



Consumer Council Report on Sea Port and Ferry Company Special Assistance Service Provision

April 2016

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1. Executive Summary

1.1. The report provides the findings of site visits to the Larne and Belfast Ports that examined the special assistance services offered by the port operators and ferry companies operating to and from Northern Ireland.

1.2. In 2012, EU Regulation 1177/2010 came into force legally protecting the rights of ferry passengers. Included in the regulations were a number of obligations on port operators and ferry companies to provide assistance to sea passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

1.3. The Consumer Council arranged the visits in partnership with Port of Larne, P&O Ferries and Stenaline for a group from a range of organisations representing consumers with a disability and reduced mobility. It involved staff guiding the group through the entire passenger process from arriving at the port to the point of boarding a ship.

1.4. Overall, participants commented it was a positive experience with the assistance provided being beneficial for passengers. Participants made a number of comments in the key areas of car parking, arrivals, check-in, security, seating, boarding and travelling with assistance dogs. Suggestions included the provision of more detailed pre-travel information, clearer signage, ensuring walkways are clear from obstruction and improved seating.

1.5. While some of these involve small adjustments with no or minimal costs, others would require more resource. The Consumer Council has provided the individual comments to the port operators and ferry companies and continue to work with them to ensure services meet passengers' needs.

2. Introduction

2.1. Ferry travel provides important services to passengers travelling to, from and within Northern Ireland (NI). NI is served by Irish Sea passenger services operating from the Port of Larne and the Port of Belfast. A foot passenger only ferry is operated by Kintyre Express between Ballycastle and Campbeltown and Ballycastle and Port Ellen. There are also local ferry services operating between Ballycastle and Rathlin Island and between Portaferry and Strangford.

2.2. In 2012, EU Regulation 1177/2010 came into force legally protecting the rights of ferry passengers as long as:

- The journey is not for sightseeing or an excursion;
- The ship is capable of carrying more than 12 passengers;
- The ship has a crew of more than three people; and
- The service is more than 500m one-way.

2.3. These rights mean that most ferry ports and ferries must offer assistance to passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

2.4. The Consumer Council is the recognised complaints handling body in NI for these regulations. It is important to ensure that these

services meet passengers' needs. Therefore, the Consumer Council, in conjunction with the port operator and ferry companies, conducted site visits at the main passenger terminals with representative organisations of consumers with a disability or reduced mobility. This is the first time such an exercise has been conducted and builds on the Consumer Council's experience of conducting site visits at NI Airports. The Consumer Council wishes to thank everyone who took part in this event.

2.5. The overall aim of this work was to conduct a site visit with passengers with a disability or reduced mobility at the main passenger terminals to examine the special assistance provided.

2.6. The objectives of the visits included:

- To gain a better understanding of the support available;
- To become more aware of the specific needs of sea passengers with a disability or reduced mobility; and
- To identify possible changes that could further assist sea passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

The overall intended outcome is to work with port operators and ferry companies to ensure that special assistance services meet passengers' needs.

3. Methodology

- 3.1. The Consumer Council arranged group visits at the Port of Larne (P&O Ferries) on 27 January 2016 and the Port of Belfast (Stenaline) on 28 January 2016. Organisations represented included Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (IMTAC), Parkinson's UK, Action on Hearing Loss, Age Sector Platform, Guide Dogs NI and the Orchardville Society. The Port of Larne, ferry companies and Consumer Council staff were also involved.
- 3.2. Ferry company staff guided the group through the boarding process from arriving at the passenger terminal as a foot passenger through to the point where a passenger boards the ship. The staff also showed the group the car boarding facilities and discussed the services on-board the ship.
- 3.3. Consumer Council staff took notes at the visits and recorded the suggestions that were made by participants.

4. Findings

Arrivals

4.1. The group found that at some points there was a slight ramp between the kerb and access areas to the terminal building. They explained that where the gradient of ramp is high, it can prove difficult for wheelchair users to access the terminal building with ease.

4.2. Participants noted the use of tactile paving to indicate a zebra crossing. This was especially important for visually impaired passengers. The group highlighted the importance of using such surfaces consistently stressing they should be present at both ends of a crossing to ensure passengers can safely cross.

Recommendations

- Where there are ramps between outside areas and the terminal building, the gradient should be appropriate to allow a wheelchair user to access with ease; and
- Consistency in the use of tactile paving areas to indicate the start and finish of a crossing allowing visually impaired passengers to safely cross.

Arrivals – Terminal Building

- 4.3. Participants highlighted that parts of the terminal buildings had inclined areas. The group commented on the importance of a corresponding hand rail along these areas to provide support to passengers with reduced mobility as they travel through.
- 4.4. The group noted the assistance point button at the entrance to the terminal building which could be pressed to notify ferry operator staff that assistance was required. Whilst they had not been aware of it prior to the visit, participants agreed it was a very good idea and clearly visible.

Recommendation

- Where there are inclined areas either inside or outside the terminal building; ensure corresponding handrails are in place to provide support for passengers with reduced mobility.

Car Parking

- 4.5. Participants commented that car parking machines which have high payment points are difficult to operate upon entering and exiting the car park.
- 4.6. The availability of an assistance button on the parking machines was highlighted by ferry operator staff.
- 4.7. Participants commented at one passenger terminal there was “no parking” signage at the entrance to the terminal building. They

noted this area is used as a drop off point for passengers with reduced mobility however the signage may deter passengers from availing of it. It was explained that the parking bay is staffed at the time of sailings and those requiring assistance can park for a period of time. Assistance can also be requested when pre-notifying the ferry company of travel requirements. The “no parking” signage was necessary to keep the area clear and ensure it was not used as a general parking space.

4.8. The group also noted the number of reserved parking bays in the car park for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility.

Recommendation

- Promote the availability of the help button facility on parking machines through signage at the car park entrance.

Check-in

4.9. Participants noted that the check-in/arrivals desk had a lowered level to allow for a wheelchair user to engage easily with a member of staff at the desk. Participants highlighted the importance of signage to allow them identify where to go in order to request assistance.

4.10. It was also highlighted that where a loop system¹ is available there should be clear signage as it allows a passenger to adjust their

¹ Induction loop systems help people who are deaf or hard of hearing pick up sounds more clearly, by reducing background noise.

hearing aid to correct setting and indicate to a member of staff to use the system.

Recommendation

- A visible 'special assistance' sign in the arrivals hall to indicate where passengers should announce their arrival; and
- Where a loop system is available this should be signposted.

Security

4.11. The group discussed the calibration of the scanning equipment and noted it was used as an aid to searching. Staff will facilitate those passengers who prefer not to go through it to protect their privacy and comfort. One participant commented that the calibration of the equipment was such that it could pick up on a passenger who may, for instance, have a metal implant or perhaps a prosthetic limb. This could cause embarrassment, especially if there were other passengers present. For passengers who prefer to go through security screening in private, a room is available upon request.

4.12. Participants accepted the importance of notifying the ferry operator in advance of special assistance requirements especially if they preferred not to go through the scanning equipment.

Recommendation

- Increase awareness of the availability of a private screening facility if required through information on the ferry operator's website and at the check-in stage.

Passenger Terminal Building

Seating

4.13. There was a large amount of seating available throughout the passenger terminal buildings from the point of arrival to the area to wait to board the ship. Participants commented that where seating is not available a dedicated waiting area within the check-in area and departure lounge for passengers requiring assistance would be helpful.

4.14. It was also noted that the majority of seating within the building was low in height and without arms making it unsuitable particularly for older people or people with reduced mobility.

4.15. The group discussed the importance of the location and spacing of seating to allow for wheelchair or scooter users to navigate safely and easily through it. Particularly, the access routes to the toilets and cafe facilities should be free from obstruction.

Recommendations

- Provision of a small dedicated seating area for special assistance passengers waiting to board the ship. This should be clearly marked;
- This area should allow for space for wheelchair and scooters to sit in line with seating;
- Seating in the dedicated area to be higher with arm rests making it easier for passengers with a disability or reduced mobility to get in and out; and
- Access routes to facilities to be widely spaced and free from obstruction.

Signage/announcements

4.16 Where there was signage present at appropriate points it was clear and visible. Participants noted that some areas would benefit from signage (discussed further in other sections).

4.17 Participants found that on occasion the quality of public announcements was not clearly audible. This is important to ensure that passengers are aware of any important travel information.

Recommendation

- Ensure public announcements are loud, clear and slowly enunciated for those who have a hearing impairment.

Access

4.18 Further to the points discussed above about clear pathways through seating areas the group highlighted other areas to consider in relation to access. Participants explained that staff should be mindful of the placement of advertising boards/stands and the storage of furniture such as baby chairs in food areas to ensure they do not restrict space/access for a wheelchair user.

4.19 It was noted that doorways were wide enough for wheelchairs to comfortably pass through. However, in some doorways there were metal saddles (joining two floors) which were raised making it difficult for a wheelchair with smaller wheels to cross.

4.20 There was ramp access to the terminal building allowing for wheelchair access. However, it was commented that the gradient of the ramp may pose difficulties for wheelchair users, as well as kerbs that are not dropped.

4.21 Participants noted that a lift was available to take passengers between different levels. However, there were concerns raised about the emergency procedure should a passenger with a hearing impairment pressed the 'emergency call button' they would not be aware if the call had been answered.

Recommendations

- Review main walk ways and entrances to ensure that there are no obstacles;

- Where there are ramps the gradient should be appropriate to allow for a wheelchair user to use with ease;
- Any 'door saddles' around doorways to join floors should be as flush to the ground as possible; and
- Where there are emergency contact points it was suggested that a sign stating that when pressed help will be on its way would be reassuring for passengers' with a hearing impairment eg in the lift.

Toilets

4.22 Accessible toilets were available in both the check-in and departure lounge area. Car passengers also have access to the toilet facilities in the terminal building. Participants made comments about the availability of the assistance cords within toilet cubicles.

Recommendations

- Assistance pull cords should be available in all accessible toilets; and
- Assistance pull cords should not be tied up. They need to meet the required safety standards whilst remaining visible and accessible to all passengers in the event of an emergency.

Boarding

4.23 When travelling as a foot passenger, participants noted there was a minibus available to transport passengers with reduced mobility between the terminal building and the ship. The group was

informed that travelling companions and assistance dogs may also use this service.

4.24 Where the back of the vehicle did not automatically lower to allow wheelchair access, the group noted that ferry operator staff are trained in the use of the vehicle's ramp to allow for a wheelchair to board.

4.25 Participants explained that passengers using a mobility scooter, which can be larger in dimension than a wheelchair, may experience problems accessing the caddy vehicle. This is because the size of the ramp is too small to facilitate the additional dimensions of the mobility scooter.

4.26 The importance of notifying the ferry operator in advance of any special assistance requirements was highlighted as passengers with reduced mobility are normally boarded on a queuing basis. This is to facilitate boarding in order to avoid any delay.

Recommendation

- Raise awareness of special assistance notification requirements in advance, specifically when motorised wheelchairs are being used, through pre-booking information on the ferry operator's website and at the arrivals desk.

Car Boarding

4.27 When boarding the ship as a vehicle driver, the group noted that special assistance was indicated by the use of an orange sticker displayed on the vehicle windscreen.

4.28 Participants explained that parking lanes reserved for passengers with reduced mobility should be kept clear of obstacles at all times. This will ensure passengers can return to the terminal building from their car.

4.29 The group noted that assistance from ferry operator staff is available to enable car passengers to access the terminal building. Participants were concerned that this was not apparent when booking or checking-in and therefore passengers may feel this is an imposition on staff. Ferry operator staff assured participants that this help is available and part of the special assistance service provided.

4.30 It was discussed that a clearly marked access area along the side of the reserved lanes is beneficial. Furthermore, participants highlighted that areas close to the dropped kerb need to be clear to allow a wheelchair to manoeuvre into the terminal building.

Recommendations

- Car passengers should be made aware of the assistance available to them if they wish to return to the terminal building when parked in the reserved car lanes waiting to board. This may be

through pre-booking information on the company's website or upon check-in;

- Monitor reserved parking lanes to ensure they are kept free from obstacles which may make it difficult for passengers to return to the terminal building;
- Review the dropped kerb area outside the terminal building to ensure there is sufficient space to allow a wheelchair to manoeuvre and access the terminal building; and
- Review the area alongside the reserved lanes with regards to providing a clearly marked access area.

On-board

4.31 While the visit involved touring the passenger terminal staff and participants discussed the facilities on board the ship. Participants discussed if there was charging points for motorised wheelchairs onboard given the length of the journey; the amount of oxygen a passenger can carry; emergency procedures for a passenger with a hearing impairment; and, facilities for guide dogs particularly in relation to spending.

Recommendations

- Review the pre-travel information, for example, on ferry company websites to ensure passengers requiring assistance are aware of what is available on-board; and
- Consider developing easy read versions of pre-travel information for passengers with a learning disability; and

- When seating passengers with a visual impairment onboard, ferry operators should be mindful of agreeing appropriate seating with the passenger. This may be close to facilities and staff members as rough crossings can be disorientating for passengers with a visual impairment.

Travelling with an assistance dog

4.32 For passengers travelling with assistance dogs, participants noted the assistance dogs are generally not subject to searching. The only exception to this is if the assistance dog is wearing a coat or any other item which is not generally used and therefore causes suspicion amongst staff.

4.33 The group emphasised the importance of having an area onboard and at the terminal building to allow assistance dogs to spend; especially during or after a long journey.

4.34 Participants were assured that during the journey, the outside deck area may be used to allow assistance dogs to spend and stretch their legs. The area is then hosed off for the comfort of other passengers. Additionally, water bowls are provided for assistance dogs.

4.35 Staff explained that a quiet area is available upon request at the terminal building for assistance dogs to take a comfort break.

Recommendations

- Review pre-travel information on the ferry operator's website and at the checking in process to ensure passengers travelling with assistance dogs are aware of facilities available for them, both on board and at the terminal building.

Staff Training

4.36 Participants highlighted the positive experiences they have had travelling by ferry in the past. The importance of the role of staff in providing assistance to ensure passengers have a positive experience when travelling by ferry was stressed.

Recommendation

- Disability awareness should include training on guiding passengers with a visual impairment.

5 Conclusion

- 5.1 Overall, the groups indicated that they were pleased with the services and facilities provided for passengers when using the special assistance services throughout the seaports. Some comments and suggestions were made by participants identifying important areas and highlighting where improvements could be made in order to make travel more convenient.
- 5.2 An emerging issue from the site visits related to the lack of knowledge regarding the level of special assistance which is available and this can be attributed to some of the comments made. This lack of knowledge related to areas such as facilities available for assistance dogs.
- 5.3 This lack of knowledge can be counteracted by increased awareness through information displayed on the company's website and more visible signage both inside and outside the terminal buildings.

6 Next Steps

- 6.1 The comments made by the participants at each of the site visits will be considered by the ferry companies and port operator. The Consumer Council will continue to work with and support the companies to review and progress the comments made to ensure that the services provided to sea passengers with a disability and reduced mobility continue to meet passengers' specific needs.



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