

Trailblazers

Young Campaigners' Network



Up in the air

The *Trailblazers'* report on air travel

Report 10 of the **Inclusion Now** series, October 2012



Muscular
Dystrophy
Campaign



Trailblazers

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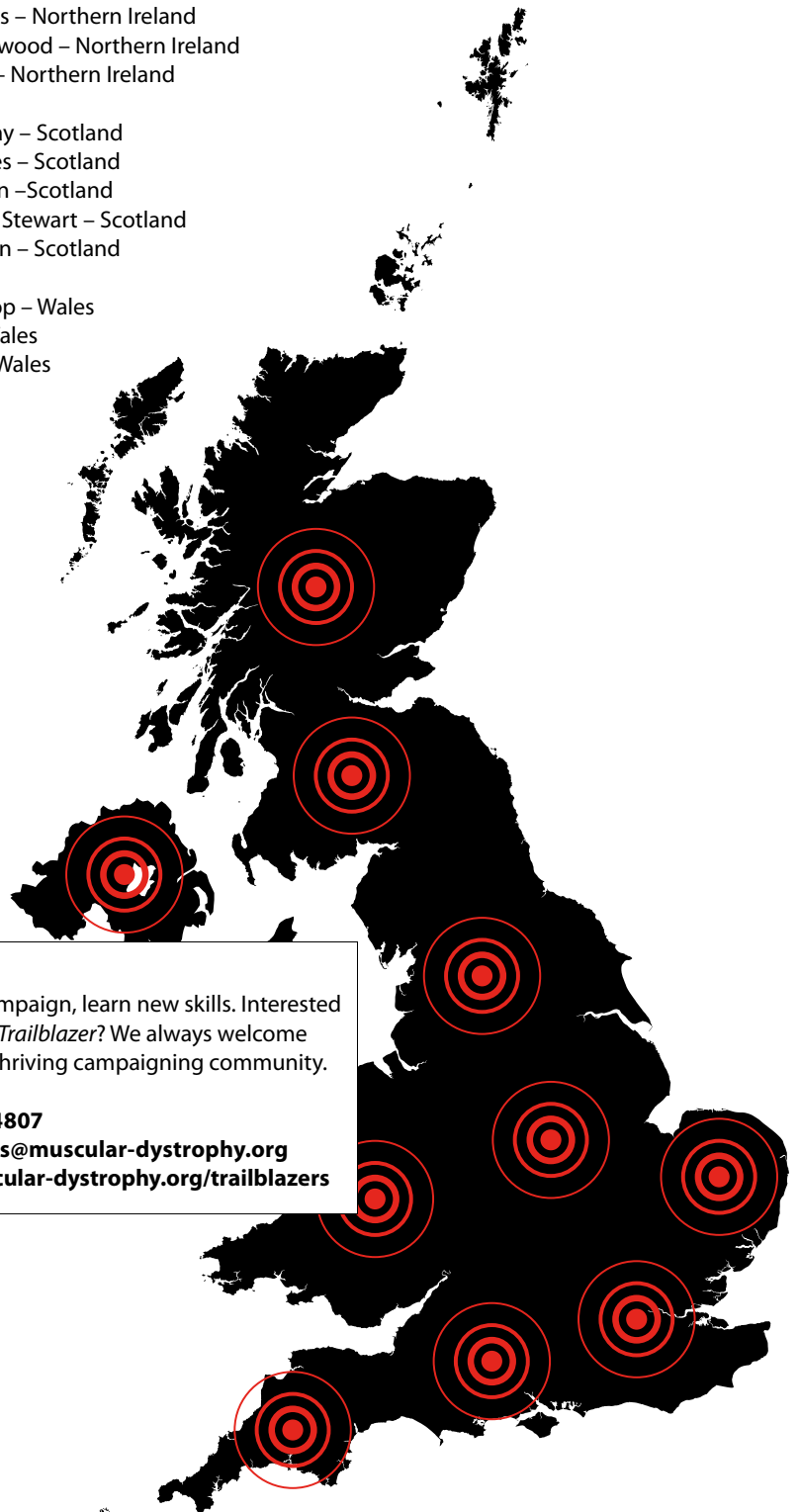
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Get involved

Take action, campaign, learn new skills. Interested in becoming a *Trailblazer*? We always welcome people to our thriving campaigning community.

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About Trailblazers

Trailblazers is a group of disabled campaigners from across the UK who tackle the social issues affecting young disabled people, such as access to higher education, employment, and social and leisure opportunities. We aim to fight these social injustices experienced by young disabled people and to ensure they can gain access to the services they require. We are part of the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign.

About the Muscular Dystrophy Campaign

The Muscular Dystrophy Campaign is the leading UK charity fighting muscle-wasting conditions. We are dedicated to beating muscular dystrophy and related neuromuscular conditions by finding treatments and cures and to improving the lives of everyone affected by them.

Our work has five main focuses:

- we fund world-class research to find effective treatments and cures
- we provide practical information, advice and emotional support for individuals with muscle-wasting conditions, their carers and families
- we campaign to bring about change and raise awareness of muscular dystrophy and related neuromuscular conditions
- we award grants towards the cost of specialist equipment, such as powered wheelchairs
- we provide specialist education and development for health professionals.

Thank you for your support

“My friend noticed my chair go past on a vehicle heading for the hold. To our horror, she said it had been taken apart. Knowing that the chair is not designed to be dismantled, something was seriously wrong. I spent the flight quite distressed.”

On arrival I was told I could not take my own chair from the plane and upon arrival in the baggage reclaim area I spotted my chair left, completely unattended, in the middle of the floor. The backrest had been unscrewed and laid sideways on the seat and the handlebars had been inexplicably forced and twisted 180 degrees. Until baggage handlers understand the consequences of actions like this, powered wheelchair users will continue to suffer and fear air travel.”

Trailblazer, West Midlands



Executive summary

Our investigation into the accessibility of the air industry was sparked by repeated reports of disabled passengers receiving a second-rate service from airlines. *Trailblazers* told of multiple headaches that ranged from complicated booking processes to their wheelchairs being damaged by baggage handlers, and people being injured when being lifted into airline seats.

In 2008, legislation was introduced by the European Union to protect the rights of disabled passengers flying in and out of Europe. However, it has been four years since the regulation was implemented, and our investigation reveals that disabled passengers still regularly encounter barriers to a smooth and pleasant travelling experience.

This report is the result of a survey of more than 100 disabled passengers who have given examples of incidents they have experienced on planes in recent years. In addition, we have held airline-focused discussion groups at 24 regional meetings across the UK during 2011 and 2012. Although some disabled passengers have had good experiences, most disabled passengers believe there is much that the airline industry needs to do before it catches up with other mainstream modes of transport.

Our members describe:

- being unable to take flights with best-priced airlines because most budget airlines will not carry wheelchairs above a certain weight
- wheelchairs being damaged beyond repair and holidays or business trips being ruined
- being physically hurt or feeling humiliated when being carried from wheelchairs to airline seats as staff members ignore their advice on best lifting techniques
- having low expectations of airlines to take care of their medical and mobility equipment.

With this in mind, it is of little surprise that this report has found that many disabled people avoid travelling by plane, at any cost. Yet air travel, like any mode of transport, can often be an essential requirement for a job, for example, which means that some disabled people are unable to pursue some careers.

Air travel is also a vital part of many holidays, which should be a time of relaxation and celebration. But for many of the people in this report, the process of travelling by plane will mean days and weeks of worrying about what will happen to them and their wheelchair on the plane as they remember past experiences when airlines have treated their essential equipment badly.

The *Trailblazers* hope that this report will bring attention to these multi-layered barriers to air travel. It is also important that young disabled people can work with airlines and organisations such as the Civil Aviation Authority to overcome what appears to be institutionalised prejudice towards disabled passengers.

We expect that the findings in this report will help airlines view disabled passengers as valued customers rather than a non-cost-effective inconvenience which they can ignore by hiding behind discriminatory policies and opaque international agreements.

Background

Since 2008, it has been illegal for airlines and holiday companies to refuse to fly people in and out of the European Union (EU) because they are disabled. European Union Regulation (EC) No. 1107/2006 is part of a general plan to reinforce passenger rights and should ensure that people with reduced mobility have opportunities for air travel comparable to those of other citizens.¹

This EU regulation represented a major change in assistance provision, identifying new responsibilities for airports and making it a statutory requirement for both the airport and the airline to provide assistance. It is now an offence to deny someone access to a flight on the grounds of a disability or impairment, except where there are specific safety restrictions.²

However, in February 2012, court rulings in the discrimination cases of passengers Tony Hook and Christopher Stott³ stated that the rights of disabled passengers do not extend beyond the time the plane is on the runway. Therefore once a passenger has boarded a plane, the Montréal Convention – a framework of international rules and regulations on air travel – takes precedence over British and European law.⁴

As of 1 October 2012, the Civil Aviation Authority is the sole handler for complaints from air passengers who are disabled or who have reduced mobility.

Go to the list of links at the back of this report to find out how to make a complaint about an incident involving an airline.

¹ www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/service-users-guidance/air-travel/

² www.caa.co.uk/docs/14/InFocus-PRM%20Review-web2.pdf

³ www.solicitorsjournal.com/node/9208

⁴ www.equalityhumanrights.com/news/2012/february/court-ruling-means-disabled-air-passengers-are-not-protected-says-commission/

Key findings

From the 100 *Trailblazers* who completed our survey, we found that:

- fifty percent have problems related to disability when booking airline tickets
- half of the passengers have problems checking in a wheelchair or other mobility or health-related equipment
- six out of ten disabled passengers say their wheelchairs have been damaged when travelling with an airline
- almost nine out of ten disabled passengers are not confident that their wheelchair or other health-related equipment will be well cared for by airlines
- eighty five percent of wheelchair users said they would not use an airline that required them to break their wheelchair up into smaller parts
- six out of ten disabled passengers said they felt unsafe when they transfer from a wheelchair to an airline seat
- almost half of disabled passengers feel that airline staff who lift and carry them do not provide a good service
- one third of people have been on flights that have no aisle wheelchairs, which makes it impossible for wheelchair users to move around the plane
- nine out of ten wheelchair users are unable to use airline toilets and therefore have to avoid drinking before or during flights
- eighty percent of wheelchair users would feel safer and more comfortable if they could travel in their own wheelchairs on board planes.

“There have been several occasions where the airline has either said they can't take the wheelchair because it is too heavy or they can't guarantee I can have extra leg room – even with a doctor's letter – because it is reserved for business class passengers only.”

Hannah-Lou Blackall, King's Lynn

Booking tickets

It is often problematic and inconvenient for disabled passengers to book their flights and passenger assistance online or by telephone, and to arrange the carriage of specialist medical equipment, such as wheelchairs and oxygen.

Almost half of the young disabled people in our survey say they have had problems booking seats with an airline, and the problems arise because they are disabled. They say it is not uncommon for disabled passengers, who have spent significant amounts of money on airline tickets, to find themselves spending hours of time and money on their telephones, waiting on hold, to inform the airline of their assistance requirements. It is not acceptable for airlines to provide such a poor quality service to disabled passengers when non-disabled passengers can book and reserve their seats online in a significantly faster time.

Disabled passengers also tell of being unable to get a guarantee of seating in areas near exits, which will reduce the distances they need to walk or be carried. Disabled passengers say they have to complete forms listing their requirements, including being located next to personal assistants or carers, only to arrive at the plane and discover this information has not been communicated to onboard staff.

“Earlier this year we booked a holiday with Enable holidays to Tenerife. I filled in forms to say what my condition and needs were. This was a waste of my time as when we arrived at check-in we found that we were going to be three rows back from the front. This led to a row and I ended up with a bulkhead seat but my wife and carer were still seated rows back from me. On the return journey I again had a bulkhead seat but this time my wife and carer were 13 rows further behind me. It was a total sham.”

Martyn Watkinson, Cranleigh

“It is difficult getting information about how to book wheelchair assistance when you fly. Information is normally only found by phoning high-cost numbers and waiting for a long time. Non-disabled people can book flights within 30 minutes, but it normally takes me a full day to book a flight and then I am normally told to call back 48 hours before I fly.”

Sarah Croft, Exmouth

“I tend to avoid air travel. I need a letter from a doctor and the travel agents say that it is still not guaranteed that I will be near the front of the plane. Also, I've had my chair broken by the airline.”

Victoria Halliday, London

“Even after giving the airlines and airports the relevant information in advance, the information is not communicated to the people who need to know. This leads to further completion of documentation and time spent doing so for a second time.”

Trailblazer

Action needed:

We are calling on airlines:

- to provide free phone advice lines for mobility assistance so disabled people do not have to pay for calls when they are required by an airline to give extra information
- to make it possible for wheelchair carriage to be booked online and for airlines to take the responsibility of contacting the wheelchair user for further information
- to ensure that advice line operators are adequately trained and can provide high-quality advice to disabled passengers with specialist needs.



Airline policies on carrying wheelchairs

Since 2008 and the introduction of the EU regulations, many disabled passengers still find that some airlines have company policies that make it almost impossible for them to travel.

Most airlines do not place restrictions on the size and weight of the wheelchairs they are willing to take, however some carriers have weight limits and require that expensive wheelchairs are broken up in to small parts⁵. The airlines justify this policy by saying that baggage handlers are protected by health and safety regulations and guidance that mean they cannot carry items weighing more than 23kg or 32kg per item, and that they only use two baggage handlers per flight. However, other airlines use mechanised lifting equipment and/or bring in an extra member of staff to overcome this barrier.

One airline has recently adapted their policy to say that if the mobility aid weighs more than 60kg and cannot be collapsed into separate parts, then the passenger should call the customer service team at least 48 hours in advance to inform the airline about the total weight of the mobility aid.

This was promising news as it seemed that the airline would now permit heavier wheelchairs. However, when *Trailblazers* called the customer service team, the staff seemed unaware of the new website guidance and could not tell us if they could carry a wheelchair. They said we would need to book a flight before they could tell us if the wheelchair could be taken on that flight.

Eighty-one percent of young disabled people in our survey say they could not consider flying with an airline that requires powered wheelchairs to be broken up into smaller parts. As a consequence, airlines with these policies are prohibiting many wheelchair users from travelling with them at all.

Trailblazers are concerned that:

- airlines are putting profits before passengers by placing a weight limit on wheelchairs that can be carried
- airlines do not recognise that requiring a passenger to break up their essential piece of medical equipment is a major disincentive to travelling with such an airline
- wheelchair users are expected to buy tickets for flights before they know if they will be able to take their essential medical equipment with them
- staff on special assistance helplines do not understand company policies and cannot give consistent advice.

“I often have problems with the dimensions of my chair, especially when on short journey flights within the UK due to the small opening for the hold. More often I have significant trouble with the weight of my chair - so much so that I have never even attempted travel with easyJet. My [powerchair] batteries also have to be dry cell or I am not allowed to travel.”

Michaela Hollywood, Crossgar

“When I flew with easyJet in 2009, they initially tried to charge me to take my electric wheelchair onboard (in the hold) due to its weight. This happened at the airport about an hour before I was due to fly. I had already rung up their helpline a few weeks before to try and ascertain their policy on carrying electric chairs, but nobody had been able to tell me whether my chair would be allowed on the plane or not. I therefore resolved to have my chair taken on to the plane regardless of what happened at the airport. I was able to kick up enough of a fuss at the check-in desk that they relented, but it took about half an hour to do this, so it was lucky I'd arrived a bit early!”

Zoë Hallam, Bristol

Action needed:

We are calling on airlines:

- to put the passenger and customer first and make it possible for people to take their essential medical equipment with them when they travel
- to be consistent across the industry, and learn from other airlines that carry wheelchairs without weight restrictions
- to ensure staff manning their advertised special assistance helplines fully understand the company's wheelchair carriage policy and can advise passengers before a booking is made.

“Jet2 refused to take my wheelchair when I was flying to Prague from Newcastle because of the weight of the chair. Jet2 blamed Swissport (the ground staff for special assistance) for refusing the wheelchair. After many phone calls and arguing, they agreed to take my wheelchair as long as the height of the wheelchair was under a certain height. I've also had to wait up to a week to know if I can get booked on to a flight.”

Emma Muldoon, Grangemouth

“Making sure wheelchairs are checked in properly and handled correctly. Sometimes the staff aren't always aware of the regulations, e.g. having flown to Ireland with our electric wheelchairs, on the way back staff were questioning whether the wheelchairs were safe to go into the cargo. This is despite the obvious answer being yes, as they were perfectly fine to go to Ireland.”

Laura Merry, Aylesbury

⁵ www.mdctrailblazers.org/assets/0000/5673/Trailblazers_tourism_final_version_with_amendments.pdf

Airline policies on wheelchairs (as of October 2012)

EasyJet

- Wheelchairs and mobility aids weighing more than 60kgs (excluding battery) can be accepted for travel provided they can be collapsed into separate parts weighing less than 60kg each.
- You will need to inform their **Customer Service Team** at least two days in advance of the total weight and also bring the operating instructions with you to the airport.

If the mobility aid cannot be collapsed into separate parts weighing less than 60kg each (excluding battery), then it will not be accepted for travel. This is to comply with weight and size limitations in and around the aircraft and health and safety regulations that protect their staff.

British Airways

To assist with the safe stowage of wheelchairs, provide sufficient information at least 48 hours before you travel.

The type of wheelchair you have will determine how we are able to load your wheelchair on to the aircraft.

Regardless of the type of battery your mobility aid or wheelchair uses, send the following information at least 48 hours before you travel:

- number of batteries installed
- type of battery
- TARE (un-laden) weight
- dimensions (i.e. length x width x height)
- instructions for preventing inadvertent operation.

Ryanair

Passengers with reduced mobility who are travelling with an electric wheelchair are required to advise the airline at least 48 hours before travel of the weight and lowest collapsed height of the wheelchair. Passengers are also asked to bring the wheelchair operating instructions to the airport.

Electric Wheelchairs must comply with the following to be accepted for carriage:

- The wheelchair battery must be dry/gel cell ONLY
- The dimensions of the wheelchair when collapsed must not exceed 81cms (height), 119cms (width) and 119cms (depth)
- The battery power must be isolated and exposed terminals protected from short circuiting, to protect the wheelchair/mobility aid from inadvertent activation, please remove the key, deactivate using the joystick or deactivate using an isolation switch or buttons, or other isolation mechanism (such as Anderson Connector Plug).

Virgin Atlantic

If you use a powered wheelchair or mobility aid, you can travel with it on Virgin Atlantic. There are a couple of things to take note of to make it quicker and easier to fly with your battery-powered wheelchair or mobility aid:

- Let their Special Assistance team know you're planning to bring it, ideally more than 48 hours before your flight. They can be reached on 0844 412 4455
- Download and complete a copy of their electric wheelchair information for each leg of your flight (so, two copies for a return flight). You'll need the form when you check in.

Flybe

- Flybe will carry up to two pieces of mobility equipment at no additional cost. This is in addition to your baggage allowance.
- They are currently unable to accept mobility equipment powered by wet cell batteries.
- Owing to health and safety, Flybe endeavour to minimise the weight of items being lifted by airport staff and baggage handlers. Therefore if your electric wheelchair cannot be dismantled into pieces **weighing less than 23kg** you will need to complete a form to arrange carriage.

Monarch

- Restrictions apply to the transportation of battery-operated wheelchairs, so it is advisable to let them know the type of battery when booking.
- Monarch do not charge for the carriage of wheelchairs or mobility aids, however only a maximum of 2 mobility aids are permitted for carriage.
- Passengers travelling with their own mobility scooter must ensure it has a manual 'Drive Forward' switch, enabling the scooter to be moved easily once the battery has been disconnected.

Jet2

Motorised Mobility Aids

- **Jet2.com** will accept for carriage mobility aids containing non-spillable dry cell, spillable dry cell (Gel Cell) or lithium batteries. Please note that **Jet2.com** do not carry wet cell batteries under any circumstances.
- Provide Jet2 with sufficient information at least 48 hours before you travel. To do this call their dedicated mobility assistance line on +44 (0) 8444 721031 or +44 (0)203 059 8337 if calling from overseas.
- Before an electric mobility aid is loaded onto their aircraft, **Jet2.com** must be satisfied that the mobility aid has been made safe in accordance with the ICAO Technical Instructions.
- If **Jet2.com** is unable to be satisfied or where it is established that the electric mobility aid has not been made safe, **Jet2.com** will refuse carriage of the mobility aid. In such circumstances **Jet2.com** is not under obligation to render it safe.

Other factors which could prevent the carriage of an electric mobility aid are:

- the mobility aid dimensions exceeding cargo door dimensions
- the tare (unladen) weight of the mobility aid exceeding the aircraft loading limitations after all possible load-spreading options have been considered and insufficient space being available on the aircraft at the time your booking is made.

(Information gathered from the respective airlines' websites.)

Checking in and transferring to planes

Most passengers find the process of checking in for a flight at an airport a tedious activity. However, for many disabled passengers, the experience can be one filled with emotions of anxiety and uncertainty.

Almost half of the young disabled people in our investigation say they have problems checking in a wheelchair or other mobility or health-related equipment and report that they often feel that guidance and advice they submit to airlines in advance have been lost or ignored. Passengers describe incidents where health equipment has been dismantled and parts lost, as well as wheelchairs being checked in and then being lost at other airports.

On other occasions, airline staff have refused to take wheelchairs and other essential medical equipment on flights even though passengers have provided information to the airlines weeks and months in advance.

Other problems disabled people encounter include unclear and inconsistent policies on whether wheelchair users can take their own chair up to the plane or need to transfer to an airport wheelchair at check-in. For a young independent disabled person to be forced to spend hours in an airport wheelchair waiting for a flight is invariably uncomfortable and disabling when the wheelchairs can only be pushed and not self controlled.

Action needed:

We are calling on airlines and airports:

- to ensure that information about mobility and health equipment that is submitted by disabled passengers via assistance lines and through websites is passed on to check-in desk staff
- to deliver a high standard of relevant disability awareness training to all public-facing members of staff including helpline operators
- to ensure that any member of staff that takes control of a wheelchair recognises that it is a piece of medical equipment and treats it appropriately
- to allow all wheelchair users to remain in their own chair up to the point of embarking on to the plane.

“I needed to go to the door of the plane in my own wheelchair. I was told it wasn't possible and I needed to check in my wheelchair straight away and use one of the airport wheelchairs, even though they didn't have the head support that I depend on. Only by me doggedly insisting on it did they eventually agree to what I needed.”

Mike Moorwood, Woking

“They are really helpful but I make several phone calls to make sure everything is ok - if you don't do the legwork you'll have problems and I'd rather enjoy my holiday.”

Aaron Pask, Cambridgeshire

“Every time I check in I am told something different. Sometimes I am told I can't take my chair to the plane door and have to check it in at the desk which is really difficult as I can't sit in manual wheelchairs but other times I can take it right to the plane door.”

Hannah-Lou Blackall, King's Lynn

“When I flew to San Francisco from London via Paris, my electric wheelchair was left in Paris and did not travel in the plane with me to America. My wheelchair was not sent on for another four days, so I spent the beginning of my holiday in an airport (manual) wheelchair which did not fit my size and caused me great discomfort.”

Luke Baily, Richmond

“Once when I tried to check in I was told that I was unable to travel as I had not made the airline aware that I was disabled - even though I had rung up and told them! They said that they couldn't allow me to travel as they did not have the equipment - even though another passenger said that she had booked the same assistance so the equipment (a lift on board!) was actually available. They were extremely rigid and rude in their attitude to me and their mistake cost me hundreds of pounds. The irony was that I was actually travelling to take part in a European Conference on Person-Centred Planning for people with disabilities! I have also had the airline check-in staff be almost rude in dealing with me as if checking a disabled person in (perhaps because it takes longer) is more of a hassle - although this is NOT every time!”

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

“Despite having communicated all the dimensions etc of my powerchair in advance to Flybe, the ground crew at Belfast City Airport refused to put my wheelchair on the plane for about half an hour and only agreed to after I appealed to the airline staff.”

Sauna Walsh, County Antrim



Booking

“After booking a ticket online, I spent hours on hold trying to get through to an airline’s special assistance department to tell them my access requirements.”

Carrie-Ann Lightley, Kendal

“I saw two men bump an electric chair down two flights of stairs.”

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“From what I can gather I think they literally throw the wheelchairs in!”

Trailblazer

“I’ve seen how they load and unload my chair and frankly it’s a miracle it’s survived this long.”

Zoë Hallam, Bristol

“Many times the airline wouldn’t let me take my own chair to the gate, the airport chairs are unsuitable, and there is no reason why the decisions are different each time, stick to one policy (preferably to keep own chair as it’s safer).”

Tanvi Vyas, London

“I never feel completely safe when being transferred, and in recent years it has become impossible for me to transfer. Staff are not trained in specific ways to transfer a person with severe muscle wastage and poor posture. It is not possible to just fling someone with muscle disease from one chair to another. I was en route from the US to Northern Ireland when a member of staff wanted to lift me in a completely unsafe way for someone with my degree of muscle disease and posture and became somewhat aggressive when my mum refused to let him do so - it was clear he had no interest for my safety, but rather wanted to get the flight off the ground.”

Michaela Hollywood, Crossgar

Staff and communication

“Every now and then, staff wish to take my own wheelchair from me at the ticket desk and put me in a wheelchair which is unsuitable for my needs - i.e. one that cannot be self propelled and which I would be required to remain in for several hours until the plane boards. I have always persuaded staff otherwise, but it is a time-consuming matter and one which is frustrating to have to discuss in front of other passengers waiting to check in.”

Raquel Sigantoria, London

“I can’t book the cheapest tickets as I have to use the telephone to confirm whether I can travel or not.”

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“Sitting in my chair on a plane”

Seating

“Being able to take my chair on a plane would be a major improvement for me as my wheelchair is designed to support me to sit straight and means I won't be in pain.”

Sarah Croft, Exmouth

“Sitting in my chair on a plane would mean me and my chair would be safe!”

Hannah-Lou Blackall, King's Lynn

lane would mean I and my chair would be safe! ”

“Very often I can't take my wheelchair right up to the gate (i.e. it needs to go with checked bags), which due to my scoliosis, causes a good deal of discomfort from sitting in chairs that are not made for me to sit in. Often I have to lie down on the nearest softish flat surface.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“Often airlines refused to let me take my chair past check-in, saying I had to use the airport wheelchair, which is impossible for me to use as it is too large and does not have any support. It often takes a long discussion to get them to agree to let me take my chair to the gate.”

Lauren West, Newport

In the hold

“I do not think staff appreciate either how expensive or delicate wheelchairs are, nor understand how even minor damage to the chair can affect the individual's ability to use the chair. This is demonstrated by staff's lack of understanding when problems have been encountered.”

Raquel Siganporia, London

“I've had problems checking in my wheelchair a few times. Sometimes they seem confused when I approach the desk to check in and seem unsure what to do and do not seem to know what the correct procedure is, whether I have to come out of my wheelchair straight away and go into an airport wheelchair or whether I can stay in my own wheelchair up to the plane door.”

Emma Muldoon, Grangemouth

“It takes a very long time, normally with a number of different members of staff involved.”

Sarah Croft, Exmouth

Carriage of wheelchairs and damage

Wheelchairs are essential pieces of medical equipment, many of which are funded by and issued by the National Health Service. For many wheelchair users their chair is their only method of moving independently, and apart from sleeping in bed or going to the toilet, they would never leave their wheelchair apart from when travelling by plane.

With this in mind it is shocking to see that in our study more than 60 percent of wheelchair users say that their wheelchair has been lost or damaged when they have been travelling with an airline. It is therefore no surprise that 85 percent of wheelchair users say that they have no confidence that their wheelchair or medical equipment would be well cared for when they travel with an airline.

Unsurprisingly, many wheelchair users will only travel on a plane when it is absolutely essential, as when checking in a wheelchair they are checking in the one item which gives them independence. It is the equivalent of checking in a pair of legs.

In spite of holidays and business trips being ruined by wheelchairs and/or other equipment being damaged during loading and unloading, airlines advise wheelchair users to take out extra private insurance. Airlines say that they are limited to approximately £1,080 compensation that they can pay out for damage or injury to passengers, luggage or cargo by the Montréal Convention. The Montréal Convention, a treaty adopted by an International Civil Aviation Organisation, re-establishes urgently-needed uniformity and predictability of rules relating to the international carriage of passenger, luggage and cargo.

“Jet2 have broken my wheelchair and are only taking responsibility for £1,000 of the damage. My chair is worth £5,000-£6,000.”

Lauramechelle Stewart, Port Glasgow

Action needed:

We are calling on airlines:

- to provide cargo boxes that protect fragile and essential mobility equipment like wheelchairs when they are being loaded and unloaded on to planes
- to train baggage handlers to treat powered wheelchairs as vital, fragile and expensive pieces of medical equipment
- to work with groups of young disabled passengers like *Trailblazers* on disability awareness training for staff
- to re-examine the Montréal Convention to reconsider the maximum payment that can be paid for damage incurred to wheelchairs and other health-related equipment.

“I have not had a good history of getting my chair back in the condition I sent it, or even getting it back at all.”

Michaela Hollywood, Crossgar

“I’ve heard so many horror stories from other people that means I’m always apprehensive whenever I fly and tend to expect the worst and hope for the best.”

Laura Merry, Aylesbury

“Baggage handlers at airports tend not to be the gentlest or very wheelchair-friendly. Also airlines insist on dismantling parts of my wheelchair (like dry cell batteries).”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“I have little faith that airlines understand how careful they need to be. More training needs to be done.”

Hannah-Lou Blackall, King’s Lynn

“Other people’s horrendous experiences put me off, so I rent a powerchair on the other end which is so expensive and uncomfortable but at least my own chair doesn’t get the chance to get damaged.”

Tanvi Vyas, London

“I don’t think airlines realise the importance of a wheelchair when it’s the only way for me to stay mobile.”

Vivek Gohil, Leicester

Wheelchairs on planes

One way to avoid the risk of damage to wheelchairs during the loading and unloading from planes is to find a way for disabled passengers to be able to travel with their chair in the cabin of the plane. However, seating on board an aircraft has to meet air safety regulations which mean wheelchairs cannot be taken into the cabin of a plane.

If wheelchairs were allowed to be taken on board a plane there would be a long list of advantages for many disabled people as well as airline staff:

- passengers would be more comfortable in their specially designed seats
- passengers would be secure in the knowledge that their wheelchair was safe throughout the journey
- passengers would not need to be lifted into the plane and transferred into seats risking injury
- baggage handlers would not need to dismantle and lift heavy wheelchairs.

Over the past two years *Trailblazers* members have debated this issue. All too often it can seem as if the very idea of a wheelchair on a plane is too outlandish for some individuals and organisations to comprehend. Yet, airlines now have planes with showers and cocktail lounges and it is now more than 40 years since a space shuttle was able to travel safely to the moon. Surely, the only things stopping aviation authorities, designers and airlines coming up with a solution to this problem are low expectations of and priorities for disabled travellers?

With nearly 80 percent of people in our survey saying that that they would feel safer and more comfortable on a plane if they were able to travel in their own wheelchair, *Trailblazers* are now setting airlines and aircraft designers a challenge to come up with a design that would secure a wheelchair on board a plane.

“Being in my own wheelchair is the only way I can be comfortable and secure for any significant length of time. Without being able to be in my own wheelchair I could not fly. Because this is not allowed I can currently not fly anywhere.”

Luke Baily, Richmond

“It would be so much better to be able to stay in my own wheelchair as there would be no need to transfer from my wheelchair to the aircraft seat.”

Ross Taylor, Cardiff

“For me a long plane ride would be very uncomfortable sat in a wheelchair with no headrest and plane seats I have found are quite comfortable. However that option should be available as not everyone is comfortable transferring from their wheelchair.”

Matilda Ibini, London

“Travelling in my own wheelchair would definitely be preferable to transferring to an airline seat because my own wheelchair is perfectly adapted for my needs and able to sustain my comfort for a long flight. This would also ensure that the wheelchair will not be broken.”

Vivek Gohil, Leicester

“We shouldn't have to leave our seats I mean we can get tie-downs in cars and taxis for our chairs so what's different about a plane?”

Catriona Brauders, County Tyrone

“It would be a lot more comfortable as my own chair has been designed around my scoliosis etc. I also wouldn't have to be transferred so this would eliminate more discomfort and humiliation. I also wouldn't have to worry about my wheelchair being damaged or broken in the luggage bay.”

Hayleigh Barclay, Prestwick

Action needed:

We are calling on airlines, designers and aircraft engineers:

- to invest time, thought and energy into designs that would make it possible for wheelchairs to be secured on planes throughout a flight
- to work with young disabled people to understand how a plane's cabin could be made more accessible to them.

“Would be far easier than having to be lifted. Would mean they would not hurt my arms. Also it would help me keeping my dignity as I do not like having to be lifted.”

Trailblazer

“With my lung capacity and spine, I don't think I could fly again without serious health repercussions unless I could stay in my wheelchair.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“I would be so much safer and more comfortable. It would certainly give me the confidence to travel more. Plus, there would be no worry of the wheelchair getting damaged!”

Lauren West, Newport

“I have a specially-moulded wheelchair which allows me to sit safely and comfortably for long periods. An airline seat does not provide enough support for me to sit well, I need someone to help me balance and can only sit for short periods due to pain. On my last flight, I spent most of it lying across three seats, which was very painful, undignified and potentially unsafe.”

Catherine Alexander, the Wirral



Plane Fair – Hayleigh’s campaign

My name is Hayleigh Barclay and I am the founder of the airline campaign *Plane Fair*. Our aim is to encourage the aviation industry to research new technologies which would permit wheelchair users to remain seated in their own chair which would eliminate the need to transfer into a standard airline seat.

The campaign started two years ago when I read the *All Inclusive?* report by *Trailblazers* regarding issues faced by disabled travellers. Some of you were probably involved in the investigation and may remember that many people reported having the difficulty of accessing planes – I too have the same issue. After reading the report I decided to get my Nancy Drew on and investigate further. You may need to find a darkened room to lie down in after trying to fathom this next part...

Here is a very brief rundown of the information I have discovered so far: the airline companies have to adhere to the safety regulations set by institutions such as EASA (European Aviation safety Authority). EASA states that any change of design relating to aircraft would need to go through vigorous testing to ensure the safety of the passenger. All seating design must meet the “Certification Specifications” which includes, but is not limited to, regulation (EC) 1702/2003. An approved design organisation would have to handle the design and certification. Any new piece of equipment would have to pass regulations before manufacturers and airlines can implement the new system; aircraft manufacturers say that there is nothing they can do as they have to follow the same regulations; the Scottish Minister for Transport passed on my inquiry to the Aviation Branch Of Scotland, who informed me that as it stands just now no wheelchair fits the requirement to be safely secured and would need adaptations to include safety restraints and head and neck support. They also said that passenger cabin configuration is driven by market demand and is a commercial matter for airlines ... I think that takes us full circle.

As of yet it remains unclear who is responsible for encouraging investment and time into a new design. Step forward *Plane Fair!* We need to prove that there is a market out there and that is where you come in. *Plane Fair* is a platform for you to voice your need for change. Please join us on Facebook (under the name Hayleigh Barclay) where people from around the world are talking about how this global issue is affecting them, or join us on Twitter @PlaneFair, and you can also sign our online petition at www.surveymonkey.com/s/airlinepetition. Please make your voice heard.

www.mdctrailblazers.org/campaigns/568_access-to-tourism-all-inclusive





Departur

Transferring to seats and facilities on the plane

The process of boarding and disembarking a plane can be humiliating and disempowering for a disabled person. Wheelchair users are often the last passengers to enter a plane and can feel exposed as they are carried in front of other passengers.

As well as the personal indignity of being carried by a complete stranger, many people say they feel unsafe and unnerved when being lifted and carried by staff members. In our survey, almost half of the wheelchair users say they feel unsafe when transferring from their wheelchair to an airline seat, and 45 percent of passengers say that airline staff don't provide a good service when lifting and carrying because staff are unsure of how to lift and carry and don't listen to a disabled passenger's advice.

One way to remove the risk of manhandling disabled passengers is to use a travel sling which will help reduce the chance of injury to both the passenger and the lifter. Currently, most planes do not carry this simple and modestly-priced piece of equipment. If all flight staff were trained in the use of a sling it would make a major difference to the confidence and experience of many disabled passengers.

Another difficulty for disabled passengers who travel with some airlines is the fact that they cannot book a specific seat near the front of the plane or next to a carer or personal assistant. It seems unfair and indeed unethical that airlines require a disabled passenger to be accompanied, charge that companion and then do not seat the companion next to the disabled passenger.

Other challenges that passengers identified in our survey included some planes not carrying an aisle chair, meaning that wheelchair users are unable to access the toilet or move from their seat throughout a flight. In addition the inaccessibility of bathrooms on planes was a cause of concern with almost 90 percent of wheelchair users saying that they cannot use onboard toilets.

“Airport staff are usually very helpful, I have to tell them how to lift me the right way but they never argued with this. Sometimes not enough staff turn up at first, but they soon call for back up. Never been dropped or injured.”

Mike Moorwood, Woking

“I have just been in hospital for three months following getting bashed about in an aisle wheelchair which caused a back wound.”

Trailblazer



Action needed

We are calling on airlines:

- to install transfer travel slings on all planes so wheelchair users can be assured that they will be safe when transferring from wheelchairs and aisle seats to airline seats
- to include aisle chair-accessible toilets on all large planes used on long-haul flights
- to ensure all staff that carry and lift disabled passengers have received high quality disability awareness training
- to ensure staff listen to the instructions and guidance given by disabled passengers when lifting or carrying them
- to guarantee that if a disabled person has been forced to book an extra seat for a companion or carer they are able to sit next to that person
- to allow the booking of seats near toilets or with more legroom without charging extra.

“I booked with a travel agent, and requested extra leg room, and a seat near to the toilet. Usually we are seated on or near the front row of the plane, and I can mobilise enough to get to the toilet from there. We were actually seated at the middle of the plane, on the wing. The toilet was directly in front of us... down a flight of spiral stairs. Had I known this would be the case in advance, I would have foregone the extra legroom to be closer to a toilet that I could access. This was a 10-hour flight and it was our honeymoon – we wanted to enjoy it and have some champagne, but every time I needed the toilet I was taken right down to the back of the plane on the aisle chair. We asked if they could leave the chair near to our seats so my husband could take me, rather than having to summon, and wait for, a flight attendant every time, but we were told the usual Health and Safety [regulations]. The same thing happened on our return flight. I believe that as well as a physical access issue, this shows the breakdown in communication between travel agents and airlines – our agent understood my needs very well, I used to work with her, but sadly the airline obviously didn’t.”

Carrie-Ann Lightley, Kendal

“I am unable to go to the toilet on the flight and have to wait until we land. I would have to be lifted from my seat to the toilet. The door into the toilet is not wide enough to fit myself and the person carrying me. Also there is not enough room in the toilet for two people and no support for me around the toilet.”

Ross Taylor, Cardiff

“I always say I need a seat not far from the door but several times I have been told the only seat I can have is near the back, meaning I have to walk a long way. Other times the assistance staff have insisted on trying to manhandle me rather than let the people travelling with me help and who know how to support me. This is very painful as they don’t have knowledge of my condition.”

Hannah-Lou Blackall, King’s Lynn

“The staff never know what they are doing! Once my fiancé had to help and he hurt his back!”

Tanvi Vyas, London

“I never feel safe when transferring from a wheelchair to an airplane seat because I firstly have to transfer on a narrow aisle seat where other people have to support me, making me feel humiliated. Secondly, the transfer from the aisle seat to the airplane seat is difficult due to a cramped environment made more challenging as disabled passengers need to sit in a window seat.”

Vivek Gohil, Leicester

“I have to be physically lifted by two people. It is painful, undignified and sometimes unsafe. I have had my back caught on aircraft armrests and my elbows and feet trapped when on the tiny aisle chair used to transport me from the aircraft door to the seat.”

Shauna Walsh, Ballycastle

“Because of my condition, I can’t sit upright without the specialist seating in my wheelchair. A workaround is using cushions around and under my arms but that is a shoddy makeshift solution. Last time I flew I had to lie across a row of seats, which was scary and uncomfortable despite the attendants’ best and kindest efforts. Unless I can take my wheelchair on to the plane while seated in it, air travel is physically uncomfortable for me.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“I cope with this situation by either holding it in or humiliate myself by using a bottle in my seat in front of other passengers.”

Vivek Gohil, Leicester

“They [toilets] are tiny and I can’t actually get to the toilet without my wheelchair. Usually I don’t eat or drink, and then go when I land.”

Sulaiman Khan, London

“If there was no aisle chair which I could transfer on the plane with then I would be unable to fly - I would hope that this would always have been checked out beforehand. However, I am frequently asked before boarding how far I can walk and I have always ensured that this is stressed when I book and when I check in - sometimes this message does not always get through to the right people.”

Rebecca Oughton, Lancaster

“I take my own pillows because the seats are uncomfortable for my back.”

Catrina Brauders, County Tyrone

Trailblazers' ideas for the airline industry

“The airline industry needs to give some considerable time and effort to improve the disabled passenger experience. I think the main focus for this should be to actually meet with disabled people to consult with them and to discuss how their needs could be better served.”

Paul Peterson, Essex

“Stop charging money for things that you can't help, e.g. equipment, wheelchairs and oxygen. Stop making me feel inhuman and like cargo. Take better care of wheelchairs and equipment.”

Karis Williamson, Inverness

“Make sure that wheelchair users get pre-boarded, absolutely horrendous to fight my way through other boarding passengers.”

Trailblazer

“Accept wheelchairs of any weight regardless of whether they can be taken apart. Heavy wheelchairs should be loaded separately using a high lift truck or other specialist equipment normally used to load cargo. Also don't charge excess baggage for additional disability-related equipment that you need on top of the one mobility aid most airlines officially allow.”

Mike Moorwood, Woking

“I had a very positive experience flying as a wheelchair user; I was met at the airport, my ticket was changed and I was able to be sped through the checking-in process faster.”

Freya Levy, Essex

“Have certain rules and procedures laid out. I feel like every time I travel the rules are different - sometimes I can go on first and get plenty of time to get ready for the flight, other times I go on last and there's no room for my suitcase on board, which is a problem if I have expensive medical equipment (e.g. my splint) in it, I don't want to have to put it in the cargo!”

Mathy Selvakumaran, Worksop

“All airlines should have disabled toilet facilities with the use of onboard wheelchairs. There should also be no extra charges for disability equipment.”

Dean Yorke, Reading

“Travel on the plane in my own wheelchair. To have a clamping system (similar to clamp systems in accessible vehicles) to clamp the wheelchair securely in the plane and fit a seatbelt around me. Disabled toilet with sliding doors.”

Ross Taylor, Cardiff

“More training probably on how to handle people with disabilities.”

Natasha Freedman



Summary

This report and investigation reveal that many disabled people have little confidence in the airline industry to provide them with an acceptable and equal service to their non-disabled peers.

The *Trailblazers* have described a situation where some airlines continue to view disabled passengers as an inconvenience rather than as paying and valued customers. There are also companies that have policies that make it almost impossible for wheelchair users to travel with airlines that offer the best prices, meaning disabled passengers are being left behind or paying more because they are disabled.

The *Trailblazers* believe that more could be done to make air transport more accessible, convenient, attractive and comfortable for disabled passengers. The airlines, aviation authorities and airports have the power to achieve this and need to work together with young disabled passengers to realise this.

Thank you for your support

Links

British Air Transport Association

www.bata.uk.com/
BATA is the trade association for UK-registered airlines.

Civil Aviation Authority

www.caa.co.uk/
The UK's specialist aviation regulator and complaints handler for disabled passengers.

Directgov

www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople
The government's hub of information on support and advice available to disabled people.

The Equalities and Human Rights Commission

www.equalityhumanrights.com
The home of campaigning and advice for equality in the UK.

Find your Assembly Member

www.assemblywales.org/memberhome/member-search.htm
If you live in Wales, search here for your Welsh Assembly Member.

Find your MLA

www.niassembly.gov.uk/members/constmap_res.htm
If you live in Northern Ireland, search here for your Northern Ireland Assembly Member.

Find your MP

www.findyourmp.parliament.uk/commons
Search here for your Member of the UK Parliament.

Find your MSP

www.scottish.parliament.uk/msp/membersPages/MSPAddressPostcodeFinder.htm

If you live in Scotland, search here for your Scottish Parliament Member.

ICARUS Project

www.icarusproject.eu
The ICARUS project intends to foster accessibility in air transport through defining the existing barriers and proposing R&D solutions that can set a framework for policy influencing.

The Office for Disability Issues

odi.dwp.gov.uk
Office for Disability Issues (ODI) leads the government's vision of achieving equality for disabled people.

Promove

www.promove.uk.com/how.html
Specialist innovators of manual handling slings.

Priestmangoode

www.priestmangoode.com/
Priestmangoode is a transport and design company that comes up with innovative new ideas for disabled passengers.



Trailblazers

Young Campaigners' Network

Get involved

Take action, campaign, learn skills, make friends. Interested in becoming a **Trailblazer**? We always welcome people to join our thriving campaigning community.

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Registered Charity No. 205395 and Registered Scottish Charity No. SC039445

Printed on PEFC paper, produced at a mill that is certified with the ISO14001 environmental management standard

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