

How Airports Work



October 2008

Have you ever experienced how hard it is to speak to the correct department or person at an airport? Finding the right person to speak to can be a challenging exercise. What I have tried to do here is to explain the business structure of an airport so that the lines of responsibility become clearer. As you begin to understand how an airport works you will find it easier to establish who you need to contact in order to get answers to your questions.

What is an airport?

An airport is a facility; buildings, runways, airplane parking stands, car parks etc. all built and maintained so that airlines can fly airplanes in and out of a particular location. This facility enables passengers to get on and off those planes and also for freight to be loaded and unloaded. Aircraft are also refuelled, restocked and maintained. This may sound obvious but it has important implications with regards to finding out information and getting things done.

Airport operating companies

Airports are operated by commercial companies for a profit for example BAA Ltd. They make their money from charging airlines to use the airport facility. In the UK the rates for these charges are set by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA).

Airport operating companies also make their money from charging other companies to use the facility for example the retail companies that occupy the shops and restaurants within the airport buildings.

There is also advertising revenue from posters and billboards and most airports do make a significant income from parking travellers' cars.

Airlines

Airlines make their money by transporting passengers with their luggage and also freight. They have to pay the airport operating company – BAA Ltd for example - to use the airport and its facilities; the runway, the stands etc. rather like you would have to pay to moor a boat.

Baggage

In addition they also contract baggage handling agents to transport customers' bags from check-in to the aircraft and then from the aircraft to the baggage reclaim hall at the destination.

Tip: *If your baggage is lost or damaged you will need to report it at baggage reclaim immediately and get a report with contact details. If you don't notice any damage or loss until you have left the airport you will need to contact your airline not the airport.*

Other services

Airlines will also contract service companies to provide other support services such as wheel chairs and electric buggies.

Tip: *If you need mobility help at an airport your airline will be able to arrange it.*

Check-in times

Your airline will inform you of how long before your flight you will need to check-in. As a guide there are some times here:

Internal UK flights: 1 hour before flight time with photo ID or passport and ticket or reference.

Flights within Europe: 2 hours before flight time with a passport and ticket or reference.

International Flights: 3 hours before flight time with a passport and ticket or reference.

The airline will need to check you and your luggage in, establishing that you are who you say you are and that you have a valid ticket and that you and your luggage are fit to fly. They will make any excess baggage charges here etc. You and your luggage will then need time to pass through all necessary security checks and make your way to the plane with enough time so that the plane can get into the queue and take it's time slot.

If the time slot is missed and the plane delayed this will impact on all subsequent flights of that plane within the next 24 hours. Airlines are understandably reluctant to delay planes so unless you get to the check-in desk before it closes you will not be allowed to fly. Gone are the days when you could be rushed through security to make a flight.

Tip: *Make sure you know what time your check-in closes. That is the latest you can get to the airport.*

Security and baggage rules

Your airline is responsible for checking in you and your luggage but will contract a baggage handling agent to actually move the luggage and physical security checks are performed by airport security. Airline staff will ask security questions at check-in with regard to the contents of your hold and hand luggage.

Hold luggage

The rules for hold luggage contents are set by the DfT and are enforced at check-in and with security checks, dogs and x-rays, on all luggage before being loaded on the aircraft. More information can be found here - [Hold Baggage Prohibited Contents](#).

If you have any queries regarding weight, size or excess baggage charges etc. you will need to contact your airline or check their website for their rules, regulations and rates.

Hand luggage

The security you pass through once you have checked your hold luggage in with your airline is operated by the airport operating company. The rules that govern what you can and cannot take within your hand baggage are set by the Department for Transport (DfT) and are enforced here. More information on this can be found here - [Hand luggage restrictions and prohibited contents](#).

Recently the one cabin bag rule has been relaxed but only by some airlines and by some airports. It is wise to check with your airline before you travel as even a ladies purse counts as one item of hand luggage.

Tip: Contact your airline directly or check their website for help and advice on all aspects of hand and hold luggage. They are responsible for transportation and so are the best people to ask.

Outsized, heavy and uncommon luggage

Airlines are responsible for transporting your luggage. Many are now charging for hold luggage and also items such as golf bags and ski bags. If you wish to take these items or things such as prams and baby seats and have any questions you should address these to your airline. Any unusual luggage should be checked in at the check-in desk along with your regular luggage. You will be directed to a separate baggage drop point if your airline deem it necessary.

Lost or damaged baggage

If your luggage gets lost or damaged in transit you will need to report this before you leave the baggage reclaim hall of the airport. The liability for the luggage lies with the airline. You will need to deal with the baggage handling agent for your airline. Make sure you get a Property Irregularity Form (PIR) for your claim and also the contact details for the agent in both your destination and home countries. Unfortunately you will need to chase them up but that is just the way it is.

Tip: Do not leave the airport until you have your PIR form or at least contact details for the baggage handling agent and the airline at that airport.

There is international agreement on compensation levels for lost and damaged luggage called the Montreal Convention. This applies to all international flights and also any flights within the European Union. Most other countries have similar legislation in place covering domestic flights.

Shops and shopping

The airport operating company will rent retail space to shops and restaurants in the same way that any large shopping centre will rent space to shops and restaurants in their shopping malls. Any information about what stock is carried, menus offered, opening hours, complaints etc. will be found directly from the retail company such as WH Smith or McDonald's or possibly from the airport's website.

Duty free limits are set by H.M. Customs and Excise and are clearly posted on many websites including their own. Some more information on duty free limits can be found here -

[Information on duty free allowances.](#)

Many airports now have shopping services so you can buy duty free goods in your departure airport in the UK and leave them for collection when you return. More information can be found here - [Duty free shopping services.](#)

Airport parking

There are several different sorts of airport parking as explained below with the good points and the bad points. If you book airport parking in advance you will save money. That is the best advice anyone can give. You will also reserve your place which is important especially in

the summer months when demand can outstrip supply.

Tip: *Book your airport parking in advance to get the best rates and reserve a space especially at busy times of the year such as the summer holidays, Christmas and Easter.*

Most on airport car parks are usually managed by a car park operating company on behalf of the airport not by the airport themselves.

Tip: *If you have a complaint or query you will need to find out the contact details of the operating company and if there is an issue of damage to your vehicle do not leave the carpark until you have registered your complaint in writing and have some sort of record for yourself.*

Short term parking

Usually based very close to the airport terminal(s) and the most expensive usually charged by the quarter hour or hour at the very least. Sometimes these carparks are managed by the airport operating company but quite often they are managed by another company who will lease the carpark from the airport operator. These carparks will have disabled spaces and spaces for motorbikes. There will be a short and usually covered walk to the terminal building.

If you have a question or complaint you will need to find out who operates the carpark.

Long term on airport parking

More economical than the short term carpark these can also be operated by the airport's operating company or by another company who will lease the carpark. Usually a short bus ride from the terminal building and some are close enough at provincial airports to walk to the terminal.

If you have a question or complaint you will need to find out who operates the carpark.

Long term off airport parking

Usually cheaper still and will definitely be a bus ride from the airport. If you take this parking allow enough time to park your car, do the paperwork, unload your luggage, wait for the bus, drive to the airport, find a trolley with everyone else and make your way to the check-in desk. Usually these carparks are operated by companies independently of the airport operating company.

Meet and greet parking

The most convenient long term parking. Usually operated by independent companies this is where you are met at the terminal by a driver who will take your car to the carpark for you. Your car will then be returned to the terminal when you arrive back at the airport. ■

Author

Sean McCarthy, Director of Help-me-park, is an experienced traveller who has worked in the airport parking industry for several years. Help-me-park offer secure and convenient **Meet and Greet valet style parking** at London Gatwick Airport. For more information visit the **Help-me-park** website or call 0845 272 8790.