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TX: 20.03.03 – NEW DISABLED ACCESS CODE OF CONDUCT FOR AIRLINE COMPANIES

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ATKINSON

Imagine being asked by an airline if you smell or if your appearance is likely to be offensive to other passengers or how about being banned from flying because you were not accompanied, or even better, thrown off not one but two flights you're booked on because you can't physically get to your seat or finally being told you can only get diabetic meals if you go business class.

Well those are just a few examples of nightmares which have happened to disabled people at airports and on planes. And just a few weeks ago there was the case of Ryanair charging a man £18 to use a wheelchair to get to the plane and another £18 on the return journey. So airlines stand accused of failing their disabled customers and they're now being urged to sign up to a code of conduct. Well John Speller is the transport minister behind this code of conduct, what does he hope it will achieve?

SPELLER

The aim is to pull together a lot of best practice that's already out there in the industry and it runs right the way through travel agents, tour operators, airlines, airports, ground handling companies and indeed the retailers in the airport. And it's looking for code of best practice to try and ensure that the whole journey should be accessible from the moment someone books on their flight to arrival and that both the airlines and also the people who work for the airlines and indeed the other operators that I've mentioned understand their responsibilities, think sensitively about what they're doing and actually learn from others experience.

ATKINSON

Now there's been quite a lot of consultation about this, who has actually signed up and who hasn't, the key point there - who hasn't?

SPELLER

The scheduled airlines have signed up, the no frills carriers aren't involved in this but we certainly hope that they will become engaged as well.

ATKINSON

What are you actually doing to make that happen because an awful lot of people do travel by them now don't they?

SPELLER

Well they do but of course this is a voluntary code at the moment, we'll be working with the operators and of course through our disability advisory committee, actually looking at monitoring the situation. We hope that there will be broad operation of this code throughout the industry. But we do reserve the right subsequently to take powers to actually make this statutory if that's going to be

required but we really want to work with the industry because we find generally the voluntary approach works best.

ATKINSON

You've just said the no frills airlines aren't signed up at the moment and other people would say that a lot of this code is already covered by the Disability Discrimination Act, so why do you include some of those points in your code, is there any point in including them?

SPELLER

Oh very much so because the Act is there but the details have to be taken through and that involves, if required, actual sort of enforcement action to take place. That isn't the route we want to go, we want to make sure that people are actually operating the code, doing it from now, we've put that out after consultation with the industry. And let's be clear - an awful lot of this is already being undertaken, this is about spreading best practice, both within companies and between companies and bringing them all up to a good standard. To be fair the industry have got a pretty good record of following voluntary codes up till now and we certainly hope they do in this important area as well.

ATKINSON

So you see it as a large element of this is encouraging forward planning and forward thinking?

SPELLER

Very much so and looking therefore, for example, at seat bookings, at access to aisle seats, a recommendation regarding the arm rest being able to be moved and also assistance to getting to the toilet on the plane, as you were mentioning.

ATKINSON

That's John Speller, the transport minister. Well we can talk now to Simon Buck from the British Air Transport Association which represents the airlines. Simon, those examples we were just hearing, all those changes cost money, we've also heard the scheduled airlines are signed up and the chartered but the no frills haven't - is it the cost that's actually stopping the no frills airlines signing up to this?

BUCK

Well first of all I can't obviously answer on behalf of the no frills airlines because they are not members of the British Air Transport Association that I represent. And I'm sure it was only a slip of the tongue when John Speller did say that the scheduled airlines have signed up, of course the charter airlines have been party to the discussions that have helped draw up the code of practice for a couple of years now. But the cost is a factor and indeed there will be a compliance cost but I certainly don't accept the premise that just because one is claiming to be a low cost carrier one cannot be expected to meet these costs because every other airline is doing so. And indeed the charter carriers are the original low cost carriers and were happy to participate in this code of practice and I hope the no frills carriers will do so as well.

ATKINSON

But how do you get that to happen because as he said a bit of lobbying but there's no compulsion about this?

BUCK

No this is a voluntary code of practice and the Department has said that it will take reserve powers to legislate to make airlines comply with the code of practice if they don't abide by it within two years time. I hope very much that that won't be necessary and that all airlines will - and indeed all air service providers, as the minister said, travel agents, tour operators and no frills carriers, will be complying with this within the next two or three years.

ATKINSON

Do you think the answer may be to get some of the airport authorities on board to this - to bear the cost and split the difference, if you like, with the no frills airlines because otherwise disabled people are going to be discriminated against aren't they?

BUCK

I think one of the big problems we've got is the cost of ground handling of disabled passengers and when we say disabled people of course we include in that people who are just a little bit frail and need a bit of extra assistance at airports. Many elderly people, quite rightly, want to be able to fly, particularly with the more affluent society that we have these days, and the problem is that people need to be able to access the airport, which of course can require something like a one kilometre walk from the check-in desk to the actual aircraft itself. At the moment the airline itself has to pay for that assistance. Now we think that's wrong, we think the airport should actually be helping to fund the cost of this service and spread the cost over all passengers, in that way you'd remove the disincentive from an airline not to be carrying people who need that bit of assistance.

ATKINSON

Okay, Simon Buck from the British Air Transport Association thanks very much.