

Minutes

Manchester Airport Accessibility Forum (MAAF)

Date	Tuesday 07th March 2023 - 11:00
Location	Double Tree by Hilton, Manchester Airport, M90 4WP

Attendees

Name	Company	Name	Company
Andy Wright	Chair, MAAF	Jennifer Byrne-Smith	Terminal 1 Director, MAN
Ed Kibblewhite	Manager Special Assistance, MAN	Matt Austin	Special Assistance, MAN
Caroline McWhirter	Lead Technical Trainer, MAN	Michelle Baxter	General Manager ABM, MAN
Donna Platt	Contract Manager ABM, MAN	Phil Bennett	MND Association
Mandy Spencer	Polio Fellowship	Emma Roberts	National Autistic Society
Kelly Barton	The Thomas Pocklington Trust	Rachael Foley	Site Loss Council
Pete Forrester	Site Loss Council		

Apologies

David Lodder	Passenger with MS	David Eastham	Spinal Injuries Association
Libby Herbert	Colostomy UK	Tony & Sheila Roberts	Alzheimer's Society
Helen Gillan	NHS Southport		

Welcome & Introductions

Andy welcomed the M.A.A.F Forum members to the meeting, who then introduced themselves, before reading the apologies for those unable to attend.

Andy then introduced Jennifer Byrne-Smith, Ed Kibblewhite and Matt Austin, who were representing Manchester Airport's management team. As well as Caroline McWhirter, from Security, Michelle Baxter and Donna Platt from ABM (company contracted by the airport to provide assistance to the airport's disabled passengers).

As the previous Forum at the end of 2022 had been cancelled due to last-minute complications, there were no actions brought forward to discuss at this meeting.

Airport Performance update.

Jen then continued by informing the Forum how the airport had seen the encouraging return of passengers over the summer months. Demonstrating very positive signs of recovery since the pandemic, with recent passenger numbers already reaching 85% of pre-Covid levels. With expectations to exceed this further by a 10% increase year on year.

Jen also confirmed that staff recruitment throughout the airport was now going well and was on target to meet Summer 2023 expectations. Accepting that unfortunately the pandemic had caused a significant impact on staffing levels, particularly to the depth of experience within the airport. However, the airport's CEO, Chris Woodroffe, had now completely restructured the senior leadership team. All of which was designed to help bridge the gap and drive efficiency and future improvements.

Ed continued by reporting on the Civil Aviation Authority's (CAA) regulatory position as far as Manchester Airport was concerned. Informing the Forum that the last four months performance had exceeded the CAA's 'Very good' threshold. And their most recent report which had recognised the sustained improvements made to the airport since early 2022.

Matt then provided a more detailed update on the Terminal 2 development work that was undertaken last year, which is due for completion by Summer 2025. When it is expected that Terminal 1 will close (Please see accompanying slide pack for further information).

Andy asked, given the disparity between the quality and level of facilities within the terminals, if there were any interim refurbishments planned for Terminals 1 or 3.

Jen confirmed that a project was underway to carry out minor refurbishments within Terminal 1, until such time when it will be phased out and replaced by the completed expansion of Terminal 2.

Mandy commented that she felt it was not just the facilities that are important but how helpful and friendly staff are.

Kelly asked how a visually impaired passenger would locate the Help Points throughout the airport.

Ed advised that he was investigating various supportive technology such as Navilens, with a view to better assisting passengers with a visual impairment around the airport.

Emma suggested adding Help Point locations to the website. **Ed** advised the airport currently works with 'AccessAble', who provide access guides, including distances and journey times etc. for the whole airport.

Andy suggested updating the Assistance videos on the airport's website, which whilst still beneficial, were now showing their age. Particularly some of the links to the AccessAble guides, which were broken and not operating correctly on the website.

Matt advised that he would look into this and would also be conducting a review of AccessAble as well.

Phil said he was pleased to see that previous feedback from Forum members had informed many of the new features within the upgrade of Terminal 2.

Matt then went on to show some proposed designs for a new Terminal 2 Airside Special Assistance lounge area with seating types, for which he sought feedback from the Forum.

Phil suggested that arm rests would be helpful for people in the early stages of MND.

Mandy felt plastic seating could sometimes be hard and uncomfortable.

Pete said it was important to ensure that there was sufficient contrast with the floor and adjacent walls when installing new seating, especially for those who were visually impaired. He said the colour of the flooring was less important, so long as it was not the same colour as the seats.

Overall, the Forum agreed the best solution would be to install a selection of various seating options. But requested that further discussions take place as to design and layout of this facility, before finally being agreed upon.

Finally, **Matt** advised that the airport planned to install a number of new screens, which would display, amongst other things, Security videos in and around the key reception points. **Matt** asked for feedback and suggestions as to where these could be best placed and what features they should include. The Forum made a number of suggestions which included, featuring Audio description, placing some screens at lower heights, and for screens to display a QR code. So that relevant information could be played on a passenger's own device.

Matt and **Ed** then highlighted some new innovation ideas the airport was considering, designed to help improve the experience for customers.

These included a WhatsApp messaging service within the airport, which the Forum members thought would be a good idea. In addition, **Ed** discussed the possible introduction of complimentary electric scooter hire for those passengers who may choose to use one.

Andy was concerned about the possible risk of incidents, caused by inexperienced drivers navigating busy terminals, especially during peak periods. But **Ed** responded by saying that many customers bring their own scooters to use at the airport and he had seen similar schemes operated at other airports, which had been successful.

Caroline then completed the Airport update section, by explaining how Security was still having to overcome considerable challenges with staff recruitment. Whilst maintaining standards to ensure that all new staff are security cleared and properly trained before passing induction. As a result of the pandemic, unfortunately many staff had not been required by the airport due to reduced passenger numbers and had subsequently left the industry.

Caroline went on to discuss the volume of new candidates who had been trained over the last 12 months, each required to pass a 4-week induction course. Emphasising Disability Awareness and Equality training are now incorporated into all courses. Most importantly, **Caroline** stressed how all Security staff are trained to ask the customer, what they need and how to facilitate their requirements, where reasonably possible.

Special Assistance Performance update

Michelle provided an update on ABM's preparations for the summer, which included a 50% increase to staffing levels and a 40% increase to the number of assistance vehicles and equipment. Such investment required a 40% financial increase to the airlines.

Michelle then went on to explain how the number of Customer Care Agents had been increased from 65 this time last year, to the current number of 160. The purpose of which was to deliver a highly improved and consistent quality of service, in excess of regulatory standards. Examples of which had already been recognised by recent CAA reports and regulated industry standards (see accompanying slide pack for further information).

Donna then talked about some of the recruitment challenges ABM had had to overcome. Followed by summarising the improvements that had been made to the ABM new recruit Training/Induction plan.

She explained how new staff recruitment was still proving difficult, with significant shortages in the labour force. But with recently agreed enhanced rates of pay, above the National Minimum Wage, along with new innovative ways to recruit being introduced. ABM had recently seen an encouraging increase in the number of interested candidates.

Donna then advised the Forum how ABM had enhanced their 'New starter training', which now consisted of a 5-day classroom-based induction course. Followed by a further 2-week familiarisation period, where new recruits were partnered with experienced agents. Whilst periodically meeting with their trainer during this time, in order to monitor progress. **Andy** advised that he had recently sat on an ABM induction course, which he was pleased with.

Rachael then relayed some feedback from her recent experience flying from/to MAN in October. Unfortunately, she had not had a good experience, especially as the ABM agent had insisted, she use the wheelchair provided. Despite **Rachael** not having any difficulty with her mobility. She had requested assistance because of her visual impairment, so she could be safely supported through the airport. She went on to explain how the experience had been unnecessarily frustrating, informing the Forum that friends of hers said how they now did not feel confident to use Manchester airport in the future. All because of what she described as a lack of empathy and training!

Kelly added that nobody with a visual impairment should ever automatically be put into a wheelchair, unless they have specifically asked to be.

Rachael asked if the airport utilised Mystery Shoppers. **Ed** replied saying there was no formal scheme in place currently.

Donna advised that ABM had recently employed 2 new 'Feedback co-ordinators' whose role included spending time out in the terminals, observing and coaching agents on customer service skills and ensuring similar bad practice did not occur. In addition, enhanced awareness training was being delivered to existing agents, to ensure greater awareness of specific disabilities, such as dementia, autism, visual impairment etc.

Phil suggested charities could provide posters for the rest rooms to help increase disability awareness to staff. The Forum all agreed that this would be a good idea.

Mandy then went on to say how she is angered when her wheelchair isn't automatically brought straight to the aircraft door when she lands at Manchester.

Ed advised that this is often due to confusion between the airline and their ground handling agent. But he would continue to work with them to seek a solution.

Andy asked whether wheelchair repatriation couldn't be written into their contract before granting their ground handling license.

Andy wanted to know if the uplift in the ABM headcount, would definitely be sufficient to manage the summer demand.

Ed replied that extensive modelling had taken place and that the projected headcount is higher than the airport has ever had before. So, he was confident that the right number of agents would be contracted.

Customer Feedback

Ed then presented an overview of the Customer Satisfaction scores for Special Assistance, including how they were benchmarked against wider airport scores.

Donna also provided a couple of examples of both good and bad feedback ABM had received in recent months.

Andy asked whether the airport had any more information relating to specific complaints and the nature of them. And were there any obvious trends or areas of weakness.

Ed said at this stage he only had data from summary reports. But would ensure that for future meetings more granular detail would be provided.

Any Other Business and Actions

Pete asked whether for future meetings, presentation slides/videos could be shared in advance to those members with a visual impairment. So that they would have a chance to study them on their own devices using screen readers.

Andy also suggested the airport consider operating a series of workshops, to include members of the airport management team along with Forum members. In order to propose improvements to...

- The existing PRM passenger journey, to/from and within the airport
- Future infrastructure designs, including the new Special Assistance area in T2
- Website and the inclusion of a passenger assistance video
- Evaluate current airport staff training

The meeting closed with **Jen** and **Andy** thanking all the Forum members for their continued support.