

# The sky's no limit

Chris Wood from Flying Disabled reports on work to make air travel more accessible and dignified for wheelchair users by developing a system that allows them to stay in their own chairs on planes

**F**lying by air seated in your own power wheelchair (PWC) was once a distant dream and the nemesis of airlines. Now, an industry-led consortium has found the solution to this aviation Rubik's cube.

The consortium comprises aircraft cabin designer Priestmangoode, aircraft certification company SWS Certification and lobbyist/consultant Flying Disabled. It's called Air4All and wants to make air travel safe and dignified for all those that use PWCs. It will be working alongside Sunrise Medical, one of the biggest wheelchair manufacturers in the world, and together we can scrutinise the PWC for safety and airworthiness.

Moreover, the prototype is being built by a subsidiary of a major airline and, despite setbacks in the supply chain, the working prototype should be in the public domain in the coming months. The Air4All concept is designed to be accommodated in all commercial aircraft types and the concept has been

designed around a single aisle Boeing 737 or Airbus A320 aircraft. These aircraft are now the most common airline purchase due to their ability to fly further, therefore it can easily migrate to the bigger twin aisles of the air. Jet Blue already flies a Single Aisle Airbus A321neoLR from London to New York.

The Air4All design isn't just great for those PWC users, it also removes the elephant from the room and offers no loss of passenger seat for the airline. There can be no more excuses from the airline perspective.

The consortium is in progressive discussions with an airline subsidiary, in other words, the prototype is currently being built with an airline following the progress closely. However, we need to go further. One airline adopting the Air4All system doesn't make a harmonised journey and safety regulators are very keen on harmonisation, especially when it

comes to passenger welfare. It's very likely that once one airline adopts the system, others will follow voluntarily then more will be steered into the stable via regulation. The Civil Aviation Authority, our UK regulator, has thrown its weight behind the project, as has the FAA.

The million-dollar/pound/euro question is, "Will I be able to fly in the PWC I currently use?" That answer hasn't been established yet. Most PWCs are tested for road vehicles at a very high standard and, on that basis, you would think so, but an aircraft cabin is a vastly different environment. A PWC will sit in a pressurised cabin, 35,000 feet in the air, travelling at speeds of around 500mph, so the safety of everyone on board can't be compromised in any way.

There are many challenges ahead to get this flying but as the consortium is industry led, we know the hurdles that aviation will lay for us, as do Sunrise Medical with all wheelchairs.

As someone reminded me, the consortium will be the first to initiate many innovations that will change so many people's lives for the better.

I often see on social media, "They can get a man on the moon, why can't airlines get a wheelchair on an aircraft?". Think of the Air4All system as the first manned moon landing. Just a few years later, they were driving around the moon in buggies, playing golf and all transmitted to viewers in glorious colour. You have to start somewhere! ■

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