

ACCESS ALL AREAS

Andy Wright, Chair of Manchester Airport's Access Forum, on the importance of an airport accessible for all

Travelling through an airport can be daunting at times - the busy environment, lots of noise and people to contend with, and limited time to get through the customer journey to board your plane. It's an experience that can be even more daunting for people requiring special assistance, which is why MAG is committed to making the customer journey as easy as possible by providing many kinds of assistance 24 hours a day.

Andy Wright has drawn upon his experience as a wheelchair user, to provide valuable guidance to a number of international airports, including ours.

I was diagnosed with a rare condition Syringomyelia in 1992, which causes damage to the spinal column, resulting in weakness and loss of sensation to the limbs. It was as a result of this, and my knowledge of the travel industry at that time, that I decided to create a specialist tour operator, Accessible Travel and Leisure, to help support less mobile travellers.



Need to know

Not all disabilities or illnesses are visible, such as dementia, autism or hearing difficulties, and this can make it difficult to know when a guest needs extra support.

Customers are invited to wear a special sunflower lanyard on their journey through all our airports. This will discreetly indicate to colleagues that this person may need additional support or understanding.

Lanyards are available from our Assistance Desk (pictorial below). Some ways you can help guests with a hidden disability:

- give them more time to prepare at check-in and/or security etc.
- allow them to remain with their family at all times.
- give them a more comprehensive briefing on what to expect.
- raise a departure board or sign for them.

"In November 2017 MAG approached me to work with them. With more than 20 years of managing the needs of disabled holidaymakers travelling worldwide, I was happy to share my knowledge and experience to help others requiring special assistance.

"Made up of representatives from local charities and disability organisations, the Access Forum meets regularly to discuss the airport's performance in supporting those customers who require special assistance when they fly. As you would expect there is additional anxiety felt as a result of crowds, noise, limited time and access so it's important to address this. The forum is also called upon to analyse guest grievances, enrich colleague training modules and provide suggestions for improvement to maximise Manchester Airport's experience for all. I also provide guidance to the teams in London Stansted and East Midlands, as well as other non-MAG airports.

"We have recently been working closely with the MAN-TP team to ensure the new terminal and piers will be accessible for all. This can be anything from wayfinding and car parking drop off, to terminal layout and colleague training. We will continue to work together as the programme progresses to ensure the best possible guest experience for all.

"The three best airports I have visited in terms of accessibility are Vancouver, Copenhagen, and Dubai. They have a seamless service, with additional features including amplified handsets for the hearing impaired, textured flooring for the visually impaired, and dedicated walkways where guests with intolerance to scents or severe nuts allergies can avoid duty free.

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Andy Wright, Chair of Manchester Airport's Access Forum

The three biggest accessibility issues facing an airport are:

- ageing infrastructure requiring numerous level changes with possibly narrow walkways, as well as a lack of sufficiently sized lifts
- colleagues who are insufficiently trained and lack empathy
- a lack of cooperation and collaboration between airport suppliers, airlines and ground handling agents, preventing a seamless travel experience.

To become best in class airports need to:

- create modern accessible terminals with more space to improve the guest experience
- improve communication mediums, wayfinding and signage to support independence and less fraught customer journeys
- provide better customer service and disability awareness/empathy training for all colleagues.

