EU Commission EUTravel Portal Focus Group Discussion for those with Additional Accessibility Needs

Aim

The EU Travel Portal aims to create a sustainable and open single European market for multimodal travel services for travel users and service providers across the EU where passengers plan, book and pay for their entire travel arrangements in a common portal. There is a specific focus on passengers being able to plan according to their own criteria, for example, environmental sustainability. The aim of this focus group discussion is to identify those criteria for people with disabilities, particularly those with limited mobility.

Methodology

Inlecom Systems Ltd invited Accomable, an accessible accommodation platform, to gather some of its users and network. The participants were invited via the Accomable newsletter and the Accessible Travel Club Facebook group, both which target keen travellers with limited mobility. There were 15 participants accompanied by their personal care assistances or partners. The participants had a variety of accessibility needs with varying severities: some using manual wheelchairs but most using electric wheelchairs and some needing medical breathing equipment and others needing electronic communication devices.

The format of the research was a 3-hour focus group discussion on Saturday 14th October 2017 in London. It started with a short presentation of the EU Travel Portal before a full-group focus group discussion. The group was later split into two smaller groups to allow participants more time to share their experiences. As per best practice, the questions were written to be open-ended and designed to ask about the participants' experiences rather than directly ask what they would like. This reduces the risk of confirmation bias where the researcher seeks to confirm an existing understanding, and also reduces the risk of acquiescence bias where the respondent demonstrates a tendency to agree with what the researcher presents. The moderator checked understanding and asked participants to elaborate on specific parts of answers that were interesting but kept language neutral and did not lead the participants.

Specifically, the questions were themed around the following points of inquiry:

- Understanding successful trips
- Understanding any barriers they've encountered
- Understanding how they currently go about planning a trip
- Understanding what information they would need and what format would be useful
- Gaining inspiration from existing products and services

Please see Appendix 1 for the list of discussion questions. The session was audio recorded, and two note-takers took detailed notes throughout the discussions. The audio recording has not been fully transcribed but key quotations have been picked out. The notes have been thematically-coded, and such theming forms the basis for the structure of the recommendations in this report.

The research materials produced will be used solely for purposes of this research, and specific experiences will be presented anonymously. All participants signed a consent form to this effect.

Themes and Recommendations

Accessibility is a broad concept: a need for standardised and specific information on all facilities of the transport

Participants were keen to emphasise that labelling a service "accessible" was nearly meaningless because accessibility is so particular to the individual. One of the key criteria frequently mentioned for whether a service was accessible was it being "step-free" or level access. There was much subsequent discussion about the meaning of "step-free" to different participants: some reported being able to get their wheelchairs over lips of a few inches step but for some completely level access was necessary:

"Probably about an inch I could bump up my chair without any issues"

"10cm gap" would be too much. In terms of a step, "6-7cm" would be too much. "That's with me travelling alone. If I was travelling with someone else, they could give me a push"

Whether the participant was able to access a non-level area also depended on other factors such as the gap (between for example the train and the platform), whether they were travelling with someone else who might be able to assist and also individual's own risk threshold. There was a request for an **EU-wide standard definition of the size of gaps and steps:** there is precedence for this in London with the [step-free tube guide](#) which categorises into steps and gaps into three categories each (forming a total of nine categorisations). In asking whether these categorisations give sufficient information, one participant said: "Generally, yes. If I find that it's step free on there then I know that I'm not going to have a problem".

Participants also cited photos of the modes of transport as being very useful. For example, one participant used Google StreetView to check whether the bus stops had dropped curbs nearby:

"I spent a whole evening just Google mapping where I was going. And I printed out all of the bus stops in the area of the hotel and where I wanted to go so I didn't waste time."

Generalising this discussion on step-free access to other types of accessibility, it is important that the **accessibility features of the EU Portal be highly specific and detailed information, preferably augmented by photos**.

There was also a desire to emphasise that **accessibility categorisation needs to refer to not just getting onto the mode of transport but also being able to use the other facilities** in the same way as able-bodied passengers are able to. This includes access to disabled toilets, and also the food and drink facilities, for example, on a ferry. One participant told a story of a ferry trip where he could get onto the ferry but do very little else:

"On the ferry to the Isle of Wight, I couldn't get up onto the deck so my entire family left me in the car and went up to the deck! There was almost no information... they just said "he'll be fine""

The participant did not mention the name of the ferry company but it is ferry companies commonly insist that passengers come up to deck, for example, Wightlink's [website](#) states that "For safety reasons all passengers must leave their vehicles and make their way to the lounges or open decks." So the lack of information can cause safety risks.

We discussed the information required on different modes of transport and found the following list:

- Train

- - Access to train itself, either via a platform level with the train, or a ramp onto the train at both the start and end of trip (with confirmation at both stations)
    - A reserved wheelchair space and accompanying seat for a personal care assistant
    - Disabled toilet (with enough room to get in and close the door, and grab rails)
    - Ideally, being able to easily transfer their special assistance request to a different train when the train is cancelled or delayed
    - For long train journeys, ideally a place to rest for example in an accessible sleeper cabins (we did not go into detail in this focus group but please do consult Accomable for additional information on what may be required)
  - Flights
    - Ability to book a bulkhead seat (which is easier for transfer from an aisle chair into the seat)
    - Ideally, an aisle chair inside the airplane to go to the toilet
  - Bus
    - Knowing exact location for the bus stop and dropped curbs nearby
    - Knowing the turning radius and ramp steepness
    - Knowing which buses on the same routes are accessible
    - Can be inconsistently accessible even on the same route
    - Tie-downs are possible on some buses but this was not considered necessary by the participants as buses don't go very fast
  - Ferry:
    - Need to know how to get from the car onto the ferry deck
    - Disabled toilet
    - Accessing the food outlets and other facilities
    - For long ferry journeys, ideally a place to rest for example in an accessible sleeper cabins (we did not go into detail in this focus group but please do consult Accomable for additional information on what may be required)

Please note that this is comprehensive for these participants but will not be comprehensive for all passengers with accessibility needs.

A need for consistent, accurate and up-to-date information

A major theme that frequently reoccurred was the importance of trust. Participants recounted their experiences where they had been given wrong or inaccurate accessibility information about transport and hotels:

"I allowed someone else to research for me because they were arranging the whole trip. He spoke to the hotel and assured me it was accessible… Never let other people arrange essential things for you. Always verify it yourself"

"In Stockholm the website says it's all accessible but actually when you come down to it the gaps vary quite a lot – some are just too large and there was one where I got stuck"

"We went to Spain and there was no way to check whether the buses had ramps" (The participant's carer went on to explain that only some of the buses on the same route had ramps, buses were infrequent and not being able to check which buses had ramps meant that they were waiting for considerable time)

The experience is a highly negative one because the passengers make arrangements on the basis of such information being true and then are forced to rapidly consider alternative options in the

moment. As with the example of trains in Stockholm, inaccurate information can present a major safety risk, and the example in Spain a major inconvenience. Arguably, inaccurate information also raises the expectations of the passenger, only to later disappoint. The example in Spain also highlights the **need for consistency of information**.

Building on the previous theme of the need for highly specific information about accessibility, the passenger also needs to be reassured of the information's accuracy. One participant explained that **"auditing of every station would be needed in terms of steps and gaps".** Whilst this is an information-intensive job, there may be ways to crowd-source such information, which shall be discussed in more detail below.

One participant also highlighted the **need to have information about the procedure for getting assistance** once you reach the station. He gave the example of being in Germany and fellow passenger kindly recommending him to stand in a certain position on the platform where the driver would be able to see him. Such granular information is also crucial for actually being able to use the transport.

Participants highlighted the importance of near real time information to take into account when services which made the transport accessible are not working. For example, a participant confirmed that he'd have chosen a different route had he had up-to-date information on the malfunctioning of the ramps on trains:

"There were ramps on the train but they'd disabled them because they kept breaking in the winter even though we were travelling in the summer"

Transport for London has a Twitter handle (@TfLAccess) which provides an up-to-date stream of information on subjects such as lifts and disabled toilets being out of action. A participant also indicated that she uses the Twitter handle to reassure herself that the accessibility information on the website is correct:

 "So for me today I used the TfL Access Twitter account… I Tweeted the group saying "is there access from King's Cross to Vauxhall?" which I knew there was but just to double check... Within an hour I got a Tweet back saying "everything's working fine""

The advantage of using Twitter to update this information is that the interaction is a public good: one of the other participants said "I saw your Tweet and thought "Oh I'm going to be alright as well"" when the participant who'd Tweeted TfL Access mentioned her Tweet. It also allows passengers to quickly report when something isn't working which means that repairs can happen more rapidly. The information is only useful if it is up-to-date and so it will be important for the EU Travel Portal to have **a means to provide up-to-date information as accessibility can change hour to hour**.

The process of booking needs to be trustworthy and accessible

The general consensus was that participants would trust a very limited circle of people – care assistants, partners and maybe specialist tour companies - to book transport on their behalf because there was very limited trust in other people knowing their accessibility needs.

As well as the accurate information, there was also a detailed discussion about what would give someone trust in that information.

"Even if you can get the information, it's do you really trust it? Do you have a phone number? Can you verify it?"

Some of this was specific to the design of the service:

"Also how the website would be laid out... have they obviously gone to the effort to talk about your likes, special requirements"

"If the website is designed well enough, you trust it"

"Even reminders like "have you booked insurance?" – things that mirrored your own mental checklist that you would go through"

Some of the comments on what would give the participants trust were around interaction with staff:

"To have email confirmations too" "Emails from the different legs of the journey that they understood" "from a real person particularly"

"I would probably still call people"

I would like the person's face like Uber does" "this person will be on shift"

"if you're talking to someone on the phone, you'd assume that they'd pass the information on but online there's no one to say "yes, I've received your information""

"when I was going to the Lake District, I booked online and the day before [I was travelling] they called me to confirm… if something was wrong, you had the chance to correct it before the day"

There was a sense of it being important that someone had mentally processed their requirements instead of an automated response which doesn't guarantee that a member of staff will be expecting them and will facilitate their needs. **Whilst it's important for the passenger to access the correct information, it's also important for the staff to understand accessibility needs, and so any user-facing platform should also be used to train staff in understanding the process for helping passengers with accessibility needs.**

It is also important to factor into the design of the EU Travel Portal **an accessible means of booking accessibility**. On many services, passengers are required to call a special phone number to book special assistance. This is problematic for passengers with speech difficulties, and also can be very time-consuming and expensive, particularly when calling international numbers. There can also be a language barrier. **Booking special assistance whilst booking a ticket would be preferable.** Although this did not come up in the focus group discussion, the website design itself is also important, particularly for visually impaired users, for example, using valid HTML and describing graphics so that software can read and provide synthesised speech for a visually impaired user. Making a website accessible in this way is reasonably technical and we recommend seeking additional guidance but mention it here for completeness.

Facilitating passengers sharing experiences

Another aspect which increased trust was evidence of people with similar access needs to themselves having used the service previously and having a positive experience of it.

"To know a lot of people who've used it and successfully."

This knowledge spread by word of mouth was cited as particularly important when first planning a trip and choosing a destination.

"If you've heard from someone else who's had a really good experience, then you might be willing to try it. Sometimes it's through word of mouth"

Seeing videos of people with similar accessibility needs use the mode of transport also increased trust that it would be possible for them. **Facilitating this kind of user-to-user interaction, for example, through blogs, social media or a community section, is incredibly important in increasing trust in the information given on a website**, and also allows for the sharing of tips and tricks which even a full audit of every station would not achieve. For example, one participant shared how he holds his finger over the STOP button for wheelchair users on the bus to prevent other passengers using it and unnecessarily deploying the ramp and annoying the driver.

A few of the participants had taken part in promotional videos to demonstrate the ease of use of particular modes of transport. For example, the Transport for London videos show wheelchair uses accessing public transport.

Other insights

Traveller rights: Participants generally knew very little about their rights as travellers and were not particularly interested in knowing, expressing that rights were only important when something went wrong.

Language: it would be useful for the EU Travel Portal to have a section on useful words (e.g. ramp, lift, step-free) in different languages and perhaps a print-out with pictures to indicate what is needed.

Conclusions

Information on accessibility needs to be standardised, highly specific and cover all facilities on the mode of transport. Simply stating a mode of transport is accessible or step-free is not detailed enough. Photos and standard categorisations would be very useful.

Information provided needs to be consistent, accurate and up-to-date. Ideally, this would involve an audit of all stations (or ferry ports etc.) to access the specific information outlined above, and also more granular details such as how to request assistance once at the station (ferry port etc.). It should be possible to access information on lift closures etc. as accessibility changes hour-to-hour.

The process of booking needs to be accessible: calling is often inaccessible to those with speech difficulties, and the website needs to be designed with the visually impaired in mind. Booking needs to engender trust: this can be through well-thought through accessibility filters but the preference is for interaction with a real person who knows accurate information. The appropriate training of staff to go alongside the information on the website is very important.

Facilitating users sharing experiences is one of the best ways to increase the trust in the service and the confidence of passengers requiring special assistance that using multi-modal transport could work for them. This could perhaps be through use of blogs, social media or a community section on the website.

In conclusion, providing detailed information is important but engendering trust in that information is also paramount. This involves considerable investment in verifying the information and facilitating the updating of that information.

Appendix 1: Focus Group Discussion Stimulus

Learning from successes:

Think of a journey that you took recently that went very smoothly and was even enjoyable! What made it so smooth?

Why was it so good? (Not necessarily to do with travel arrangements…)

How did you organise the travel?

What was a word you'd use to sum it up?

Understanding when it went wrong:

-Can you think of a journey you took recently that went wrong? What went wrong?

 [Encourage participants to expand on whatever information provided]

What information do you need?

- Name top 2 criteria when making your travel arrangements

-What is your usual way of making travel arrangements (online, travel agent, through Accomable, other)?

- What information do you need to know if you can take the transport? Is it you of someone else who gets this information? Who else asks for it? Carer / family / friend / partner?

- How do you normally get that information?

- is it a) accurate, b) clear, c) easy to access?

- Available online tools you use and find useful/accessible

- What is the preferred mode of travelling e.g. plane, train, car etc.? Why?

- What is the most difficult form of transport for you to use? Which type of transport are you most nervous about using (if you're at all nervous)? Why?

-Do you know what rights you have as a traveller in the EU? If so, how did you find out about them?

Accessible travel across the EU

- Have you found the travel experience consistent across the EU?

- If not, where are the places that have good accessible transport and communicate about it well?

Be inspired by existing products

Open it up to the room to share other products: ask the participant to share why they like it and any particular features that are useful