Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP  
Prime Minister  
10 Downing St  
London  
SW1A 2AA  

18 August 2023  

Dear Prime Minister,

As a coalition of consumer advocates and travel companies, we urge you to show your support for British holidaymakers affected by this summer’s air travel disruption by agreeing to strengthen the Civil Aviation Authority’s (CAA) enforcement powers through this autumn’s King’s Speech.

This summer has seen the all too familiar sight of holidaymakers’ plans ruined by air travel disruption; this time through UK and European strike action, thousands of summer flight cancellations, and the terrible environmental impact of wildfires. While some of these issues are outside of airlines’ control, they are routinely failing what’s in their control: to uphold their customers’ legal rights to rerouting and refunds, and provide clear and timely passenger information.

Thousands of UK citizens have again been left at risk of being stranded or out of pocket at a time when household finances are already squeezed. Which? is aware of numerous holidaymakers who, without clear information from their airline, have had to make snap, costly decisions - in some cases dipping into their savings and overdrafts, as well as affecting their mental wellbeing.

Every year we’re seeing disruption, and every year newspapers and news broadcasts are full of unacceptable images of holidaymakers struggling to navigate airline customer services who won’t give them what’s due. Yet the airlines’ regulator, the CAA, is without the powers to hold them properly to account. This has emboldened firms to prioritise commercial interests over those of their customers. Notwithstanding airlines’ response to recent events, as of March of this year Which? found firms owed £4.5 million in outstanding County Court Judgement (CCJs) payments to passengers. This is an indictment of a failed regulatory system in which consumers have nowhere to turn but the courts to recover the compensation to which they’re legally entitled.

Businesses have been impacted too. Package holiday providers and third party businesses responsible for flight bookings have struggled to recoup millions of pounds owed to them by airlines during periods of disruption - harming the competitiveness of a key part of our economy. There’s a significant imbalance between the legal obligations of airlines for flight only bookings when compared to package holiday providers, with the latter exposed to unnecessary financial risk if airlines fail to comply with the law. With the CAA unable to take action, both consumers and businesses lose out.

This contrasts starkly to the US where the Government has taken stringent action to hold to account companies suspected of mistreating customers, with British Airways recently fined $1.1 million for failing to refund passengers during the pandemic. If you, as Prime Minister, intervened on behalf of passengers by enabling the regulator to take action, it would send a strong message to airlines that their behaviour is unacceptable and put enforcement of UK passenger rights on a par with countries elsewhere.
The Department for Transport (DfT) has recognised the plight of UK travellers and we strongly welcomed its recent commitment to strengthening the regulator’s enforcement powers in its response to its Aviation Consumer Reform Consultation. However, the Government has yet to set out a timetable for delivering this reform. With limited time in the Parliamentary calendar before the next General Election, it is key the Government demonstrates to airlines and passengers that this is not an empty promise.

We urge you to take immediate and decisive action on behalf of British holidaymakers to ensure the rights of passengers are upheld and not undermined, by including a Bill that will strengthen the regulator’s enforcement powers in the upcoming King’s Speech.

Yours sincerely,

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