

Heathrow reports busiest January since Covid but new strikes loom over Easter getaway

Heathrow airport today revealed its busiest start to a year since the pandemic hit, raising hopes for London's rebound from Covid, but its January traffic numbers arrived alongside the threat of more travel chaos from Easter strike action.

The capital's main international gateway handled over 5.4 million people in the month, the most since 2020. It also said the current half term getaway has been going very well, with peak demand for travel school holidays representing a major test for the airport as it rebuilds staffing levels to handle the resurgent demand.

But Heathrow also faces fresh disruption from industrial action, which could threaten the upcoming Easter getaway for Londoners, as well as the smooth arrival of international tourists vital to much of the capital's economy.

Around 3,000 workers at the hub, which employs around 76,000 people directly, will be balloted by the Unite union over strike action. The vote will cover engineers, firefighters and security guards after they rejected a 10% pay rise.

Heathrow – also the busiest airport in the UK and Europe handling 81 million passengers in 2019 – was battered by a bitter industry row over its handling of the spike in demand for travel after Covid travel restrictions were lifted.

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In what became known as ‘the flightmare’, the airport was left short-staffed after ground crews and other support workers were laid off during the pandemic. After scenes of long delays and wider chaos around the Bank Holiday for Queen Elizabeth II’s Platinum Jubilee, Heathrow introduced a cap on airline ticket sales throughout the entire summer holiday period.

The decision provoked fury among carriers and stoked a furious war of words between major industry figures. Former Heathrow chairman Sir Nigel Rudd and Willie Walsh, who ran British Airways, blamed each other’s previous employers in a noisy public clash involving letters to the press. Rudd said Walsh had a cost-cutting obsession, leaving the airline a “laughing stock”, while Walsh called Heathrow’s management “a bunch of idiots.”

Current CEO, John Holland-Kaye, got £2.6 million in 2019 in salary and bonuses, having received £4 million in 2018, with industry analysis finding his pay package was around three times the size as those in the equivalent jobs at rival international airports. He is stepping down from the job in 2023 after nine years in charge, but will stay in place until a successor is appointed.

Holland-Kaye claimed today that “Heathrow is back to its

best,” and pointed to “passenger satisfaction scores meeting or exceeding 2019 levels,” adding: “We are giving a warm welcome to families over the half term getaway by delivering excellent service and bringing back the magic of travel.”

Unite general secretary Sharon Graham accused Heathrow of “gross hypocrisy,” saying it paid “telephone number salaries to its chief executive and senior managers, but the workers who make the company a success are on poverty wages.”

The airport said it coped with recent strikes by Border Force staff, helped by automated eGates, which are now being trialled for use by children aged 10 and 11.