

Back to the... airport

THE HIGH FLYER



Lionel Prodigers gets up close and personal with passengers at Heathrow's T3



Industry veteran Lionel Prodigers returns to front-line FM service provision, this time with OCS at Heathrow Airport in the second of a series of *FM World* features

Photography: Sam Kesteven

Seldom do I prepare for a trip to the airport with no intention to fly. But on the morning of my visit, I patted my pockets as if I was going on a business trip: passport – check; wallet – check.

Today I was joining the PRM team at London Heathrow, one of the world's busiest international airports. PRM to anyone that may not have encountered the service before stands for passengers with reduced mobility and the LHR team provides special assistance to hundreds of people each day with a wide range of disabilities and mobility difficulties, ensuring individuals are transported safely and efficiently around the sprawling facility, from carpark to aircraft.

But, first things first – meet the team, and get past security! At the time of my visit OCS was responsible for a whole host of airport services, from 'aircraft grooming' to compliance and, of course,

PRM. When I met OCS's service delivery manager at Terminal 3 it was clear he was already in the thick of it and making a sterling effort to remain positive and encouraging about my visit despite the challenges he was already facing when I arrived for my shift at 9am. My role was to assist with PRM and compliance (the pre-security service that ensures passengers are aware that they cannot carry liquids or 'sharps' beyond the security screening).

I was introduced to my 'buddy' for the day who was an airport veteran and had clearly seen it all over the years and wasn't phased by his new role as guide, trainer and baby-sitter... The first challenge was to get me a temporary 'air-side' pass, allowing contractors and workers to move more freely around the airport than a checked-in passenger. For once, I thought I'd bypass the normal queues at security but, if anything, the process was more arduous with a long wait in a queue of business visitors, retailers and contractors. It was an eye-opener to see how many temporary passes are issued to people each day with no intention of boarding flight.

With my photo taken and a ID eventually issued, I was off on a tour of Terminal 3. We watched the comings and goings at the main 'land-side host' as it's termed – this is an area of the airport that

facilitates the movement of people unable to make it from terminal to plane on their own.

I must have walked past areas like it a hundred times before but that day, as I stopped to take in the activity that ebbed and flowed around a few rows of seats and wheelchairs, I was struck by the level of personal interaction going on. If I'm honest, I can be a little impatient at airports – particularly when I am usually rushing to a departure gate, even with not so 'fast track' security, and don't recognise the huge effort that goes on around me and the thousands of others just like me, to make that passage as stress free as possible.

Working with the OCS team, I was impressed by the rather more intimate nature of the work than what we'd deem the more 'usual' FM-related services. Passengers of every age and nationality pass through the airport every minute of every day: and the PRM team interacts with them and makes them feel comfortable and secure throughout their whole Heathrow experience.

It never occurred to me that even today, some passengers are flying for the first time in their lives and are simply not familiar with the procedures, let alone the whereabouts of check-in desks and security. Wearing my high-visibility jacket

clearly indicated that I was approachable for any information about the airport and it felt good to be able to direct people to where they needed to be – even adding in my own unofficial tips. It is difficult to imagine being immobile and arriving in or leaving the UK for the first time or arriving in a foreign land, not speaking a single word of the local language and with just 60 minutes to make a connecting flight at another terminal the potential for drama and distress exists at every step of the journey. Now installed in the middle of London Heathrow, I was beginning to understand how important this all-but invisible care service is.

The accurate scheduling of work and rotas for the team on a day-to-day basis is dependent on the accuracy of the information from each of the airlines in advance of a flight arrival. The PRM team relies heavily on passengers alerting their airline to the need for special assistance at the point of booking a flights. I dare say most of us have never even noticed the tick box on our online booking form. No proof of illness is required, and discriminative allocation of resources to inbound or outbound flights is not permitted. Also, airlines differ in the way they demarcate between airport and aircraft – some airlines do not permit PRM staff to board the aircraft.

Then I learn that this is not simply a question of requesting assistance with a wheelchair or buggy and providing someone like me to do the pushing. The administration and allocation of resources is quite complex. Assistance can depend on how far a passenger can walk, or to what extent they can climb stairs. There are several categories of people with reduced mobility, such as blind or deaf passengers and others that may be autistic or mentally ill where the stress of passing through the procedures of an airport is significantly heightened.

Astonishingly, between 1,800 and 2,000 passengers a day are assisted in some way, with approximately 60 per cent being notified as requiring assistance in advance. When this process works well, the service runs like clock-work, but as with everything dependent on a series of actions, occasionally something is missed or the line of communication breaks down. On my short shift I got to see first hand the potential for chaos that exists every time a flight lands at LHR.

One particularly errant airline, known as 'the airline that shall never be named', is notorious for causing last minute panics, and on the day of my visit I realised why. A full 747 flight landed and brought with it the ultimate challenge for the team – no information regarding the number of passengers with PRM requirements had been provided by the airline in advance of the aircraft landing, but called for no fewer than 50 people requiring mobility assistance. The service delivery manager had to mobilise his people, and at very short notice. Many of the operatives were already assisting passengers around the terminal and clearly had to complete the activity. But within moments, wheelchairs began to appear and the team swung into action. The passengers were safely collected and moved to the land-side host with no fuss – I like to think they were blissfully unaware of the panic their arrival had caused.

It seems that EU legislation specifies the regulations about the service to be provided



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at airports and passengers' rights if the airport authorities do not comply. The problem is that airlines based outside the EU are not bound by the regulations. Then the US has its own regulations, but they are at least similar to EU standards. This all begins to sound familiar to me having worked for so many years on the fledgling FM standards with the British, CEN and ISO standards bodies.

Once relative calm had been restored and I'd convinced the team I was a trustworthy and vigilant assistant, I was allowed to join the compliance operation, taking my position behind the table where your hand luggage is routinely emptied of all bottles, lotions and potions. I have to confess I found it quite exciting to be on the 'other side', giving out the little plastic bags (and the orders!) but it did make me curious; how come after all these years of liquid restrictions on flights do half the flying population still turn up at security with a bottle of water? But, again, I am reminded that not everyone frequently goes through this routine.

Two amusing events of the day: I was sitting in the OCS buggy having my photo taken at the start of the long stretch to the gates of T3, and a young lady, burdened with expensive fashion bags, was trotting down shouting out that she needed a lift to her gate as she was late. I tried to explain that I wasn't licensed to drive the buggy and couldn't help her, and as she ran a little faster on the travelator she gave me some choice verbal abuse. While we were still dealing with the photography she came back, having missed her flight, with an even bluer selection of adjectives. I guessed there was no point in trying to explain that I was only posing.

Later, while doing the compliance task with walkie-talkie in hand, OCS lanyard and ID round my neck, I was asked for directions to an airline desk by a rather more polite lady passenger – clearly, I appeared to know what I was doing. After I gave her very clear and detailed directions she said: "You're not for real, are you." Well, at least I tried! **FM**

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