

ABTA response to Consultation on issues affecting passengers' access to UK airports: a review of surface access - CAP 1364

ABTA – The Travel Association - was founded in 1950 and is the largest travel trade association in the UK, with around 1,200 members and over 4,500 retail outlets and offices. Our Members range from small, specialist tour operators and independent travel agencies specialising in business and leisure travel, through to publicly listed companies and household names, from call centres to internet booking services to high street shops.

The success of ABTA Members' businesses is directly reliant on the UK's aviation infrastructure; many of ABTA's larger Members are themselves part of groups that own airlines. ABTA Members provide 90% of the package holidays sold in the UK, with Members also selling millions of independent travel arrangements. Annually, ABTA Members' turnover is in excess of £32 billion. The business of our Members is the provision of quality, efficient and competitively priced passenger travel.

Introduction

ABTA believes that effective, efficient, high quality and resilient surface transport to airports benefits not just air passengers and airport staff but also the local population and is an integral part of the sustainable growth of any airport. It is an important aspect of the passenger experience and is instrumental in the choice of a passenger's departure airport. A modern integrated transport system can play a decisive role in attracting international investment, offering greater accessibility for Passengers of Reduced Mobility (PRMs), a growing percentage of the population, and easing surface transport disruptions for the local population near transport hubs.

ABTA welcomes the work that continues to be undertaken by UK airports to increase the number of passengers and staff accessing the airport by public transport.

ABTA agrees with the recommendations put forward by the House of Commons Transport Committee in their recent report on Surface Access to Airports, namely that:

- The Department for Transport should require airport operators to update any plans and surface access strategies that have not been updated in the last five years by the end of this year.
- The Government should prioritise integrated transport planning for airport surface access.
- The DfT should work with airport operators, airlines and others to devise a workable and affordable system for offering integrated ticketing across all public surface transport modes and airlines. This would also include signposting to, and information about, public surface transport options to and from UK airports.

Executive Summary

- Although airports have worked hard to increase the number of passengers accessing the airport by public transport, there will always be times where public transport either isn't available or isn't suitable.
- Where public transport is lacking and passengers are reliant on private transport, drop-off charges and car parking can be expensive. At the very least, free drop-off should be available to within easy walking distance of the terminal.
- Stricter enforcement of the time vehicles spend in the drop-off area would help.
- Airport websites should clearly show all the options available to access the airport with transparent charges.

Consultation Questions

1. Have we identified the key issues on market structure within the scope of this review?

Yes. The CAA's review is thorough and addresses a wide range of issues affecting the passenger experience in accessing UK airports.

ABTA agrees with the CAA's view that competition between airport operators and between different surface access operators is the best way to keep prices at competitive levels and quality of service high.

There will always be times when it's not possible to take public transport to the airport and passengers need to either be dropped off at the airport or park their car. On some railway lines there are no services during the night period or in the early hours of the morning, leaving passengers, arriving late in the evening or departing early in the morning, and airport staff, working early or late shifts, no alternative but to use private transport. Public transport links generally operate in day time hours and do not take account of passengers having to be at an airport at least two hours ahead of a 0600 departure or of the airport staff required to service those flights.

Equally, public transport isn't always suitable for passengers travelling with large pieces of luggage, child buggies and for Persons of Reduced Mobility (PRMs) who might be travelling in a wheelchair.

ABTA recognises that, however good the public transport links, a certain proportion of passengers will travel to airports by car, either through necessity, or through choice. It is important that car parking charges are not so high as to encourage passengers to make two return airport trips rather than one, thereby doubling their congestion and air pollution impact. Also, high car parking charges may lead to passengers parking in nearby residential areas, to the inconvenience and disruption of the local community. A careful balance needs to be struck.

Many airports have seen passengers arriving by private car as a revenue opportunity, and several are charging quite large amounts simply for drop-off or collection with charges frequently applied to taxis as well as to private vehicles. Airports that do charge for drop off must be completely transparent with signage that the charge only applies to a limited period - frequently 10 minutes – and if this is exceeded, there will be an additional higher charge. Whilst taxi drivers using the airport frequently should be aware of this, drivers of private vehicles who are not regular visitors might not.

ABTA believes it's essential that there is a free drop-off facility for passengers arriving by private car/taxi. This must be within walking distance of the terminal so that they can get quickly into the airport and start their journey. It's not acceptable that the free drop-off is only in a car park away from the terminal and then the passenger must take a bus to the terminal.

Pick-up is a different matter. Some airports have offered 15 minutes free parking in short-stay car parks immediately adjacent to the terminal with marked and reserved areas. This encourages drivers to avoid cluttering the forecourt. It offers an undercover dry area to transfer passengers and luggage and much less stress for drivers than arriving too early and driving round the airport for 10 minutes to avoid being given a ticket. Although drivers might think their pick-up will just take a few minutes, it frequently entails a longer wait. It's quite likely that many drivers would exceed the 15 minutes and be charged anyway. The airport is unlikely to lose out in parking fees and stands to gain from good PR and a less congested forecourt.

ABTA agrees with the CAA that stricter enforcement of the time vehicles spend in the drop-off area would help.

If there is a charge it's essential that it is made known well in advance.

Airport operators generally work with selected taxi operators. For example, Heathrow has a black cab stand at each terminal with larger feeder parks and is now introducing a formal waiting area, with lavatory facilities for Uber and mini-cab companies. This will hopefully avoid drivers, without a pre-arranged fare, parking up in neighbouring residential areas, to the annoyance of home owners.

Passengers can pre-arrange cheaper journeys with mini-cab companies with pick-up normally in the car park. These arrangements are well understood by regular passengers.

Most airports will have contractual arrangements with transport providers which are acceptable providing that there is competition and transparency. For example, Stansted held an open tender in May 2014 following which three operators were awarded a contract to operate coaches into the airport from a wide range of destinations. However, one former operator, which was not successful in the tendering process, continued to market itself as operating to the airport. Its passengers were still turning up at the airport with tickets valid for travel on the operator after it had stopped running services to/from the airport. This is now the subject of litigation.

2. Have you any views and/or evidence on the market position of airport operators in the provision of airport services used to access the airport?

ABTA has no views on this.

3. Have you any evidence or views on how well informed consumers are of their airport surface access options and on what is important to passengers in accessing an airport? Is this an area that merits further research?

ABTA's latest research¹ shows that three-quarters (75%) passengers consider that ease of transport connections to the airport are important or essential.

UK originating passengers are probably better informed (local knowledge of different options) than visitors who are reliant on websites, onboard airline magazines. It is essential that airport websites are transparent and promote options equally. The passenger needs to be offered a choice. Whilst there will always be passengers who want the fastest, more direct service to the city centre and are prepared to pay for it, there will be others who are cost conscious and would be prepared to travel a slightly longer albeit direct journey.

¹ Arkenford – August 2015

For example, the Heathrow website, information desks and leaflets offer information about accessing central London. They readily recommend the Heathrow Express but not the rather cheaper Heathrow Connect:

- Heathrow's website Transport, Directions & Parking front page shows Heathrow Express, underground and National Express but does not include Heathrow Connect; this only appears on the second page after clicking on the train icon.
- Heathrow Express staff are frequently located in the duty free area after the baggage hall; they will sell a Heathrow Express ticket but not a Heathrow Connect ticket. Equally, the Information Desk leaflet makes no mention of Heathrow Connect.

Conversely, Gatwick's website, on the Journey Planner pages, gives equal prominence to Gatwick Express, Thameslink and Southern trains. However, it should be pointed out that if a passenger is buying a rail ticket in Victoria to travel to Gatwick, they are nearly always offered the Gatwick Express, rather than the much cheaper Southern service which stops once and takes about 3 minutes longer.

Identifying ways by which access to a comprehensive set of surface access options is available, including a comparison website, may be an area that merits further research.

4. Have we identified the key issues related to the distribution of airport car parking? Do you have any views on what, if anything, would improve outcomes to consumers?

ABTA believes that the CAA has identified the key issues related to airport car parking. It is important that a range of options are offered. As previously mentioned, a careful balance needs to be struck on car parking charges so as to encourage passengers to use public transport but, at the same time, encouraging drivers to use car parks and not park in local residential areas.

We commend Gatwick's Approved Operators Scheme which allows approved operators to access the forecourt/short stay car parks. Other airports have similar commercial arrangements in place.

Regular users of airport car parks will likely be aware of the different options available, if not via the airport's own website, through price comparison websites.

5. Have you any views and/or evidence on how the information set that passengers have, when choosing between airport surface access products, could be improved for consumers?

As previously mentioned, ABTA believes that airports should offer comprehensive information clearly stating any charges.

A good example is Edinburgh which produces a route map covering Lothian Buses (including the Airlink bus) and Edinburgh Trams; this is available to all arriving passengers in the baggage hall.

It's also important to look at good practices of airlines. One example is the Directory page of British Airways' Highlife magazine clearly showing the different choices available for passengers to travel from the London airports they serve to central London with indicative prices.

6. Have you any views on our proposed way forward and, in particular, the development of good practice principles by airport operators?

Ensuring that passengers are able to access a full range of options for assessing what is the most convenient and financially acceptable way for them to travel to the airport is of great importance.

The suggestion that further research be undertaken by the CAA on surface access is welcome.

Thank you for taking our comments into consideration. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any points raised in our response further with the CAA.

Further information

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