

# Minutes London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF)

## Thursday, 17 March 2022 11:00 a.m.

Attendees	
<b>Andy Wright</b> - Committee Chair	<b>Clare Armstrong</b> - Head of Passenger Services, LLA
<b>Denise Hobbs</b> - Accessibility Manager, LLA	<b>Nick Galle</b> - Airport Services Director, Wilson James
<b>David Swain</b> - Associate Director, Ethos Farm	<b>Robi Gaine</b> - Operations Manager, Ethos Farm
<b>Dr Rita Egan</b> - Luton Passenger Services Committee	<b>Libby Herbert</b> - Colostomy UK
<b>Peta Barratt</b> - Spinal Injuries Association	<b>Mary Doyle</b> - Disability Etiquette trainer
<b>Sandie Allen</b> - Autism Bedfordshire	<b>Laura Hannibal</b> - Alzheimer's Society
Apologies	
<b>Siobhan Meade</b> - Guide Dogs for the Blind	<b>Daniel Churchman</b> - DRCB
<b>Emma Hotchkiss</b> - RNID	<b>Jo Rising</b> - Age UK

Welcome and introductions
<p><b>Andy</b> welcomed attendees to the London Luton Airport Accessibility Forum (LLAAF), which was held online due to the ongoing Covid crisis. <b>Andy</b> confirmed that there were a few apologies for the meeting (please see above) as well as some new members, due to changes/promotions within attending organisations.</p> <p>There were no outstanding action points from the previous meeting as, due to Covid, the purpose of the last Forum had simply been to update members on recent airport activities.</p> <p><b>Andy</b> completed a 'round the table' introduction to all members and guests, before introducing Clare Armstrong.</p>
LLA Operational Overview
<p><b>Clare</b> started by updating the Forum on LLA's performance in recent months and how it was now managing the transition out of Covid. Saying that in 2019 LLA had just under 18million customers using the airport each year and then on 23rd March 2020, this changed significantly. Dropping to less than 5 million customers in 2020, with a further reduction down to 4.5 million in 2021.</p> <p><b>Clare</b> went on to explain how in 2019 LLA had partnered with Ethos Farm to create a new customer orientated strategy which changed the focus from just creating improvements to physical infrastructure, to now thinking more about people and service. This resulted in developing a strategy to deliver "Great guest hospitality, consistently". Understandably, Covid had a major impact on air travel, amongst other things, resulting in a number of new projects having to be paused. This however provided an opportunity to revisit the airport's new vision, given the changes to peoples travelling patterns at that time, to now being "The simplest and friendliest major airport, whose focus was on sustainable growth".</p> <p><b>Clare</b> then added that in 2021, LLA developed 'The LLA Way' being a set of standards &amp; behaviours for all staff to be delivered at all times. Thereby enabling the airport to hold contractors/individuals to account and creating a mechanism to recognise and reward superior levels of customer service.</p> <p><b>Clare</b> summarised that LLA is on a journey with exciting things ahead, that include improvements to training, new uniforms, new offices, all with a view to elevating the level of service LLA provides to its passengers.</p> <p><b>Andy</b> asked Clare with regards to passenger numbers in 2022, what was the airport expecting?</p> <p><b>Clare</b> anticipated passenger figures to exceed 12 million this year, with airlines hoping to achieve 80-90% of 2019 levels. There are obviously considerable recruitment challenges across the airport coming out of Covid, not to mention the Ukrainian crisis, which LLA are working hard to overcome. With LLA having 25% of its schedule to eastern Europe, this will cause an additional challenge for the airport in the months ahead. But nevertheless, it is hoped that LLA is now on the path to recovery.</p> <p><b>Andy</b> asked whether staff shortages were affecting the operation of retail and catering units at the airport.</p> <p><b>Clare</b> confirmed most units are now open, with some retail stores being forced to close during Covid. But any available spaces were now being retendered and there will always be an offering of hot drink or snacks available, even if some stores have to operate reduced hours initially.</p>

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## Wilson James - Special Assistance performance update

**Nick** introduced himself to the Forum and advised that Wilson James (WJ) had now been operating the Special Assistance contract since February 2021. And similar to most aviation suppliers in the UK, WJ had struggled due to the impacts of Covid. Initially with the inevitability of staff redundancies due to a radical decrease in the number of passengers flying. Followed by new challenges including recruiting new staff to meet increasing demand, especially drivers for the ambulifts. As well as encouraging particular airlines to increase their prenotification rate of passengers requiring assistance when they get to the airport - which has been as low as 60% for certain carriers - so that WJ can better prepare in advance.

**Denise** confirmed that most areas of the airport, including airline staff, ground handlers and retail units, were all struggling with staff recruitment currently.

**Andy** asked Nick how short WJ was on current staffing level targets and how do WJ compare with other airport suppliers, as far as rates of pay are concerned.

**Nick** admitted it was definitely a challenge to attract new staff to the aviation sector currently because of the unsocial hours and lower rates of pay. WJ was also very concerned that when a newly qualified member of staff receives their airport security pass, they then can be attracted to another on-site airport supplier, when offered a higher rate of pay. Thereby inadvertently leading to a wage race. **Nick** also pointed out that WJ was not just recruiting any staff, favouring individuals who were naturally compassionate and caring. WJ was also concerned that as of 1<sup>st</sup> April, the minimum wage will rise to £9.50, adding further constraints to being competitive in the marketplace. Consequently, WJ is working closely with LLA to look at ways of introducing a sustainable wage model.

**Rita** then wanted to raise an issue about when her power-chair is transferred by the loaders onto the ambulift, it can get wet when raining. So asked whether WJ staff have protective sheets to cover chairs when this happens.

**Nick** admitted there were some communication issues at times between suppliers during the power-chair handover process from the ground handling agent to the assistance service provider and that is probably the most vulnerable time when a power-chair could get wet. He said he would take this point away and discuss it further with the ground handling agents to find a workable solution.

**Nick** admitted that the operation was not currently where it should be right now, but Wilson James have now introduced a number of new initiatives to help drive the necessary improvements and better cope with the increasing demand of passengers now wanting to travel.

One such initiative, is the introduction of a new operating system, which when launched will link directly to a passenger app called Purple Door (please see attached presentation document). This feature will enable PRMs to create a personal profile, capturing all the critical data related to their journey, their needs and requirements, as well as information about their wheelchair for example. All of which will enable the Special Assistance team to be forewarned and consequently better prepared.

**Rita** asked whether the information card she has created for her own power-chair, could be transferred onto the new system and would this system communicate her flight and power-chair related info, between all suppliers at the airport. As she is often asked details about her power-chair repeatedly by different people at different stages of her airport journey.

**Nick** confirmed that currently it would be possible to store power-chair details, such as make, model, dimensions, weight, and battery type. But beyond that at this stage, it would not be possible based on the current hardware limitations. However, going forward it was very much hoped that further information, such as how to safely disconnect the power source, move the chair without the battery being engaged etc, could be added to the system. Also, it was the aspiration of Purple Door to roll the app out to airlines, ground handling agents, check-in staff and Special Assistance staff, to ensure everybody had similar information. Thereby reducing the need for the same questions to be asked repeatedly.

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**Andy** then mentioned to Rita about the BHTA guide, which is a list of power-chairs/scooters containing all the critical information required, as described above, which can be linked into the app initially, before the next phase of the app's development.

**Mary** asked if the launch of Purple Doors will be a soft launch and if the system has been tested in the airport environment and by end users.

**Nick** explained that there had been a lot of engagement within the aviation community, but greatly appreciated being able to present the Purple Door concept to the Forum for feedback. This is something he would now like to do more around other airports.

**Mary** suggested having an end-user experience group consisting of PRMs, who could test drive the product before launch.

**Nick** agreed that this would be a very good idea and would pursue.

**Laura** asked what does airport staff training currently consist of and what is included?

**Clare** confirmed that the training she alluded to earlier, was particularly around the 'LLA Way' and customer service delivery. But LLA had also targeted, as part of its Responsible Business Strategy, to deliver hidden disability awareness training to all the airport's customer service staff. As well as determine the level and frequency of disability awareness/etiquette training conducted by all other airport stakeholders.

## Ethos Farm / DART update

**David** and **Robi** introduced themselves and then explained to the Forum the history behind the DART with its purpose to be the *rail gateway* to LLA. **David** showed a video of drone footage of the DART construction works. As well as a slide presentation of the route from Luton Parkway station (managed by GTR) to reach the DART platform for the shuttle, which will then bring the customer to the airport. He said that the DART is 99.5% reliable but if in the event of breakdown, trains will be able to return to a station. So, they would not be stuck between stations, and the normal journey time between stations is approximately 4 mins.

**David** then explained the 3-way partnership between Doppelmayr (for the shuttle & control room), Bell Rocks (facilities management services - like maintenance of the infrastructure) and Ethos Farm (who would provide staff for meet and greet services and customer support).

**Robi** then explained that Ethos Farm's main focus was making sure that each guest journey is seamless and a pleasant experience. Whilst also cementing relationships between Doppelmayr, Luton Airport, WJ and GTR to build a seamless service.

**David** went on to explain that there were some infrastructure concerns, as unfortunately Ethos Farm had not been involved at the design stage, which included the current design for the PRM waiting area at Central station.

So, it was hoped that there would be a number of changes/adjustments that could be made, before the station was officially opened.

**Rita** expressed frustrations over issues concerning the Parkway station, such as lifts breaking down, and felt that there had been a breakdown in communication between the train company and their customers.

**Denise** advised that the Parkway station was actually operated by GTR, so would check out the situation directly with them. But also suggested that when the DART has been officially handed over, the Forum members undertake a full end-to-end journey, involving GTR and the DART staff, to audit and evaluate the service before it goes live.

**Denise** said she would contact Andy to advise Forum members, once a pre-inspection date had been confirmed.

**Andy** asked where would PRM customers wait, having arrived at the DART station, if the WJ staff were delayed for the handover and were not yet there. How would the seamless transfer work practically?

**David** confirmed that when Ethos get control over the site, there will be a thorough testing process to fully evaluate the processes and procedures. Ethos accept they will come up against hurdles at the testing stage but expect to resolve these before going live.

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## AOB

**Denise**, before the end of the meeting, asked Forum members for their views on proposed plans to refurbish the accessible toilets with sensor flush systems. Due to the fact there had been a number of damage related issues with some of the toilet flush handles.

**Andy** was in the process of consulting with a number of visual impairment charities. But also wanted to know from organisations with service users who had either dementia or autism, whether they felt an automated flush system may cause some confusion.

**Laura** mentioned that dementia can vary considerably from person to person. So, if the flush handle is changed to a sensor, then to use signage to advise the user of the change, may help some. But won't necessarily suit everybody.

**Sandie** agreed that a clear sign would be useful and for the flush to be in a position where it was not constantly activated and the toilet repeatedly flushing.

### Actions:

- **Andy** to liaise with forum members to gather disability related content for possible inclusion into future staff training modules. Following which, share with **Clare** and **Denise** for consideration.
- **Denise** to liaise with **Andy**, once inspection dates for DART evaluation and audit have been agreed.
- **Andy** to liaise with Nick to look at power-chair processes and procedures, including ground handling agents
- **Andy** to liaise with Nick about the possibility of creating end user evaluation volunteers for Purple Door app

**Next Forum scheduled for Thursday 15 September 2022**