Issues facing passengers during the snow disruption

Final report

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

In December 2010 the heavy snowfall created circumstances in which consumers faced significant disruption to their air travel plans; these circumstances were even more challenging as the events unfolded close to Christmas, at a time when travel had particular personal significance for many customers.

In light of the significant disruption that occurred, the CAA identified a need to conduct a rigorous and varied programme of information gathering, to understand the way disruption was experienced, and how well it was responded to, by a range of different stakeholders including airlines and passengers. The CAA commissioned SHM, a research agency, to undertake one key strand of this information - gathering process: **qualitative research to understand the passenger experience in detail**.

This report focuses exclusively on this strand of research. The aim of this piece of work was to collect detailed information on the experiences of passengers whose air travel plans were disrupted during the bad weather between 18th and 22nd December 2010 in particular, in order to broaden and deepen the CAA's understanding of the issues that they faced.

The CAA wished to hone in on the different experiences of a diverse sample of passengers who flew, or were planning to fly, from or to Edinburgh, Gatwick, Heathrow and Manchester when the disruption occurred. The CAA was keen to do so through targeted, qualitative interventions with individual passengers or small groups, that would augment the data already provided by passengers in an online survey.

In particular, the CAA wished to consider the following aspects of the passenger experience during the disrupted period:

- How well passengers feel that they were kept informed about the disruption, both before travelling to the airport and at the airport itself

- Any difficulties that passengers faced in travelling to/from the airport

- The availability/visibility of airline staff and airport staff at the airport

- Whether people were told about their right to assistance by airlines

- The quality of any such assistance provided by the airlines (or airport)

- The ease, or otherwise, of rebooking/making alternative travel arrangements

- Any specific problems faced by disabled or reduced mobility passengers

The CAA also wished to understand the expectations of passengers in times of such disruption and what they feel are the priority areas for improving the passenger experience in such circumstances. The CAA was interested in gathering both good and bad aspects of the passenger experience.

SHM's fieldwork took place in March 2011, and comprised two phases: exploratory one to one interviews, followed by group workshops. SHM initially engaged with 43 passengers (5 of whom declared a disability) in a series of telephone interviews designed to understand and capture passengers' individual experiences in detail. 29 of these passengers proceeded to participate in creative workshops to explore passengers' expectations during periods of disruption. Full details of the fieldwork methodology are outlined in Appendix A.

Report format and approach

The report comprises four sections:

- Understanding passenger experiences

- Exploring passenger expectations

- Examples of good practice

- Prioritising areas for improvement

Quotes taken from interviews with individuals are coded LGI, LHI, EI or MI (correlating to London Gatwick Interviewee, London Heathrow Interviewee, Edinburgh Interviewee and Manchester Interviewee respectively). Passengers may have been flying to, from or via the named airport on a planned or re-routed journey. Quotes extracted from passenger discussions between London, Edinburgh and Manchester workshop participants are attributed as LWP, EWP and MWP respectively.

Relatively few issues specific to persons of reduced mobility (PRMs) were raised; however, where they were, these have been integrated into the main body of text, with a commentary upon the particular impact for PRMs.

In line with the CAA's request to focus this research on understanding the general issues and identifying priorities for improvement, rather than attribution of blame, the names of specific airlines have been removed.

1. Understanding passengers' experiences

The passenger experience in these disrupted circumstances is striking in its sheer diversity: from passengers who never actually left for the airport to those who eventually made it to their destination 3 days later; from those who were forced to camp out in the departure lounge to those who were waiting on planes for up to 6 hours. Passengers were flying alone or with relatives or friends; for business or, more commonly at this time of year, for social or leisure purposes. Respondents told us about their experiences both at home (or, if flying into the UK, at their overseas accommodation), at airports (both landside and airside) and whilst being re-routed.

This section includes:

- an overview of the issues most commonly faced by passengers

- an indication of how passengers were accessing information at various points (along with any challenges this brought) and their levels of confidence in these sources of information

- an outline of the support or assistance they were offered at various stages of the journey or travel experience

- reflections on passengers' understanding of their rights or options in various situations

1.1 Issues commonly faced by passengers

Interviews with passengers to understand their personal stories revealed a plethora of issues that were common to many of their experiences - regardless of the airport, airline or any individual circumstances of travel. These include:

- Poorly co-ordinated and implemented information and communication systems (see 2.2 for detail), including:

    - a lack of co-ordination between different information systems

    - insufficient information available via staff, the internet or helplines

    - jammed or unanswered phone lines and websites

- Insufficiently pro-active information provision from airlines (see 2.2 for detail)

- A limited sense of responsibility or care for passenger welfare (see 2.3 for detail), including:

    - insufficient assistance with alternative travel plans and accommodation

    - inadequate provision of food, drink or vouchers

    - delayed, or broken promises, of reimbursement by airlines

- Lack of clarity about passenger entitlement in these circumstances (see 2.4 for detail)

- Lack of adequate human resources

    - *"There should have been more people working on the customer service desks, as there were so many people waiting for flights that had been cancelled. There were only 2 or 3 people there helping to change flights – so that's why the queues were so long."* (EI)

- A sense of chaos, with no clear sense of what was going on or where to go to get an answer

    - *"So we got to T3 and were told to queue. After 20 minutes, we realised it wasn't a queue to check in, but a queue for a bus to Stansted. Nobody told us. We were taken to Stansted by bus…there for four hours…then finally told we were going to be bussed back to Heathrow."* (LHI)

    - *"It was -2 degrees at T3, and they weren't letting people into the terminal. There were people fighting to get in. The airport staff – security – were on the doors."* (LHI)

1.2 Poor communication and unreliable information systems

This section outlines:

- the primary information sources accessed by passengers at home

- the primary information sources accessed by passengers at the airport

- their levels of confidence in this information

- the extent to which airlines pro-actively contacted passengers to provide an update

- the impact of unclear messages in online and broadcast media

> *"I checked the [airline] website the night before, and the flight looked to be scheduled still. There was no communication from the airline saying otherwise, but my colleagues (due to fly the day before me) got stuck at Heathrow overnight...and called me to check if my flight was leaving. It seemed to be our responsibility to call the airline to check. The [airline] phone lines were totally jammed. The worst part was that the TV was telling me more than the airline was...It was like being in the stone age in communication terms. After all, this is not a one-off experience in British airports." (LHI)*

Passengers were accessing a range of information sources both at home and at the airport in order to try and determine what was happening (see 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 for detail). However, the inability to access reliable information and poorly co-ordinated communications systems were the most common issues raised by passengers.

1.2.1 Primary information sources at home

Passengers who were already aware of the disruption were very active in checking all available sources of information whilst still at home or in their accommodation, if overseas. Before departing for the airport, they most frequently accessed – or attempted to access – 'official' channels such as airline websites, airport websites and helplines; however, they also supplemented this with information gleaned from media coverage and also informal sources, such as friends and colleagues.

> *"Talking to friends; lots of talking to friends, and on the internet too. On the airline website." (EI)*

Amidst the plethora of potential information sources, airline and airport websites tended to be the primary trusted sources of information at this stage:

> *"I was looking at [the airline] website online...I also listened to the news, radio and TV and weather forecast, but the one I really trusted was the [airline] flight schedule." (LHI)*

One or two of the passengers we spoke to mentioned using social media (Twitter, facebook) or phone apps (such as an Airport Weather App) as a source of information:

"We kept on checking weather reports on the met office website and I also had my eye on Twitter updates, as that seemed to be quicker…We were hooked up to Twitter RealTime, 'Real Radio' and also were looking at the boards." (EI)

Some passengers were attempting to ring the airport to seek advice on whether they should travel, but had no success in getting through:

"Their phones were cutting off dead." (LHI)

1.2.2 Primary information sources at the airport

Once at the airport, the primary sources of information shifted to the screens and staff.

"[Airline] staff and screens [at T5]." (EI)

"We assumed all was well…the screen is what you rely on and it told us what we wanted to know."(EI)

However, this was particularly problematic when staff were scarce:

"The only information we had once we were through security was the departure board information…there was no announcement and there were no [tour operator] staff around at all. We tried to get information from the central departures desk…I started walking back through security because I wanted to go back to [the tour operator] on landside and get some information." (LGI)

or when alternative sources of information (such as helplines) advertised on the screens were inaccessible:

"There was an 0800 number being displayed on all the screens in the building that went straight through to a voice recording that said: 'We're very busy. Goodbye.' Can you imagine? I must have called that number 500 times over the following weekend trying to get through to [the airline]. I finally got through two and a half days later." (LHI)

Some passengers with access to personal laptops or tablets were able to access alternative sources of information whilst landside or in the departures lounge:

"I was using my iPad and getting information from the internet." (EI)

Many were very pro-active in trying to identify alternative travel options. However, passengers reported very limited access to public computer terminals and to wifi, and resented the fact that internet charges were not being waived in the circumstances.

"No wifi was available; only 6 computers for crowds of people charging £1 for 10 minutes." (EI)

In the absence of other information, passengers were also relying on 'hearsay' from other travellers:

"When we heard it wasn't going, we just picked up the bags as fast as possible and went to the airline desk to rebook (although I didn't know why, I was just doing it because everyone else was) The queue must have been 100 people long …it took us an hour and a half. Then I overheard someone say that you could rebook online." (EI)

1.2.3 Low levels of confidence in accuracy of information

Passengers told us that they instinctively trust information on official airline and airport sites:

"You expect the website pages of airports to be accurate, so I thought all is OK." (EI)

However, confidence levels were frequently shaken when passengers went on to compare information between different sources, as the information was often not aligned, leading to confusion and uncertainty.

"We rang [the airline] numerous times on the way and were told a different thing each time…that it was definitely departing, that it was delayed, that it wasn't going…Our flight finally departed 2 days later, after numerous conversations with [the airline], all of which were inconsistent with the news we were told." (LHI)

"Check in staff told me the flight cancelled - nothing was displayed on the screens at all about a cancellation."(EI)

Some passengers in the Edinburgh workshop felt that the proliferation of on-the-spot passenger information channels (i.e. websites, Twitter) are a good thing. However, as the information is often inconsistent between channels, others felt that the greater the proliferation of channels, the greater the likelihood of variance of information, and therefore the greater the risk of their confusion and uncertainty amplifying.

Sometimes, passengers who had access to the internet were ahead of airline staff with their knowledge of the situation, as with this example in Stuttgart:

"We checked in and waited a long time. We quickly saw on the Heathrow website that they had cancelled all flights. Back at the [airline] desk we asked 'why check us in on a flight that's not leaving? They went away to get further information and said 'we won't be operating the flight after all." (LHI)

At later points in the disruption, passengers were even less likely to be confident about the accuracy of information:

"I checked everything I could find, from the BAA site to the Heathrow site to the airline site many, many times…the previous two days the flight was cancelled…and many others. I didn't feel hugely confident." (LHI)

1.2.4 Inadequate pro-active communication from airlines

We heard relatively little from passengers about having received pro-active communication from airlines – even when passengers had provided emails and mobile numbers. Passengers felt this could have been helpful in keeping them updated with the latest information during any periods of uncertainty and, in particular, in avoiding unnecessary trips to the airport for flights which had definitely been cancelled.

> *"We never received any text alerts, although we had set up for it…not great really." (LHI)*

> *"We didn't receive any emails beforehand, so it was down to me checking the site to see if they were still flying…I think that would have made things better to have some form of communication from them." (LHI)*

Some did receive such communication, and found the update (if there was no concrete news) or the certainty of this information (if a flight had actually been cancelled) to be helpful, even if the news was not what they were hoping for:

> *"I checked my iPhone and had an email telling me the flight was cancelled and 'would I like to rebook?' I booked another flight for the day after in about 5 minutes using the link." (EI)*

> *"I got emails too, just about the flights still being on and stuff after they'd re-routed me. So they kept in communication."(EI)*

1.2.5 Unclear messages

In passing, one or two passengers mentioned the relative inefficacy of 'routine messages' that tend to get communicated in such situations:

> *"They had a stupid announcement: 'please cancel all unnecessary travel' – which made me think, what travel over Christmas is unnecessary?" (LHI)*

At a time such as Christmas, which is of national and personal significance to so many, passengers are more likely to perceive even 'leisure' travel as essential. Passengers told us that when they see such a message it can suggest to them that there is a chance that some flights or some passengers will 'get lucky' and make it through – and that therefore it is worth taking the chance and going to the airport. Passengers also spoke of their concern that the likelihood of a refund in such circumstances would be low, if their particular flight went ahead and they had made no effort to travel. This suggests that any such message would need to be supported by a clear statement on the rights and options of the passenger in these circumstances.

In addition, passengers felt that where the information provided on websites was not particularly helpful or sufficiently informative, people had no choice but to travel to find out what the situation really was:

> *"When I looked on the Heathrow website the night before my flight, it just said 'contact the airlines'. The airport website didn't have any information. A flock of passengers seemed to be*

heading to the airport because that's all they <u>could</u> do - the relevant websites weren't giving them any information." (LHI)

1.3 Support and assistance offered

This section covers:

- the availability and visibility of staff

- the extent and quality of assistance offered by staff

- the extent of welfare assistance offered

1.3.1 Lack of visible human resources

Accounts of the support and assistance offered were very mixed in terms of the extent to which the airline was willing to take responsibility for passengers; the support offered by staff; and the actual facilities or amenities provided.

Those travelling during the first couple of days of the disruption reported very little in the way of dedicated support staff at the airport. However, a couple of days into the situation, some airports had arranged helpers who were easy to identify – but who did not always appear to be particularly knowledgeable or able to provide essential information:

> *"When we got there we were greeted by lots of helpful staff in purple outfits who were buzzing around…The staff were all very nice and there were loads of people running around, but they had no real information. You trusted them, as they appeared to know what they were doing…it felt reassuring having them there." (LHI)*

> *"Staff…handed out flyers, telling us what to do. A lot of them were telling us to go home and contact travel agents. They informed me that the flights weren't leaving – they also said they were sorry. I think they were just information people (not with the airline). Well, all that was on the flyers was everything that everybody already knew!" (EI)*

An overwhelmingly common experience reported by passengers was the lack of sufficient airline staff available at check-in or airport help desks, resulting in long queues and general confusion about what to do next.

1.3.2 Inadequate assistance offered

Regardless of their awareness of their rights in law, most passengers clearly believed that the airline has a 'duty of care' towards them in such circumstances, and many were clearly dissatisfied with the level of assistance received in booking alternative travel or accommodation, or the facilities provided:

> *"No one helped us book alternative travel. They took an email address and said they'd let us know of developments." (LHI)*

> *"It was every man for himself…[the airline] should have made sure everyone had alternative arrangements in place." (EI)*

"[The airline] was very poor about offering passengers overnight accommodation, in our experience there was no indication of help, or any sort of regulations." (EWP)

In such circumstances, unsympathetic attitudes from individual members of staff only served to exacerbate the situation:

"The guy at the [airline] desk was rude and irresponsible in response to my situation. I tried to tell him about my situation…I wanted to find somebody from the airport to escalate my travel problems too. But there was no-one. So my colleague and I went to the manager for [the airline], who put us on a flight to Dubai that afternoon." (LHI)

Some passengers sympathised with airline staff, who they felt were doing their best in the circumstances, but appeared to be working with limited knowledge:

"The level of service from staff was OK throughout both these experiences. I'm pretty sure it was airline staff I dealt with, not airport staff. They were quite stressed and didn't know what to do a lot of the time. But if they were approached in a friendly way, they tried to help." (LHI)

1.3.3 Wide variations in level of welfare assistance offered

Passengers who were delayed land or flight side reported very varied experiences with regard to the provision of food, drink or vouchers – sometimes these were issued after 3 hours, and in other instances not at all.

"Nothing at all. We'd run out of money, and nothing was provided." (EI)

"£5.00 vouchers were being offered for food at this stage." (EI)

"The people I'd been speaking to had been sleeping at the airport for three days and were given no food or drink for free at all." (LHI)

Being able to access food and drink is particularly critical to PRMs:

"Some people travelling need to eat regularly, especially people with medical problems…they can't be left waiting for hours." (MI)

Similarly, those who were subjected to long delays on the runway reported a range of experiences with regard to sustenance:

"[Waiting to be de-iced for 6 hours]. There was no food on board. They did give us a drink – a choice of water, juice or alcoholic drink. The hostess said she'd been in touch with the terminal for refreshments. Half an hour later, they produced some rolls, but there wasn't enough for the whole plane. The crew did their best. They were in a no-win situation." (EI)

1.4 Passengers' understanding of their rights and options

This section covers:

- the extent to which passengers were informed about their rights to assistance

- examples in which passengers feel rights and/or promises were not met

1.4.1 Poor communication of passengers' rights and options

Many passengers reported a sketchy understanding of their rights or the options they perceived to be open to them at any stage of the journey:

> *"I had no idea what my options were." (EI)*

> *"I thought I was entitled to a refund or replacement flight. To be reimbursed for all expenses including the taxi I had to get myself home as it was late by now and it cost £30." (EI)*

However, even those passengers who did feel confident about their rights often found that this was little help in ensuring the outcome they believed they were entitled to, as some airlines were claiming limited responsibility in such extreme circumstances. One airline even required passengers to sign a disclaimer before they were allowed to board:

> *"When we finally departed, we were required to sign a disclaimer saying that if we got stuck in Seoul without an onward flight to Auckland we wouldn't hold [the airline] responsible for paying for hotels/food." (LHI)*

> *"Even if you do know your rights, the airline always finds a way to side step their responsibilities." (LWP)*

Some airlines were indeed taking responsibility for arranging alternative travel plans and accommodation, whilst others were reluctant to do so. With many passengers uncertain of their rights, most were reliant upon the airline's indication of their options at any stage:

> *"Our flight was cancelled...when we went to the [airline] check-in desk, they told us we could either get a refund, or wait until the next available flight...they said they'd pay for a hotel if we re-booked with them." (EI)*

> *"We are residents of Edinburgh so we didn't need accommodation if we could get home. No alternative flight was offered, we queued to speak with desk staff but they didn't know anything or were not able to advise us. I thought they had to at least tell you about alternative flights." (EI)*

1.4.2 Broken promises of reimbursement

Some passengers were promised reimbursement at the time, but have found this has yet to materialise or has subsequently been denied.

> *"We received an email advising the flights arranged for us had been cancelled…we were assured that all expenses incurred - rail fares etc. - would be reimbursed. When we arrived at Gatwick we went straight to the [airline] information desk. We were expected, but advised also that no accommodation had been booked and none was available!...customer services at [the airline] are still refusing to reimburse us for anything." (EI)*

> *"Then we eventually got to the front of the queue and the option was either a refund or they were offering to put you on a flight from Newcastle the next day …we were asking if you move us from the Edinburgh flight onto the Newcastle flight and we decide to go on a boat, can we still command a refund? The girl was like, 'yep, yep no problem.'. But two days later when…we were trying to sort that out, it was just met with a 'no'." (EI)*

2. Exploring passengers' expectations

Passengers fully acknowledge that the weather is beyond anyone's control. Nevertheless, they have an underlying expectation that airports should allocate adequate levels of resource to minimise the potential impact of severe weather.

Several passengers (in particular those flying from or via Heathrow, but also from or via the other airports) made specific reference to the need to ensure sufficient investment in the airport infrastructure for dealing with severe winter weather conditions:

> *"It seems ridiculous that they can't cope with snow – the logic just seems to be how can we make the most money, rather than how do we keep the customer experience high at all times?" (EWP)*

> *"What about the technical aspect of it all, more gritting vehicles, salt, being better prepared?" (MWP)*

Passengers believe that such weather conditions, although not frequent, are predictable and inevitable and that there should therefore be a more evident plan in place for handling such situations – supported by a legislative requirement for airports to ensure sufficient investment.

Putting the weather-specific issues to one side, the research reveals a situation in which passengers experiencing disruption appear to be driven by a distinct set of motivations. Unsurprisingly, the overarching motivation is: **"I want to get to my destination."** Passengers also have a desire to know what is going on; understand their options; be comfortable; and to be helped by staff and systems in all of these. This can be represented as per the diagram below.

These motivations drive passenger expectations of 'how things should work' during periods of major disruption.

Several passengers noted that a state of emergency was never officially declared. This is pertinent, as it means that **the motivations and expectations outlined below should be viewed in the context of a perception of** *severely disrupted circumstances,* **rather than an 'official' emergency.**

Motivation	Related expectation
I want to know what is going on	• to be able to access accurate and consistent information • to be pro-actively provided with accurate information • to see a co-ordinated approach
I want to be clear about my options	• to be pro-actively informed of my rights • to understand what the options are
I want to be comfortable	• to be able to access basic sustenance • to be warm enough • to be able to sit • to sleep somewhere comfortable
I want to be helped	• to be assisted by staff • to be supported by systems

I want to know what is going on

I expect to be able to access accurate and consistent information

Passengers returned frequently to expectations around the provision of accurate and consistent information throughout the customer journey. They acknowledge that with such a plethora of official and unofficial sources of information available, it is difficult to ensure consistency between all of them. However, they would appreciate:

- a review of the ways in which official sources of information – such as screens, airline and airport websites and helplines – can ensure a more co-ordinated response

- a clear steer as to which should be their primary source of information at a given stage (i.e. which can be guaranteed to have the most up-to-date information: the screens? the airline website? the airport website?)

Also, some passengers expected to be provided with an indication of the likely scenario – for example, to be able to see online that a particular flight's status was questionable. Providing as much certainty or reassurance as is possible in any circumstance is important to all passengers. However, it is of particular importance to PRMs, particularly those with severe mental health issues and those who need to plan for medication.

I expect to be pro-actively provided with accurate information

Passengers who had provided email and phone numbers expect airlines to make pro-active contact with them to keep them up to speed with what is happening – even just to say 'there is no further information currently'.

Both emails and texts are acceptable, although several passengers pointed out that once they have left home, unless people have access to their email on Blackberries or smartphones, the email may reach them at too late a stage:

> "At 1.33am I received a notification via email that the reallocated flight the next day had been cancelled, but obviously we didn't pick this email up until we woke in the morning." (EI)

> "There's software that allows you to send out mass text messages, it's not difficult." (LWP)

I expect to see a co-ordinated approach

Passengers spoke, for example, of disparities between the airport staff's understanding of the situation versus the perception of airline staff. In times of disruption, they want to see a clear plan of action being implemented and a clear sense of who is in charge.

> "Heathrow is one of the biggest airports – you would expect it to have a plan B." (EWP)

I want to be clear about my options

I expect to be pro-actively informed of my rights

Passengers expect that detailed information about what they are entitled to under EU legislation in terms of support, alternative arrangements or reimbursement should be available on the relevant airline and airport websites at times of disruption – and prominently displayed at airports, in hallways and at check-in desks.

> *"I think [my rights] should be displayed on the walls in the terminal." (MWP)*

For some, clarity about the options whilst still at home would prevent unnecessary travel to airports and enable them to make an informed decision about what to do from the relative comfort of their home environment. Once at the airport, passengers expect that both airlines and airport assistance staff will <u>actively</u> provide them with an accurate picture of their options in any given situation.

Passengers expect such information to be clear about whether there are any circumstances in which their entitlements might vary, and in which the level of assistance from airlines might be discretionary:

> *"The airlines were just saying 'we're under no obligation [to provide assistance] as it's such exceptional circumstances." (LWP)*

I expect to understand what the options are

In addition to knowing their basic rights, passengers expect to be informed about the options available to them in any particular scenario. This includes options that are underpinned by legislative rights, but also those that may be offered at the discretion of airlines and/or airports in light of the circumstances.

> *"A list of, or conversation about, 'what if?' options would be useful." (EWP)*

Examples of possible scenarios include:

- I am still at home. The general advice on websites and in the media is to cancel all unnecessary travel, but the airline website shows that my particular flight status looks good. I am not sure what to do for the best. Can I *choose* not to travel, but still receive a refund or re-book my flight for another day, when travelling to the airport will be safer?

- I am already in the departures lounge, and have been waiting an unacceptably long time. Can I return back through security and 'check out' my luggage? Or is this only possible if the flight actually gets cancelled?

> *"I should be able to abandon the journey after a certain number of hours' delay, and get a refund." (LWP)*

- My flight has been cancelled. Do I have the option to book alternative accommodation and/or travel options for myself, if this is easier for me (and reduces the burden on the airline staff), but still reclaim the expenses?

Implicit is the expectation that, in such extreme circumstances, there should <u>be</u> options and that reasonable levels of discretion and 'common sense' should be employed.

Indeed, to feel that there <u>are</u> options is important to passengers in extreme circumstances, as it enables them to retain as much of a sense of control as possible during periods of uncertainty.

> *"Someone advised me not to check my bags in so that I could make other plans if I need to…"*
> *(EWP)*

I want to be comfortable

I expect to be able to access basic sustenance

Many passengers felt that drinking water should be provided free of charge in disrupted circumstances:

> *"Even the access to free drinking water has been stripped away from airports these days so that we are forced to buy bottled water at £2. I understand that there is commercial competition, but who makes these decisions? There should be some sort of standard that they shouldn't be able to drop below. A minimum standard of service." (EWP)*

Passengers wanted to be provided with basic food and drink supplies or vouchers after a reasonable amount of time. This is particularly important for PRMs who may need to regulate blood sugar levels or take medication with food.

In addition to this, they also suggested that they should be able to retrace the steps of their journey (e.g. from departure gate to departure lounge) to purchase supplies, if they have been waiting for long periods of time.

> *"There was food just upstairs and we weren't let up there." (LWP)*

I expect to be warm enough

Warmth was of particular concern to those forced to stay overnight at the airport:

> *"We had no heating in the departure room for 2 days. They gave us those silver blanket things, like for marathons, but they're useless if it's freezing. The airport should have emergency blanket supplies." (LWP)*

I expect to be able to sit down

Passengers would like airports to be required to provide additional seating and blankets/pillows; and for airport retail staff to display community spirit during such times, for example, encouraging customers in food courts to be considerate of fellow passengers:

> *"There was nowhere to sit down. Families were just camped out at restaurants for hours on end, just drinking the odd glass of water to keep their seats. The restaurants could have requested they move on after a certain amount of time, just to give others a chance to eat something and sit down in comfort." (LWP)*

> *"The airports should have stocks of fold-out chairs for such emergencies." (LWP)*

I expect to sleep somewhere comfortable

If they are disrupted overnight, passengers expect be put up somewhere comfortable (at the cost of the airline) – and not at an unheated departure gate on stretchers, as was the case for one passenger.

I want to be helped

I expect to be assisted by staff

Face-to-face interactions with staff on the ground play a huge role in shaping people's experiences. Passengers expect these interactions to be supportive and as informed as possible. At home, people expect to be able to access supportive staff by phone. At the airport, they expect to be able to do so face to face, or by phone if queues are lengthy.

Passengers expect airline staff to empathise with their situation, and be able to advise them of the current situation with regard to their flight and their options with regard to alternative travel, accommodation and sustenance during long delays. They expect to be able to speak to someone from the airport for advice on accessing general assistance (e.g. blankets, seating etc).

Customers still expect to be treated courteously by staff in these circumstances, and spoke of the need to feel that that they have the passenger's welfare at heart at a time of uncertainty and stress. Some highlighted the positive difference it can make when treated warmly and with respect by frontline staff:

> *"It's like, if you've had a bad experience and there's nothing you can do about it, a bit of humanity goes a long way." (MWP)*

I expect to be supported by systems

This encompasses both the expectation that systems and facilities will be made available and accessible to passengers – and that they are set up to cope with the demand during times of disruption.

For example, passengers expect support to be provided to facilitate their access to information (e.g. on websites). In the midst of their travel troubles, a few people were able to look up airline websites from their iPhones or laptops and then to re-book flights online. Participants felt that computer terminals should be made available to everyone free of charge in such circumstances and that they should be able to re-charge phones and laptops easily, and without charge.

Passengers spoke of phone lines going unanswered and websites crashing. They expect sufficient investment in the technical infrastructure to ensure that these are operationally viable in times of additional demand:

> *"I received a text from [the airline]...telling us not to come to the airport and to re-book free of charge on the website. The free transfer service on the site didn't work. It's ridiculous that they would offer a service that they were unable to deliver. When the site is busy because of something going wrong is when you need that service the most, and it didn't work." (MI)*

> *"What's the point of an emergency helpline that can't cope in a crisis? That's what it's for!" (LHI)*

2.1 Preventing financial disadvantage to the customer

Finally, but critically, there is a distinct expectation amongst passengers **they will not be financially disadvantaged in any significant way as these expectations are met.**

Many passengers spoke of their anger at any sense that 'someone is making money at their expense' in times of disruption or that they are being financially disadvantaged in any significant way. This manifested itself in diverse ways, spanning the range in terms of implications for cost and convenience, including:

- not being offered reimbursement for alternative travel or accommodation costs

- airlines reneging on promises of reimbursement made at the time

- being charged – often at inflated or premium rates – for helplines

- continuing to be charged in the usual way for wi-fi or to get online at a public computer terminal

- not being able to access free water

Some passengers explicitly said they are not seeking compensation per se, just reimbursement of actual costs incurred. Expectations regarding clarity around rights to reimbursement and free drinking water are covered in section 3.2 and 3.3 respectively. In addition, passengers expect that in times of disruption:

- high quality after care should be implemented (including honouring all commitments to reimbursement) and information to support claims should continue to be available

  "I noticed they'd taken the emergency stuff down off the website by the time I got home…so all records of the disruption have disappeared without trace!" (LWP)

- helplines should be free

  "I should be able to contact budget airlines…to ask them about flight status without incurring a huge bill." (EWP)

- charges for wi-fi and internet access on computer terminals should be waived

3. Examples of good practice

Some passengers also highlighted examples of good practice experienced during the disruption. These Unsurprisingly, perhaps, these tend to mirror the expectations outlined above – and are therefore also testament to the key motivations for passengers. The examples can be broadly categorised as follows:

Motivation	Related example of good practice
I want to know what is going on	• being pro-actively provided with accurate information
I want to be clear about my options	• *[no examples provided]*
I want to be comfortable	• being provided with comfortable accommodation • being provided with free refreshments
I want to be helped	• staff taking a positive, friendly attitude • airline staff 'going the extra mile' • staff making sure passengers got home safely

Interestingly, most of the examples of good practice provided fall under the 'I want to be helped' category – a testament to the impact that individual staff and teams were nevertheless able to make, despite the surrounding circumstances.

The diagram overleaf captures snapshots of good practice, as identified by passengers.

Snapshots of good practice

EI: "[The airline] arranged alternative flights for the next day and accommodated us in the Radisson Hotel there."

EI: "The [no frills] airline would have paid for a hotel, if we'd rebooked with them…The others got put up in a 4* hotel!"

MI: "A room in a hotel near by was arranged and a chauffeur driven car to take me there."

Being provided with comfortable accommodation.

EI: "We received an email advising the flights arranged for us had been cancelled."

Proactive information from airlines

LHI: "When we eventually flew on Christmas Eve, a tent had been erected outside the airport, and coffee/tea etc. were available."

MI : "People I spoke to at the airport who had been delayed some time seemed to have been looked after with vouchers, refreshments etc."

MI: "Once it was clear we were to be on the plane for a long time the captain announced he would give a free hot or cold drink for everyone."

Being provided with free refreshments

What made a difference?

Airline representatives going the extra mile

MI: "I was prepared to be fobbed off at this point but the manager of the airline was there and was making purchases of new tickets for people with his own credit card."

EI: "I actually had food poisoning at the time, and the drive was awful! They were so good with me, you know when you're sick you just can't take in the information like usual. I was very impressed with how they handled it – if anything I'd like it to be known, they were so good. They directed us to where we needed to be and all the staff there at Glasgow were very nice and patient, all of us were confused and groggy but they just made it easy for us."

Making sure passengers got home safely

EI: "When I came home, the flight from Amsterdam was actually cancelled as well so I had to fly in to Glasgow instead (of Edinburgh). The airline did arrange a car – and were really helpful with that."

EI: "When we landed there was a bus ready and waiting there to take us to Edinburgh. There were airline reps that pointed us to the right place, and we got onto the bus… Transport arrangements in place, it was all very nice. It took us an extra 45 minutes/1 hour or so in total so not too bad."

Staff taking a positive, friendly attitude.

LHI: "The staff were all very nice and there were loads of people running around…It felt reassuring having them there."

EWP: "The security staff were friendly and helpful."

EI: "Once I got to the customer service desk – that woman was really helpful and told me what to do, so then I knew."

EWP: "Front desk were very helpful at the airport."

LHI: "I have a serious spinal condition, but I'm not registered disabled…[the airline] found me on the system, and re-booked me."

4. Prioritising areas for improvement

Having considered their general expectations in times of disruption, passengers prioritised the areas that they felt would make the most significant difference to their experience in future. A synthesis of the most commonly identified priorities across all the workshops is below.

1. Ensure that official information sources are accurate and consistent with regard to airport and flight status (*I want to know what's going on*)

2. Ensure sufficient numbers of staff are available to assist passengers or arranging emergency accommodation or with re-booking travel *(I want to be helped)*

3. Require airlines to pro-actively contact passengers by text (or email) with updates on flight status *(I want to know what's going on)*

4. Provide free internet access and free calls to helplines to enable passengers to take control of re-booking, if they prefer to do so themselves *(I want to be helped)*

These can be summarised as a set of priorities that **ensure <u>airlines take responsibility</u>, whilst <u>enabling passengers to take control</u> where this will ensure a better outcome for the customer.**

Interestingly, the four priority areas above are driven by two motivations in particular: to know what is going on and to be helped. This suggests a 'hierarchy of needs' in disrupted circumstances, prioritising the need for knowledge about what is going on and help, over and above comfort and clarity about options. The latter are important, but the former are fundamentally essential.

In addition, Heathrow passengers in particular prioritised the need for legislation to ensure that airports are adequately equipped to deal with such weather conditions.

These passenger-defined priorities should strongly inform CAA and other relevant stakeholder thinking when developing any strategy for improvement.

Appendix A: methodology

The CAA requested that the focus of the research be on: London Heathrow (which experienced major disruption); London Gatwick; Edinburgh (as an example of a regional airport significantly affected by snow); and Manchester (as an example of a regional airport less affected by snow).

The research comprised two components: a series of one-to-one telephone interviews, followed by group workshops.

One to one telephone interviews

We undertook a series of semi-structured telephone interviews with 43 research participants, 5 of whom described themselves as having a disability (i.e. as being a PRM). The primary aim of the interviews was to:

- surface and understand the stories and experiences of individual passengers in more detail

- identify the key issues and themes that emerged

- inform the approach for the workshops

Telephone interviews were designed to enable participation from a wider cohort of passengers, including those who might not be able, or willing, to attend workshops due to issues of physical mobility; confidence; geographical location; and availability.

The intention was to include (where possible) a cohort of passengers comprising a reasonable mix of the following variables:

A cohort of passengers comprising a mix of:	Research variable	Recruitment channels
Motivations for flying	- Business - Personal	- CAA survey - Airport/airline leads - Online travel forums/social media websites - Disability forums and associations - Adverts in local
Destinations	- Long haul - Short haul - Domestic	
Departure points	- Heathrow - Gatwick	

	- Manchester	papers or online forums
	- Edinburgh	
Stages at which journey was disrupted	- Travelled to airport - Chose not to/were not able to travel to airport	- Business booking agencies (e.g. Portman)
Intended departure dates	- 18th December - 19th December - 20th December - 21st December - 22nd December	
Travelling status	- with dependents (children; older people) - with friends - alone	
Mobility	- able-bodied - PRMs	
Travel frequency	- Frequent flyers - Occasional flyers	
Travel type	- Package holiday - Independent travel (booked personally) - Travel booked by third party	
Airline type	- Full service - No frills	

Interviewees were recruited via the following mechanisms:

- CAA survey (where respondents had indicated a willingness to participate in further research)

- PRM-specific organisations

- Travel operators

- Community routes: universities; libraries

- Social media: Twitter

- Word of mouth

There were no selection criteria for interviews, and we interviewed all passengers who expressed an interest in response to the opportunity communicated via these mechanisms within the fieldwork window.

Group workshops

We facilitated three group workshops in London (Heathrow and Gatwick passengers), Edinburgh (Edinburgh airport passengers) and Manchester (Manchester airport passengers). 29 of the participants interviewed continued to participate in these workshops, 4 of whom described themselves as having a disability (i.e. as a PRM).

Where selection was necessary (i.e. where there were more passengers available and willing to attend workshops than places), participants were selected to ensure a reasonable mix of travel experience and circumstances.

The aim of the workshops was to:

- uncover a deep understanding of the expectations that run across the passenger cohort

- develop a set of passenger-developed priority areas for improvement