

Heathrow passengers may have to fly outside peak times ahead of Christmas

Airport still has shortage of 25,000 staff and is keen to avoid disruption of summer



Heathrow is thought to be talking to airlines about retiming flights to avoid the morning peak time in the run-up to Christmas. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

Heathrow has said passengers may have to fly outside peak times on some days in the run-up to Christmas to **avoid further travel chaos**, as Europe's busiest airport admitted it was still short of 25,000 staff to meet high demand.

The airport, which this Sunday is due to lift the current cap of 100,000 passengers a day **that was introduced in July** as summer holiday travel descended into chaos, said it was in talks with airlines over the selective cap.

It is understood that **Heathrow** is discussing retiming flights from morning peak time - when most passengers prefer to get away - to quieter afternoon slots if the airport needs to manage the festive travel rush.

"We are working with airlines to agree a highly targeted mechanism that, if needed, would align supply and demand on a small number of peak days in the lead-up to Christmas," Heathrow said. "This would encourage demand into less busy periods, protecting the heavier peaks, and avoiding flight cancellations due to resource pressures."

Heathrow said passenger numbers were likely to hit 60-62 million this year, 25% lower than in 2019.

The airport does not expect a return to pre-pandemic levels of demand for "a number of years", except at peak times, because of a combination of worsening global economic conditions, the war in Ukraine and the impact of Covid-19 on travel habits.

In 2019, a record 81 million passengers used Heathrow, a level its chief executive predicts will not be reached until 2025 or 2026.

John Holland-Kaye, the chief executive of Heathrow, said the 100,000 cap had enabled Heathrow to manage 18 million passenger journeys over the summer, taking Heathrow from being "one of the quietest airports in **Europe** to the busiest".

"The cap in the summer was on passenger numbers, which airlines managed by limiting seats sales so consumers wouldn't notice it," he said. "Whatever mechanism we have [at Christmas] will have the same kind of effect of keeping passenger numbers in balance. Anything we do will be in the background so consumers don't notice it."

The London hub said it was still some way from being able to cope with peak periods of travel demand. "Our priority is to build back the airport ecosystem to meet demand at peak times," Heathrow said. "To do so, businesses across the airport need to recruit and train up to 25,000 security-cleared people - a huge logistical challenge."

Holland-Kaye said there were 75,000 staff employed at the 400 companies based at Heathrow - mostly ground handlers but also airline staff and about 7,500 directly employed by the airport - and getting back to that level would mean it could also handle peak demand.

The airport said it had established a recruitment taskforce to help fill vacancies, and was working with the government on a review of airline ground handling, after passengers had to wait for hours for their luggage during the summer holidays.

The company said losses had hit £400m in the year to the end of September, adding to the £4bn lost over the previous two years.

Javier Echave, the chief financial officer of Heathrow, said that like many other companies, it faced increases in bills for energy and staff pay rises. He said that most of the airport's electricity costs were hedged for all of this year, and a "significant amount" in 2023. "It will be 2024 and beyond when we feel the impact of energy cost increases," he said.

On Wednesday, workers at Southampton airport announced three days of strike action over the failure to secure a pay rise since 2019. Airside operations controllers, firefighters, technicians and engineering workers at the airport, run by AGS, which also operates Aberdeen and Glasgow airports, will strike on 5, 12 and 19 of November.

"The airport bosses need to make a realistic pay offer to the staff if they are to avoid an escalation of the dispute," said Sharon Graham, general secretary at Unite.

AGS has been contacted for comment.

From Italy to Sweden, Hungary to France, the far right is once again a force to be reckoned with. Its hostility towards immigrants encourages xenophobes everywhere, including in Italy. Its social conservatism threatens hard-won LGBTQ+ rights. Its euroscepticism has already upset the dynamics of the EU.

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