

# Are airport fees fair?

**INVESTIGATION** From drop-off zones to baggage trolleys, passengers at UK airports are being hit with one new charge after another. Has your nearest airport introduced these fees, do you know about them and are they fair? Which? Travel investigates

**A**irports have started to follow the no-frills pricing model of some airlines and are now charging for services that were once absorbed into the price of an air fare.

In November 2010, Durham Tees Valley airport began charging adults an obligatory £6 'Passenger Facility Fee' on departure. While earlier in 2010, Belfast International, East Midlands and Edinburgh airports introduced a £1 charge for vehicles dropping people off at the terminal.

These are just the latest in a string of airports now charging for extras such as plastic bags at security, baggage trolleys and the use of a fast-track security lane. Fees, even if only £1, are particularly galling for passengers if they are for services that were once free – even more so if you're unaware of them in advance.

## Drop-off zones

Several airports such as Gatwick, Heathrow and Manchester still allow 'kiss and fly' passengers to be dropped off (though not picked up) by the terminal for free. But an increasing number of airports have brought in charges, the latest being Edinburgh airport which introduced its drop-off fee in October. Taxi drivers may also be charged this fee at some airports, so you might not escape these costs even if you travel by cab.

Common reasons given by airports for charging drop-off fees are to encourage the use of public transport and to reduce congestion. Edinburgh and Luton airports, for example, have cited these reasons. Edinburgh stated that, in turn, less traffic would also help to reduce carbon emissions. However, initiatives such as the above are not so good if public transport options are

## £10

the fee you'll pay at Blackpool airport before you board a flight

## £5

the cost to go through a fast-track security lane at Bristol airport

## £2

the charge to use a baggage trolley at London Luton airport



limited. For example, currently Edinburgh can only be reached by a bus service.

Alternative parking options may not be much further away than the drop-off zones, especially when these zones aren't always right outside the terminal (in line with security guidelines brought in following the 2007 terrorist attack on Glasgow International airport). At Belfast International, where the drop-off fee is £1 for up to 10 minutes, you could park for an hour in the adjacent short stay car park for the same price. All airports charging for drop-offs do also offer free parking areas. At Newcastle, this is located just four minutes by foot from the terminal.

One concern in regards to drop-off fees is whether they will unfairly penalise those with reduced mobility. While the first 15 minutes in Edinburgh and Birmingham's drop-off zones are free for Blue Badge holders, other airports offer no similar exemptions. That said, all airports do cater for disabled passengers. At Luton, for example, free porter assistance and free parking is available at the short stay car park for Blue Badge holders.

## Baggage trolleys

The era of free baggage trolleys is also a thing of the past at some airports, with non-refundable charges now as much as £2 at Bristol and Luton. Birmingham said its £1 fee was introduced to create a better marshalling system and less trolley misuse after a poll found only 3% of its passengers needed one.

You'll also need a spare £1 or €1 coin to use the trolleys at Gatwick, Liverpool, Manchester and Stansted airports. But as they have a supermarket trolley-style system, at least you'll get your money back.

People of limited mobility, who are more likely to need help with their luggage, are not



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exempt from the charge. But again, airports insist that those who require help can arrange free porter assistance. Luton said it hadn't received any complaints from disabled people nor from families (who tend to carry more baggage).

### Transparent bags

Since 2006, all passengers taking liquids through security must display them in a clear, resealable plastic bag. Initially, staff handed these out for free, but many airports will no longer do this. If you haven't come prepared, you'll now need to pay £1 for a pack of two or four bags. At Manchester and Newcastle, some or all of this money goes to charity.

Airport officials at Birmingham and East Midlands say that passengers have had time to become accustomed to restrictions and they want to encourage people to bring their own bags. Newcastle says it wanted to stop customers taking excessive handfuls of bags.

While this is understandable, it can be stressful if passengers are turned away from security queues because they are unaware

that bags are no longer handed out. This was a problem at Liverpool airport, which has ditched the charge for the time being after passenger confusion.

### Fast-track security lanes

An increasing number of airports are introducing a fast-track security lane, where those who are willing can pay extra to avoid the queues at security and pass straight through in the 'fast lane'.

In some instances, the fast-track security lane is in operation purely for business- or first-class passengers and is provided as part of the ticket price, while other airports provide a fast-track security option bundled in with a daily car parking charge.

Six of the airports we looked at, however, offer all passengers the fast-track option so long as they are willing to pay. Charges range from £3 at East Midlands, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Luton and Newcastle airports to £5 at Bristol. Discounts may be available if you pay online. Bristol airport said it introduced the lane after 60% of its business travellers

said they would welcome it. Others have said the lanes have been introduced as a premium product – much like any other – and are available only to those who wish to pay a premium for this service.

When Liverpool John Lennon first introduced its fast-track lane in 2007, the Air Transport Users Council (AUC) initially expressed concern that those passengers who chose this lane were effectively paying twice, since security costs are already included in ticket prices. There was also concern that security resources would be diverted to fast-track lanes, leading to lengthy queues building up in regular lanes. The AUC's view remains the same today, but it now feels that as long as airports can demonstrate that fast-track lanes don't have a negative effect on regular lane queues, they are acceptable.

### Are these charges fair?

Airports receive no state funding. They charge airlines a fee to use their premises and services, which is then passed on to us in the ticket price. So, are these increasingly

## CHARGES AT THE UK'S MOST-USED AIRPORTS

| AIRPORT  | DROP-OFF ZONE  | BAGGAGE TROLLEY                                   | TRANSPARENT BAGS FOR LIQUIDS |
|--|--|---|------------------------------|
| <b>BELFAST INTERNATIONAL</b><br>www.belfastairport.com   | £1 for 10min max. Pick-up permitted. Nearest free drop-off (up to 10min) in long stay car park (220 metres away)                               | Free  | £1 for four bags             |
| <b>BIRMINGHAM</b><br>www.birminghamairport.co.uk         | £1 for up to 15min, £2 for 15-30min. Pick-up permitted. Nearest free drop-off (up to 15min) in long stay car park (10min walk to terminal)     | £1 or €2.<br>Pay by coin or credit card           | £1 for four bags             |
| <b>BRISTOL</b><br>www.bristolairport.co.uk               | Free up to 10min, then £4 for 10-30min. Pick-up permitted  | £2 or €2.<br>Pay by coin, notes or credit card    | £1 for four bags             |
| <b>EAST MIDLANDS</b><br>www.eastmidlandsairport.com      | £1 for 10 min max. Pick-up permitted. Nearest free drop-off at car park 6 (5min away by shuttle bus)   | Free  | £1 for two bags              |
| <b>EDINBURGH</b><br>www.edinburghairport.com             | £1 for up to 10min, £5 for 10-20min. Pick-up permitted. Nearest free drop-off is 1km away (5min away by shuttle bus)                           | Free  | Free                         |
| <b>GLASGOW INTERNATIONAL</b><br>www.glasgowairport.com   | Free. No time restrictions. Pick-up at nearby short stay car park  | Free  | Free                         |
| <b>LIVERPOOL JOHN LENNON</b><br>www.liverpoolairport.com | Free for up to 10min, then £2 per 10min. Pick-up at adjacent short stay car park   | Free, but refundable £1 or €1 coin needed         | Free                         |
| <b>LONDON GATWICK</b><br>www.gatwickairport.com          | Free. Pick-up at short stay car parks  | Free, but refundable £1, €1 or \$0.25 coin needed | Free                         |
| <b>LONDON HEATHROW</b><br>www.heathrowairport.com        | Free at all terminals. Pick-up at short stay car parks   | Free  | Free                         |
| <b>LONDON LUTON</b><br>www.london-luton.co.uk            | £1 for 10min max. Pick-up at nearby short stay car park. Nearest free drop-off (up to an hour) at mid-term car park (5min away by shuttle bus) | £2.<br>Pay by coin or credit card                 | £1 for four bags             |
| <b>LONDON STANSTED</b><br>www.stanstedairport.com        | Free. Pick-up at a separate zone: £2 for up to 15min, £5 for 15-25min  | Free, but refundable £1, €1 or \$0.25 coin needed | Free                         |
| <b>MANCHESTER</b><br>www.manchesterairport.co.uk         | Free at all terminals. Pick-up at nearby short stay car parks  | Free, but refundable £1 or €1 coin needed         | £1 for two bags              |
| <b>NEWCASTLE</b><br>www.newcastleairport.com             | £1 for up to 20min, £2 for 20-30min. Pick-up permitted. Nearest free drop-off (up to 15min) at medium stay car park (3-5min walk to terminal)  | Free  | £1 for two bags              |

All prices correct at time of going to press. Some airports may increase prices on 1 January 2011

prevalent charges at airport terminals just an excuse to squeeze more money out of passengers who have already paid for airport services as part of the air fare?

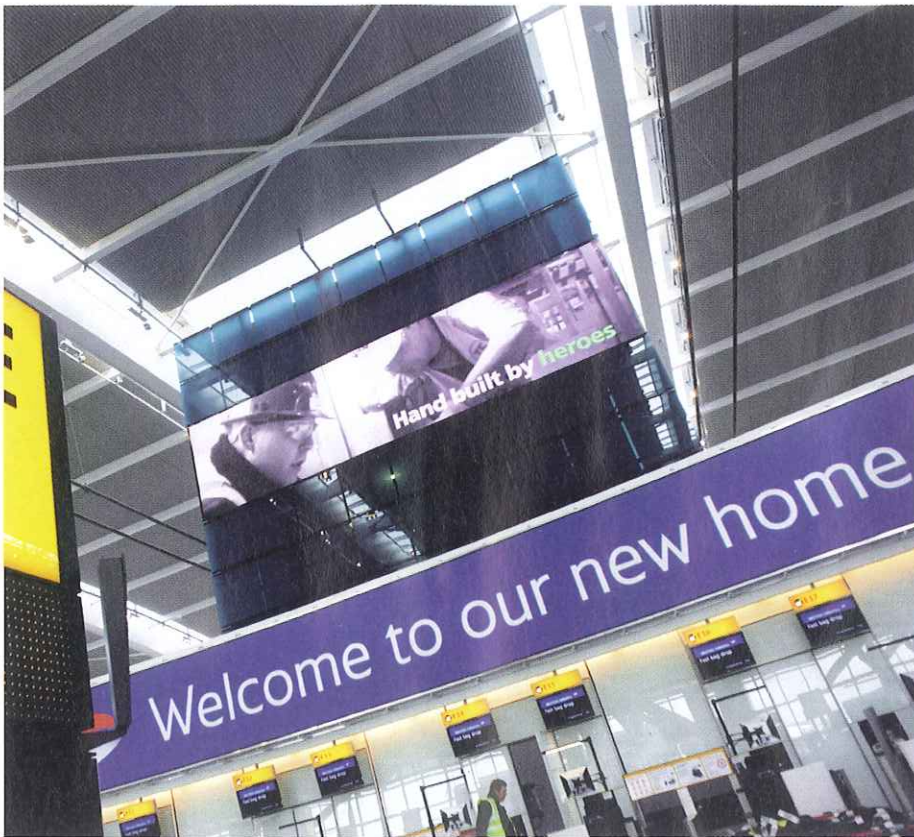
The bottom line is that airports are businesses and they need to generate revenue to remain in operation. Airport operators say that it has been financially tougher since the abolition of EU duty-free shopping in 1999, and more recently because of an overall decline in passenger numbers during the economic downturn.

In our 2009 survey of UK airports, we found that members preferred visiting the small, regional airports. But it's these airports in particular that have been struggling recently. Not surprisingly, they are reliant on airlines and are therefore affected if the airline industry is having a tough time.

Smaller airports argue that they must keep charges to airlines low (especially to no-frills carriers) to persuade them to operate from their terminals, in turn providing more routes and destination options for customers.

This lost revenue stream, however, must be recouped elsewhere, especially if cash-strapped airports are embarking on large improvement projects. Edinburgh airport dismisses accusations of profiteering over its drop-off charge, citing the example that it has spent £42 million on developments, even though its profits were only £30 million in 2009.

As further justification for these charges, airports also argue that it's fairer for only those who use the trolleys and drop-off zones to pay for them, rather than all passengers.



## Airport Development Fees

Four small airports in the UK – Blackpool, Durham Tees Valley, Newquay and Norwich – have decided they need to safeguard their future by charging a compulsory Airport Development Fee (ADF) directly to passengers on departure. These fees – paid at ticket machines before reaching security – help the airports to invest in improved facilities.

At Blackpool airport, for example, passengers are now obliged to pay a £10 per person ADF (free tickets for under 16s), although those arriving by car can at least take some comfort that they are entitled to up to 15 days free airport parking.

We believe that consumers should be aware of all compulsory charges before they pay for their flights. All four airports mention the ADFs clearly on their websites, but the majority of travellers don't check airport websites before booking a flight.

The Civil Aviation Authority believes that airlines and tour operators selling flights from these airports have an obligation to clearly highlight the charge on their own sites. We agree, so we checked to see if this is happening during the booking process and on destination or airport guide pages.

Some companies do make customers aware of the charge – Air Southwest prominently mentions the Newquay ADF, as do Flybe and Thomson Airways for the Norwich ADF. But neither Jet2 (for Blackpool) nor Ryanair (for Newquay) warn people about this fee. Ryanair said it wouldn't benefit from highlighting a charge that wasn't its own.

After we brought this to the attention of the companies in question, we're pleased to report that BMI has now added Norwich ADF information to its booking pages, while BMI Baby has done the same in regards to the Newquay ADF. Manx2 also now mentions Blackpool's ADF on its 'Destinations' page. Newmarket Holidays, which sells flights from all four airports, has agreed to add ADF details to its site, and Thomas Cook said it would make the Norwich ADF details more prominent on its holiday booking page.

### Airports charging an ADF

- **Blackpool** £10, free for under 16s
- **Durham Tees Valley** £6 (called a Passenger Facility Fee), £2 for 3-15 year olds
- **Newquay** £5, free for under 16s
- **Norwich** £5, £1 for 2-15 year olds



Which? Travel says

**Jonathan Mitcham**  
Principal Researcher

**If to survive, an airport genuinely needs to add extra charges at the terminal, then we think this is a price worth paying.**

More airports mean more choice for consumers. If you had the option of being able to use an airport nearby but perhaps having to pay a little more in fees at the terminal, or having to travel much further to a larger airport, what would you choose? We know what we'd prefer.

Even so, we believe airports should always ensure that any new charges are well publicised. All of the airports we contacted claim they do go to great lengths to keep the public informed of upcoming new fees – through the media, on terminal signs, and on their websites.

But when we looked online, some airport websites didn't mention all charges, while on others, the info was hidden away. Birmingham and Bristol airports' websites, for instance, are among those that don't mention the charge for transparent bags.

Although we're often only talking about £1 or £2, it can be intensely annoying if the first you hear about a new charge is on arrival at the airport.

So we're pleased that some airports have taken our comments on board. Belfast International, East Midlands and Newcastle have added transparent bag charges to the 'Security' pages of their websites, while Liverpool and Luton airports have also agreed to add the details about trolley costs to their sites. There is further good news for passengers in that airlines have responded to our calls to mention ADFs on their websites.

which?  
**Conversation**

What do you think about airports introducing these charges? Are you prepared to pay to use a drop-off zone or baggage trolleys? Have your say at [www.whichconversation.co.uk](http://www.whichconversation.co.uk).