



HOUSE OF LORDS

Justice and Home Affairs Committee

Corrected oral evidence: Electronic border management systems

Tuesday 19 March 2024

11.20 am

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Lord Foster of Bath (The Chair); Lord Bach; Baroness Buscombe; Lord Dubs; Lord Filkin; Lord Henley; Lord McInnes of Kilwinning; Baroness Prashar; Lord Sandhurst; Lord Tope.

Evidence Session No. 6

Heard in Public

Questions 71 – 85

Witness

[I](#): Tonia Fielding, Director of Services, Heathrow Airport.

USE OF THE TRANSCRIPT

1. This is a corrected transcript of evidence taken in public and webcast on www.parliamentlive.tv.

Examination of witness

Tonia Fielding.

Q71 **The Chair:** Welcome. We are now in our sixth evidence-gathering session, and we are looking at the introduction of two European schemes, ETIAS and EES, and the UK's introduction of the Electronic Travel Authority, ETA, which is just beginning to be rolled out. We have our witness today. Would you be kind enough to introduce yourself?

Tonia Fielding: I am the Director of Services at Heathrow Airport.

The Chair: Thank you. I will turn now to Lord McInnes.

Q72 **Lord McInnes of Kilwinning:** Good morning, Tonia, and thank you for coming along. We have just had a witness who has given us interesting evidence on the relationship between Border Force and the Home Office. As a bit of a scene setter, I would like to explore the relationship between Heathrow and Border Force and look at the delineation of responsibilities and where things work and where they maybe do not work. If you could cover in your response the communication issue between Heathrow staff and Border Force, especially radio communication within Heathrow, we would be grateful. Thank you.

Tonia Fielding: There is quite a lot there. If I give you some context to my role, that will help with understanding. I am an operational director with responsibility for our terminals, transport logistics and, ultimately, customer experience. In Heathrow, this means being the internal conscience for the passenger, championing passenger experience and needs, and as part of that I have responsibility for the Border Force relationship and our connecting product.

I will take the main question in two parts. I have been in the role for seven years now. I had a brief stint managing security, but I used to manage the Border Force relationship prior to that, so it has definitely been a journey over the last seven years or so. From a day-to-day point of view, it is an extremely collaborative relationship and has certainly moved on within the last 18 months to two years.

I have Joe, our Border Force relationship manager, with me today. He is responsible for the main day-to-day relationship alongside one of the assistant directors, who is responsible for stakeholder relationships. The routine working through of issues and what might be coming very much happens between Joe and the assistant director for Border Force.

Then I have a relationship with their director at Heathrow, which happens in a number of ways. There is the informal relationship where we meet up and talk through the similarities of our operations and any issues arising on a day-to-day basis.

Sitting behind that, we have a series of formal governance. There are three tiers, the first of which is what we call our Border Force Co-ordination Group, which looks at the day-to-day operating models and is co-chaired by me and Katherine, our

director of Border Force at Heathrow. Our remit is to look at the night to six-month trajectory of the past performance of the previous month, and at issues that might just be arising that we need to make sure we are focusing our attention on. It works well, and we get to do deep dives into performance.

I am a massive advocate for making sure that the experience is as quick and seamless as possible for our passengers. One of the biggest changes over the last 18 months has been the ability to start to forensically examine performance at the border and get into the nitty-gritty of when it is not performing as it should be: why it is not, what we need to do, what can we do differently, how we could offer support with the data that is available to us, and what we might need to do to tweak the operation. If we have late-running flights in a terminal, it could be as simple as making sure that we share that data so that we can move resource between terminals. It could be that we have noticed poorer performance in one area over another and question why that is happening and what we can do. Locally, it works really well.

We have a couple of layers beyond that. We have our Border Transformation Group, which does horizon scanning and looks a bit further ahead to any policy change or infrastructure change where we might need to start to tweak our direction. That group is a combination of local teams and some of the central border teams. It is chaired by our team at Heathrow, called the Solutions Group, and its job is to look at any programmatic and infrastructure changes that are happening.

We then have the Heathrow Leadership Committee. On that committee is our CEO and a number of CEOs of key airlines. Border Force attends that meeting, along with organisations like NATS. Anyone looking at the governance and leadership of the airport is part of that.

As I said at the beginning, it has definitely been a journey of sharing and collaboration, but I feel that we are very much in a place now where we are all working towards a common goal that will make sure that we are not only looking at the security of the border but understanding the importance of passenger experience and what that can mean for people choosing to fly through Heathrow.

Q73 Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: We had Alexander Downer before us last week, and one of the issues mentioned was flexibility. You mentioned flights coming in late and needing to move staff around. Have those issues been overcome? Could you give us a bit more of a feeling for when a problem or issue with Border Force is noticed and how you resolve that, maybe using the flexibility of staff as an example?

Tonia Fielding: Absolutely. It might sound boring, but every day we review our performance from the previous day. A couple of things happen. You tend to look back at how your operation ran, where any problems arose, and what you could have done differently. We have something called PDR, which is our plan, do and review process. As I say, that happens every day to reflect on what happened the day before, but every morning and lunchtime we also review what is going to happen—the schedule ahead of us—or whether we have had mass cancellations

the day before or whether there is fog. You can imagine all the operational issues that might arise. Then we take that information and work on a day-to-day basis with all our stakeholders to say, “These are our common watch-outs. These are the things that are going to be happening, so this is where we might need to focus”.

Every week with our teams we do the deeper dive into the previous week where we try to understand what happened, why it happened, and whether there was anything we could have done. It could be that there was a late-running schedule, and actually that did not matter because it affected the whole airport, but in some instances there are issues that affect individual terminals, so we really get into that nitty-gritty. We are quite lucky at Heathrow, because one of our Border Force counterparts sits in our Airport Operations Centre, which is a big operations centre that is slightly off-site. Everyone is there: you have baggage, emergency call handlers, NATS, the weather, security.

Border Force sit with us in that Airport Operations Centre probably 80% of the time—they cannot be there all the time—so as things start to happen we can have that conversation in the moment to say, “Right, late-running schedule in T3, so we’re going to have to pivot resource into that terminal”.

Maybe 12, 18 months ago, the level of sharing and ability to be much more agile was not as great. Within the last 12 months, we have definitely seen a huge amount of change in the use of our data. We are probably a little more advanced than the Border Force teams are on available operational data, and on being able to reflect and think about what people want to do differently. We have definitely seen more agility. There is probably still a bit of a way to go, so I would say that we are 80% there.

Q74 The Chair: You just said that the Heathrow team were more up to date with the data availability than Border Force. Just clarify that and tell me why that might be.

Tonia Fielding: We work on different sets of data. Border Force has nationalities and flight loads available to it, for example. We have the ability to start to distil performance on a daily basis. We can understand customer satisfaction metrics.

The Chair: Are you saying that Heathrow has a wider range of data because you need it, and Border Force has a more limited range of data because that is all it needs? It is not a criticism or a suggestion that it is short of access to data.

Tonia Fielding: No, it is just different data that we use for different purposes.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: You are a member of the advisory board to the Government on UK border security. Do you find that a useful means by which you can directly affect policy from the Home Office on to Border Force and improve the relationship and the utility of Border Force in Heathrow?

Tonia Fielding: I am not a member of it.

Lord McInnes of Kilwinning: Okay. Sorry.

Tonia Fielding: That is okay. We will have to come back to you on that. The way we are divided is that there is border security, for which our security director takes responsibility, and my responsibility is operational performance.

The Chair: Thank you.

Q75 **Lord Filkin:** I have a specific question about eGates. Clearly, the benefits are obvious when they work. We can all see that. Tell us what the limitations are and the problems from the point of view of Heathrow Airport, and then maybe say a few words about what might be coming next, such as contactless borders, and what you think that requires for successful implementation.

Tonia Fielding: We are huge advocates of automation at the border. As you said, the benefits are significant, to the point where, in terms of transaction time, it could take roughly 26 seconds to get through an eGate and, for a non-EEA passenger, up to 120 seconds. So it is operationally significant in terms of keeping the hall moving. That is really important from a safety point of view, and when you are processing the number of passengers we do it is important to keep people moving quickly.

On the limitations, human error is one limitation but probably only about 10% of people are unable to use the eGates.

Lord Filkin: Is that human error passenger error rather than staff error?

Tonia Fielding: Yes. It could be as simple as them wearing a hat, or sometimes they might be trying to take a child through as well. That is more physical. It is not necessarily people struggling to use them.

We are conscious that, for passengers travelling with reduced mobility, eGates are not accessible in any way, so as we start to move forward with this we are advocating that we make sure that our passengers who travel with reduced mobility can use them in the right way. So accessibility is definitely one limitation.

The other limitation relates to the future of automation at the border and understanding what that would mean to the layout and the infrastructure of our immigration hall. It would not be as simple saying, "Right, we're definitely going to go for eGates, so you need to double the number you have at Heathrow". We would have to think about how that would be funded, how we would physically install them and whether we would need to change our ways of operating. Things like that take years for us to be able to do in some ways. T3, for example, is an incredibly complex immigration hall in terms of the gates that sit around it, so it would not be as simple as putting in more. We would have to really think about the layout of our airport.

Lord Filkin: Thank you. And what about the future?

Tonia Fielding: We welcome automation, and factually we know that our passengers have a better experience through automation.

Q76 **Lord Filkin:** Some countries already have contactless borders and you do not even

need to produce a passport. What do you think of that? How long will it take us to get that? Is it a good idea? Should we do it?

Tonia Fielding: Yes, it is a good idea. I think most people would say that anything that is automated tends to be safer than human interaction. How long will it take us to get there? We are some way off, because there are many steps to jump through when it comes to how to physically do it. How does everyone get the assurances they need that it is safe? How do you bring consumers along on that journey, because it will be a completely different way of operating? In my mind, the upgrades to eGates that are coming are iterations of software capability or the next model of eGates, and we step into that space, rather than wholesale change to contactless borders quickly. It will take some time for people to do this.

Lord Filkin: I believe you. I am just not sure that we should be happy with that. I have already used contactless in Seychelles recently. It was a seamless experience. Why should it take us longer than Seychelles?

Tonia Fielding: I do not think it should. I just think it will, given the complexities of legislation, the trust in systems, and how to physically make it happen. Some ports, which might not have eGates or are smaller, might be able to move to it much more quickly. As I say, there are implications for our infrastructure that would have to be considered.

Lord Filkin: You are being properly polite. Is that Heathrow's bureaucracy or the Home Office's bureaucracy?

Tonia Fielding: I would say that we want to move as quickly as we can to introduce a contactless border. There is the question of trials and whether we have been engaged. We are pushing hard to say that we want to be part of those trials. We want to be first. We are the biggest airport in the UK and the most connected airport in the world. Therefore, we want to be at the forefront of all that from a passenger experience point of view. I just believe that it will take a long time.

The Chair: Heathrow may want to be at the forefront of all this, but I have been noting down phrases you have used about the introduction of new systems: "There are many steps to jump through", "Things like that take years", and so on. Is that a function of the fact that Heathrow is an enormous airport and it is just difficult to introduce new things to it, or is there some other reason? I hear what you say, but I do not understand why other countries can do this quite quickly, and you are telling us in advance that Heathrow would struggle to do it quickly.

Tonia Fielding: I am not saying that Heathrow would struggle. We were the trial airport for under-12s through the eGates, and we moved quickly on that, so we can definitely move at pace. However, when I look at how long it took for the B5JSSK countries to be introduced as another cohort that wanted to go through the eGates, that was not us standing in the way. It was just legislation and policy taking a long time to get through.

The Chair: Thank you. I just wanted to give you the opportunity to put that on the

record.

Q77 Lord Henley: Heathrow is obviously one of the major, if not the major, hub airports and, once fully implemented, having an ETA will be compulsory for very large numbers of your transit passengers. What will that mean for your business, and were you consulted on that?

Tonia Fielding: The ETA it is our biggest concern. We fully support the scheme in terms of a secure border. However, we believe that the impact assessment did not take our connecting passengers into consideration. As you will know, at Heathrow we deal with just under 80 million passengers a year, and approximately 18 million of those passengers are connecting and transferring passengers. So it is a huge business to us, but it also enables us as a country to be the most connected airport in the world. We believe that if passengers have a choice about whether they use a paid-for product or whether a product in another area is cheaper or better in any way, they will probably choose to take the easier option. So we do believe that it will have an impact on our connecting passengers and therefore on us as a hub airport.

Were we consulted? As I said, we do not believe that connecting passengers were considered in the initial impact assessment. More recently, we are encouraged by the communication from the Home Office and we believe that we are being listened to. We believe that connecting passengers are a very minor risk and therefore need to be reconsidered within this scope. So we were not consulted to begin with, but consultation has got better lately.

Lord Henley: You have not made any assessments in effect about what it might cost you.

Tonia Fielding: Not about what it might cost us, but I will just highlight some of our connecting routes for you. With places like Bangalore, Dallas, Argentina, some of those flights are made up of in excess of approximately 50% or 54% connecting traffic, so we believe that those commercial routes could become unviable for airlines just because of the load factors not being where they need to be. That is the initial danger. You then layer on things like cargo and our exports within that. We export £100 billion worth a year, and that could be damaged in some way.

We did a piece of work in the last couple of days trying to understand the impact of the arrangement on our Qatar flights. It is very early days and the data that we have looked at is quite crude, so we do not know what nationalities are flying on those flights. But we can tell you what might have happened with the load factors. Since the introduction of this scheme, we have seen a decline of about 14,000 passengers on those flights over the last three months. There might be some other contributory reasons for that, but it seems quite a coincidence that we have seen a drop on those flights since the introduction of the scheme. So I believe there is a risk there.¹

¹ The witness has confirmed that Heathrow Airport will continue to measure the impact and will be sharing this with the Government.

Lord Henley: You might not be able to answer this question, but might it be worth us asking the airlines themselves?

Tonia Fielding: Yes.

Q78 **The Chair:** I do not have this piece of information, but you can perhaps help me. Does somebody who is travelling via Heathrow as a hub currently require a visa to enter the UK if they are travelling out?

Tonia Fielding: No. Unless you are going to Manchester, for example, you do not need to go through the border. You are literally going from one plane to the other plane.

The Chair: I just want you to confirm the situation so that it is on the record. If you are travelling from a country that requires a visa, transiting at Heathrow and moving on to a country that may or may not need a visa—that is up to them—you do not need a visa to get into Heathrow to fly out. Under the new arrangements, however, you will require travel authorisation, an ETA, to come into Heathrow when you are travelling out. Clearly, there is a difference in approach there, and presumably in your discussions with government you have raised that issue. Can you tell us what response the Government have given?

Tonia Fielding: They are listening, but not acting. We have involved other ports and our airlines colleagues in this, so it is not just Heathrow. We are having the conversations, but our frustration is that there is a lack of data coming back, or a lack of evidence in some ways. We have asked for evidence or data to show us why we should not do this, but nothing has come forward.

The Chair: Okay, so basically they are listening, but not acting, and you are deeply frustrated. We will have the opportunity to raise those matters in our report. Clearly, as you point out, you are not the only people who are directly impacted by that.

Tonia Fielding: Since Christmas the dialogue has been open, so there is more consideration, but nothing has been forthcoming.

Q79 **Lord Bach:** I think I know the answer to the question I am going to ask you. Are travellers sufficiently aware of the forthcoming ETA system? Before you answer that, whose role is it to increase awareness? How much is it the airport's role? How much is it the Government's role or whoever else? The first question is: do you think travellers are sufficiently aware yet?

Tonia Fielding: No.

Lord Bach: That was the answer I was expecting.

Tonia Fielding: I did a straw poll of friends and family, and they were not aware. Whose role is it? I believe it is the airlines' and the Home Office's role to inform passengers that this is going to happen. We can help when it comes to using our

websites, our social media, anything that is available to us, but we do not see it as our role. We believe that it is the role of airlines and the Home Office.

Lord Bach: Do you think you have any role in this in practical terms?

Tonia Fielding: It is almost impossible in some ways other than signalling to our websites. The passenger buys the ticket with the airline, so that is where the main communication happens. As I say, government has a responsibility to let people know that this is happening.

Lord Bach: Are you worried about the fact that there seems to be very little awareness?

Tonia Fielding: I do worry, for a couple of reasons. Travelling makes people worry generally, so adding another layer of complexity into it can put people off or make the experience not as good as it should be. I also worry because we do not have any significant timelines on this, and we are selling tickets now for six, seven months out. Depending on the implementation date, it will need to move quickly. So yes, I do worry from a passenger point of view.

Lord Bach: Do you worry from an airport's point of view about the trouble there might be if people are not aware of where they stand when it comes into effect?

Tonia Fielding: Not so much, because when it comes to dealing with passengers, it will be the inbound airport that takes the responsibility for most of that. I look back to Covid and what happened with forms and uncertainty and things that people needed to fill in. It becomes confusing. Travel can be overwhelming for some passengers at the best of times, especially connecting, which we know is the highest source of anxiety for passengers generally, so adding this in is not going to help.

Q80 The Chair: It is not surprising that your friends and family are not really aware of ETA, because of course it does not directly impact them. I suppose the question is whether you have any awareness of how much information is being provided in the countries from which the passengers will come that require an ETA. Have you been supplied with a phasing-out agenda for ETA, for example, and which countries it will affect and when?

Tonia Fielding: No.

The Chair: So you have not even had the basic information of which countries will come after Qatar and a few countries around that area?

Tonia Fielding: It is characterised as “rest of world” at the moment.

The Chair: You are assuming that all the other countries that are impacted will all come in one big bang. Do you know the date for that?

Tonia Fielding: Not firmly. We are told that it could be the end of 2024. In discussions, 2025 has been mooted, but we do not have a firm date.

The Chair: Thank you. I just again wanted to give you the opportunity to place that on record to help us.

Q81 **Baroness Buscombe:** Thank you, Tonia, for coming today. I just want to go back a bit and clarify your role a little more, given some of the things you have stated, which I have to say are slightly at odds with some of the other witnesses who have given us evidence so far. You said, for example, that eGates are safer than human interaction. Your role is, I understand, operational rather than security. So that is where we misunderstood. I thought you were head of security in terminals.

Tonia Fielding: I used to be a head of security in the terminals, and now I am director of services.

Baroness Buscombe: Okay. And presumably you work for Heathrow Airport Holdings Limited, which is 20% owned by Qatar Investment Authority, 10% owned by China Investment Corporation, et cetera. I am a little concerned about the tightrope that you and your colleagues walk when it comes to what is more important with the development of technology. Is it to make life easier for entry and business? You will have pressure from your owners to deliver versus border security.

This is particularly important, given that we have heard some alarming concerns from people who have border security embedded in them that we might be losing some aspects of security through, as you say, wanting to be as quick and seamless as possible for our passengers. Can we talk a little about the pressures you may have to deliver to your bosses, because Heathrow Airport has to make a profit at the same time as managing, with your colleagues, the issue of security?

Tonia Fielding: Yes. Put simply, you can look at this as two sides. You have immigration and border security on one side. On the other side, as Heathrow Airport we are responsible for the security of our passengers embarking on planes. Therefore, safety and security are our absolute priority above all else, and if you can do that with a great passenger experience, you are winning, but for us there is never any pressure to compromise on security or safety.

Q82 **Baroness Buscombe:** In terms of the balance that you have to strike, we know that we are importing a huge amount of organised crime and other issues. We have a real problem in this country with that. Much of that must be coming through our airport terminals—not just Heathrow, of course—but do you feel that the systems we are going to be introducing, with visas and so on, will support more security?

Tonia Fielding: Yes, and our stance on all this is that we support the ETA and securer borders. That is incredibly important to us. The bit we are concerned about is our connecting and transferring traffic. We believe that proportionally they are a relatively low-risk cohort of people, but we need evidence to be able to show that. If that is not the case, we will not support it, but we do not know at the moment. They will not be entering into our country, so we deem them to be low risk.

Baroness Buscombe: That is the bit I am really concerned about: the prevalence of

the approach to this, which is “low risk”. Do you sleep at night and feel comfortable with “low risk” being the truth about most people coming into Heathrow, and that our systems will support that?

A noble Lord: Transiting.

Baroness Buscombe: Transiting, yes.

Tonia Fielding: I am not a border expert, so when it comes to trusting our systems, all I can really go on is what experts around me have told me. Why would we be doing this if we did not believe that it was the right thing to do and the right way to go in terms of assurances? As I have said, ultimately we will always prioritise safety and the security of our border above all else.

- Q83 **The Chair:** We talked a lot about the ETA, which is the UK’s intended scheme, which has begun to be rolled out. There is uncertainty about how quickly it will be rolled out around the rest of the world. At the same time, there is the introduction of the European schemes, the ETIAS and the EES. The EES seems to be a very sensible measure, with both entry and exit information taking place, and ETIAS is the equivalent, if you like, of the ETA. Can you just talk us through how you have planned for that introduction, what the implications have been for Heathrow, and any concerns you might have?

Tonia Fielding: When we speak to our forecasting team, they say that the introduction of any new process normally has an initial bedding-in period where you might see a slight decline in the number of passengers or a slight period of adjustment. That is what we are thinking about at the moment.

Also, if you were to compare the schemes, the European scheme seems more appealing from a consumer point of view. It is a three-year scheme, whereas ours is a two-year scheme. It has taken a different approach to the under-18s and the over-70s. It is a tiny bit cheaper. I think it also comes in a number of languages, maybe 26, versus ours just being in English. So for passengers there are some benefits to that scheme.

- Q84 **The Chair:** Thank you. It is very helpful to make that comparison with our ETA scheme. In terms of the way this will operate, do you envisage an increase in the number of people refused permission to fly? If a passenger is in Heathrow and cannot fly, you will have to deal with that.

Tonia Fielding: That will all be done up front, so I do not envisage an increase in the number of people turning up at the airport. On the numbers overall, I do not know. I am not a border expert, so I am not quite sure what that will mean in the background for numbers more broadly.

The Chair: At the moment, a passenger arriving at Heathrow to fly to Australia or one of the American airports has to have the equivalent of ETIAS before they fly. I am led to believe that a number of passengers will turn up thinking that they are allowed to fly but will be told that they do not have an up-to-date or correctly filled

in form for entry to Australia or America. This will now be to all the Schengen countries. You do not see that happening.

Tonia Fielding: No. There are a couple of things. With the European scheme there is a bedding-in period—a transition period. With the ETA, it appears as though we will go from the off on day one. So the transition period will enable some of that to be captured. At the moment, if someone turns up without an ESTA, unfortunately they will not be able to fly, so they will have to book another flight for when it has all been approved. That tends to happen off-airport. It does not happen regularly. There are maybe one or two a day, so it is not an issue.

Q85 **The Chair:** What arrangements have you had to put in place at Heathrow to prepare for these two European schemes?

Tonia Fielding: At the moment, we have not had to do anything, so we will continue to work with the Government as and when it starts to launch and to happen, and to work with our airline partners, but nothing has changed.

The Chair: Do you think that you at Heathrow have a responsibility to notify people about the need for it, or again is that down to the airlines and to the European Union and the Schengen area countries?

Tonia Fielding: Primarily, yes, I believe it is the airlines' responsibility. As I have said, we will always work with people and make sure that we are indicating information, but it is mainly their responsibility.

The Chair: Thank you. I am enormously grateful to you for the evidence you have given us. As I am sure you are aware, we will produce a transcript of the proceedings, which we will let you have to see if there are any corrections that you want to make. Much more importantly, if there are other issues that you think we need to know about that we perhaps have not picked up during our inquiry so far, please do not hesitate to write, and I hope you will agree that if we do need to write to you with any further questions, you will be able to respond to them.

Tonia Fielding: Of course.

The Chair: Thank you for coming and for bringing your colleagues with you.