

New Inquiry – Impact on Transport of recent Adverse Weather Conditions

1. Introduction

The Board of Airline Representatives in the UK (BAR UK), representing 85 scheduled airlines, welcomes this inquiry and is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to it.

2. Background

- a) There was heavy snowfall at Heathrow on 18 December, and it is readily acknowledged that the airport would require a period of closure whilst snow clearance took place. However, what my airline members cannot reconcile is why this single snow occurrence caused the extended period of drastically restricted flight operations between 18-22 December 2010.
- b) This led to totally unacceptable delays and cancellations to hundreds of thousands of passengers, and aircraft out of position that could not be used elsewhere. Subsequently, the conditions that passengers had to endure were simply not acceptable.
- c) Our comments below are of a broad nature, with a view to highlighting the major issues that come to mind. These same points can be expected to be raised with the forthcoming enquiry to be chaired by Professor David Begg.

3. Communications

- a) There is a well-tested and strong history of cooperation between Heathrow Airport Ltd and the Airlines during crises.
- b) However, it is questionable whether the airport's own communications procedures are as efficient and robust as they should be. There is a strong reliance by the airport operator on just teleconference calls and, sometimes, e-mails. This is inadequate; up-to-date situation reports are required not just by those on the scene, but also by airline decision-makers in head offices overseas.
- c) BAR UK suggests that Heathrow Airport Ltd be guided by the facility that NATS instigates at such times. They provide a dedicated website for contingency events. It is available to authorised users anywhere in the world, and provides instant confirmation of updates and related NOTAMS and other instructions.

4. Clarity of communications

Whilst communications were issued on a regular basis, some of the content was imprecise e.g. the airport being closed 'until further notice'. This open-ended terminology meant planning was put in abeyance, and was a particular problem for long-haul airlines that operate flights of 8-14 hours into the UK. They were in the invidious position of not knowing whether Heathrow would be open at the due time of arrival.

5. Terminal closures

The issue of closing terminals to passengers requires examination.

Some airlines have reported that, despite snow falling outside, and no accommodation or shelter being available, passengers were going to be evicted from Terminal 1. This created very understandable pressures and reactions from passengers, and was simply a totally unacceptable decision in the first instance.

6. Sheer scale of the closure

- a) The pictures seen on television are possibly the best evidence of the chaotic situation that prevailed at Heathrow.
- b) Information was scant and the sheer volume of passengers and baggage crammed into terminals made effective and good passenger care well nigh impossible.
- c) Under such conditions, it is easy to realise that the range of available hotel accommodation would be inadequate for the needs of the thousands of passengers who travel arrangements had been disrupted.

7. Night Flights dispensation

The current process is outdated and ill-serves the needs of all parties at times of force majeure events.

Currently, the airport operator has almost to go cap in hand to the Department for Transport and seek their approval.

This is an unnecessary impediment and most probably denied the opportunity to operate a number of flights, thereby exacerbating the situation on the ground.

BAR UK believes that the airport operator should be granted the powers to authorise additional night flights at such times, and then report them to the DfT as part of a properly-policed audit system.

8. Costs of airport closures imposed on airlines

- a) BAR UK wishes to express its concerns to the Committee that the greater costs of the airport's lack of performance fell on the airlines and not the airport.
- b) For example, and despite not being designed with force majeure events in mind, airlines have to bear the costs imposed by EU Regulation 261/2004, popularly known as the Denied Boarding Regulation. This imposes, without any time limit or reference to the costs of tickets, duties of care assistance, accommodation or refunds during times of cancellations and delays.
- c) Airlines were forced to divert their aircraft to other airports. There were the passenger costs associated with such diversions (as per paragraph 8b above) plus those of the crews as well. At the same time, the use of the aircraft itself was denied elsewhere on the network of the airlines concerned, so leading to delays and cancellations elsewhere in the world.
- d) Without prejudice, BAR UK invited Heathrow Airport Ltd to mollify the situation by treating airlines as customers, and offer financial rebates to airlines in the form of reduced airport fees over a set period of time. This it has steadfastly refused to do.

9. Cargo

- a) Heathrow is a key port for the UK economy.
- b) Whilst not close to what the effects were for freight customers, BAR UK suggests that the Committee may wish to explore what adverse effects were imposed on imports and exports.

10. Runway De-icing media

There is a lack of clarity as to how much de-icing media existed for the clearance of runways and taxiways. Was this the reason that, whilst technically not running out of such stock, only one runway was able to be cleared until December 22nd?

11. Snow clearance equipment and training

- a) The announcement that Heathrow Airport Ltd was to spend an additional £10m on snow clearance equipment strongly suggests that its current inventory is inadequate.
- b) The additional requirement raises the question of what resources are available to operate it in the times ahead, and what training is given.

12. Summary

- a) The snow closure, and restrictions that followed, at Heathrow in December created very unacceptable conditions for passengers and airlines.
- b) The results were:
 - huge disruptions for all parties,
 - great emotional costs for passengers,
 - huge financial penalties for airlines.
 - airline reputations tarnished by the failures of the airport.
- c) It is timely to examine the failures so that future ones are prevented.

BAR UK remains readily available to the Committee to provide any additional information that may be required.

We will welcome the opportunity to address the Committee in person to answer their enquiries.