

Sent via email

Pete Wishart MP
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee

25 January 2022

Dear Mr Wishart

Thank you for your letter of 18 January 2022 requesting information on the Inverness to London Heathrow flight.

As I explained to the Committee, the aviation sector as a whole, continues to face an extremely challenging period as the rapid spread of the omicron variant with the associated travel restrictions once again impacted the demand for aviation services. Airlines and airports, whilst benefiting from the various government schemes, including furlough and rates relief, have built up significant debt, given the high fixed cost element of the business. Against that background I will endeavour to answer your questions.

The London Heathrow route is essential for the economy of the Highlands and Islands as it provides a direct link to one of the world's leading aviation hubs. Moreover, it has a high degree of connecting traffic, with just under half who use the service travelling onwards to the rest of the world, and similar numbers in reverse.

Stakeholders and businesses in the Highlands and Islands have repeatedly highlighted the importance of securing guaranteed access to international hub airports. It is imperative that Inverness Airport has access to London Heathrow with a minimum frequency of two services per day that enables passengers to undertake a viable day return in each direction.

By way of illustration, in 2018 an independent London - Heathrow route impact assessment provided the following headline figures:

- A total on-site employment impact of 748 FTEs in the Inverness catchment area
- A total on-site income impact of £23.3m in the Inverness catchment area
- A total on-site GVA impact of £33.3m in the Inverness catchment area
- A total spend of £89m by inbound visitors in the Inverness catchment area
- Inbound visitor spend created 1,774 FTEs and £60m GVA in the Inverness catchment area
- A passenger time savings value of £43m, split evenly between business and leisure travellers

These figures clearly demonstrate the importance of maintaining this route for the economic recovery of the Highlands and Islands as we continue to recover from Covid-19 and beyond.

In terms of alternatives, we do of course have regular services to other London airports including London Gatwick and London Luton, both operated by easyJet. They provide good levels of point-to-point connectivity. KLM provide limited international connectivity, currently with two flights per week, and as with BA, will build the frequency back to pre-pandemic levels when load factors permit.

The temporary suspension of the route from Inverness was part of wider reductions that BA actioned across their network due to significantly lower levels of demand as a result of the pandemic.

BA has indicated their intention to re-start this route with tickets on sale from Monday 28 February on their website, but again this is dependent upon trading and the impact of any future variants and associated travel restrictions.

Of course, we are hopeful that the recent easing of travel restrictions will give passengers more confidence to allow them to plan their travel. We will continue to work closely with BA and other airlines to promote routes and rebuild confidence.

Arising from the submission and input from Mr Hendy, it would be helpful to understand what actions the Committee can take to help secure the long-term future of the route given its importance to the Highlands and Islands.

I noted at the meeting on 10 January that you mentioned you had used Inverness Airport, and that Mr Ross is a regular passenger on the Heathrow flight. When next passing through, please let us know. We would be very happy to provide an update on the different initiatives currently underway and our strategy to address the challenges HIAL currently face, as well as discuss opportunities to ensure our remote communities remain connected.

Yours Sincerely



Inglis Lyon
Managing Director



Scottish Affairs Committee

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18 January 2022

Dear Inglis Lyon,

The evidence you gave the Scottish Affairs Committee on 10 January 2022 highlighted the importance of the link between Inverness and London Heathrow (Q104). Since the evidence session, British Airways have suspended the flights between Inverness and London Heathrow. The final flight took place on Sunday 16 January 2022 and bookings show these flights returning on Monday 28 February 2022.

The Committee have questions about this current situation:

- What is the impact of this suspension on Inverness Airport?
- What are Highlands and Island Airports Limited doing to ensure the route is not affected by temporary closures?
- What alternative transport is available?
- Are you expecting the return of flights on Monday 28 February?

I would be grateful if we were able to have a response to this letter by 25 January 2022.

Yours sincerely

Pete Wishart MP
Chair, Scottish Affairs Committee