

Government helps prevent last-minute summer flight cancellations with “amnesty” on airport slots rule

- ministers have laid regulations to help airlines make sensible decisions about schedules, avoiding last-minute cancellations and providing passengers with more certainty
- airlines will be given a chance to hand back their take-off and landing slots ahead of the summer peak to help them plan a deliverable schedule
- takes advantage of UK’s new freedom from EU slots rules, to which we were previously tied

The government has today (21 June 2022) laid regulations before Parliament that will help airlines prevent last-minute flight cancellations during the summer peak.

The regulations will allow a one-off “amnesty” on airport slots rules, enabling airlines to plan ahead and deliver a realistic summer schedule that minimises disruption at the airports. This is being provided as an exceptional measure while industry makes progress in recruiting necessary staff.

A bit like parking spaces for planes, slots are used to manage capacity at the busiest airports. A slot gives permission to use the full range of airport infrastructure (runway, terminal and gates, for instance) necessary to operate an air service at an airport on a specific date and time.

Highly valuable commercial assets, airlines must use slots a certain amount of times each season in order to keep them. However, many parts of the sector have been unable to recruit enough staff in time to fly the number of flights they have planned for, leading to flights being cancelled at short notice.

The government will now give airlines a short window to hand back slots for the rest of the summer season that they are not confident they will be able to operate. This will help passengers find alternative arrangements ahead of time, rather than face the kind of last-minute cancellations seen over the Easter and half-term holidays.

Subject to parliamentary approval, the measure takes advantage of our new freedom to set our own slots rules after leaving the EU and comes after the Transport Secretary and Aviation Minister urged the industry to develop a deliverable and realistic summer schedule.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said:

The British people have made huge sacrifices over the pandemic and, for many, this will be well-deserved time away that they haven’t

had in years.

That's why it's crucial they don't face disappointing last-minute cancellations and chaos at airports when the system can't deliver. And I will do everything in my power to stop that.

Today's announcement aims to help airlines provide certainty to passengers and ensure the next few months are as smooth as possible.

Aviation Minister Robert Courts said:

This is a hugely challenging time for our recovering aviation industry, but we cannot have a situation where passengers arrive at the airport just to have their flight cancelled or face long delays.

Today's announcement follows the discussions that my officials and I have been having with airports and airlines to understand where we can help them and ensure that they can run realistic schedules and make this summer a great success for the British public.

Richard Moriarty, Chief Executive of the Civil Aviation Authority, said:

Providing passengers with certainty this summer is vital and this intervention will help to relieve the pressures we see being experienced by the aviation industry and its customers.

Short-term measures are welcomed, but a continued focus on the unplanned and inevitable operational challenges is crucial for consumer confidence this summer.

Tim Alderslade, CEO of Airlines UK, said:

This is a welcome step that will help build greater resilience into operations this summer, coming on top of measures already taken by the sector. We will continue to work with ministers and the whole aviation ecosystem to ensure the summer peak runs as smoothly as possible for our passengers.

Government is already supporting the industry where possible including:

- using our post-Brexit freedoms to provide the sector with more flexibility when training new employees
- working with Border Force to ensure preparations meet passenger demand
- allowing HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) employment history letters to be used as a suitable form of reference check

Slots that are handed back would be available for other airlines to use in the current season before being returned to the airlines that normally own them in the next season.