

Rt. Hon Grant Shapps MP
Secretary of State for Transport Department for Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London SW1P 4DR

By email to: TransportSecretary@dft.gov.uk

8 October 2020

Dear Secretary of State

Testing for COVID at Heathrow

You will be aware that the Heathrow Community Engagement Board (HCEB) performs the role of an Airport Consultative Committee and Community Engagement Board for Heathrow Airport Limited. Our primary aim as a Consultative Committee is to discharge the functions of Heathrow Airport Ltd under s35 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 in regard to facilitating consultation with local authorities close to the Airport, airport users, SMEs and other groups such as those that represent local communities. In discharging these functions, we act independently of Heathrow Airport Limited though in a way that is constructive and effective so that we are a “critical friend” to the Airport.

A variety of concerns are being expressed to HCEB by members of the local community in the Heathrow area, relating to the absence of a COVID 19 testing regime at the airport, which I want to bring to your attention. The impact of this pandemic on the aviation industry is well documented and we believe that a structured approach to testing could allow travellers to leave quarantine earlier. This would bring increased confidence in flying and lead to a much needed boost to the local economy, as well as the travel and tourism business as a whole.

Residents living in areas surrounding the airport have expressed concerns about passengers arriving at Heathrow from countries that are not on the Exempt Countries and Territories List. They are anxious that those who use public transport and taxis on arrival could increase the risk of local people coming into contact with someone infected by the COVID 19 virus.

We welcome your announcement to establish a Global Travel Taskforce to look at these issues. I am writing to ask that the taskforce considers, as a matter of urgency, the need for the introduction of a testing regime at Heathrow which can reduce the length of the quarantine requirement and ultimately mitigate any risks posed to local communities caused by arriving passengers. We would welcome the taskforce exploring options including a 5-day post-arrival test and pre-departure testing to reduce quarantine time and better protect local communities respectively. In addition, as a short-term solution, we believe the taskforce should explore rapid point-of-care testing solutions for arrivals from high-risk countries which, while not perfect, would form an inexpensive further line of defence when combined with a 5-day follow-up.

We echo the view of John Holland-Kaye, CEO of Heathrow, that a firm commitment on this matter is needed by early November. I recognise that if a testing regime is introduced that the funding for this should come from private and not public funds and that current NHS testing capacity should not be adversely impacted in any way.

The feasibility of this approach has been demonstrated in Germany and other airports and we are assured that Heathrow Airport has potential supporting systems in place to allow for an effective testing regime.

You will be aware that there has been some reporting on this subject in recent days and it would be very helpful to understand the timetable and process in place for making a decision on this urgent issue, so that we can share this information with our stakeholders, including local businesses and communities.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rachel', written in a cursive style.

Rachel Cerfontyne
Chair
Heathrow Community Engagement Board Ltd