

## **Tonia Fielding, Director of Services, Heathrow Airport – Written evidence (EBM0023)**

Thank you to you and your colleagues for the opportunity to give evidence to your inquiry into electronic border management systems. I write to provide further detail.

As outlined during my oral evidence, Heathrow plays a critical role for international trade, global connectivity, and UK economic growth. Heathrow is the UK's hub airport and most valuable port, serving over 200 destinations and facilitating £100 billion of exports to non-EU nations every year.

Our vision is to deliver the best possible experience for our passengers. Heathrow is the UK's front door for tourists, students, and investors – any person visiting the UK is likely to have their first interaction with a Border Force official. The border should therefore be consumer focused; it should be simple and straight forward for passengers. However, I want to be clear that safety and security are our primary priorities and will never be compromised.

### ***Electronic Travel Authorisation***

As part of its transformation and digitisation of the UK border, the Government is introducing an Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA) scheme for visitors who do not need a visa for short stays or who do not have any other UK immigration status prior to travelling. An ETA is not a visa, it does not permit entry into the UK – it authorises an individual to travel to the UK.

Heathrow supports the introduction of and rationale behind the new ETA scheme and will continue to work with officials to enable its successful rollout. We are also grateful for the Department's recent constructive engagement on this matter, to whom we have provided robust evidence about the negative impact of requiring all passengers transiting through the UK to obtain a new ETA. However, industry have been clear with Government that the ETA scheme has placed the UK at a competitive disadvantage compared to our European neighbours, given the inclusion of airside transit passengers in the ETA.

Transit passengers make up a high percentage of our total passenger numbers – ranging from 20% but up to over 50% on some international routes – and are a critical part of Heathrow's 'hub and spoke' model. In practice, passengers that need to connect onto secondary services will have the choice of using UK or EU hubs. This offer of connections, and competition with other hubs, is the driver of the UK's international connectivity and means that all the UK's regions and nations can reach 95% of the world within a single flight from Heathrow. A significant number of Heathrow routes generate huge economic prosperity from cargo and tourism traffic, but many routes are only viable due to transit passengers.

Several million travellers, who do not currently require a visa or other form of additional authorisation to transit through the UK, will now require an ETA even if remaining airside. The ETA would add £40 to the cost of a trip for a family of four, adding a barrier to travel through an additional administrative burden, making transiting through the UK much less competitive.

We are already witnessing the impact of the ETA policy: transfers on Qatar routes had recovered faster than the rest of the world from the pandemic and were a growth area of traffic for Heathrow, particularly important given the UK's growing relationship with Qatar. However, since the rollout to Qatari nationals of the UK ETA scheme in November 2023, our transfers on Qatar routes have lost approximately 14,000 passengers. This means that Qatar transfers have recorded their lowest monthly proportions for over ten years each month since the implementation of the ETA.

We would welcome the Committee raising the importance of exempting airside transit passengers from the ETA scheme with Government, for the benefit of the UK's international competitiveness and therefore the wider economy.

**International Border Policies**

During the evidence session, you asked a range of questions on ETIAS. As I noted, there are changes ahead for travel, with both the EU and UK introducing new automatic, electronic border controls for third-country nationals entering and exiting a territory.

In relation to ETAs, the Government has drawn on comparisons to the United States (US) Electronic System for Travel Authorisation (ESTA) which requires all transit passengers to obtain an ETA. However, all passengers transiting via US airports must clear immigration, so it is not appropriate to compare the two schemes.

As you noted, the most relevant comparison would be the EU's European Travel Information and Authorisation System (ETIAS). The EU is taking a different approach to the UK, presenting a more attractive option to airside transit passengers by exempting airside transit passengers from the ETA. The EU are mitigating any perceived loopholes for transit passengers via the existing and effective Direct Airside Transit Visa. Ultimately the EU's ETIAS scheme is a significantly more competitive offering than the UK ETAs, as the below table demonstrates:

	<b>ETA (UK)</b>	<b>ETIAS (EU/Schengen)</b>
<b>Cost</b>	£10	€7 (£6)
<b>Languages</b>	English only	24 languages
<b>Access</b>	UK only	26 EU Member States and four Schengen Associated Countries
<b>Exemptions</b>	None	Over 70s and under 18s, family members with the right of free movement
<b>Validity period</b>	2 years	3 years
<b>Required by transit passengers?</b>	Yes – all transiting passengers	Not required of transiting passengers that remain airside and do not pass the border

Further, those transiting through the UK to European destinations would be required to obtain both the ETA and ETIAS in order to travel, the cost and inconvenience of which is likely to lead to many bypassing the UK altogether. It

is unfortunate that the impact assessment undertaken for this policy has failed to consider the impact on transfer traffic.

The shift of any significant percentage of travellers on these routes to European hubs ultimately risks damage to the UK's position as a global aviation hub, harming UK route viability and connectivity. It could therefore cause the shift of aircraft, routes, and jobs from the UK to Europe.

We will continue to work with the wider industry, Government, and political stakeholders to ensure that this policy is swiftly addressed to ensure Heathrow consumers are not penalised simply for travelling via the UK. We would be happy to support any further queries the Committee have and encourage you to seriously consider the impact of the ETA on airside transit passengers – and therefore the UK economy – when you finalise your concluding report.

*28 March 2024*