

Transport Committee

Oral evidence: Air traffic control disruption, HC 242

Tuesday 23 April 2024

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Iain Stewart (Chair); Jack Brereton; Paul Howell; Gavin Newlands.

Questions 1 - 31

Witnesses

I: Martin Rolfe, Chief Executive, NATS; and Kathryn Leahy, Chief Operations Officer, NATS.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Martin Rolfe and Kathryn Leahy.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to today's session of the Transport Committee. This is the second part of a double bill: the Civil Aviation Authority last Wednesday, and you today.

I ask you to begin by stating your position in the organisation.

Martin Rolfe: I am the CEO of NATS.

Kathryn Leahy: I am the chief operations officer at NATS.

Q2 Chair: We are very grateful for your time this afternoon.

This session follows up on the one that we did last autumn on the air traffic control incident that summer. The Civil Aviation Authority has issued its interim report and will probably want to return to the subject when the final report is published later this year.

I shall start with a general question and ask you to give your thoughts on the interim report. What work have you been doing to follow on from some of the recommendations it made?

Martin Rolfe: Thank you for inviting us back. We appreciate the opportunity to come back and talk about what we are doing.

We were most pleased that the interim report broadly concurred with the findings that we supplied in September following our original interim investigation. We understood the cause of the issue. We understood how it had come about. We understood the nature of the failure. We understood how to fix it. We have fixed it and we have had a good service since.

It identified some of the same areas where we could make improvements as we identified in our original report, particularly around communications and such like. I may turn to Kathryn in a moment to update you on that.

From a practical perspective, we engaged with the Committee on a number of different occasions. That started at Swanwick, our main control centre, and we took them through all the activities that we do there. It was a familiarisation, spending a day answering questions and helping them to understand our systems, how we operate and how we fix faults.

We have subsequently had written and oral follow-ups, and we spent another day with them recently. They have seen upwards of 20 people in our organisation. It has been an open, transparent and constructive collaboration. We look forward very much to seeing their final report.

This might be a good opportunity for Kathryn to talk a little about some of the changes we have made already, particularly around communications, as a result of last year and ahead of this summer.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Kathryn Leahy: I joined in November. I was encouraged to see that work was well under way on improving communications, following the feedback from the interim report. A lot of the criticism that NATS made of itself in the initial report was in hand.

We have since improved the technology to host multi-stakeholder conference calls. Imagine having 300 to 400 participants on a call. It is not easy to co-ordinate. We did a lot of dry runs to make sure that that worked well, and they were tested in earnest during the recent winter storms. The feedback from the aviation community—airports and airlines—has been really positive.

We have improved escalation processes and the notification of incidents. We continue to do quite a lot with our airline partners on the notification process and how quickly we tell them that something has happened.

Q3 **Chair:** My colleagues will probably want later to explore the communications point in more depth.

Do you think that you can get on with the interim report's recommendations, or are you holding back on taking action on some of them until you have seen the final report?

Martin Rolfe: No, we are absolutely getting into action. In fact, we started getting into action straight after 28 August, or as soon as we had resolved the issue based on the findings of our internal report.

When we received the interim report of the CAA's independent panel we cross-checked it with ours and added the recommendations that come from that. There is nothing in there at this point that we did not already have in action or have not now got into action on.

It is looking at wider considerations around other stakeholders and such like, and to some extent the resilience of the entire system, which we cannot do on our own. One of the recommendations—Kathryn has taken this on herself—is around multi-stakeholder preparedness and running practice scenarios. Kathryn has proposed to the CAA that, for the first time, we take the lead on that. The CAA and the airlines and airports are supportive, and we plan an industry-wide practice run for a disruption scenario after the summer.

We are already in action on almost everything.

Q4 **Chair:** You say that you plan to do that after the summer. Why not before? Summer is the peak season.

Martin Rolfe: You will appreciate that, to be really valuable, those things take an awful lot of co-ordination. It will have to be arranged via the Civil Aviation Authority and with all the stakeholders—airlines and airports. We are already in the summer season; the summer schedule started at Easter. All the preparation for the summer has largely been done, as an industry. We have co-ordination forums, which we think are right for heading into the summer, but this would be an additional piece that we could use after the summer to make us even better next year.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q5 Chair: I should like to read a comment made at last week's session by Sir Stephen Hillier, chair of the CAA: "The interim report pointed to the challenges of resilience in the system. If up to 700,000 people are affected by an incident that lasted for about six hours before we were into the recovery phase, it shows that the system is running pretty tight. This is something that must be looked at further."

Will you reply to that and expand on which areas need to be further explored?

Martin Rolfe: By all means. When Sir Stephen talks about "the system", I understand that he means the aviation system in its entirety rather than the NATS system and the NATS resilience piece. I do not want to speak for him, but my interpretation was that he was talking about the fact that even if we have a short outage of our systems and recover relatively quickly—it could be at any point in the summer; it is always busy from the start of the school holidays to the end of August, or probably even longer—there will always be a challenge with repatriation and people catching up on cancelled flights.

I think he is referring to the system working in such a tight environment that there is literally no space to recover following a disruption. That is one of the reasons why we think it would be good to practise a multi-stakeholder engagement and why we have spent an awful lot of time on ensuring that our recovery procedures are as fast as they can be. The shorter we can make that disruption, the better for the industry overall.

Q6 Gavin Newlands: The interim report makes fairly interesting reading. The first point I would like to address is the joint decision-making model that it flags up. There is no single post holder with accountability. Can you explain that model in a bit more detail—ironically, to a Committee?

Martin Rolfe: I take your point.

We think that is a fair observation. We shall run our gold, silver and bronze commands slightly differently going forward. We will have a single accountable post holder for a disruption event.

Given the way in which we run our escalation processes, the bronze incident will be stood up. It will probably be a technical incident, but it could be operational. It could be at an airport, at one of our centres or at a remote site that serves all those things.

We have had multiple strands because we have multiple sites and services to consider. You can imagine that an incident at an airport might not have an impact on the network. We have realised, in looking at things we could do better, that going to a model whereby we effectively stand up all of it under an individual bronze, silver or gold—particularly silver and bronze, which really resolve the problem—would probably be better as it would allow for better dissemination of information.

I can ask Kathryn to explain a little more if you would like further detail.

Q7 Gavin Newlands: Will we also look at whether it is a gold, silver or



HOUSE OF COMMONS

bronze incident? NATS's designation of an incident might differ from that of the rest of the industry—its importance, etc.

Kathryn Leahy: A lot of work is under way to that point. With our key stakeholders, we are making sure that we are talking in a common language. I come from an airports background, and previously an airline background. We are going to follow exactly the escalation processes that are common across airlines, airports and the Metropolitan police and Hampshire police. There is a standard way of escalating them, and we will follow everybody else. We were broadly following everybody else, but there was a single point in each strand of the command process.

Q8 **Gavin Newlands:** Martin, you said that you will have a single post holder responsible. I take it that that means that you haven't changed the processes yet. Are you waiting for the final report? What is your timescale?

Kathryn Leahy: That is under way at the moment. We are in the process of training at the different levels. We are training the new bronze commanders, and the silver commander training will start before the summer peak in mid-June.

Q9 **Gavin Newlands:** You said that in October you had the right number of engineers on site, but the report says something different. It comments on certain staff not being on site at the time of the incident. It says that a level 2 engineer was not on site, and that having attempted to fix the problem it took an hour and a half for the engineer to arrive.

The escalation protocols meant that the level 3 engineer was not sought for more than three hours after the failure, which affected hundreds of thousands of people. The level 3 engineer was unfamiliar with the fault message, so the software company was not contacted until four hours after the incident started. That is far from ideal. What now will be the process for how engineers are rostered and where they are stationed when dealing with a problem?

Martin Rolfe: Thank you for that question; it is helpful to be able to clarify that. We are discussing it with the independent panel. We have engineers at every site who are specially trained to resolve issues. To give you a sense of the number of issues that they resolve, since 2016, when we started to measure in the way we currently do, 54,000 technical issues have had to be solved by that group of engineers. About 99.98-something per cent. of those are solved by that initial group. The vast majority of problems are solved by people on site all the time. They are 365 rostered on and will actually be at the site.

When a problem becomes particularly complex, we go to our design engineers. The way in which it is easiest to think about this is that the first line of support on site is like roadside assistance: they get you back and operating. The second line is more of your design engineers, and they get called in when we do not understand the problem. It is relatively rare that they get called in. When they do, they apply their expertise.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

There is a relatively small number of those people, and I will happily follow up with the exact numbers. It is a much smaller number than first-line engineers, because these are real experts. They cover multiple systems. They do not have one particular place to be. They will work 9 to 5, generally speaking, at a suitable location, but on any given day they might be called to another location if a problem is difficult to solve.

We always have them rostered on call. They are always available. Some of the time, they will be in the office.

Of those 54,000 incidents, only 10 caused any delay to the public, of which this was the only one where the absence of the second-line engineer—or the fact that it took him an hour and a half to get to work, on a bank holiday on call—has had any impact on the recovery time.

We are, naturally, looking at how we do that—we are taking the opportunity to do so—but fundamentally with our first, second and third-line engineering we are operating a model that is very similar to those of almost all the rest of our critical national infrastructure.

It is a very fine line as to when we contact the manufacturer of a piece of equipment. Manufacturers are generally there to design and deliver equipment. They are not necessarily the best people to fault-find or restore a service; that is not what they are there for. When we do go to them, we have to have been through all the procedures and tried the standard recovery approach. We would go to them only when we had exhausted that and collected data for them usefully to be able to understand the problem.

Again, to make sure that we are as prepared as we can possibly be, we have gone through all our procedures with all our engineers and suppliers, to make sure that the point at which we call them—the point at which we escalate—is very clear and that we have all the right information when we escalate so that the timeline for restoration is as quick as it can possibly be.

Q10 Gavin Newlands: That is the critical point—the urgency of the timescale. You used the analogy of roadside assistance and engineers on site. This is not a bus that has broken down. This is a national network that affects hundreds of thousands of people at any given time. EasyJet and Ryanair said that it cost them around £15 million each just in costs that day, with associated costs in multiples of that. It is about the urgency of the timetable for getting these problems resolved. I look forward to seeing the new plan.

The other point that I want to raise is contingency plans. I am the MP for Glasgow airport. The manual work you have to do results in an 85% reduction in network capacity, which makes some of the costs I just mentioned seem rather small, given the knock-on effects for airports, passengers and businesses.

Can you do anything to make the contingency plans more robust, with more network capacity? I am not suggesting it is easy.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Martin Rolfe: I am happy to answer the question; I am trying to think how best to frame it.

We have looked at how, in this instance, we could have increased network capacity. Our duty primarily is to make sure that everybody is safe. Going back to your earlier point, the fact that this took longer to fix is incredibly unusual. We absolutely understand the fact that this has a hugely disruptive impact, but I would point to the fact that this is the only time in the 10 years I have been CEO when we have had something of this scale. That says to me that, while we can always do better, we generally get the response rates correct.

The level of manual network capacity depends very much on the failure mode. If somebody was jamming all the airwaves, then no matter how much manual intervention we applied we would not be able to solve it.

With this incident, we have gone back and looked at whether we could have had more people manually inputting flight plans. We have systems designed for specialists to fix flight plans incorrectly input by airlines. It is quite a technical job. It is quite a slow process because of the manual input. We could train more people to do that, but from a practical perspective they probably would not be utilised almost ever.

The other challenge is that we rarely see problems like this twice. This one is resolved. We are satisfied that it is completely resolved, but we are looking at whether we could do other things to make sure that network capacity is maintained as high as possible and as safely as possible.

Q11 **Chair:** I have a couple of supplementaries following Gavin's questions.

Will you give me a little more detail on the timescales for when you expect the review of the escalation protocols to conclude? When will the system that you decide is appropriate be in place?

Martin Rolfe: Parts of it are already in place, but, as Kathryn said, we plan to get this in place before the summer school holidays.

Kathryn Leahy: Yes, before the busy school holidays. Our bronze teams are in training at the moment. Our silver teams are due to commence in late May or early June.

We had a gold exercise just last week. We trialled the new escalation processes for ourselves and the way in which we would run gold going forward. That is all in hand.

I am keen that we have it in before this summer. I am also keen that we continue our work with airline and airport partners on the notifications that we give them and the timeliness of those notifications. It is difficult, in any scenario, as Martin said. Normally, these issues get resolved. Time is of the essence, because not knowing how quickly it will get fixed makes decision making very challenging in trying to run the operation.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

A lot of work will continue and is ongoing with our partners—hence the reason we want to do the exercise post summer. We can then test some of the conversations that we are having at the moment.

- Q12 **Chair:** When the interim report came out there was quite a bit of commentary in the media about this being a symptom of the working-from-home culture. I understand your explanation of the tiers of engineering support. Had the system that was in place last year been in place a long time, or had the pandemic and post-pandemic period caused you to change the level of engineering on call and in-person support?

Martin Rolfe: That is a very good question. I should first say that our engineers do a fantastic job. Almost none of them—probably none of them—works from home, other than when it is appropriate to do so. The second-line engineers are at work during the week. As they are senior, specialist engineers, they are generally at work during the week because they are working on new projects.

The working-from-home piece was more of a bonus, because since the pandemic we have had the technology to allow them, outside the hours when they would normally work, if they are called on call, immediately to work remotely to try to diagnose a problem. Before the pandemic, it would have been worse. We would have had physically to get them in immediately. Now, they have the ability to log on remotely—appropriately and securely—and in many cases they fix the problem much quicker than if they had to come into the office outside normal hours. It is an advance in how we deal with these things.

- Q13 **Paul Howell:** You commented on your gold, silver and bronze training. You are training bronze at the moment and will move to silver. Why are you not doing them in parallel rather than in series? Why wait to finish one before you move to the next?

Does that mean that you now know what you want to train and it is therefore just a training exercise, as opposed to a decision being taken about how you will manage the new world order, as you see it, of problem resolution?

Kathryn Leahy: We are not running them concurrently because we have a bronze, silver and gold process in place, but it does not have a single point of decision making. We are bringing collaborative decision making into one point in bronze, with the same in silver. There was an operational team and a technical services engineering team. We are joining those two bronzes and two silvers together, hence the reason we are doing it. We are running it separately. We will do concurrent training and we will exercise this ahead of the summer process.

The overall exercising and work that we are doing with our airlines to test the different scenarios will inform how we take that forward. We are talking to them in a very different language at the moment. We are talking to them in a customer language—a language that they understand. We talk in delay minutes; airlines and airports talk in punctuality minutes.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The team is really on this. We are trying to drive some of that change into the way in which we run the overall crisis management process.

Martin Rolfe: Perhaps I may add that, in parallel, we are doing the gold training.

There is another challenge that Kathryn did not mention. Many of the people involved are rostered on to lots of other work ahead of the summer and in preparation for the summer. Some of it is about making sure that we have the right people in the right place at the right time so that we do not impact the normal day-to-day operations while we go through the retraining.

Q14 **Paul Howell:** I am trying to feel confident that you have a determined plan to which you are trying to train people, as opposed to doing this bit while you work out what you will do with that bit.

Kathryn Leahy: No, that is not what we are doing. We have a command-and-control structure that we have been using over the winter period, when we have had various incidents such as the storms that I described. This is enhancing it and bringing it more in line with the way in which our airport and airline partners and emergency services partners operate.

Q15 **Paul Howell:** At what point will you feel comfortable that your escalation and control processes are fully embedded and in place? You will look for refinements for ever, but I am talking about feeling comfortable that you have got through the transition from where you were to where you want to be.

Martin Rolfe: I am very comfortable that we are ready for an event. If something were to happen tomorrow—this relates to an earlier question—in our network or, more likely, within the overall aviation network across the UK, we would be in a position to stand up our gold, silver and bronze. Everybody would know what they were doing. The majority of the lessons that we learned last year would be incorporated, so we are now talking about the finishing touches, which will be done before we head into the school holidays—before the end of June is probably a fair assessment. It is now more of an incremental finishing off rather than a massive restructuring of how we do it. We are confident that we are in the right place.

Q16 **Jack Brereton:** I want to ask a little more about scenario planning and exercises to test the systems and how you respond. There does not seem to have been very much of that going on in the past with multi-agency involvement. Why have we not done the scenario planning and multi-agency operations?

Martin Rolfe: I shall have to try to give you my answer, because I do not think that I have a full answer from an aviation system perspective.

Before the pandemic, things were perhaps a little more joined up. There was not necessarily much multi-agency planning, but there were probably a lot more people in the industry with a lot of institutional knowledge of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

how things worked, such that when things went wrong—I am not talking specifically about NATS but across the entire patch—everybody sort of knew how things worked.

Q17 **Jack Brereton:** You were reliant on that institutional memory.

Martin Rolfe: That generally served the industry pretty well in dealing with issues that came about. Each organisation—an airline, airport or NATS—did a lot of its own internal scenario planning. From our perspective, we ran quite a lot of exercises every year, and we have continued to do so. We have quite a lot of gold training simulations, but I think that at about the time of the pandemic some of the forums where we all got together as an aviation system drifted away, for sensible reasons. There were bigger, more pressing problems around the survival of the industry. I think that some of the work that Kathryn is doing to bring some of that back together, with the CIA's support to do that multi-agency planning, will pay dividends in the future.

Q18 **Jack Brereton:** Who do you think should lead that? Some at the CAA said they did not necessarily think that they should. Should it be the CAA, or in organising these simulations should there not be a specific leader system-wide?

Kathryn Leahy: I put my hand up and volunteered. In January this year, the CAA convened an operation directors delivery group—a joint group of airlines, airports and ourselves at COO and ops director level. I think we should do it in the same way as, every couple of years, an airport would drill its emergency response to an aircraft crash. We will take the lead on a system-wide issue that is a scenario based on our having a failure to ensure that everybody is prepared and ready.

Martin Rolfe: We see an overseeing role for the CAA, making sure that it is done well and has buy-in from everybody, as opposed to the operational running of the exercise. We are not saying that we would always take charge of something that happened in the system. That would need to be done, as Kathryn has just said, by the group most likely affected, but we are in a rather unique position because we have a bird's eye view of the entire European network. That is one of the reasons we have tested this out with the storms over the winter, because we can effectively give help, advice and support to all the parties in the network.

Q19 **Jack Brereton:** Do international comparators run these exercises already?

Martin Rolfe: I have spoken a lot to my counterparts in other countries over the past six months on these topics. We probably do more than most. Possibly, in the US there is a little bit more, largely because of the relationship with the FAA, which is the regulator and service provider. That probably makes a slight difference. I am not aware of many countries doing entire aviation system simulations, but we can follow that up. I do not know the answer, but I do not think there is.

Q20 **Jack Brereton:** Could other things be done with wider, multi-agency



HOUSE OF COMMONS

collaboration? Should we see more collaboration beyond the simulation exercise?

Martin Rolfe: A lot of collaboration goes on in the background. Both Kathryn and I very recently were in Brussels with EUROCONTROL, the intergovernmental agency that looks at the network across Europe, along with the airlines, airports and ground handlers. The programme is called "All Together Now". It is about pre-planning for the summer across Europe, and we are playing an integral role, just like everybody else.

There is a lot of collaboration going on in that regard. We do a lot of collaboration with individual airlines and airports. Every day, we have a network call looking at the next day and what we think is coming and what might be happening. What special events are there? Are there any big football matches—the Olympics are coming up—and those kinds of things? There is already a lot of that going on and we are looking at how that can be enhanced based on the events of last year, but I would not want to downplay the amount of collaboration that is ongoing in the space.

Q21 **Jack Brereton:** I do not want to stray into what my colleagues will ask you in a minute about communication, but when these events do happen do you think there is room to improve that collaboration among airlines, airports and others to ensure we have a proper response?

Martin Rolfe: I very firmly believe you can always improve how you respond to these events. They are incredibly rare, thankfully. As I said before, this was the first one on this scale that we had had in 10 years, certainly since my time as CEO. Whenever they happen, we do our very best to extract every possible element of learning, but we also try to learn from other people's incidents. I think that on the same day as we had our issue in the UK, 28 August, there was an Italian issue. Last week, there was a complete outage of the Dutch air traffic system. We will learn from those to make sure we can bring the best of it all together.

The challenge will always be in a busy summer, if something goes wrong. The operation of the system as a whole is tight—every seat is sold—and, therefore, we all need to act very quickly. That is particularly difficult if you are up against a technical problem that has not been seen before. If you know it will be fixed in 20 or 30 minutes, you can make decisions, so it is about how we learn to deal with that.

Q22 **Jack Brereton:** But in this circumstance you did have the benefit of time in some cases, because some people were waiting for several days. We should have had staff there, should we not, to respond to and deal with passengers stranded at airports, not just one person serving in a cafeteria when you have thousands of people waiting in an airport? That is just not a good response to that situation, is it? That is my personal view.

Martin Rolfe: I would not disagree with your comment. All I say is that that is much more a matter for airports than it is for us. Our job in those circumstances is to communicate effectively and ultimately resolve the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

problem as quickly as we can, but first make sure everybody is safe. You are absolutely right that all the other things have to work as well; otherwise, it is a terrible experience for everybody.

- Q23 **Paul Howell:** For people to make decisions in a difficult situation when something has gone wrong there needs to be clarity about what has gone wrong and the opportunities to fix it, what the risk is going to be, who is involved, etc. It feels that on this occasion that just did not work. There have been quite a number of representations about delays in reporting the problem, not communicating adequately what the problem was, how long it would last, etc. I know we have also had questions about providing a warning of the problem. It sounds to me that, if you have to act that quickly, in the first instance you provide a warning of the problem, but, in terms of what was happening and telling people what was happening, what have you done to make you feel you are in a better place going forward?

Martin Rolfe: Let me start. I am sure Kathryn can pick up some of the specifics.

You are absolutely right: speed of communication is really important, but it is also a very fine balance. With the incident on the 28th, we have not in recent history had a problem that has taken that long to resolve. When we go into these problems, there is first an assumption that we will be able to fix it. We will, almost certainly, be able to fix it 54,000 times or so without there being any impact on the public.

The thing that we have to balance—it is exactly what we are looking at as part of this—is: at what point do we tell airports, airlines and the general public, because it is probably the same thing, that there is a problem? We do not want to be doing that 54,000 times for there not to be a problem, because that would probably lead to some incorrect decisions being taken.

As Kathryn explained, one of the things that we are trying to do now is say to the airlines and airports, “If we do not know what the problem is, at the earliest possible moment we will say that we have a problem and we think it could be serious if it is not resolved. We do not have an immediate outlook for it, but in your world treat it as though you had a check-in system failure, or with the Met Office, or something like that.” Therefore, it is something that relates to them. They can then go into their procedures.

One of the challenges that we have on the day is that everybody wants to know what the problem is, which is not all that helpful for most people because it will be very technical. What they really want to know is when it will be fixed and, therefore, what they should be doing about it. Of course, asking repeatedly when it is going to be fixed if we do not know does not help anybody prepare.

By putting in place scenarios that say, “In these circumstances, treat it like this in your world,” means that they can make early and better



HOUSE OF COMMONS

decisions and everybody can resolve the situation more quickly. The timing is just the bit we will have to figure out, because to my knowledge it is not done like that anywhere at the moment. That is something new that we will be doing.

Q24 **Paul Howell:** The phrase that comes to mind is: do not let perfection be the enemy of the good.

Martin Rolfe: Absolutely.

Q25 **Paul Howell:** You were clearly on that curve. If it is a 50% risk, it is possibly too early, but you do not need to wait until you reach 99.9% before doing something and you have to determine where it is at. You did not quite use the word, but I think you were trying to say that what you would want to communicate to the stakeholders would not necessarily be what your problem was and how you would fix it, but what the impact would be on them.

Martin Rolfe: That is exactly right.

Q26 **Paul Howell:** They would have to deal with that.

Kathryn Leahy: The contingency plans are common consequence plans, because in most scenarios the root cause does not matter. It could be a cyber-attack; it could be a loss of facilities or loss of a resource, but how do you manage mass disruption in this case? In my experience of working for an airline and for airports, there are common consequence plans for dealing with mass disruption.

To Martin's point, the challenge is that, because we have traditionally got the systems back up and running very swiftly, in dealing with the level of ambiguity and not knowing whether it will come on, there is a natural worry: "Do I make a decision to start cancelling things?", only for it to come back up and I have caused myself more difficulty.

We are talking in their language, saying, "Plan as if it is the loss of a check-in, or loss of a global distribution system. Prepare your plan on what would be your first measures," because these are all drilled, as Martin has said, in their own exercising, so that when and if we do have to push the button at least they are coming to the table with something that is ready to go, as opposed to doing the thinking at a very late stage.

Q27 **Paul Howell:** To probe that concept a little further, if you are sitting on your side of the fence and looking at what the problems are, you see them in terms of the scale of the impact on you. Sometimes, a substantial impact to you can be a trivial impact to somebody else, or, more pertinently in this case, a trivial impact to you could be a massive impact for somebody else. It is about how you get that clarity, what messages you should be sending to people and what the priorities are.

One of the questions raised in the interim report is about the choice of communication platforms and things like that. What are you doing to try to look for where those sorts of problems exist? If you go back to the not too distant past, none of us had Teams or Zoom, or we did not see them



HOUSE OF COMMONS

as being things that were there, but you must have been sitting there for a considerable time thinking, “If we had an incident we would have to hit all these multiple stakeholders,” and that will have been before covid. During covid, suddenly everybody is getting these better communications methods. Why was somebody not thinking, “We have a problem with this. We have always had a problem in getting the communication out to a breadth of people. These new platforms exist. Let's get them in place before we get an incident where we actually want to do it”? Why was somebody not looking at that before you got to the situation of having to deal with it?

Martin Rolfe: The honest answer is that our previous systems had worked pretty well up to that point. As you rightly say, the system we were using was not Teams; it is now. All of that has been fixed, tested and used in earnest over the winter, so we know that it works. On this occasion, significantly more people—hundreds and hundreds—were making crisis calls than we had ever had previously, which meant that ultimately it did not work.

Q28 **Paul Howell:** To explore that a bit further, can you give us an insight into what sort of people were calling who did not call before? Multiple organisations did the same thing. Will you explain that?

Martin Rolfe: These were multiple organisations. Effectively, it would be every airport and airline in the UK, plus anybody else who had some relevance to the sector. It could literally be 50 people from the same organisation. It probably is not, but it could be. I will check the numbers and send them to the Committee, but I think that about 500 or 600 people dialled in on the day. That had not happened before in any of the things that we had practised, or when we had instances previously. You are absolutely right. We did send out other messages as well, so it was not as if people had nothing, but it was not as effective as it could have been, and we recognised that straightaway in the interim report.

To your point about why we did not think of it sooner, through the pandemic and because it had worked up until then it was seen to be sufficiently robust. I think this was the example that showed up that we needed to do something different, and that is exactly what we have done.

Q29 **Paul Howell:** I assume you are now taking a look back and thinking whether there is anything else that you would do differently.

Martin Rolfe: Absolutely.

Q30 **Paul Howell:** We have had representations or questions about whether the number of people and flights affected was accurately communicated during this process. If there were doubts about the number of flights affected, or the number of incidents happening, how would you know with whom to communicate about where the problem was, if you did not even know the right number of flights? It is a rhetorical question.

Martin Rolfe: But it is a good one. I can give you an answer, if you would like, and it probably would be helpful. I know that there has been a lot of speculation from some quarters about whether we provided the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

right numbers on the day. As I said in the interim report and when we here last time, we got all our data from EUROCONTROL, which is independent. We went back over the numbers. In our initial report, we said that we thought that 575 flights were delayed for an average of an hour and 50 minutes, and up to 1,500 flights were cancelled. We were not sure of the number because it is not collected anywhere centrally.

We have gone back and verified it. The number of flights on the day was 579, so we were four out on that, and the average delay for those flights was an hour and 54 minutes.

As for the 1,500 flights that were cancelled, there has been a lot of talk about passenger numbers in the interim report. We still have not seen a definitive number of cancelled flights. There is no central repository in the industry that collates that. Obviously, the panel has been trying to understand that for the past six months. If one of the findings that comes out of the panel's report is that there should be some form of collation of the impact on flights, that would be hugely helpful.

Paul Howell: It makes sense to me that you need to know with whom you are trying to communicate and the extent to which you communicate with them, in terms of a platform.

Q31 **Chair:** I would like to draw this session to a conclusion by touching on one area that follows on from the last point. When you were in front of us in the autumn, along with various airlines, one criticism was that the airlines had suffered significant financial loss as a result of the problem. Has that debate moved on, or do we need to await the final report before any calls are made about what compensation or reduction in fees might be appropriate?

Martin Rolfe: You are absolutely right. That is not something that we have discussed particularly with the panel. One would assume that it is discussing that with the CAA and other parties, so we are awaiting the final result to see what the outcome is.

Chair: I thought that would be the answer, but I just wanted to check. We will return to this when we have the final report, but it has been very helpful to have this update from you while we get to that final stage. Thank you both again for your time this afternoon.