

Mr Iain Stewart MP
Chair of Transport Committee
House of Commons

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10 Oct 2023

Sent by email: iain.stewart.mp@parliament.uk [REDACTED]

Dear Iain,

On behalf of Ryanair, the UK's largest passenger airline and UK NATS single biggest customer, I look forward to meeting with you and your Committee on Wed 18th Oct next.

It would be helpful to set out a summary of Ryanair's position on UK NATS as follows;

1. Ryanair is UK NATS largest UK customer, paying NATS in excess of €100m p.a. for ATC services to, from and over the UK.
2. We have no confidence in NATS service provision or its management team under Martin Rolfe CEO.
3. At the first UK Aviation Council meeting in Feb 2023, Ryanair raised the issue of NATS staffing levels, and specially requested confirmations from CEO Martin Rolfe that NATS had sufficient staffing to manage its summer 2023 volumes. In reply, Martin Rolfe confirmed "*NATS is confident that UK ATC would operate effectively in Summer 2023*". When further pressed, he confirmed again that "*NATS staffing would be sufficient to manage the Summer 2023 season*". These assurances have proven, yet again, to be worthless. During summer 2023, Ryanair has suffered recurrent delays in Gatwick, Bristol, Manchester, and also on thousands of overflights due to NATS short staffing. In 2023, Ryanair has suffered 20% more NATS delays between Jan to Sept than in 2022, with almost 1.5m passengers suffering flight delays due to NATS short staffing.
4. The situation continues to worsen. On 25th Sept, Gatwick Airport tried to impose a daily movement cap of 800 flights a day, which has since been extended into Oct, due to "*NATS sickness and staffing shortages*". Airlines were requested to reduce capacity by 20% - Ryanair has refused to commit to any such reductions, since our customers should not have their flight plans disrupted by NATS mismanagement and incompetence.
5. NATS system failure on 28th Aug has still not been adequately explained, and the NATS "initial report" contains multiple falsehoods, inaccuracies and misinformation, including;
 - Why did the NATS system not reject the single erroneous flight plan as other ATC's do?
 - Why did NATS shut down its entire system?
 - Why was the backup system running on the same computer as the main system, which rendered the backup system useless?
 - Why did NATS claim 1,500 cancellations when Eurocontrol confirmed over 2,000 cancellations?
 - Why did NATS falsely claim only "575 delays", when Ryanair alone suffered more than 2,000 delays, and we estimate over 5,000 delays took place across the UK that day and the 29th Aug as airlines struggled to recover their schedules?
 - Why was NATS engineering team sitting at home ("*working remotely to reduce travel time*")?
 - Why, 2 months later, has the DoT not produced an independent investigation of this latest NATS screw up?

6. The 28th Aug was not an isolated NATS system failure. Over the last decade, NATS has delivered repeated technical faults, computer failures, and other system issues (see appendix 1).
7. NATS falsely claim that the reimbursement of airlines costs for the 28/29 Aug is "*not within its remit*". This claim has no basis in reality. NATS should, and/or must be required by the Dept for Transport to reimburse airlines for the EU261 costs over the 28/29 Aug. NATS is free to do so if it so wishes. Without some financial penalty, NATS mismanagement and failure will continue without any repercussions.
8. NATS CEO Martin Rolfe, despite presiding over this mismanagement and staff shortages and system failures, was paid over £1.3m last year in basic pay and bonuses. He is rewarded for his failures. He assured the UK industry in Feb this year that NATS would be "fully staffed" for summer 2023, and these assurances have proven – yet again - to be worthless. He has presided over a still unexplained system collapse on 28th Aug, which caused cancellations to over 2,000 flights, and delays to more than 5,000 flights to, from and over the UK on 28th and 29th Aug. Ryanair's EU261 costs over these 2 days amounts to £15m, and we believe that NATS should reimburse its airline customers these vouched costs.

UK NATS needs urgent reform and change. A Board stuffed with the great and good of the UK regulatory establishment will not deliver reform or change. The CEO has proven incompetent and incapable and should be replaced not from within, but by recruiting externally with a mandate to deliver efficiency, effectiveness and a lower cost, more efficient ATC service. UK aviation enjoys some of the lowest air fares in Europe as a result of intense competition between the airlines, and indeed airports. However, NATS which is yet another of the UK's poorly managed and inadequately regulated monopolies, continues to provide a 3rd rate service, characterised by staff shortages and system failures. It needs urgent reform and change under new management.

Ryanair looks forward to meeting with your Committee to instigate this much needed reform and change of yet another failed UK regulated monopoly.

Yours sincerely,



Michael O'Leary
Group CEO

Previous NATS IT issues

- Aug 2023 – more than 200 flights cancelled and over 5,000 flights delayed due to a NATS system collapse involving a “rogue” flight plan being submitted. NATS back up system also failed – closing the skies over the UK.
- July 2019 – more than 50 flights were cancelled at London airports following an “issue with radar displays” at Swanwick.
- April 2018 – an overhaul of the Nats system at Swanwick led to delays of up to 20 minutes for flights bound for Heathrow and Gatwick for up to three weeks. This was exacerbated by a failure of the Europe-wide traffic control system – not operated by Nats – which caused 15,000 flights across the continent to be cancelled or delayed, affecting half a million passengers.
- Aug 2017 – The Guardian reported that “thousands of passengers” had been hit by flight delays because of high “sickness” rates at the Nats centre in Swanwick.
- Oct 2015 – air passengers in Scotland faced delays after Nats reported interference on radio frequencies used to speak to aircraft.
- Dec 2014 – Nats pledged to compensate thousands of passengers after a “technical fault” led to 10,000 people facing delays at Heathrow with a total of 16,000 minutes of delays at Heathrow and Gatwick
- Dec 2013 – 126,000 minutes of delays were caused as hundreds of flights were cancelled after a “problem” with Nats’ internal telephone system
- July 2013 – a computer failure at Swanwick, which involved a “rogue” flight plan being submitted, caused dozens of flights to be delayed.