Heathrow warns 13,000 more staff needed to keep up with demand

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eathrow today warned a further 13,000 staff need to be hired at the airport if it is have any chance of coping with expected levels of passengers on its busiest days.

In a statement with its results for the first nine months of the year said more than 18 million passengers used Heathrow over the summer – more than any other European hub – as people flocked back to international travel after two years of Covid lockdowns and restrictions.

But it said the 400 businesses that use Heathrow face a “huge logistical challenge” to recruit the security cleared staff they need for airport to meet demand at peak times.

Employers at the airport have struggled to find the numbers of staff such as baggage handlers they need after pandemic travel restrictions were lifted because of Brexit and competition from other companies who pay more. Before the pandemic about 75,000 people worked at the airport.

Heathrow has set up “a recruitment taskforce to help fill vacancies, working closely with the Government on a review of airline ground handling and appointing a senior operational executive to invest in joint working.”

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About half the 25,000 extra staff it needed to find after ther pandemic have now been hired but another 12,000 to 13,000 are still needed.

A cap on flights introduced to control capacity is due to be lifted on Sunday. But the airport said it is working with airlines about a new “highly targeted mechanism” to prevent fresh chaos at the airport on the peak days in the run-up to Christmas.

The company added: ”This would encourage demand into less busy periods, protecting the heavier peaks, and avoiding flight cancellations due to resource pressures.”

Total passenger numbers are expected to reach 60 to 62 million this year, about a quarter down on 2019. The airport said “headwinds of a global economic crisis, war in Ukraine and the impact of COVID-19 mean we are unlikely to return to pre-pandemic demand for a number of years, except at peak times.”

The airport remained deep in the red in the first nine months of the year, although losses are reducing as passenger number recover. A loss of £442 million compared with a deficit of more than £1 billion for the same period last year. Revenues trebled to £2.02 billion.

The company said: “Our balance sheet remains robust despite losses – Our underlying losses have increased to £0.4 billion in the year to date as regulated income fails to cover costs, adding to the £4 billion in the prior two years. We have acted responsibly in the face of an uncertain market to protect liquidity and cashflow and reduced gearing. We are not forecasting any dividends this year.”

Chief executive John Holland-Kaye said:” We have lifted the summer cap and are working with airlines and their ground handlers to get back to full capacity at peak times as soon as possible. As we look to the future, we encourage the CAA to think again at stimulating the long-term investment that will deliver the smooth and predictable journeys consumer value most, rather than focusing on short-term pricing which we have seen only benefits airline profits.”