

Minutes London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF)

Date	Wednesday 01st of September 2021 12:00
Location	The meeting was conducted online via Microsoft Teams

Attendees	
Name	Company
Andy Wright	Committee Chair
Denise Hobbs	Accessibility Manager - London Luton Airport & LLAAF Joint Chair
Peta Barratt	Spinal Injuries Association
Dr Rita Egan	Luton Passenger Services Committee
Siobhan Meade	Guide Dogs for the Blind
Helen Fleet	Guide Dogs for the Blind
Sue Stephen	Wilson James
Rebecca Starr	DART
Gary Collins	DART
Apologies	
Annlouise Taylor	Alzheimer's Society
Carol Barraclough	Spinal Injuries Association
Libby Herbert	Colostomy UK
Daniel Churchman	Disability Resource Centre
Amy Gavin-Birch	Autism Bedfordshire
Abigail Burrell-Rann	JDRF

Welcome
<p>Denise welcomed attendees to the London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF), which was held online due to the ongoing Covid crisis. Andy confirmed that there were a few apologies for the meeting (please see above). Denise started by explaining that the DART project team had been invited to the meeting, as well as a representative from Wilson James, so that both guests could provide updates on their respective project / operation. Denise then handed over to Rebecca and Gary to update the forum members regarding the DART project.</p>
DART update
<p>Gary delivered his presentation, providing an update on the further work that has been carried out on the DART project since the forum last met, which included current photographs as well as floor plans for the stations both at Parkway and at the airport terminal building.</p> <p>Rita raised concern regarding the hoardings around the DART works, which she felt restricted access for wheelchair users when embarking and disembarking the train via a ramp. Rebecca confirmed that most of the hoardings had now been removed as that section of the build process had now been completed, so there should no longer be any restrictions.</p> <p>Rita also asked if a customer parked in the multistorey car park at the train station, would they be able to pass through the station in order to access the DART platform? Gary confirmed that GTR & DART had agreed that provided a customer has a car parking ticket, they will be able to gain access to the DART platform.</p>

Minutes London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF)

Rita then asked whether there are plans to introduce a concession pass for disabled travellers to use the DART, as she is currently able to utilise her bus pass for the existing shuttle bus. **Gary** responded saying any concessions should be aligned through the Network Rail System, so will confirm this is the case at the next meeting.

A final question from **Rita** was that if the lift in the main station (the first lift on the ground floor next to ticket desks) was to fail, was there a contingency plan to then assist PRMs over to the DART platform?

Rebecca confirmed that a routine maintenance service had recently been performed on the lift following feedback regarding its reliability. Plus, there is now a new over-bridge which is intended to provide additional lift support. However, this will only be from platform 4. Currently, if the lift on the ground floor next to ticket desks was to fail, the contingency plan to assist a PRM over to platform 1 or to the DART station, is to order a taxi or provide an accessible bus in order to transfer the PRM around to the Kimpton road entrance. **Rita** acknowledged this but did advise that this process can greatly affect a traveller's journey time. **Rebecca** confirmed that she would talk to the DART team and GTR about this point and the other concerns raised before the next Forum meeting.

Gary continued with the presentation explaining how the new carriages will have wheelchair locking points onboard the DART shuttle. **Andy** asked whether assistance is provided to help lock wheelchairs into position or does the wheelchair user do this themselves? **Gary** explained that the wheelchair user would lock themselves in position and he will send pictures of the locking process through in due course. **Rita** did mention that she had never had wheelchair locking devices before. But **Andy** suggested that the DART project was no doubt complying with new European regulations, which is why locking points for wheelchair users are now being introduced. **Denise** confirmed that it would be up to the individual service user whether they wished to use the locking system or not.

At the end of the DART presentation **Rebecca** invited **Rita** to e-mail her if there were any further concerns she could address directly.

Wilson James update

Sue from Wilson James (WJ) then provided her update for the forum. She started by explaining the inevitable frustrations the pandemic had placed upon her operation in recent months. But nevertheless, expressed her desire to continue looking at ways to improve the level of service despite the obvious challenges currently being experienced.

WJ had commenced managing the PRM assistance contract on the 1st February 2021, when airline schedules were literally changing on a week-by-week basis with many flights being rescheduled or even cancelled. Since February 2021 Wilson James had only assisted 8,882 passengers, considerably less than in previous years. Prior to WJ taking over the contract, 97 members of the operational staff had regrettably been made redundant by the previous assistance provider, reducing WJ's staffing levels down to 36 members at contract start. The reduction of staffing has led WJ to proceed with recruiting now PRM figures are returning.

Fortunately, WJ have seen some recent signs of recovery, but **Sue** stated that we are still some way off pre-covid numbers.

Despite the downturn, she confirmed how WJ were ensuring that the current number of ambu-lifts (8) were being systematically refitted and refurbished, whilst passenger numbers were low. WJ had also invested in 10 new Colombia (high specification) aisle chairs and plan to take delivery of 3 new minibuses in December of this year, all to further support the operation.

Sue finished her presentation by talking about the difficulties she was now having with future recruitment, as the airport sees positive signs of passenger growth. **Andy** asked if any of the staff who had previously been made redundant had been approached to see if they wanted to return to the airport. **Sue** confirmed they had been contacted, but many had now unfortunately found employment elsewhere.

Andy then went on to ask if the rate of pay for the PRM staff was competitive? **Sue** confirmed that the rate of pay had remained unchanged from when CCS (the former PRM assistance provider) managed the contract.

Minutes London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF)

Sue agreed that this may be one of the reasons she was struggling with sourcing new recruits. Consequently, she was now meeting with union representatives to discuss possible pay negotiations, **Sue** felt salaries were no longer competitive compared to other companies based at the airport.

Rita raised an observation regarding the customer engagement of staff, having recently travelled through the airport. She suggested that it would be preferable if staff addressed a passenger by their correct name as it was far more professional. **Sue** completely agreed saying professional engagement should be part of the WJ service and a discipline that she intends to instil in all staff members.

Andy asked what Sue's impressions of the WJ induction training course were. **Sue** said she felt that the new recruits had all really engaged with the training and this has been backed up by the positive customer feedback & compliments she had received from a number of recently travelled passengers. **Denise** confirmed this by explaining that she had also received several positive responses via the LLA PRM Survey and independent emails. **Andy** was encouraged by this feedback but still suggested **Denise** should attend a WJ training course to observe the content and style of the course and to ensure she was comfortable with how it was delivered.

Peta also described to the forum how she had been left to transfer herself unsupported from her aisle-chair to her personal mobility device due to a communication breakdown, at another airport. Unfortunately, she slipped and badly hurt herself as the aisle-chair was not supported by the agent during the transfer. She felt it was important to mention this to ensure all agents were appropriately trained on how to conduct a safe transfer.

LLA update

Denise closed off the meeting with a small summary which compared 2019, 2020 & 2021 PRM figures and percentage of PRM numbers compared to previous years. **Denise** then continued by highlighting current LLA actions and projects which had either been completed or were still ongoing.

Rita commented that an accessible toilet had been locked when she'd recently been travelling through the airport. **Denise** explained that she was aware that this could have occurred during the early stages of the Covid crisis, as the airport had not opened all of its facilities due to low passenger numbers. But this should not be the case currently. So she would ensure that if an accessible toilet had to be closed (perhaps due to routine maintenance), then adequate signage would be displayed explaining the reason for the temporary closure.

Denise advised that she had recently completed an Airport Council International (ACI) training course on Disability Sensitivity, and it had raised some concerns for her. Consequently, she wanted to seek guidance from the forum as to their thoughts on appropriate UK Language etiquette. So asked if members of the forum if they would be happy to share how their service users prefer to be described or referred to.

Siobhan confirmed that she was more than happy to be described as a person who is *blind* or *visually impaired*.

Peta confirmed she mostly uses the term *wheelchair user*. There then followed a group discussion about appropriate choice of language, political correctness and words to avoid so as not to cause offence.

Andy confirmed that as an international airport, LLA and its staff, need also to be mindful of other countries language choice and phraseology. Because even though some words may appear clumsy in English, for example *handicapped*. In other countries they may still be used regularly, without intending to cause offence.

The meeting was then brought to a close by **Andy** and **Denise**.

Future Meeting

The next forum meeting is scheduled for **Wednesday, 2nd March 2022**. Further information about timings and formats will follow in due course.

Minutes London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF)

--