



Accessibility of the Rathlin Island Ferry Service - Findings and recommendations

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About Imtac

The Inclusive Mobility and Transport Advisory Committee (Imtac) is a committee of disabled people and older people as well as others including key transport professionals. Its role is to advise Government and others in Northern Ireland on issues that affect the mobility of older people and disabled people.

The aim of the Committee is to ensure that older people and disabled people have the same opportunities as everyone else to travel when and where they want.

Imtac receives support from the Department for Infrastructure (hereafter referred to as the Department). Accessibility of the Rathlin Island Ferry service - Findings and recommendations

Background

As part of its 2019/20 Work Programme Imtac agreed to examine and make recommendations for improvement of the accessibility of the Rathlin and Strangford ferry services. These are currently supported by the Department for Infrastructure. This report examines the Rathlin Island Ferry service.

In preparing this report representatives from Imtac and the Consumer Council undertook a site visit on the 14th June 2019. The visit included the opportunity to look at facilities at Ballycastle Harbour and on Rathlin island and to travel to and from the island on the two vessels used to provide the service, the Spirit of Rathlin and the Rathlin Express. Staff from the ferry company were available during the site visit to answer questions.

In compiling this report Imtac has taken into account a number of regulatory and design considerations. These include requirements placed on ferry operators in relation to disabled people and others with reduced mobility by the EU Regulation 1177/2010. The Committee has also considered best practice and inclusive design guidance in relation to infrastructure including Inclusive Mobility¹ and BS 8300².

¹ Inclusive Mobility - A guide to best practice on improving access to public transport and creating a barrier-free pedestrian environment (DfT 2005).

² BS 8300 Design of an accessible and built environment (BSI 2018)

The Committee has also looked at information provided about the service by the ferry company with specific interest in advice for disabled passengers. The main source of information about the service is the company website - www.rathlinballycastleferry.com.

Current provision

Facilities at Ballycastle

The terminal building is located in a large car park by the harbour. There are two accessible parking bays provided in the car park a short distance from the terminal building. These bays are not the closest parking to the building and signage in and around the car park is poor. Pedestrian routes to and from the car park require upgrading with appropriate tactile paving included at crossing points.



There is an automatic door at one of two entrances to the building. Both entrances are step free as is the interior of the building. Inside the terminal there are two high level ticket windows. Seating has been provided within the terminal building, located away from the main circulation routes. There is no dedicated priority seating within the terminal. A standard accessible toilet is also located within the terminal. Additional toilet facilities are available in the adjacent car park but are in need of replacement/upgrading to meet modern accessibility standards.



Ferry embarkation/disembarkation at Ballycastle

Access to the ferries is via a slipway. The pedestrian route is open to the elements and involves walking a distance and down/up a significant incline. Access to the Spirit of Rathlin is via a ramp at the front of the vessel on the main slipway. The gradient of the ridged ramp is constant at 1 in 7, likely to be challenging for some passengers.



Access to the Rathlin Express is via a separate ramped gangway. Although the ramp is step free, there is a step onto the vessel itself. The height of this step varies due to the tide.



The Spirit of Rathlin does have access for a small number of vehicles. Ferry company staff explained that vehicle access to the island is limited but that Blue Badge holders are allowed to travel on the condition that all drivers and passengers can leave the vehicle during the crossing. Access for vehicles is via the same ramp used by foot passengers.

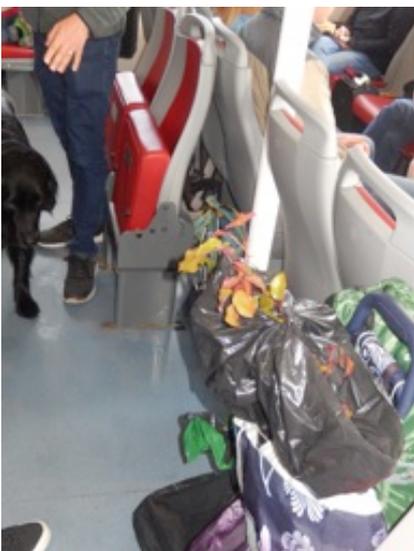


Facilities on-board The Spirit of Rathlin

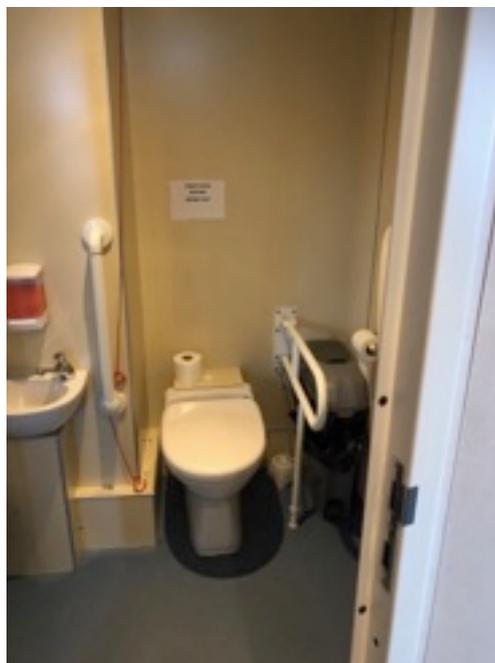
Seating for passengers is available on three levels on-board The Spirit of Rathlin. As there are no lifts on-board wheelchair users and other passengers who find stairs difficult to use are restricted to the lower deck only. There are two doors from the car deck to the lower deck passenger facilities. One of these doors has been ramped to provide step free access. Access to the main passenger lounge is via two doors, one of which has been ramped to provide step free access.



The main passenger lounge is completely enclosed from the elements and has a mix of seating, including table seating, flip down seats and seating without tables. There is also a small area free of seating. Staff explained that this area is the space allocated for wheelchair users on-board, although there is no signage to indicate priority. Staff also explained that whilst in normal weather conditions there are no restrictions on wheelchair users and other disabled people travelling, restrictions are put in place during adverse conditions.



An accessible toilet/baby changing facility is available on this deck. There is a small step at the entrance to the toilet. The layout of the toilet itself does not meet design standards and its design is likely to mean some wheelchair users will have difficulty transferring from their wheelchair to the toilet.



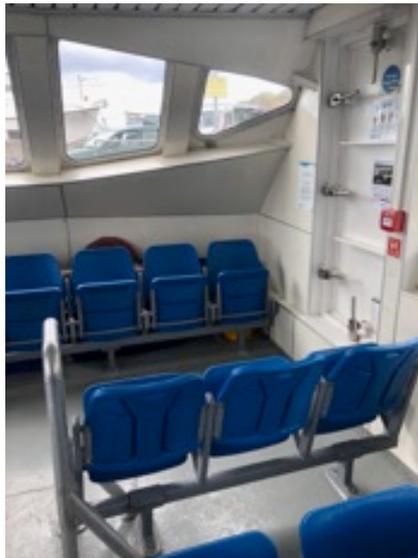
Access to the upper decks is via two stairways. Efforts have been made to ensure the nosing of the steps contrast with the surrounding treads. Contrasting tape has also been used on stepped doorway entrances.



Before setting off safety announcements are made over the on-board public address system.

Facilities on-board The Rathlin Express

The Rathlin Express is smaller vessel for foot passengers only. It has seated areas on two levels. As with the Spirit of Rathlin there is no lift on-board so passengers who find stairs difficult or impossible to use are restricted to the lower level. There is a passenger lounge on the lower level which is protected from the elements. Access to this lounge is via a door with a small step. Inside the lounge there are banks of seating. There is no designated area for wheelchair users but staff did indicate an area in the lounge which is often used to accommodate passengers using a wheelchair.



Whilst a toilet is provided on-board this is not an accessible toilet.

Access to the open upper deck is via a very steep stairway. Whilst a handrail has been provided contrasting materials have not been used.



Before setting off safety announcements are made over the on-board public address system.

Ferry embarkation/disembarkation on Rathlin

Embarkation/Disembarkation to the Spirit of Rathlin is via the ridged ramp onto a slipway on the harbour. As with Ballycastle this presents similar challenges with the 1 in 7 gradient for some disabled people.



Embarkation/Disembarkation to the Rathlin Express is via a separate ramped gangway located opposite the Manor House on the island. As with Ballycastle there are similar issues with the step onto the vessel on Rathlin.



Facilities on Rathlin Island

There are no ferry terminal facilities on Rathlin, however there are number of facilities close to both embarkation/disembarkation points. These include the Manor House and public toilets provided by Causeway Coast and Glens Council. The public toilets include a standard accessible toilet with shower facilities.



There are limited footways on the island and pedestrian priority/access is problematic in some places. This is particularly acute on the route from the ferry slipway which can be busy with service vehicles and tourist buses.



Staff

Throughout all aspects of the journeys undertaken during the visit staff were available and willing to provide assistance if required. There did not, however, appear to be any formal arrangements for the embarkation/disembarkation of disabled and other passengers with reduced mobility.

Information

Although the ferry company website contains some useful information, there is a lack of detail about the accessibility of the service including specific information about booking and requesting assistance.

Findings and recommendations

The Rathlin Ferry service is an important service for local residents and visitors alike. It is important to Imtac that disabled people and older people can access the service on an equal basis to others. This aim has informed the Committee's approach to its findings and recommendations. However it does recognise that there are limitations to physical changes that can be made to the current vessels in particular.

Based on the site visit and a review of current information Imtac does believe some improvements can be made to the current services. Some of these changes are physical changes to infrastructure but others involve changes to policy and practices and the provision of information. The Committee also recognises that implementing the changes is not the sole responsibility of the ferry company and that some of the responsibilities lie with Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council and the Department for Infrastructure. In recognition of this recommendations have been grouped below under each of the agencies involved.

Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

The council currently has responsibility for the harbour area in Ballycastle including the terminal building and associated car park. In addition the council is responsible for public toilets at the harbour in Ballycastle and on Rathlin.

The car park at the harbour is in need of significant improvement including increased numbers of accessible parking bays designed to BS 8300 standard and located adjacent to the ferry terminal building. Pedestrian routes to and from the terminal need to be improved and upgraded to Inclusive Mobility standards, including the provision of appropriate tactile paving. Consideration should also be given to improving the foot passenger route from the terminal to the ferry, widening the current railed pathway and providing some protection for foot passengers from the weather.

Public toilet facilities, particularly at the Harbour, are in need of replacement or upgrading. When making any changes to existing toilet facilities on Rathlin or Ballycastle Imtac recommends the Council install a Changing Places facility in addition to standard accessible toilets.

Although accessibility to and around the terminal building is adequate there are still a number of improvements that should be considered in any refurbishment. These include ensuring all entrances/exits to the building use automatic doors, reconfiguring the ticket desk to include a section of low-level counter and installing an induction hearing loop system and replacing the existing seating providing a mix of seating types including some with armrests

and a section of perch style seating. Some seating must be designated as priority seating for disabled and other passengers with reduced mobility. Finally consideration should be given to providing a designated spending area of assistance dogs close to the terminal.

Department for Infrastructure

The Department is responsible for roads and pedestrian infrastructure on Rathlin itself. Although Imtac recognises that there are constraints on what can be provided on the island, the section of road linking the ferry slipway with the main facilities on the island does need to be improved and widened to make it a safer and more accessible environment for all pedestrians. If possible a separate footway should be provided.

Rathlin Island Ferry Company

As with all ferry operators it is essential that the Rathlin Island Ferry Company demonstrates it is meeting its obligations under EU Regulation 1177/2010. Key to this is the development of a clear Passenger Charter around the rights of disabled passengers and others with reduced mobility. The Passenger Charter should include:

- A clear commitment around the right to travel and free assistance
- Notice requirements for booking requests (48 hours before travel)
- Exceptions (including during adverse weather or when it is expected)
- Commitments around loss and damage to mobility equipment
- Details of complaint procedures including mention of the Complaints Handling Body for the Regulation in Northern Ireland (The Consumer Council)

In addition to the above Imtac also recommends that the ferry company includes some specific information about the service including:

- Details of the arrangements for Blue Badge holders wanting to bring their vehicles onto the Spirit of Rathlin emphasising the requirement to vacate the vehicle during the crossing.
- Details of key facilities particularly toilets both on-board vessels and at Ballycastle and Rathlin Harbours

- Details of potential access difficulties such as the step onto the Rathlin Express

The Committee would welcome the opportunity to provide advice to the ferry company when developing the Charter. Once finalised the Charter must be available and easily accessed from the ferry company's website.

Although the Committee recognise that there are limited opportunities to change the physical access to the vessels, it does believe a number of small changes could make a significant difference to passenger experiences.

The first recommended change is to provide designated, well signed priority seating for the use of disabled people and others with reduced mobility on the lower deck of both the Spirit of Rathlin and the Rathlin Express. The priority seating on the Spirit of Rathlin should include signage in the space currently allocated for wheelchair users. Further seating should be allocated for the use of ambulant disabled people. This should not be flip down seating or the table seating. Signage should require other passengers to move from the priority seating areas if required by disabled people.

The second recommended change is to improve colour contrasting onboard vessels and associated infrastructure. In particular the hand rails on the gangway leading to and handrails and nosings on the stairway onboard the Rathlin Express should contrast with their surroundings.

Finally the Committee recommends the ferry company to consider the following changes:

- Providing a portable boarding ramp to improve access on to/off the Rathlin Express
- Purchasing a manual wheelchair to assist foot passengers access vessels - the distance and gradients involved will be challenging for some disabled people
- Producing a written version of the safety announcements for passengers with hearing impairments and advertise their availability
- At the earliest opportunity consider options to reconfigure the accessible toilet on-board the Spirit of Rathlin (In the interim passengers should be advised of the current limitations of toilet facilities on-board and advised, if possible to use facilities in the terminal building or on Rathlin itself)
- Consider Disability Equality Training (training designed and delivered by disabled people) for all staff

Conclusion

Imtac would like to thank all the staff at the Rathlin Island Ferry Company for their help and assistance in arranging and facilitating the site visit. The Committee looks forward to working with the company to make the current service more accessible and inclusive.