom (UK) law following the UK's exit from the European Union (EU).
- 1.2 The Regulation requires all airports and airlines in the UK and EU to provide assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. The Consumer Council has been designated by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to be the complaints handling body for the Regulation.
- 1.3 In 2014 the CAA issued guidance requiring airports to consult with passengers with a disability or reduced mobility. This report details the findings of a meeting on 22 March 2023 of the George Best Belfast City Airport's (GBBCA) Accessibility Forum which involved a tour of the airport building. The Forum is made up of a range of organisations which represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 1.4 The Forum was very positive about the airport's facilities and, in particular, the special assistance services that are provided to passengers right through from the initial car park call points to departures. There were a number of recommendations made by participants. These focussed on:
  - Placement of items in accessible toilets;
  - Colour contrasting on escalators/steps;
  - Improvements to Aspire Lounge.
- 1.5 The findings of the visit will be shared with the airport. An update on progress made against the recommendations will be reported by the airport to the Accessibility Forum at its next meeting.

## **2. INTRODUCTION**

- 2.1 In 2006 European Regulations<sup>1</sup> came into place that require all airports and airlines in the EU to assist passengers with a disability or with a reduced mobility (PRM)<sup>2</sup> when travelling. These have been retained and

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<sup>1</sup> European Regulation (EC) 1107/2006

<sup>2</sup> People of Restricted Mobility (PRM)

written in UK law since its exit from the EU<sup>3</sup>. Airlines licensed in the EU, operating flights from a non-EU country into the EU must also assist passengers.

- 2.2 The Consumer Council has been designated by the CAA as the complaints handling body for the Regulation<sup>4</sup> 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 their services continue to meet passengers' needs.
- 2.3 In 2014 the 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.'*
- 2.4 In 2018, the Consumer Council worked with GBBCA 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 mobility.<sup>5</sup> 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 intended outcome of this visit is for the Forum to continue to work with the airport in looking specifically at special assistance to gain a better understanding of issues faced by passengers using this service. In particular, it is intended to identify areas where it works well, and to implement suggestions made by forum members to help make travel more convenient for those passengers. The airport will provide feedback on actions taken from the recommendations made at the next forum meeting.
- 2.6 GBBCA and the Consumer Council would like to thank those participants who took part on the day.

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<sup>3</sup> Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 (as amended by The Air Passenger Rights and Air Travel Organisers' Licencing (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019)

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

<sup>5</sup> IMTAC, Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB), Alzheimer's Society, Shopmobility, Queen's University Belfast

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

- 3.1 The Forum met at the airport on 22 March 2023. There were six participants from a range of organisations that represent consumers with a disability or reduced mobility.
- 3.2 The forum was split into two groups and airport staff guided each group through the airport beginning at the check-in area and finishing in the arrivals areas.
- 3.3 Staff from the Consumer Council took notes at the visit and recorded the recommendations that were made by the group.

### **4. FINDINGS**

- 4.1 The following section provides a summary of the key discussion points that were recorded with corresponding recommendations. The findings are set out in the order of the various stages of moving through the airport, with an overall summary provided at Annex 1.

#### Arrival at the airport/parking area

- 4.2 Some changes in parking at the airport had recently taken place however parking for blue badge holders, or travelling companions of blue badge holders, was unchanged. Blue badge holders can avail of the short stay car park at the long stay rate in all circumstances no matter how long their stay would be. As part of the reconfiguration of the car park accessible spaces have been made wider and the signage for these was very clear and easy to find (Figure 1). A larger parking bay for accessible vans was in the process of being installed.



Figure 1: Signage at accessible parking bays

- 4.3 A separate shelter was being provided which will be used as an accessibility meeting point. New intercoms were being installed and this would provide better light and shelter. A telephone number is also provided at every call assistance point for those who would rather wait in the car or if they cannot use the intercom. In these cases, the PRM team will go out to meet the passengers.

#### Entrance/Departures area

- 4.4 At the previous visit in April 2022, the group recommended moving the special assistance desk as its location was not obvious. The desk was also obscured by a tourism information area (Figure 2). This was still a work in progress and plans were in place to move the desk nearer the entrance.



Figure 2: Special assistance desk view from entrance (obscured by tourism information desk)

**Recommendation:**

- Prioritise relocation of special assistance desk

Security area

4.5 Passengers requiring special assistance could avail of a fast-track lane through security. The area was quiet and spacious. The seating area after security checks, where passengers can gather their belongings and put shoes, coats etc. back on was obscured from view by a number of desks (Figure 3). The desks/shelving could also benefit from colour contrasting.



Figure 3: Assistance seating area after security

## Recommendations:

- Additional signage to make seating area immediately after security more visible.
- Provide colour contrasting at the desk/shelving areas after security where people gather their belongings.

4.6 There was a large flight information screen after security and the group praised the number and size of information screens throughout the airport. Signage to the lift up to the gate area is large and contrasting. Again, signage throughout the airport was praised (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Example of flight information screen

4.7 The availability of an alternative route to the departure lounge was welcomed (Figure 5) – this would allow passengers with sensory issues to avoid the busy shopping area.

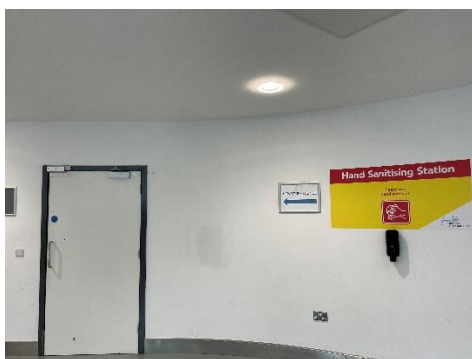


Figure 5: Alternative route to departure lounge



## Recommendation:

- Consider larger signage indicating this alternative route.

### Gate area

- 4.8 The group noted larger signage on the door to the Accessible toilet, which had been a recommendation from the previous visit (Figure 6). A suggestion was made to add braille to these signs. Regular checks should be made throughout the airport to ensure that bins are not located beside toilets - this is a barrier, for example, to people in wheelchairs needing to transfer to toilet.



Figure 6: Signage for Accessible Toilets

## Recommendations:

- Add braille to accessible toilet signage.
  - Ensure cleaning staff are trained with regards to bin placement in toilets and carry out routine inspections to ensure these are not a barrier.
- 4.9 There is a large assisted travel reserved seating section in the departures area with plenty of seating. The call button in this area is yellow and therefore easy to see but care should be taken to ensure that chairs are not placed directly below this and that the area is kept free to allow

access for someone in a wheelchair (Figure 7). A separate work/charging area was complimented by participants as being very accessible with excellent space for wheelchairs.



Figure 7: Call sign in assisted travel seating area

**Recommendation:**

- Consider placing a sign on the wall beside call point / marking floor to keep clear and make staff aware.

4.10 It was noted that the Aspire Lounge was in the process of being refurbished and would become much larger. The current area posed several accessibility issues which should be addressed as part of the upgrade.

**Recommendations:**

- The carpet in the current lounge was difficult for wheelchairs to navigate over - carpeting that is too thick or plush is not an ideal choice for a wheelchair and should be avoided.
- Better signage is needed to the toilets in the Aspire lounge.
- An automatic door would be beneficial to access toilets.
- A handrail on the entrance door to toilets would help someone in a wheelchair to push the door open.
- It would be beneficial to have seating which allow someone in a wheelchair to move easily from their wheelchair to a seat as it can be uncomfortable sitting in wheelchair for prolonged periods.
- Provide easily accessible power points at these chairs/tables.

- 4.11 There had previously been plans for a quiet area/room at the airport but this had not happened due to Covid. Passengers needing to avail of a quieter space could head down to the gates at any time where seating was available.
- 4.12 A recommendation from the previous visit was to have yellow strips at the top and bottom of all steps (Figure 8). It was noted that this had not yet been implemented.



Figure 8: Steps down to Gates 1-3 and 5-10.

**Recommendation:**

- Insert yellow strips at the top and bottom of all steps in the airport.

- 4.13 There was a significant amount of information posters at the Border Control at International Arrivals (Figure 9). Whilst the group appreciated that this was legally required consideration could be given as to how this was positioned.



Figure 9: Information posters at Border Control

### **Recommendation:**

- Give consideration to repositioning information posters at Border Control.

- 4.14 Clearer signposting was needed to the the toilets in the domestic arrivals area as currently the arrow was pointing straight ahead rather than to the left (Figure 10). There was plenty of room in the toilet but the assistance bar is broken. The hand drier was poorly positioned.

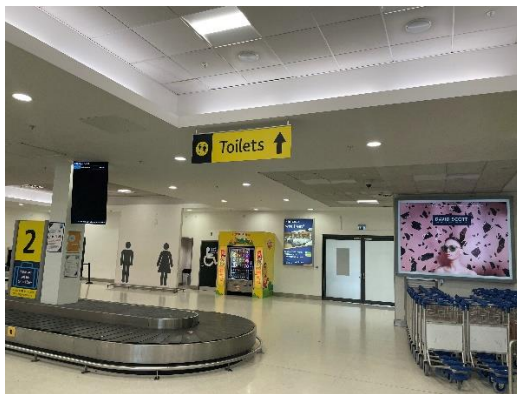


Figure 10: Signage to toilets in domestic arrivals area

### **Recommendations:**

- Amend signage to toilets by redirecting the arrow.
- Consider relocating the hand drier in the accessible toilets beside the basin.

- 4.15 The car hire desks in the Arrivals Hall were very high and could pose issues for wheelchair users in particular.

### **Recommendation:**

- Liaise with third party service providers in the airport regarding accessibility issues. The Consumer Council will be happy to assist with this.

- 4.16 The ability to arrange a familiarisation visit prior to travel was appreciated, the airport should ensure that this service is advertised appropriately.

### **Recommendation:**

- Ensure reference is made to familiarisation visits in the appropriate section of the airport website.

## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

- 5.1 Participants welcomed the opportunity to tour the airport and expressed satisfaction throughout at the processes and changes that had been implemented already to improve the experience for passengers requiring special assistance. Participants were able to ask questions throughout the visit and make suggestions based on their experiences and knowledge of some of the barriers passengers may face. A number of recommendations were made around placement of items in accessible toilets, colour contrasting on escalators/steps, and improvements to the Aspire Lounge.

## **6. NEXT STEPS**

- 6.1 The comments made by participants will be presented to the airport through this report. The Consumer Council will work with the airport as it implements the changes to ensure that services continue to meet passengers' needs. An update on the progress made against the recommendations will be shared with the Airport's Accessibility Forum at its next meeting.

## Annex 1 Summary of Recommendations

	<b>Special Assistance Desk</b>
1	Prioritise relocation of special assistance desk to more prominent location.
	<b>Signage</b>
2	Additional signage to make seating area immediately after security more visible.
3	Provide colour contrasting at the desk/shelving areas after security where people gather their belongings.
4	Consider larger signage indicating alternative route to departure lounge.
5	Add braille to accessible toilet signage.
6	Consider placing a sign on the wall beside call point / marking floor within assisted travel waiting area in departure lounge to keep clear and make staff aware.
7	Insert yellow strips at the top and bottom of all steps in the airport.
8	Give consideration to repositioning information posters at Border Control.
9	Amend signage to toilets in the arrivals area by redirecting the arrow.
	<b>Toilets</b>
10	Ensure cleaning staff are trained with regards to bin placement in toilets and carry out routine inspections to ensure these are not a barrier.
11	Consider relocating the hand drier in the accessible toilets (in arrivals area) beside the basin.
	<b>Aspire Lounge</b>
12	The carpet in the current lounge was difficult for wheelchairs to navigate over - carpeting that is too thick or plush is not an ideal choice for a wheelchair and should be avoided.
13	Better signage is needed to the toilets in the Aspire lounge.
14	An automatic door would be beneficial to access toilets.
15	A handrail on the entrance door to toilets would help someone in a wheelchair to push the door open.
16	It would be beneficial to have seating which allow someone in a wheelchair to move easily from their wheelchair to a seat as it can be uncomfortable sitting in wheelchair for prolonged periods.
17	Provide easily accessible power points at these chairs/tables
18	<b>Third Party Providers</b>
	Liaise with third party service providers in the airport regarding accessibility issues. The Consumer Council will be happy to assist with this.



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