



Invisible travellers

INVESTIGATION Disabled airline passengers are receiving mixed levels of assistance at UK airports. We sent two guide dog owners and two wheelchair users undercover at seven airports to investigate

Disabled travellers going to and from UK airports are receiving erratic levels of assistance, Which? Travel has found. The provision of assistance is, at best, patchy and, at worst, neglectful.

In 2008, legal responsibility for providing assistance to passengers transferred from airlines to airports. It is now down to airports to assist disabled passengers from the terminal building until they reach their seat on the aircraft.

While airports get it right on many occasions, dozens of letters sent to Which? Travel have revealed passengers experiencing distress or frustration as a result of poor levels of assistance from airport staff.

Some have been left upset by their airport experiences, while in a number of instances, disabled travellers described being 'passed around like a parcel', 'abandoned like a piece of luggage' or simply left 'feeling humiliated'.

Vulnerable passengers spoke of a one-size-fits-all approach that failed to address the needs of individual passengers.

While some members have been extremely complimentary about the assistance they have received, others told us how they were dismayed by the service and have been put off flying again as a result.

We decided to test the assistance at UK airports for ourselves. We sent two guide dog owners and two wheelchair users on domestic

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flights around the UK to assess the level of assistance at seven different airports. All four passengers had requested airport assistance at the time of booking and informed their respective airlines of their specific needs.

Our four passengers are frequent flyers and travelled undercover for our investigation. Each encountered some sort of problem with the assistance they received, with three of them experiencing significant problems.

In December 2010, we asked 1499 members (including some who were disabled) about their experience of airport assistance and, although the majority of respondents (72%) were happy with the assistance received, 9% told us they were dissatisfied with the service.

As we've seen from members' letters, and as demonstrated by our investigation, when the assistance fails, it can have quite a serious effect on the passenger and can even put them off flying again in the future. ➔

Guide dog owners

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of our undercover travellers

RICHARD*

AIRPORTS Glasgow International to Birmingham International
AIRLINE Flybe



The outward journey went smoothly for Richard, although when he checked in with Flybe, there were no airport staff to help him, despite having pre-booked assistance. Instead, he was told by airline check-in staff that they would shortly be going to the departure gates and he could go with them.

While they were pleasant and efficient, once through security and at the departure gates, they were unable to take Richard to a café for a refreshment as they had to get to work at the departure desk. 'It wasn't a problem because one of them brought me a cup of tea,' said Richard.

The return journey, however, did not go so smoothly. Richard was greeted by an airport assistant with a wheelchair, despite explaining that he could walk and simply required sighted assistance. The assistant was pleasant and friendly, helping him to check in and took him to the departure area. Here, Richard told his assistant he needed the toilet and a cup of tea. He was asked to take a seat while the assistant made a call on his mobile. He then told Richard he'd be back in a few minutes and asked him to wait. The assistant never returned.

A fellow passenger came to Richard's aid and her husband took him to the disabled toilet, which was on a different floor. By the time another airport assistant came to take Richard to the departure gate, he'd been left sitting alone, in the same spot, unable to go and buy any refreshments and without any assistance from airport staff for an hour and 35 minutes.

Richard was very upset at being 'dumped', especially as he was so desperate to use the bathroom. He was also hungry and thirsty as he'd had nothing to eat or drink for several hours. His guide dog also went without water for a long period.

As a blind traveller he felt completely helpless without sighted assistance and felt abandoned by airport staff. Richard was keen to point out that guide dogs don't know where to go unless instructed by their owners, and that their main duty is to lead their owners on a clear path. Richard suggests that airports should have at least one member of staff in their departure lounges to assist disabled passengers.

“To be dumped and left for so long was absolutely terrible. It was very upsetting

JENNY*

AIRPORTS London Gatwick (North) to Manchester T3
AIRLINE British Airways



Jenny booked her flights through a travel agent, but the first agent she spoke to didn't know how to go about pre-booking assistance for a guide dog so she was then passed on to another agent who managed to pre-book it for her.

On arrival at Gatwick airport, Jenny's driver took her to a designated 'Help Point' station outside the terminal building. Jenny called for assistance, but had to wait around five minutes for the phone to be answered, then she had to wait a further five minutes in the cold for the airport assistant to arrive. The assistant arrived with a wheelchair which Jenny didn't need as she can walk. The assistant then guided Jenny to check-in, but told her she would have to wait for another colleague to take her through security. Jenny waited 10 minutes for the new airport assistant to turn up.

“At the security checkpoint, my guide dog was taken away from me. I was unhappy about this

Both assistants were pleasant, efficient and helpful. But one problem Jenny faced was at security, where her guide dog was taken away from her. She was deeply unhappy about this as her guide dog is her mobility aid – in effect, her eyes.

Then in the departure lounge, the airport assistant brought Jenny a cup of coffee, but left her waiting for some time until someone else came to take her to the departure gate. She was given a bleeper to hang around her neck and told to raise her hand in the air when it sounded. 'As a totally blind person, I could not move as I didn't know where the shops, cafés or toilets were located,' Jenny said.

Jenny felt she was passed from one person to the next from check-in, through the airport and onto her flight. This also happened on the return journey. What's more, Jenny's guide dog was not given the opportunity to go to the toilet before boarding at either airport.

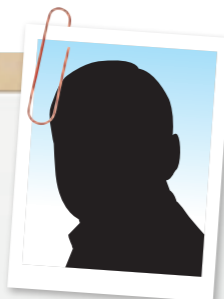
The airline also seemed to struggle to cater for blind travellers as there were no Braille safety instructions on either flight. Instead, the instructions were explained to her separately. When disembarking on the return journey, there were only two members of airport staff waiting to assist six people. This meant Jenny was left waiting around at different points while staff struggled to help all the passengers that needed assistance.

Wheelchair users

*Names have been changed to protect the identity of our undercover travellers

ALEX*

AIRPORTS Leeds Bradford to Bristol
AIRLINE Air Southwest



When Alex pre-booked airport assistance, he was told to go to car park 7 at Leeds Bradford airport – he actually needed to be in a different place, Zone 7. From there he had a 20-metre distance to cover in his wheelchair to the bus stop. Once off the bus, it was a further five minutes to the airport terminal, where it was unclear which entrance Alex needed to take.

It was also unclear which desk Alex needed to visit in order to get assistance. He went to the general enquiries desk where he was told to go to the check-in desk. Here, he was then told to visit a location point in the oversized luggage section where manual wheelchairs were stored. This again was incorrect, so Alex ended up going back and forth before being able to find the assistance desk. Once there, staff were not expecting him, despite him having pre-booked assistance.

On the whole, Alex found security staff at Leeds Bradford airport to be sensitive, apart from when he was asked to stretch his arms out straight. He found this inappropriate and insensitive as, due to his disability, he is unable to do this.

Once at the departure gate, Alex was left outside in the cold for some time before boarding. Alex thinks there is a general lack of awareness about how quickly disabled people with limited movement can get very cold.

When boarding the plane on the ambulance chair, Alex's legs were not properly secured. In addition, he was placed too close to the handrail and his arm was scraping against it as he ascended. Then when transferring him into his seat, airport staff did not lift him appropriately and Alex had to explain the correct lifting techniques. No one asked him about his specific needs or abilities.

At Bristol airport, it was easy to find the assistance desk. However, when Alex arrived, he found it was unmanned. There was a phone available, but as he has limited dexterity, he couldn't reach it.

Going through security at Bristol, staff failed to ask if he was okay. It was only when Alex flinched during the search that staff realised it was painful for him. Once through security, Alex felt all the disabled travellers were 'shepherded' to an area with barriers that kept them all together.

“I was left waiting, for a long time in the cold, before getting onto the plane

ANGELA*

AIRPORTS Manchester T3 to London Heathrow T1
AIRLINE British Airways



Angela had the best experience of our travellers. She rated the outbound and return journeys as 'excellent' and 'good', respectively. Despite her positive experience, though, she encountered a few issues en route that were worth noting.

Angela booked her flights through BA.com, but was unable to pre-book assistance at the same time as there was no online facility to do this. She had to telephone instead.

On arriving at the airport car park, Angela found it difficult to reach the ticket machine in order to feed in her debit card. The 'Help' button was also out of her reach. Had she been alone in the car, she wouldn't have been able to enter the car park.

Once at the terminal building, Angela found there was no way to 'communicate with anyone to request assistance'. She followed signs for departures and eventually found the special assistance office. But it wasn't signposted from the entrance.

“On arrival there was no way to communicate with anyone to request assistance

The assistant helped Angela check in, though he failed to take her to security as he was called away on another job. She was offered another assistant, but was told this could take some time as everyone was otherwise engaged. Keen not to miss her flight, Angela declined and followed the assistant's directions to security. Once through security, she made her own way to the departure lounge as no assistance was forthcoming.

When it was time to proceed to the departure gate, a call came over the PA system. However, Angela didn't hear the announcement as she was in a shop. She felt it would have been more useful to be issued with a bleeper.

After a second announcement, an airport assistant came and took her to the gate. On the return journey, again, the special assistance office at Heathrow was not easily visible. 'Signage was extremely poor,' Angela said.

Although Angela was carried onto the aircraft efficiently, the assistant refused to let her sit in her allocated seat by the window, insisting she be seated in an aisle seat on the other side of the aircraft because this was easier for him. Angela protested that other passengers could cause damage to her legs should they need to pass her to get to their seats. Luckily, on this occasion, Angela's carer was sitting next to her.



Your rights

The EU Regulation 1107/2006 governs the provision of assistance to Persons of Reduced Mobility (PRMs) at airports. Its overarching aim is to ensure that disabled people have comparable access to air travel as any other passenger flying within the EU.

Until this became law in the UK in 2008, responsibility for providing assistance to passengers had rested with the airlines. Now, airports are responsible for providing assistance for the whole process – from arriving at the airport through to getting the passenger into their seat on the aircraft. Airports must also provide assistance to incoming passengers.

The total number of PRMs using UK airports is unclear. But, according to research carried out by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), published in March 2010, approximately 1.75 million passengers used airport assistance between July 2008 and July 2009.

In 2009, the CAA reviewed how the regulation has been implemented in UK terminals. Their results, which were published in March 2010, found a number of failings across numerous airports. The CAA says it is working with airports to address these.

What you can do

● **Pre-book assistance** According to the CAA, the number of passengers actually pre-booking assistance remains relatively low. This suggests that passengers may not know they need to do this. There is an obligation, placed on the passenger by the regulation, to pre-notify the airline (or airport) of their need for assistance at least 48 hours before travel. If you don't pre-book, airports are still required to make all reasonable efforts to provide you with assistance, but priority will be given to those who pre-book.



Which? Travel says
Amanda Diamond
Assistant Editor

It's clear from our members' letters that many people receive excellent assistance at UK airports. But there are still many passengers who don't. It seems that when assistance fails, it fails significantly, often causing disabled passengers distress or humiliation. This is unacceptable.

The regulations have gone some way to address the problems faced by disabled passengers when flying. But much more needs to be done. Following the findings of our investigation, we have written to all the airports we assessed and asked them to answer why they failed to provide adequate levels of assistance.

We feel there are some simple steps airports can take to make big improvements and we have sent them our suggestions. With better staff training and better processes, improvements could be made to airport assistance provision, making it more consistent and fit-for-purpose.

We've also written to the Civil Aviation Authority asking how they propose to ensure that all airports meet their obligations under the legislation. And we've asked how they plan to ensure that assistance provision is more consistent and fit-for-purpose in future. We're awaiting their replies.

- **Inform check-in staff** On arriving at the airport, notify check-in staff immediately if the special assistance desk is not obvious. They can point you in the right direction.
- **Tell your assistant your needs** Don't be afraid to inform your assistant about what you require from them. If they don't know you need certain help they may not ask, this includes trips to the toilet or refreshments.



Have you ever used airport assistance? If so, what is your opinion of the service? If you have a view you'd like to share on this topic or article, have your say at www.whichconversation.co.uk.