Manchester Airport Accessibility Forum Minutes

Date/Time: 2nd September 2025

Venue: Doubletree Hilton Manchester Airport/Teams

Attendees

Ed Kibblewhite – PRM Contract Manager – MAG
Matt Austin – Assisted Travel Manager – MAG
Ryan McLearon – Security Training Manager - MAG
Alex Shaw – Security Training Manager – MAG
Donna Platt – General Manager – ABM
Anwar Hussain – Senior Ops Manager – ABM
Jon O'Brien – Training Manager – ABM
Michelle Baxter – PRM Director – ABM
Lisa Birtles – DSN
Brian Cadwallader – DSN
Rachel Zimbler – Manchester Sight Loss Council/Thomas Poklington Trust
Charles Van Berckel – Chairperson
Steve Kane – Airport User
Stephen Rigby – Airport User
Marlene Evans – Ileostomy Association
David Lodder – Airport User/MS Society
John Fishwick – Accessibility Manager – Virgin Atlantic
Emily Kilby – CAA
Chris Bright – JDRF
Adam Marsh – Guide Dogs
Emma Roberts – National Autistic Society

Minutes

1. Opening & Previous Actions

- Ed talked through introductions and previous actions.
- Quiet Space action closed; further feedback will be collected as project develops.
- Disability Champions action – guest speakers attending to update today.

2. Training & Accessibility Initiatives

- ABM visual & hearing impairment training review assigned to Charles.
- GDA training closed as MAG Group Strategy is currently developing wider training.

- Enhance the UK to deliver training to some operational managers.
- Strong feedback that lived experience input remains vital for training development.

ABM Updates

- Jon: increased focus on lived experience within ABM recruitment.
- Collaboration with Pure Innovations for neurodiverse employment.
- Developing a long-term internship programme aligned to operational roles.
- Rachel highlighted Manchester Sight Loss Council's similar 9-month internship scheme – agreed to connect offline.

3. Mystery Shopper / Feedback Tools

- Charles exploring options for mystery shopper programme

o Discussions with app developers for a simple end-to-end passenger feedback app.

4. Guest Speaker - Transreport Presentation

Emma, Jim, Sophie delivered demo of trans report app.

Key strengths of Transreport:

- Messaging-based assistance booking and communication.
- Ability for passengers to add personalised details for staff/cabin crew.
- Live updates on who is meeting them (including photo/description).
- Works well for autistic passengers and those overwhelmed by in-person conversations.
- Chat history retained for future travel.

Questions & Concerns Raised

- Need clarity on whether user is speaking to a bot or a person.
- Language accessibility issues for:
  - Deaf passengers (BSL users).
  - Passengers with low English literacy.
  - People with learning disabilities (request for plain English/easy read options).
- Concern for older passengers who may struggle with smartphones; advised that the tool would remain optional, not replace ABM support.

Operational Benefits

- Helps reduce queues at assistance desk.
- Allows staff more time to support customers who do not use the app.
- Provides ABM with more detailed information earlier in the journey.

5. Guest Speaker - Airline Engagement – Virgin Atlantic

John Fishwick (Virgin) shared:

- Strong culture of accessibility and empowerment.

- Onboard accessibility features continue to expand, with focus on neurodiversity and wheelchair carriage improvements.
- All Ground Handling Agents receive VS disability awareness training, though consistency needs improvement.

Issues Raised:

- Poor communication around wheelchair battery information at check-in.
- Virgin apologised; identified as a known breakdown in communication being worked on.

6. Security Screening Concerns – From forum members

Recurring Issues Raised:

- Stoma bag searches: inconsistent empathy, unclear instructions, anxiety due to separation from belongings.
- CAA reportedly advising airports that staff may ask passengers to show stomas – group concerned
- Possessions security: passengers not allowed access to belongings when taken to private rooms.
- Catheter checks: lack of consistency; some passengers asked to expose medically private areas unnecessarily.
- Mobility aids: a recent incident where a splint and walking stick were removed, leading to a fall.
- Communication barriers for BSL users during screening.

Agreed Actions:

- Ed to feed issues back to Security & Security to attend next meeting with a list of implemented changes and clarifications on CAA guidance
- Explore whether trays can be safely held/secured during private searches.

7. Border Force & E-Gates

- Home Office reviewing accessible e-gates for UK airports (approx. 5-year programme).
- Complex approval process; no immediate solution.

8. BSL Training & Comms

- Further BSL course sessions requested by Lisa; Ed agreed to review.
- Positive feedback on earlier BSL sessions from colleagues and passengers.
- Security video in BSL now live on the website with QR codes available in security areas.

9. Built Environment & Wayfinding

- Rachel: desire for visually impaired members to support built environment walk-throughs and quiet-season training.
- MAG exploring audio descriptions for existing airport maps (instead of GoodMaps solution).

10. Survey & Additional Support

- Chris: diabetes passenger experience survey underway; insights available for the group.
- Charity developing diabetes-specific training; open to collaborating.

11. AOB

- Discussion on Signapse and potential live BSL interpretation on airport screens, similar to stations like Kings Cross/Paddington.
- Ed shared MAG updates:
  - CAA rating
  - Accessibility award shortlisting

Next Steps / Actions

- Feedback to Security on raised issues
- Arrange Security attendance at next meeting
- Explore additional BSL training dates

Charles:

- Review ABM sensory impairment training.
- Provide update on Mystery Shopper/app solution.

Jon (ABM):

- Connect with Rachel re. internship programme collaboration.