

# SURVEY ON AIR TRAVEL FOR WHEELCHAIR CUSTOMERS



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ableMove along with Flying Disabled undertook a survey of **336 wheelchair respondents** (powered and manual) spanning the US, UK, Europe, Asia and Africa to help understand the significant concerns wheelchair customers have when travelling by air.

The findings found the biggest concerns were;

- Wheelchairs being lost or damaged
- Toileting at airports and onboard the aircraft
- Transferring on and off the aircraft
- Seating in the cabin
- Boarding and disembarking processes
- Carriage of medical equipment.

The impact of these concerns have identified; 1 in 4 wheelchair customers rate their overall experience flying by air as good, very good, or extremely good. With 43% of wheelchair customers no longer choosing to fly.

Whilst the aviation industry has seen incredible advancements in accessibility with enhanced regulatory frameworks and best practices around the globe for people with reduced mobility (PRM) in recent years.

“ We believe that everyone should have access to air travel, and we welcome the significant improvements in accessibility made by UK airlines and airports in recent years. **Sir Stephen Hillier, Chair of the UK Civil Aviation Authority** ”

The findings support urgent need for a globally harmonised standard that ensures the same level of service at every airline and airport. Whilst providing guarantees wheelchairs will not be lost or damaged, improve timing and dignity when boarding and disembarking. And the need for a wheelchair in the cabin solution including accessible toilets so wheelchair customers can explore the world like everybody else who take it for granted.



Wheelchair customers (WCHC) are one of the smallest categories of PRMs (passengers with reduced mobility) in the aviation industry.

“PRM volume is equivalent to 1% to 2% of overall passenger numbers globally. For example, in the UK during 2018 there were roughly 3.2m PRM requests. WCHC passengers make up 5-7% of total PRM requests. In the UK that equated to between 160k and 224k requests in 2018.

The perception from the industry around the true value of wheelchair passengers is misconstrued and maybe why advancements to eradicate some of the biggest problems faced by wheelchair passengers remain slow.



**Josh Wintersgill, Founder of Able Move**

WCHC volume is small, not because wheelchair passengers don't want to fly - they do. These findings evidence the hassle, sacrifices and humility that goes into travelling by air for wheelchair customers.

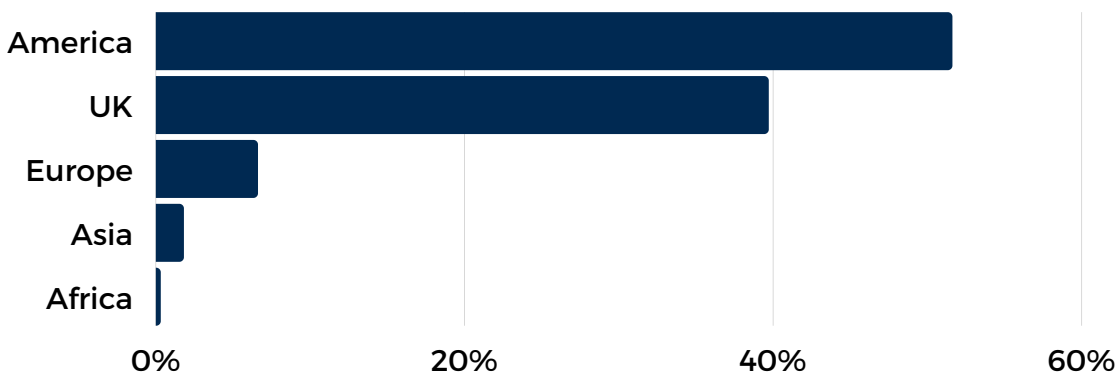


Flying as a wheelchair user is completely humiliating and current procedures are a deterrent to fly at all!

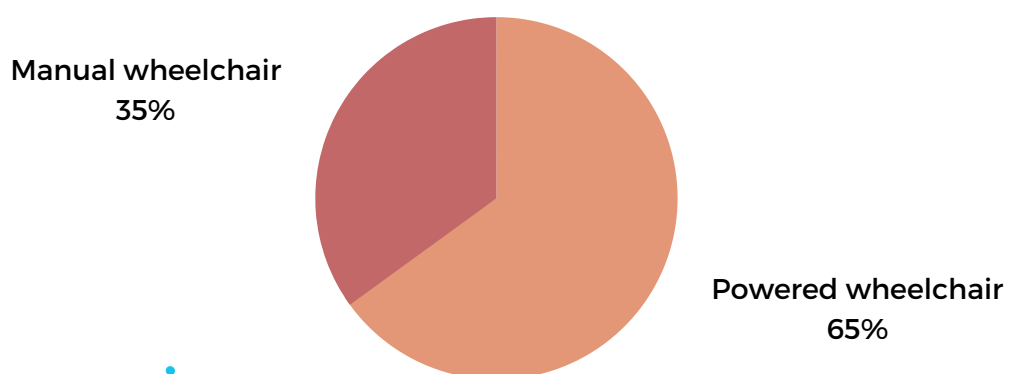


Survey respondent

### Region of where respondent were from



### Type of wheelchair the respondent uses



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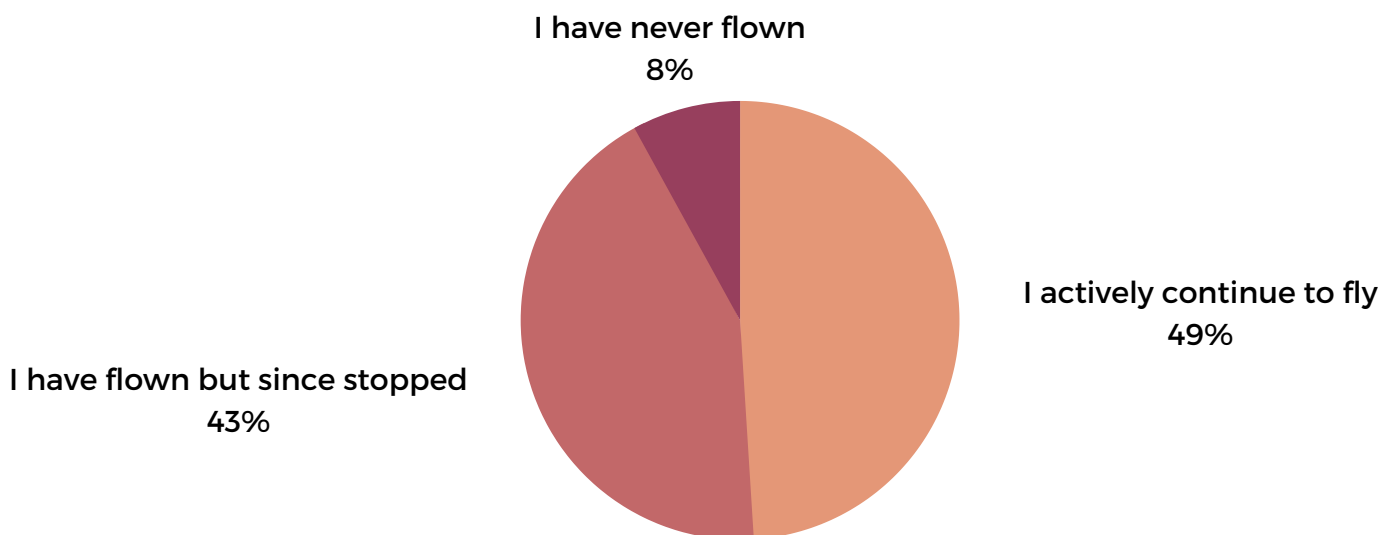
All airline execs should have to anonymously experience what it's like to be completely wheelchair dependent and have to fly on their airlines.

”

Survey respondent

Initially, respondents were asked to identify if they had never flown, have flown but since stopped and those who continue to fly. With almost 1 in 2 wheelchair customers no longer choosing to fly. To gain greater insight to the decisions behind why wheelchair customers have never flown, or have since stopped. Respondents had the opportunity identify what was the single most important reason and if they had more than one reason.

**Status of flying as a wheelchair customer**



## Wheelchair customers who have never flown

44% of those who have never flown said the most important reason why they have not is due to the **fear of losing or getting their wheelchair damaged**.

Asking what would encourage them to fly, the majority stated **“being able to stay in my wheelchair onboard the aircraft”**.

One respondent would be encouraged to fly, saying

“

If I had a 100% assurance that I would have my chair intact and at the correct destination then I'd be more comfortable.

”

## Wheelchair customers who have flown but since stopped

Out of **43% of people who have flown but have since stopped**, the single biggest reason was **personal injury or having bad experiences** when it came to transferring on and off the aircraft, equating to **33%**.

Respondents stated multiple reasons that have stopped them flying:

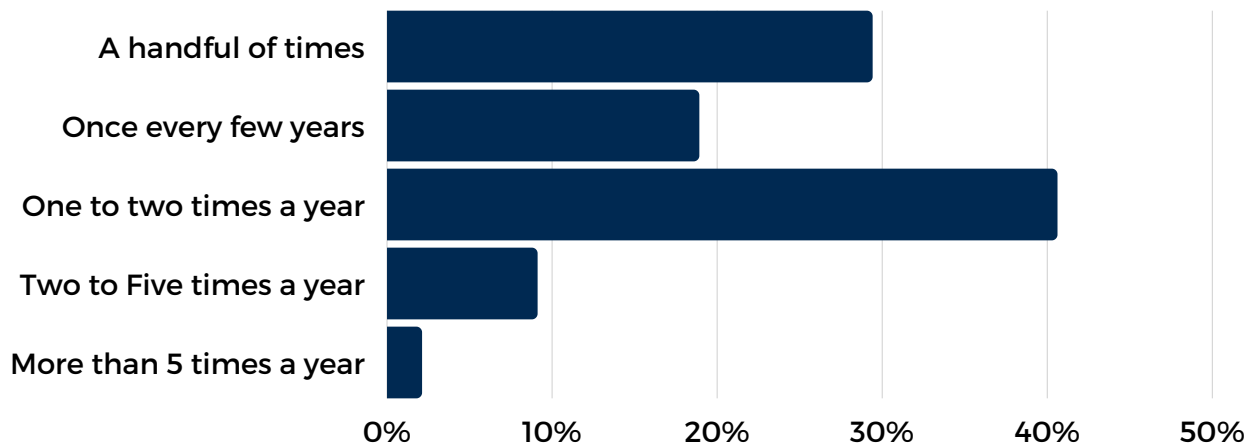
- 56% not being able to use the rest room
- 49% fear their wheelchair being lost or damaged
- 46% have stopped due to personal injury or bad experiences when being transferred
- 39% have stopped due to deterioration in mobility.



# 52%

of wheelchair customers who have since stopped flying use to fly between 1 to 5 times a year

### How frequently did wheelchair customers fly before stopping completely.



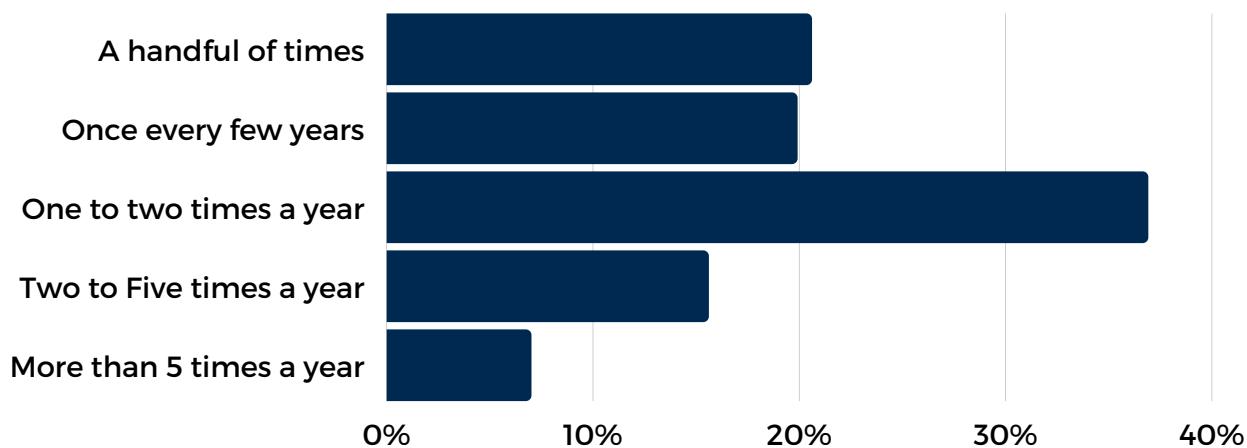
These passengers were also asked what would encourage them to get back flying again. With the majority of answers saying they would need to be able to remain in their wheelchair to get them flying again as this helps avoid chairs being lost or damaged and removing the need for transferring to aisle chairs.



# Wheelchair customers who actively continue to fly

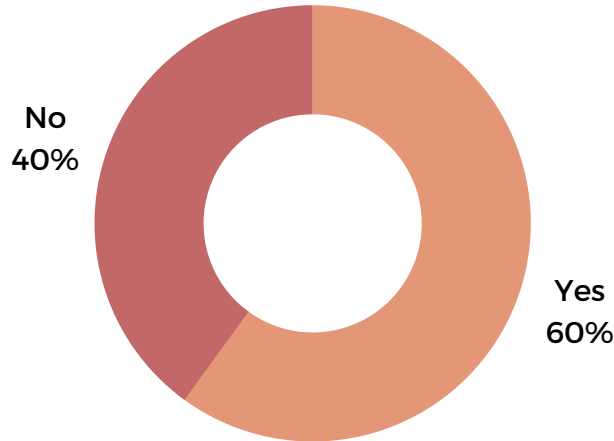
With those who actively continue to fly, there is a similar correlation with **55%** saying the biggest single cause of concern when flying was due to the **fear of their wheelchair being damaged or lost.**

## Frequency of flights for an active WCHC customer



# Wheelchair customers who have experienced their wheelchair being damaged when flying

Respondents who have or have not had their wheelchair damaged



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I can fly without being seated in my chair, but the stress of knowing the chair is going to be lost or damaged is very high. I arrived in Turkey with no wheelchair at all. It had not been put on the flight.

Survey respondent

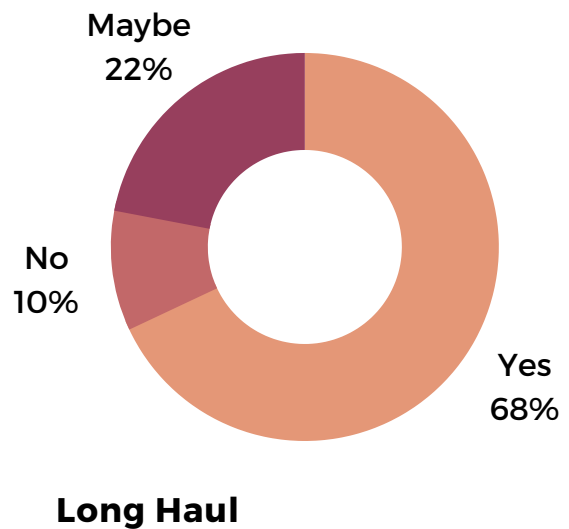
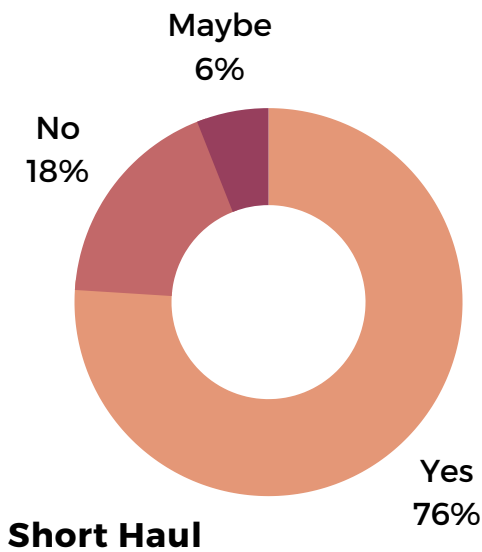
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# Wheelchair customers remaining in their wheelchair for short and long haul flights

Respondents were asked, if they could remain within their wheelchair, would they fly more frequently than they currently do for short and long-haul flights.

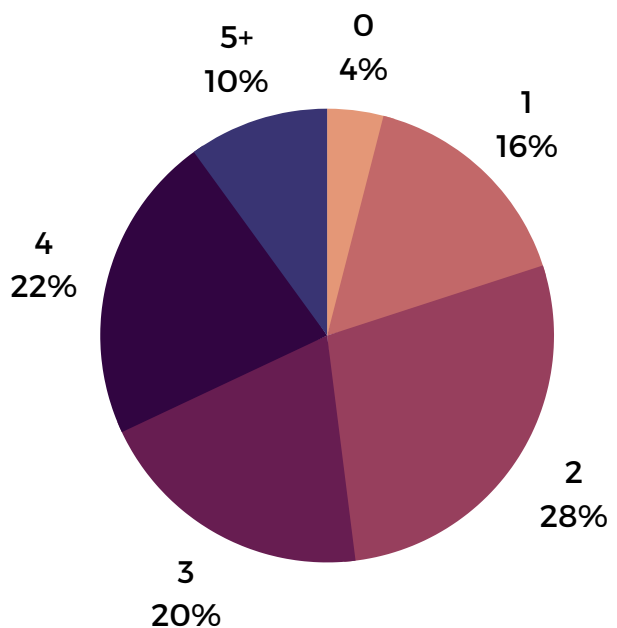


# Understanding how many companions wheelchair customers fly with

For many wheelchair customers, the regulation requires those to fly with an accompanying companion.

Respondents were asked to identify if they were to or do fly, how big a group would they be flying in.

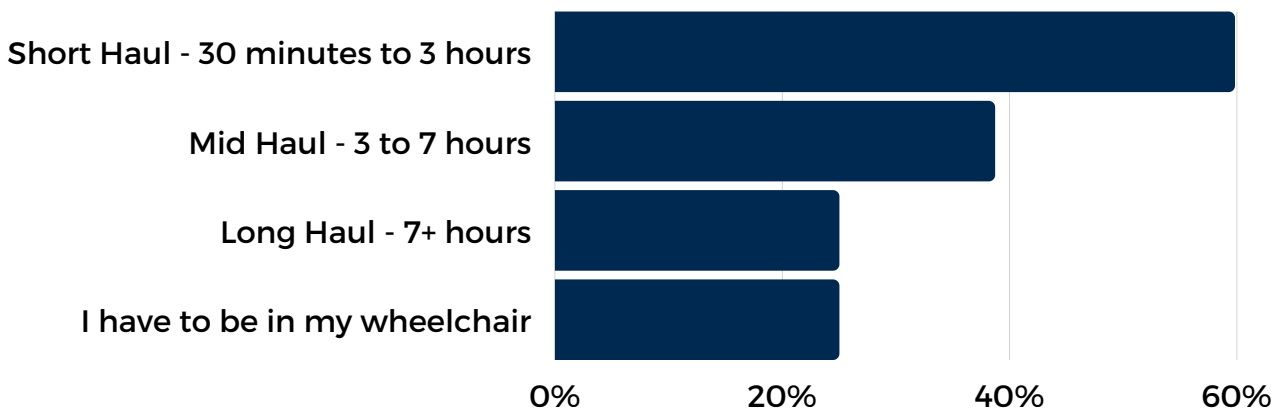
Our findings suggest **80%** of wheelchair passengers fly with at least **2 or more people in their group.**



# Managing short and long haul flights without being in a wheelchair or accessing the toilet

Respondents were asked to identify what types of flights were and were not possible for them to manage without needing to be in their wheelchairs.

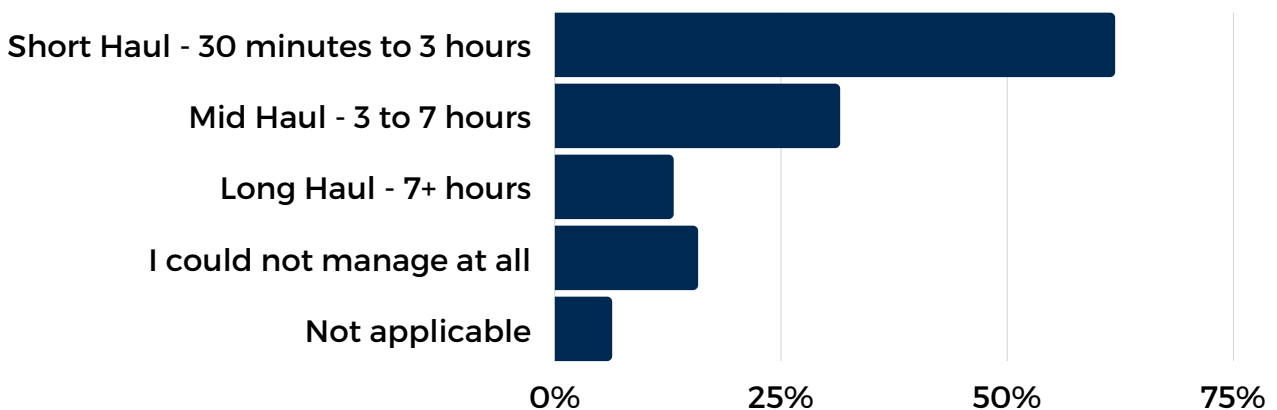
## How long a flight can you manage without needing to be in your wheelchair



Respondents could select more than one option.

With toileting being a critical factor for wheelchair customers, it was important to understand how long a flight could somebody in a wheelchair manage without needing access to the toilet, especially as for most, the onboard toilets are completely inaccessible.

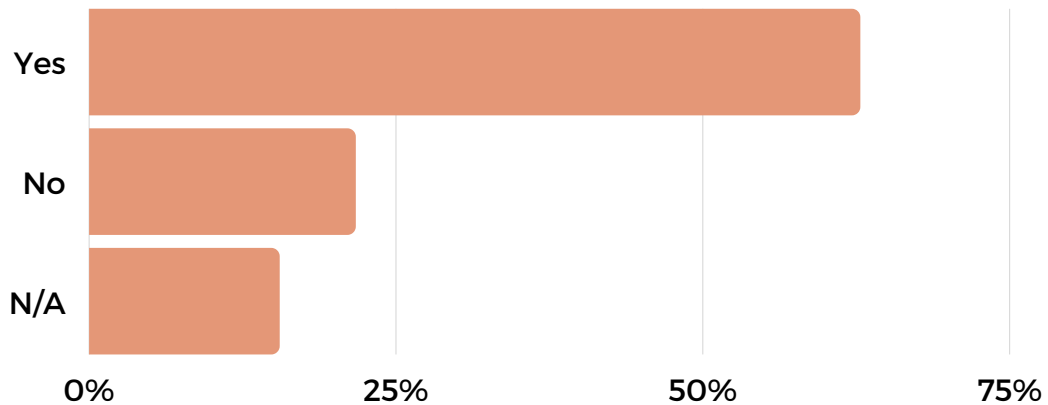
## How long a flight can you manage without needing to access the toilet



Respondents could select more than one option.

Therefore many have to dehydrate or starve themselves of food in order to fly. This process can start at least 24 hours prior to flying to ensure they will not need the toilet and can cause significant detriment to their health. These findings found **62% of wheelchair customers dehydrate or starve themselves in order to fly.**

Have you ever had to dehydrate or starve yourself of food and drink in order to fly



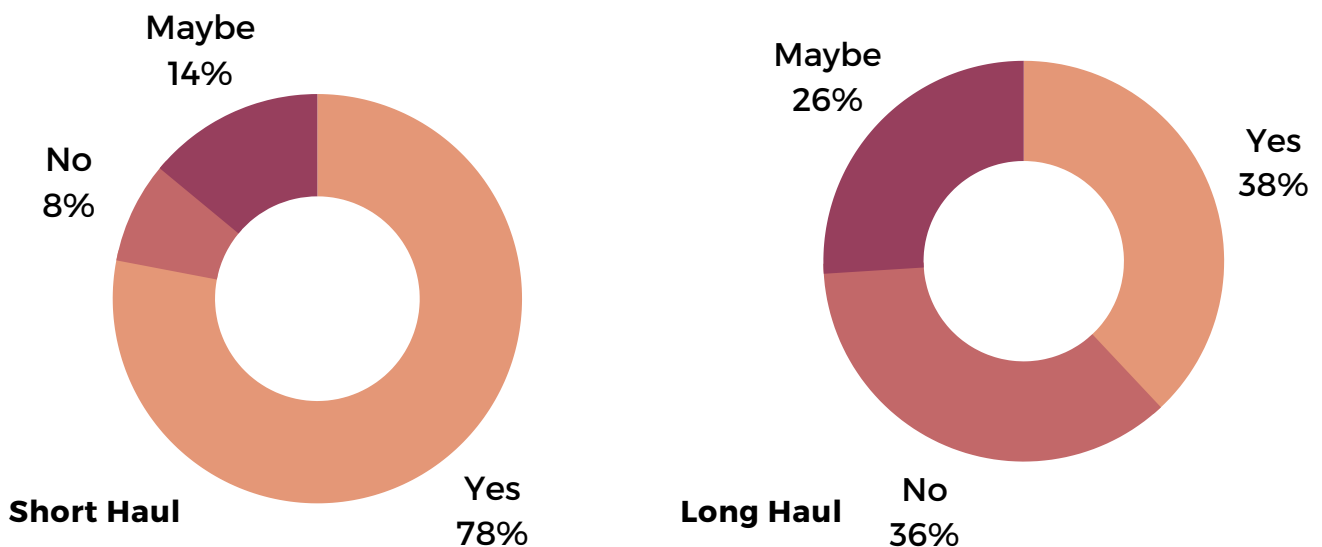
“ To be able to remain in my own wheelchair and that restroom facilities be accessible onboard so my body does not need to take such a toll being dehydrated ”

Survey respondent



Wheelchair passengers should have access to toilet facilities like any other passenger, particularly onboard the aircraft.

Respondents were asked, if they were sat within their wheelchair onboard the aircraft but could not access the toilet on a short or a long haul flight would they still consider flying.



“ Every airport needs a Changing places toilet ”

Survey respondent

The findings suggest the majority of wheelchair customers would sacrifice not having access on short haul flights for the ability to stay in their chair. However significant advancements need to be made into long haul flights and the possibility if wheelchairs were in the cabin could they be released from a tie down to get to an accessible toilet in their wheelchair?

A question also remains is it possible to get a Changing Places style toilet (the type of toilet these customers require and define as accessible) into a twin aisle aircraft, let alone a single aisle aircraft?

Which raises significant concern, as single aisle aircraft are becoming more common place for mid and long-haul flights.



# Transferring to and from the aircraft

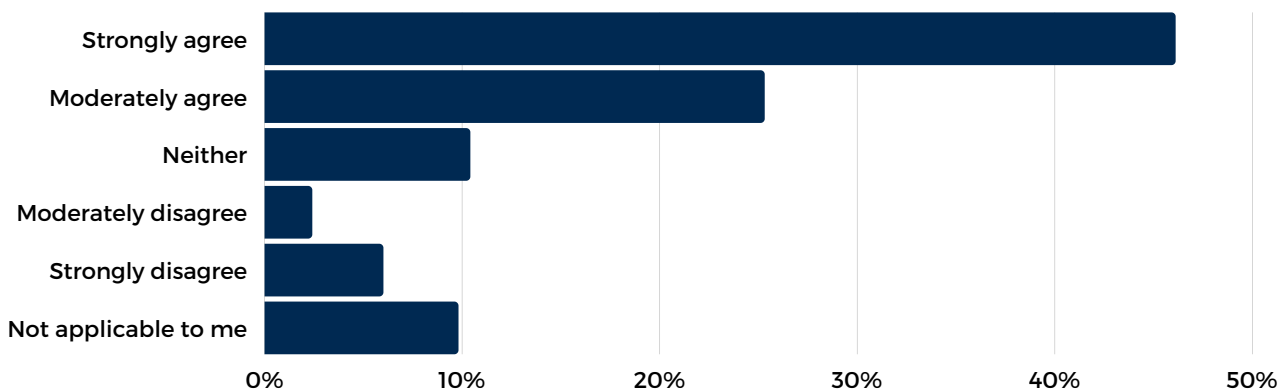


With transferring being such a significant cause of concern for customers in these findings, it is critical to understand whether wheelchair customers actually know if any equipment exists that can be used to safely transfer them to and from their wheelchair and the aircraft. With 6 companies across the globe providing suitable equipment, **53% didn't know transferring equipment existed**, 24% could self-transfer with **only 23% reporting of having used transferring equipment**.

## Legislation on lifting on and off the aircraft

Wheelchair customers have identified transferring and injury is of huge concern for them. It does raise a question, why is it that there is no legislation at minimum that enforces the use of equipment to help reduce the impact on transferring?

Respondents were asked if legislation ensured people who require being lifted on and off an aircraft with an appropriate piece of transferring equipment how strongly do you agree this should be implemented? **71% strongly or moderately agree legislation should be changed**.



# Aisle chair safety

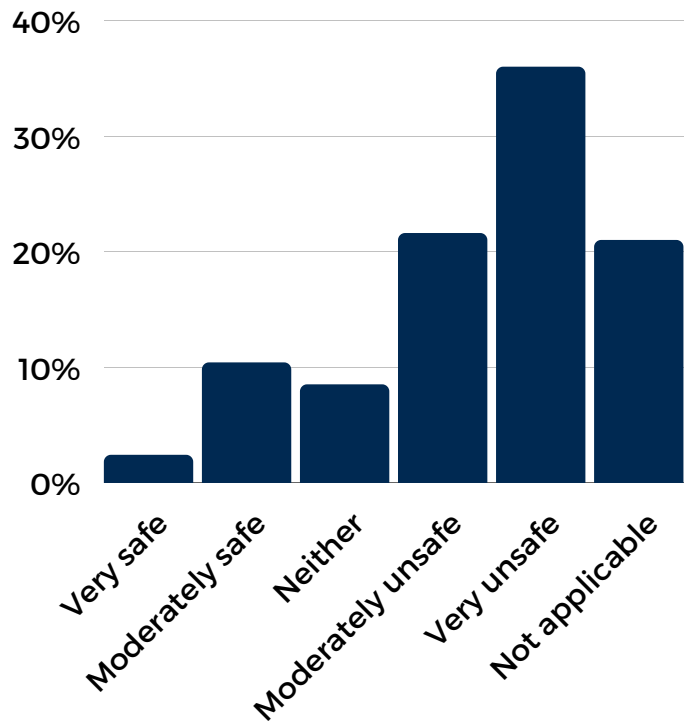
The other element to being transferred to and from the aircraft involves using an aisle chair. Aisle chairs are used to take the customer from the cabin door to their seat. Aisle chairs have been designed purely to fit the aircraft rather than designed to fit the needs of the person having to sit in it.

To understand how inadequate these aisle chairs are, respondents were asked how safe they felt when using one.

**Only 2% of wheelchair customers felt very safe, with 58% feeling moderately or very unsafe.** One respondent said:

“As soon as you go to the transfer chair and onto the airplane you immediately feel like you don’t belong if you are disabled. Nothing is made for us and everything is so difficult too, and it is very disheartening because I would love to travel more if it wasn’t so hard.

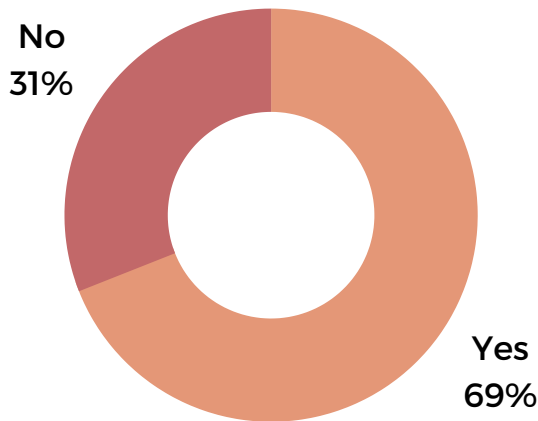
Survey respondent



# Boarding before other passengers

Another challenge wheelchair customers face, is when an airline has already commenced boarding of other passengers. The overwhelming anxiety, tight chest, paranoia and the feeling of a puppet getting dragged onto an aircraft whilst being watched by lots of people is humiliating.

**Have you ever experienced boarding either during or after an airline has commenced boarding of other passengers?**



“

“It was the most awful experience, I was transferred through a full flight, getting stuck in the aisle, being watched by all passengers, was taken to my seat which was right at the back of the flight! Staff did not know how to manage the chair or to help me out into a seat. I was made to wait until all the passengers were on and then seen to - the chair did not arrive on time, I was the last to be taken off, after a 7-hour flight it was another 45 minutes before I got off. I was desperate for the washroom. It was the most humiliating and stressful experience of my life.”

”

Survey respondent

# General experience of special assistance when being supported on and off the aircraft

One of the other areas passengers face significant amounts of trepidation is with the attitude of staff and appropriate training. Whilst training on general disability, diversity and inclusion has come on at phenomenal rates. It still appears wheelchair passengers are being significantly let down.

One passenger commented saying,

“ I often feel like an inconvenience to the staff. Sometimes staff rush without taking into consideration my concern and safety for proper transfer off the plane.

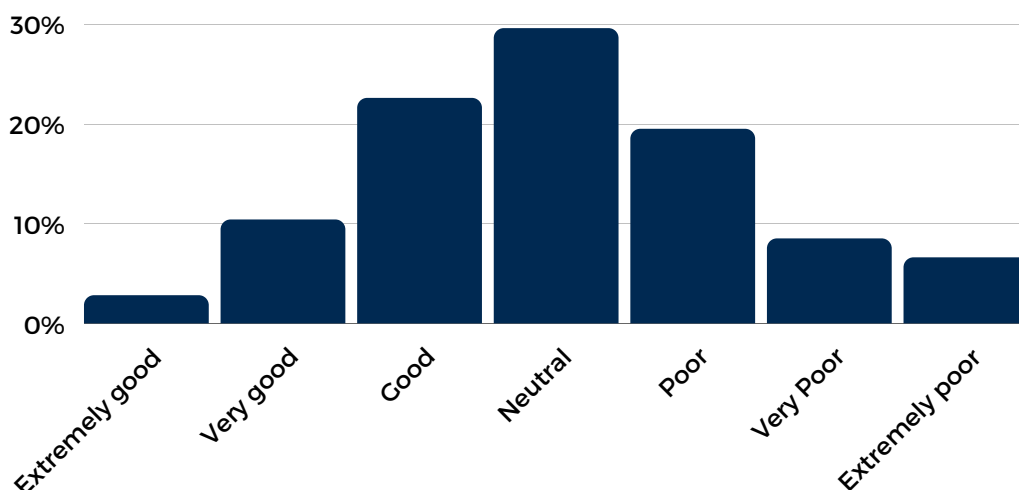
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When surveys are conducted generally to get PRM feedback, often wheelchair passengers views are lost in translation purely because their responses are significantly outweighed to greater volume of other PRMs. At the backend of 2020 the **UK CAA (Civil Aviation Authority)** released their rankings of special assistance service ratings for UK airports with 15 airports rated as very good, 13 as good, 3 as needs improvement and 0 as poor. They found 90% of passengers who responded to a survey at Glasgow and Bristol on the standard of assistance rated the service as good or excellent at both airports.

However, when asking wheelchair passengers to rate their general experience of special assistance when supporting them on and off the aircraft it paints a completely different picture.

**2 in 3 people rate their experience as neutral, poor, very poor or extremely poor.**

How would you rate your overall special assistance experience when flying?

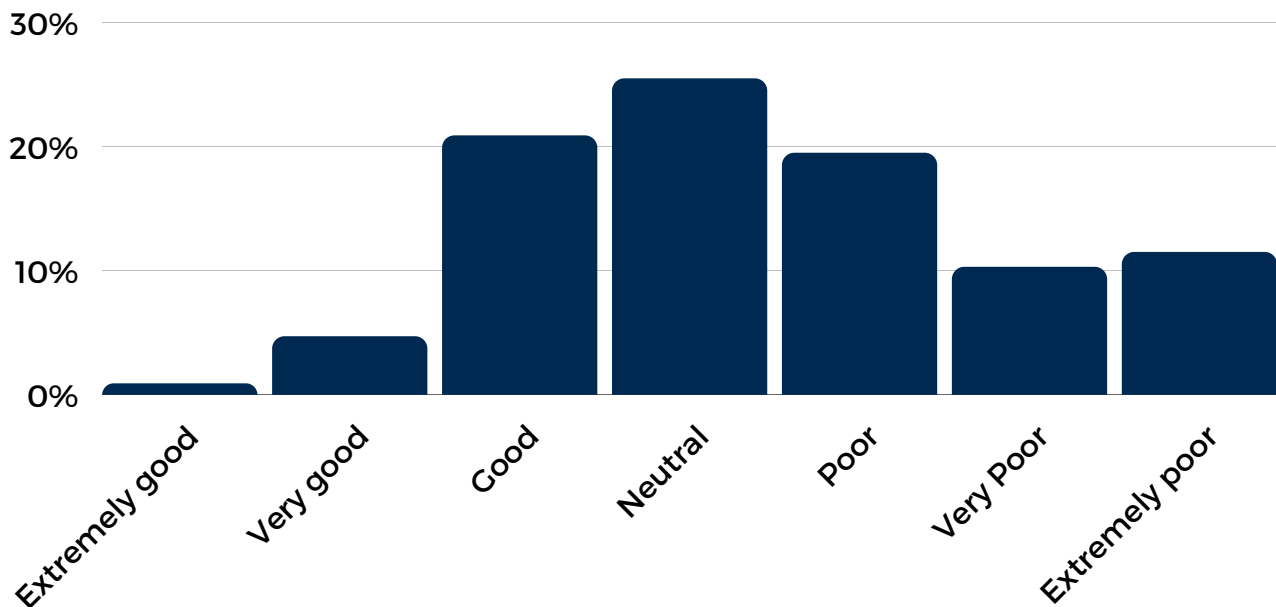




# Overall experience when flying by air

1 in 4 rated their overall experience as good, very good, and extremely good. With the other 3 in 4 people rating it as 'neither good or poor, poor, very poor or extremely poor.

How would you rate your overall flying experience as a wheelchair customer?



The most common occurring words across all responses in the survey from wheelchair customers

## TO CONCLUDE

The findings point to a clear solution, 'wheelchair in the cabin'. That gives wheelchair customers the safety, dignity and comfort they are entitled too.

Wheelchair in the cabin will get more wheelchair customers in the sky, flying more frequently in groups of more than 2, contributing to significant growth in tickets sales. It will remove the need for specialist equipment to board passengers, prevent the logistical challenges of putting wheelchairs into the hold and improve boarding and disembarking.

Whilst various organisations such as [All Wheels Up](#), [Wheelchairtravel.org](#) and [Flying Disabled](#) (too name a few) who work to make 'wheelchair in the cabin' a reality for millions of wheelchair users around the globe. There is a significant amount of work in the immediate future the industry can address to help improve the experience of these passenger.

A superb start would be:

1. A globally harmonized standard that ensures the same level of service at every airline and airport across the globe
2. Provide wheelchair passengers guarantees their wheelchairs will not be lost or damaged
3. Improve timing and dignity when boarding wheelchair passengers
4. Increase dialog and innovation with industry about wheelchair in the cabin and accessible toileting.

Of course, this requires further investment and COVID will impact this. For now, the fear and humility of flying amongst the WCHC community remains, preventing them from being able to explore the world like everybody else who take it for granted.

“In the US, each airline has their own process, requirements, paperwork, etc. It would be nice if there was more uniformity over the entire process. Current guidelines allow for too much deviation.”



Survey respondent



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