

Service level agreements imperative

The European Commission is considering a revision of its Council Directive 96/67 which liberalised the ground handling market, following a study of its implementation by independent consultants SH&E. Proposed amendments are expected to be published by the end of the year. At the time of writing, the ACI EUROPE response was not finalised, but the draft position included a number of key themes. John Frank-Keyes reports.



The SH&E study of 33 European airports was carried out by a five-strong team led by Vice-President Dr Chris Smith. He explained that SH&E was not asked to come to conclusions or to provide policy recommendations. “The objective was simply to compile a strictly factual report on the process of implementation,” Smith said. “The Commission was looking for the facts to help it decide if amendments were required.”

In addition to the airports visited (see box), the SH&E team held meetings with trade associations of stakeholders, including ACI EUROPE, the AEA, IACA, ERA, and the Association of Independent Handling Agents, together with the European Transport Workers’ Federation. The contract for the study was signed in December 2001, with the first meeting in Brussels in mid-January 2002. The SH&E final report was delivered to the European Commission on 5 November 2002.

The European Commission subsequently issued a consultation paper to all relevant stakeholders (who were given until 1 June 2003 to respond), inviting comments on a range of issues including transitional rules which might be removed from the Directive, definitions in need of further clarification and measures to liberalise further the ground handling market.

Quality suffering

The central finding of the SH&E report was that quality standards at European airports are falling and that urgent action to address this issue is required. The Directive does not allow airport operators to set standards – an omission which ACI EUROPE insists must be rectified.

ACI EUROPE supports the introduction of a level playing field in the ground handling sector but argues that any revisions should seek only to be complementary to the existing legislation. ACI EUROPE

Specified list of 33 airports

London Heathrow, Birmingham, Manchester, Belfast International, Frankfurt, Munich, Stuttgart, Nurnberg, Hamburg, Rome Fiumicino, Milan Malpensa, Naples, Paris Charles de Gaulle, Lyon, Nice, Toulouse, Madrid, Palma, Barcelona, Fuerteventura, Tenerife Sud, Lisbon, Faro, Brussels, Schiphol, Luxembourg, Copenhagen, Stockholm, Helsinki, Vienna, Athens, Heraklion and Dublin.

As presently framed, the Directive does not allow airport operators to set standards – an omission which ACI EUROPE insists must be rectified.

also warns that before introducing any further liberalisation, the European Commission should take note of the difficulties faced by some accession countries in meeting current legislation.

In a statement, ACI EUROPE said: “The Regulation needs to reflect better that quality standards must be better defined and allow airport operators to ensure that ground handling operations are carried out in a correct and timely manner.”

“Poor quality ground handling affects the entire management (operation) of an airport. Ground handling operations (such as baggage transfer) are part of a chain, and any disturbance in these operations has a major impact down the line, with repercussions for all operators including airlines (departure and transfer operations, delay in embarkation, loss of slots and so forth).” ACI EUROPE’s Director General and Director of Policy have met with members calls of the upcoming Italian Presidency of the European Union to highlight the importance of minimum obligatory service level agreements or requirements, for ground handling services providers. Only in this way will the true benefits of a liberalised ground handling market be passed on to air passengers.”