

Opinion **The FT View**

Airlines have made promises they are unable to deliver

Companies should trim flights now to prevent a summer of chaos

THE EDITORIAL BOARD



Travellers queue to pass through security at Heathrow airport last week © Carl Court/Getty Images

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We regret to inform passengers of flight delays. For the next 18 months. That is the forecast, from the boss of London's Heathrow airport, John Holland-Kaye, of [how long it will take](#) to recalibrate supply and demand for air travel. The unacceptable and avoidable chaos at British airports last week, which resulted in thousands being forced to abandon holiday plans, therefore has a real chance of repeating itself this summer. Both industry and the government share responsibility to ensure that it does not.

The prospect of many people's first foreign holiday since the start of the pandemic has meant demand for air travel has taken off far quicker than the industry's ability to meet it reliably, at a time when airlines are already facing soaring fuel costs and are under pressure to transition to cleaner flights. At the height of the pandemic,

airlines, airports and ancillary-service providers all had to reduce costs drastically, which meant swinging job cuts and sometimes regrettably cynical sharp practice. Over 25,000 people lost their jobs in UK air travel, despite a government furlough scheme intended to help smooth out firing and rehiring. British Airways alone [cut 10,000 jobs](#) and threatened to force staff who remained on to cheaper contracts.

Those cuts are now proven to be too deep. Now that passengers want to travel again, workers — and their unions — have the upper hand in a tight labour market. Hiring staff takes longer than in other sectors because of training and rigorous security checks. Shortages are particularly acute among ground crew. A baggage handler's annual starting salary is £15,000 for a 45-hour week: pay that could easily be matched by jobs at supermarkets or delivery companies with more sociable hours and no lengthy background checks. Better pay may help; a cost that will inevitably be passed on to passengers. But if that results in a more reliable service, it may be a price worth paying.

The problem is not uniquely British. Travellers suffered in Amsterdam and Dublin airports. A strike by air traffic controllers in Milan added to delays. In the US, Delta said it would cut 100 flights a day this summer in order to minimise disruption. But bosses at Ryanair and Jet2 have been clear that the UK suffers from an additional crunch to worker supply from Brexit. The ideological constraints of the government, led by Boris Johnson fighting for his political survival, mean it is unlikely to grant an emergency visa scheme to ground crew in the EU, as it has done for other understaffed key roles such as poultry workers and HGV drivers.

The government, which was warned by both industry and a [parliamentary committee](#) of looming turmoil, deserves criticism. Confusing restrictions on air travel only lifted in March, leaving the industry scrambling to fill vacancies. While it has gone some way to meet industry demands that background checks be speeded up, the government could have done more, sooner. In a sector with such a fragmented supply chain, ministers need to take a coordinating role.

But the industry was well aware of the problems it faced, and how long they might take to resolve. It therefore had no business selling tickets it could not honour. [Flight cancellations](#) today are a result of earlier overselling. Airlines need to take action now to alleviate passenger misery this summer, when planned strike action in the UK and Europe could make things worse. Cutting flights weeks before travel, when passengers can try to make alternative arrangements, is the least bad option. Cutting them after passengers arrive at the airport is inexcusable. The industry must not make promises it cannot keep.

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