

# PRM attention moves to hidden disabilities

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**Services have improved in recent years but there is no room for complacency, and more work is needed to help passengers with non-physical disabilities. *Barry Cross and Ben Vogel report***

Some 12 years after European Commission (EC) Regulation 1107/2006 entered into force, the quality of service for passengers with reduced mobility (PRMs) at airports has improved significantly, and more people with disabilities are choosing to fly.

However, regulators and industry organisations remain aware that more still needs to be done.

Accessibility remains a key priority in the United Kingdom, Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) Chief Executive Richard Moriarty told delegates at a PRM seminar during the British-Irish Airports Expo in June 2018.

“We are committed to making sure that people with disabilities and limited mobility have the same opportunities to connect with family, friends, and businesses as everybody else,” he added.



*More PRMs are travelling by air than ever before – so the onus is on airlines, airports, ground-handlers, and regulators to ensure they receive a high quality service. (Getty Images)*

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Moriarty mentioned there were more than 3 million PRM requests at UK airports in 2017, more than any other European country. Requests for assistance are increasing twice as fast as overall passenger traffic growth. Furthermore, he added, 80–85% of disabled passengers say they are satisfied with the service they get, with 50–55% very satisfied.

“The evidence suggests that the industry is doing a lot right,” said Moriarty, although he noted that satisfaction rates among disabled passengers are still lower than for able-bodied travellers. Indeed, PRMs are half as likely to use airport services.

The CAA issues biannual reports to rank PRM services at the largest 30 airports in the United Kingdom, rating them as Good, Very Good, or Poor. These reports have been highly influential in encouraging standards, although the government is keen to know why the performance across the sector remains quite variable. The August 2017 report highlighted deficiencies at Heathrow, Manchester, and two other airports, underlining the need for further progress on PRM services.

Some airport operators are reluctant to pay compensation for PRM-related delays that they blame on ground-handlers. In a BBC radio interview on 26 March 2018, Heathrow CEO John Holland-Kaye argued, "I don't think it's reasonable that we should take financial responsibility". The UK hub aims to disembark all PRMs "20 minutes after everybody else has got off", he added. "We are not perfect yet. We are much, much better than we were 12 months ago but we have a long way to go."

### **Helping with non-physical disabilities**

In his presentation at the UK-Irish Airports Expo, Moriarty also emphasised the importance of serving passengers with hidden disabilities (such as dementia, autism, learning disabilities, anxiety issues, mental health impairment, and hearing loss). He cited CAA research that indicated around 20% of the public have a disability that makes air travel difficult. "Of these, 40% said it was a non-physical disability. With an ageing population, we only expect the number of passengers with hidden disabilities to increase."

In this context, the CAA published a report (CAP 1629) in June 2018, in which it assessed progress at major UK airports to meet guidance and recommendations in its earlier CAP 1411 document (issued November 2016).

"In general, we are very pleased with the progress made, with airports describing to us how they have implemented new assistance services in key areas and developed existing services further with a focus on the needs of people with hidden disabilities," the CAA concluded, adding that all 29 of the airports surveyed have introduced special training for this purpose.

"However, there is still work to be done, both for the CAA and for airports, and it is important that we do not become complacent. As described in this report, some airports have not done enough as yet to improve their assistance services; for these airports, we will be requiring them to do more and we will be seeking further information about future work that is planned and we will ensure that this is carried out. For example, we would like airports to create more quiet routes and quiet rooms where people can avoid the noise and disturbances often found in busy terminal buildings."

Airport managers at the PRM seminar acknowledged the problem. "Security is a stressful experience for most passengers," said Gatwick Chief Operating Officer Chris Woodroffe. "If you're someone living with a hidden disability then it's doubly stressful."

He explained that Gatwick actively sought advice from disability organisations.

One thousand security staff at the airport are now trained as 'dementia friends', but Woodroffe emphasised that the airport has not stopped there. "We are trying to raise awareness [about hidden disabilities] across our population. It's not about training specific groups of people; if you want this to be successful, you need to ensure that the entire airport staff all do things in the same consistent way."

One solution adopted by Gatwick was a lanyard that helps staff discreetly to identify passengers with hidden disabilities. This proved so successful that it has been adopted by Heathrow and other

UK airports. Aena Aeropuertos, which runs 46 airports in Spain, is also introducing recognition lanyards.

“We need staff to recognise those people who are disabled by the [overall] airport environment. They need to make sure that passengers are reassured. This is good business for airports and airlines as much as it is the right thing to do,” said Woodroffe.

OCS Group provides PRM services at five UK airports (Belfast, Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, and Manchester) and two in Ireland (Cork and Dublin). The company won praise in CAP 1629 for its work in helping airports to improve the PRM airport experience.

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