

23 April 2008

BAA Inquiry

I don't know whether there is a mechanism whereby public comments can be made in relation to an ongoing inquiry, but I would like the opportunity to state my views on BAA.

I am a Licensed Private Hire driver (Medway Council) for an airport taxi service in Kent. Nearly all our passengers use Heathrow, Gatwick, London City, Stansted and Luton.

Last July BAA decided to limit access to the Departures area at Gatwick South to their franchised taxi operator, Chequer Cars. Other taxi and private hire operators who wished to drop outbound passengers at Departures, not an unreasonable thing to do, were made to use the Arrivals lanes on the lower level. For my part, I don't really mind where I drop passengers, any place is as good as any other; however, for the passengers, many of whom may have mobility problems and find it very difficult to negotiate their way up to the appropriate level via the inadequate lifts, this is distressing and inconvenient and adds more difficulty and confusion to every journey.

When I queried this with BAA I was (eventually) told that this was on security grounds; when I challenged this, having found not a shred of evidence that the Chequer Cars drivers were vetted differently or more stringently than any other Hackney Carriage or Private Hire drivers, I was then told that it was done out of a desire to discourage the use of private transport in bringing passengers into the airport(!?). In common with all the other drivers with whom I have spoken, I strongly suspect that the over-riding factor in this decision was actually the amount of money that BAA believed they could make out of the franchise by granting exclusive access.

It may be said that BAA's decision was arrived at on perfectly sound commercial grounds. However, there is no mechanism whereby BAA's decision can be challenged - given that they do have a virtual monopoly, they can do what they please, whether or not it is in the best interests of passengers, and there are no regulatory powers available to prevent them from putting commercial interests ahead of passenger convenience.

All BAA airports that I've been to suffer to a greater or lesser degree from a mind-set in which passengers are a bloody nuisance and need to be dragooned by armies of uniformed men and women whose sole mission is to provide the most uncomfortable travel experience for the maximum number of people. Most of these people are not directly employed by BAA, for example those employed by NCP who work for NCP Car Parks at Heathrow, but BAA must have a responsibility for setting the parameters within which they work. It would be nice to arrive at an airport to deliver passengers and not be shouted and sworn at for daring to stop to help the passengers out with their luggage and point them in the right direction. It would be nice, having been told to use the "Assistance" telephones to summon help for an elderly disabled passenger, to get an answer and actually get someone out to assist them into the terminal.

I believe that BAA should be broken up and that the public would benefit from competition in the provision of decent airport services. I quite often ask prospective passengers who are enquiring about fares and availability if they have a choice of airport - if they haven't yet booked I will always advise them to avoid Heathrow at all costs and only use Gatwick if they can't get a flight out of Stansted, London City or Luton. Since four out of those five are BAA airports, this doesn't at present make any difference to their income, but if they were all separately operated, by different companies, there would have to be a substantial change in

the way they were operated so as to ensure that they could actually persuade passengers to use one airport instead of another. This could only serve to improve things for passengers.

These views are my own and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the company for whom I work.

Harry Keane