



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Infrastructure

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Financial Impact of COVID-19 on Belfast
International Airport: Belfast International
Airport

2 December 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for Infrastructure

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Miss Michelle McIlveen (Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Martina Anderson
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Keith Buchanan
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Ms Liz Kimmins
Mr Andrew Muir

Witnesses:

Mr Graham Keddie	Belfast International Airport
Mr Emmanuel Menanteau	Belfast International Airport

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I welcome our guests to the meeting this morning. We have Graham Keddie, who is the managing director of Belfast International Airport (BIA/BFS), and Emmanuel Menanteau — apologies for the pronunciation, if that is incorrect — who is the chairman of Belfast International Airport. You are both very welcome to our Committee.

Mr Graham Keddie (Belfast International Airport): Thank you, Madam Chairman. If you do not mind, I will make an opening statement, and then Emmanuel will come in. Thank you for meeting us at such short notice. It is greatly appreciated, and I thank you for recognising the urgency of the issue. Emmanuel is our chairperson and the regional director of Vinci Airports.

BFS is a member of the Vinci network, but, as you can imagine, all the airports are suffering from the effects of COVID. All are asking for support from their respective Governments, and much of the network is getting that support. To put things in context, the situation is so bad that Airports Council International (ACI) estimates that 200 airports are on the brink of collapse in Europe. We come before you today to ask for the Committee's help in securing urgent and much-needed financial support for the airport.

COVID-19 has had a devastating impact on the aviation sector across the world, including in Northern Ireland. Anyone who has watched the news over recent months will be aware of the steps that we have had to take to keep the doors open. You will also be aware that there are three commercial airports in Northern Ireland. We are unique, however, in that Belfast International Airport is the only facility that can operate two runways 24/7 all year round. We do not close. We have category IIIA and IIIB capabilities, so planes can land in virtually any weather conditions. We can facilitate passenger

flights, emergency landings, and Royal Mail, cargo and medical — including transplants — PSNI and military flights. We are essentially the safety net for Northern Ireland and anybody overflying it. Unfortunately, we cannot support those flights when we are closed. We did not take the decision to close during November lightly. If we do not get support to sustain our business and recover quickly, aviation in Northern Ireland will be set back more than 30 years. It will be harder for people to see their friends and family and to do business in Britain and become very difficult for us, as a country, to move forward.

I will now talk about connectivity in 2019. To put it into context, in 2019, we carried almost 6.3 million passengers to 70 domestic and international destinations. Last year, 70% of all passenger journeys out of Northern Ireland went out of BFS — 44,000 flights — and, of those, we carried 47% of the business traffic for Northern Ireland. We are therefore crucial to the business community as well. Our largest carrier, easyJet, carried 53% of all passengers out of Northern Ireland. Normally, we have six based easyJet aircraft, with locally employed cockpit and cabin crew, together with Jet2, which has four based aircraft, again with locally employed cockpit and cabin crew. We have associated jobs across the board. Last year, we facilitated more than 5,000 time-sensitive cargo flights for Royal Mail, DHL and online retailers; over 5,000 medical and private flights; and 2,000 PSNI and MoD flights.

In 2020, since the arrival of COVID-19, passenger numbers have dropped significantly, in line with global travel restrictions. Regrettably, we had to close our passenger terminal, but we stayed open, at our own cost, to facilitate the deliveries of food, medicines and PPE during the initial lockdown, from April through to June. During that lockdown period, we facilitated 3,000 flights and kept our airport open 24/7 to ensure that medical emergencies could be facilitated. That cost the company upwards of £5 million, and we are still making substantial losses today by keeping the airport open. We have seen a 54% drop in flights and a 70% drop in passenger numbers. This year, up until the end of October, only 1.6 million passengers had passed through the terminal. For the same period in 2019, 5.5 million had gone through the terminal. In fact, COVID has wiped out 35 years of growth. In June, when compared with numbers for 2019, we lost 98% of our passenger numbers. That shows how significantly our sector has been affected. We have been subject to quarantine, firebreaks, circuit breakers, tiers and a whole raft of other restrictions, and we cannot continue to sustain that.

By the start of 2020, we at BIA employed 200 direct staff, and a further 5,000 people were employed on the site. Sadly, since then, we have lost 32 of our staff through a voluntary redundancy scheme. That is almost 20% of our workforce. I will not sugar-coat it: one of the hardest things that I have had to do in my career was to lose friends and colleagues. So far, on the site, we estimate that there have been 800 job losses, across security, ground handling, retail, airlines etc. We have had to operate tactical closures through the night and the day. That number could increase quite substantially unless support is forthcoming. We need your help to make sure that that does not happen. Let me be clear: if the UK Government had not extended the flexi furlough scheme, we would be in a much more difficult situation today. We are using that furlough scheme, as are many other companies on the site, to retain and protect jobs for as long as possible. We have used the furlough schemes, quite extensively, as has virtually every other company on the site, and we have received a rates holiday. For that, I thank Minister Murphy and his team in the Department of Finance. It has been a godsend. There are fixed costs associated with operating our business, however, of which we just cannot get rid. Those include air traffic control, security, policing, utilities and operational security costs, which we just cannot degrade, because we have to maintain our standards for our regulators the CAA and the Department for Transport.

The Assembly, the Executive and, specifically, the Infrastructure Minister need to work together to ensure that Northern Ireland gets the connectivity that it deserves. When it became clear that there would be disruption to air travel, I wrote to the Finance Minister on 24 March and again on 19 April to ask for support. I followed that up by repeating the request with the Finance, Economy and Infrastructure Ministers. We have heard and read that £10 million has been set aside to support airports, but, to date, we have received none of that money, and we have not heard from the Department or the Minister about it. That is why we are here today to ask for your help.

We have subsidised medical flights, NHS cargo carrying PPE, PSNI flights and MoD flights and have subsidised operations to make sure that the people of Northern Ireland receive their online purchases. We cannot continue to do that. We ask for your help and support. I will ask Emmanuel to conclude, and we will then be available to take questions.

Mr Emmanuel Menanteau (Belfast International Airport): Thank you, Graham. Good morning, Madam Chair and members of the Committee. Thank you for giving us the opportunity to speak to you this morning. Graham has made a statement. From my side, as the chairman of Belfast International

Airport and a representative of Vinci Airports, I highlight the fact that the crisis has caused a dramatic downturn in the aviation sector.

As you probably know, Vinci Airports manages 46 airports across the world and especially in Europe. As you probably also know, in the UK, we manage London Gatwick, which has suffered a lot, the same as Belfast. In November, our overall traffic will probably be minus 80% compared with last year's. Over the whole year, it will be more than minus 70%. Mostly owing to drastic lockdown restrictions in the UK and Europe, recovery will be very difficult, and we do not see a proper recovery happening before the end of 2021. We still have some hope for next summer, but the first part of next year will be extremely difficult. That is why being supported by the Executive in Northern Ireland will be critical.

We feel that we need to have a meeting with Minister Mallon. I understand that the Department for Infrastructure team is responsible for providing some support. We are very thankful to the Minister of Finance for the rates reduction support, but, as you will have understood from Graham, we need more in order to reopen and operate our airport as normal. Thank you very much.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you both for your comments. The Department for Infrastructure will be quite clear in its remit, which is quite limited. That aside, however, there have been exceptional circumstances, and it has been charged with looking after the support package. It is quite interesting that an announcement was made last week about City of Derry Airport (CODA), with £1.23 million being allocated for there to ensure that it remained operational. You have highlighted the fact that you are now in that place in which there are challenges for your future. Graham, you said that 800 jobs have been lost in the short term. In the longer term, what do you see being the future of the airport if this continues for another few months?

Mr Keddie: It is going to be bleak. It is difficult to gauge just what will happen. The problem that we face is that lockdowns, firebreaks and tiers all create a lack of confidence in travel. It is therefore difficult to gauge, but it will be serious. We were, and still are, the second-largest site employer in Northern Ireland. Eight hundred jobs are already gone on the site, and more jobs are under threat.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): At this point, if you had —

Mr Menanteau: *[Inaudible.]* The public need mobility, and we support mobility. Those who *[Inaudible]* restrictions are not being supported, and that might affect airlines' ability to provide mobility. As part of the Belfast International Airport company, for the time being, we are able to reduce staff numbers only through a voluntary plan. We hope to continue in only that direction. We have not forced staff to leave. We have no obligation to do so. We checked, as the shareholder and the company. We have supported out of our own costs the burden of staff costs. We are trying to save as many staff as we can. I am not sure that it will be a very good future if the situation continues like this.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Have you written to the Minister and the Department?

Mr Keddie: Yes, we have.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What response have you received to date?

Mr Keddie: There seems to be some meeting being organised between the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy, with the Minister for Infrastructure also in attendance, but we have not been contacted. I do not think that any date has been set for it. The Minister seems to be saying that she has accepted a meeting, but we have had no contact about it. We have asked for meetings, and we stand ready to attend them, but no date has been given to us to talk.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): In response to a question that I put to the Minister, she said that the Department of Finance is leading on work for safety and security measures. That is for all three airports, and it will be coming out of the remaining £8.8 million that is held for airports. Has there been any discussion about that? What is your ask from those particular measures?

Mr Keddie: We were contacted last night by the Department of Finance about that and are giving them information today, so the Department of Finance team is hopefully working on that. We have had no contact from the Department for Infrastructure team, however, about what it requires.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What is your ask from that fund that will allow you to remain operational?

Mr Keddie: We have asked for a large seven-figure sum. Our operational costs requirement is very high. We are working through the numbers now. Our losses are already in excess of £5 million so far this year. Much of that is cash burn, and our shareholders are allowing us to maintain that and keep operating. That is not sustainable, however. From our perspective, we are working through the numbers and will be talking to the Department of Finance later today.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Your work is much broader than just transporting passengers. You also have medical flights. What impact, if any, has the closure had on that?

Mr Keddie: We are not aware of any individual circumstances. We have just announced closure, so nobody can operate, and nobody would ask to operate. *[Inaudible]* what is called a notice to airmen (NOTAM) that we are now closed. For example, we closed yesterday at 10.00 pm until 6.30 am, so no aircraft were moving during that period. If any medical flights were requested, they were not operating from Belfast International Airport.

Mr K Buchanan: Thank you, Graham and Emmanuel. I have a couple of quick questions on your running costs. I appreciate that you have fired out a few figures, Graham. What were your running costs prior to the pandemic? Can you give us a rough yearly, weekly or daily figure for running costs from, say, a year ago?

Mr Keddie: Our running costs last year were roughly £30 million. I do not have the figures in front of me. They are in the annual accounts.

Mr K Buchanan: When you say that the airport is closed or that the airport is open, what is the difference in financial terms? I presume that everybody has gone when the airport is closed. What is the financial difference between its being open or closed? What is the saving from having it closed?

Mr Keddie: It is saving us a four- or five-figure sum during the period, but it is still saving us money.

Mr K Buchanan: What is the difference in percentage terms between being open and closed?

Mr Keddie: It is not a huge amount in percentage terms, but it is an amount that we have to save.

Mr K Buchanan: Is it 20% or 30% of a saving?

Mr Keddie: It is difficult to gauge in percentage terms, but I can come back to you on that.

Mr K Buchanan: OK.

Mr Keddie: It is a decision that we have to make because we have no flights. There is no point in our being open if there are no flights.

Mr K Buchanan: When you are closed, I presume that no emergency flights can land?

Mr Keddie: Yes. No emergency flights can land.

Mr K Buchanan: Have you got any emergency cover for when you are closed?

Mr Keddie: No.

Mr K Buchanan: OK, so when you are closed, you are closed. You cannot open for an emergency landing.

Mr Keddie: Yes.

Mr K Buchanan: OK. Thank you.

Mr Boylan: You are very welcome here. Thank you very much for presenting to the Committee.

The Chair asked you earlier about your asks to determine how we can assist you, but can you talk us through exactly how we can assist you in the immediate future? What are your projections for the sector? What is the major challenge for you?

Mr Keddie: The major challenge for us is confidence in getting people back flying. The sector is struggling, and we are in survival mode. The money is needed to cover some of the operating costs that we have, many of which are fixed, whether they be air traffic control, policing, security or operational safety costs, which we cannot reduce, because we have a high fixed cost operating base. It is about buying time until we get some level of recovery. We are hoping that next summer might get us back to some level of traffic. Overall, however, I think that Emmanuel has a better *[Inaudible]* me through Europe, because Europe is not expecting to experience true recovery for several years.

Mr Menanteau: We *[Inaudible]* the whole picture. That is something that we share with all institutions, especially aviation institutions. We do not expect a proper recovery for domestic traffic back to 2019 levels before 2022 or 2023. For international traffic, it will not be before 2024. That is what we expect for most of our airports, and especially for Belfast International Airport. Graham mentioned fixed costs. While we have fixed costs, we have to face a period in which we cannot generate revenues from our passengers. Closing the airport helps us reduce those fixed costs, but we still have those costs. Nevertheless, we are forecasting a slight recovery by the middle of next year, when we can re-engage our strategy and investment. We have several investments that we would like to see continue, especially the expansion of the airport, work on the security building and the expansion of the commercial area for the future. Today, of course, we need to address this very short-term situation, and that is mainly because COVID has been more prolonged than what we expected at the beginning of the crisis.

Mr Boylan: Thank you. We all welcome this morning's announcement about the vaccine and its potential.

Finally, are you looking for a financial package that will cover you for at least the next three, four or six months? I ask that because you said that the recovery plan is for a longer period. Is that the kind of financial package that you are looking at needing?

Mr Keddie: I think that it is. In the COVID period, if you look at our estimates for April, we thought that we would get recovery by June. In May, we thought that we would get recovery in August. Our figures just get lower and lower and lower. We are on to the ninth or tenth version of our passenger projections for 2020. The difficulty that we face is that we do not really know just when recovery will start to reach such a decent level. What we are looking at is needing potential support beyond March 2021.

Mr Boylan: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Ms Anderson? Hello?

Ms Anderson: Hello.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Hello.

Ms Anderson: That is me unmuted. Graham and Emmanuel, thank you for that. Like everyone in the room, I am sure that nobody wants to pit one airport against another. I represent the Derry constituency, and it was very welcome news for all of us as representatives, and for the people, to hear that £1.23 million was allocated to there for operational costs. As a former MEP who regularly used Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport, I understand the importance of both — of all three airports — for the all-Ireland economy.

I am just trying to tease out what the ask is. I heard you say that you have been requesting a meeting with the Minister. I am conscious of the Chair's comment about the safety and security of all three airports and perhaps the remainder of the finances that were set aside going to that. I think that the announcement of a £1.3 million allocation for Derry airport was made on 19 November, and we were told at that stage that urgent consideration was being given by the Executive to support for Belfast City Airport and Belfast International Airport. So I think that we need to ascertain what "urgent

consideration" means for the Belfast International and Belfast City. Graham, I am conscious that at one stage you said that it was costing £65,000 a day just to leave the airport open in the event of needing to accommodate medical and emergency flights. That is a cost that, obviously, you cannot continue to allow to drain out of whatever reserves you may have left. You said that you are on your ninth modelling scheme in trying to project what is going to happen, but it is very hard to do that with this virus.

Graham and Emmanuel, I am struggling to get a handle on what you are asking the Committee to do. Is it that you are asking us to ask the Minister to meet you? I know that you have requested that. We know that there are other Ministers who are responsible, whether for tourism or, in the case of the Finance Minister, safety and security. You have a specific ask for a meeting with the Infrastructure Minister. I assume that she will meet you to hear what you have to say and to report what the "urgent consideration" is that has been given. When you work out the figures, Graham — we need to know what the figure is. We cannot just say, "Will you give them something?" It would be good for us to know, when you finally calculate that figure, exactly what financial support you are seeking — maybe you said it and I did not pick it up — so that we can at least inform the Minister of what the ask from the International Airport is. I am assuming that she knows anyway.

Mr Keddie: Originally, we were asked by Minister Murphy's team to put in our safety and security costs, and those were in excess of £12 million for the period that we were asked about. We know that there is a pot of £8.8 million left after CODA's share, and we are looking for a large chunk of that. We are not trying to be greedy, but we are trying to be sensible in our ask. We want to make sure that it keeps us in survival mode. The three airports in Northern Ireland are all vital in their various ways. We are the largest and the one that supports a range of products. We are the one that keeps this place moving with our cargo and with our passenger numbers and also with our jobs. People come here from every constituency in Northern Ireland, from as far away as Foyle. Would you believe that we have guys travelling from Donegal to come and work at the airport? We have pilots coming up from the Republic to fly from here. This is where we need that support to continue to provide those jobs. Yes, we would like to meet the Minister. It is key to try and build that relationship, because we are a key part of the infrastructure in Northern Ireland. I think that Emmanuel and I want to work with that. As Emmanuel stated, we want to invest here, but the money that we are currently burning is the money that was set aside to invest. Those are the sorts of things that we will not be able to do.

Ms Anderson: Listening to —.

Mr Menanteau: It —.

Ms Anderson: Sorry, Emmanuel; I cut across you there. From listening to members of the Committee and to Members on the Floor of the Assembly, I think that there is support for all of the airports on the island and here in the North of Ireland. I think that we need to make sure that, whatever that ask is, the Minister hears directly from you. I think that, if she was to set down and listen to you —. I am not saying that she does not have that understanding, but I think that a face-to-face meeting or, in this climate, a Zoom meeting would be most helpful for you. Sinn Féin supports the airports getting the kind of support you need. Obviously, that will depend on the ask that you make, Graham, and that needs worked out, but keeping all three airports operational needs to be supported.

Mr Menanteau: Thank you very much, Martina. It is exactly what we ask for. Belfast City obtained some support last summer during the first lockdown, and CODA is getting support now. As you mentioned, the three airports are necessary for Northern Ireland and for addressing different markets and different destinations. Easyjet is linking different international destinations in addition to the medical flights etc. We would like to meet the Minister, and we know there is some support. I am very pleased that the Minister for Finance is asking us for costs, and we can provide that. We will have a discussion and see what can be obtained. Definitely, that is what we are asking for.

Ms Anderson: The Committee will lend our support maybe by writing to the Minister to ask him to meet you, if the Chair wishes to take that forward.

Mr Menanteau: Thank you very much.

Mr Hilditch: Thanks, and you are very welcome this morning. Graham, obviously there is a crisis, and it has to be worked through. It is absolutely crucial that the airports remain operational as best they

can during this period. You touched on the more commercial end of things, like cargo. Is there much cargo business going through the airport in comparison to the passenger flights?

Mr Keddie: Belfast International is quite a large cargo airport at night. It is all integrator traffic. For example, every one of your online purchases is probably coming through us. The Royal Mail has two flights a night. However, bear in mind that, previously, passenger operations subsidised the cargo operation, as it is through the night and the flight movements are not as busy. We have kept the Royal Mail operating. We have been talking to the Royal Mail about moving flights and closing the airport at night. We are still in talks with Royal Mail. However, it does give you some indication of how crucial the airport is to Northern Ireland. We now have tests kits coming in to Randox from England on freight aircraft. We have PPE coming in and foodstuffs going out. A lot of high-value exports go out on our freight aircraft at night.

Mr Hilditch: I am just trying to tease out the importance of that element of the operation, particularly when you are looking for support.

Mr Keddie: It is a tiny part of the business. Cargo is about 7% or 8% of our revenues. A box does not buy a coffee, park a car or spend money in the duty-free.

Mr Hilditch: You mentioned that you had subsidised some aspects of the operation. In what way was that subsidised? Did you pay people to work through the shifts?

Mr Keddie: Basically, the subsidy was that, if we closed completely and sent everyone home and shut down, we would save ourselves money. However, we have kept operating by staying open. For example, during the lockdown, we kept enough fire crew and operational cover to operate medical, police and military flights. We kept open during that period. It is the same with cargo at night; we have full fire cover and full air-traffic control cover, and the cost of keeping everything ready to go is enormous. The cost outweighs the revenue.

Mr Hilditch: And that was for the greater benefit of the people of Northern Ireland. Thank you for your presentation.

Mr Muir: I have a question on the closures that you are having to do because of the financial situation you find yourself in. Obviously, the airport is closed. What is the situation if there is a medical emergency flight? Does it have to wait until the airport reopens?

Mr Keddie: Yes.

Mr Muir: That is a very serious situation that needs to be resolved. How often do you have medical emergency flights?

Mr Keddie: It is difficult to gauge, but we handle several thousand medical flights a year.

Mr Muir: Are they currently going to George Best Belfast City Airport?

Mr Keddie: We do not know where they are going or if they are operating.

Mr Muir: You are aware that Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport got financial support in the first round and you did not. Can you give me some background on your understanding of why that occurred?

Mr Keddie: We believe that it was used for lifeline services for CODA and Belfast City. We were still operating, so we requested support but did not get any.

Mr Muir: Has there been any proactive engagement by any of the Departments to yourselves about support in this round?

Mr Keddie: The Department of Finance have been very proactive, it would be fair to say, and, to some extent, the Department for the Economy as well.

Mr Muir: What about the Department for Transport (DFT) in London?

Mr Keddie: No contact at all.

Mr Muir: OK. Have they offered any support to any other airports across the UK?

Mr Keddie: As far as I am aware, other than the support offered to Belfast City and CODA, nothing.

Mr Muir: OK. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Thank you very much.

Mr Menanteau: I can mention that, for instance, there is *[Inaudible]* support from DFT in London.

Mrs D Kelly: Thank you, Emmanuel and Graham. It was our understanding that there was a rates relief provided to the airport of £1.7 million. Is that correct?

Mr Keddie: We had a rates holiday alongside the other two airports, which I addressed and which we thanked Minister Murphy for.

Mrs D Kelly: We understand that the Department of Finance has £2 million secured for safety and security measures. Would that assist with your fixed costs around traffic control and security? You also mentioned airport police. Are you responsible for paying them, or does that come out of Government —?

Mr Keddie: That is our own police force. Yes, we pay our police. We are the only airport in Northern Ireland that covers policing costs.

Mrs D Kelly: Oh. Right. Why is that?

Mr Keddie: It is something that has always been done at Belfast International. The other two airports do not pay policing costs, but we do.

Mrs D Kelly: Maybe we could ask why there is that anomaly. Are there any bespoke measures that have been implemented in other regional airports in GB that you think might be of assistance to you?

Mr Keddie: There is nothing that I know of. I believe that there was some borrowing being allowed in Liverpool by the mayor, and perhaps at Luton, but, beyond that, no specific package.

Mrs D Kelly: Neither the Department for Transport nor the regional airports have come up with any brilliant scheme, in essence, to assist airports.

Mr Keddie: As far as I am aware, no.

Mrs D Kelly: That is very disappointing. I understand that there is an outstanding commitment from three of the Ministers to meet you, but that you do not have a date for that yet.

Mr Keddie: No.

Mrs D Kelly: OK.

Mr Keddie: We met Minister Dodds on Monday and had contact from the DOF last night — a couple of very senior civil servants *[Inaudible]* permanent secretary, but nothing from the Department for Infrastructure.

Mrs D Kelly: OK. Thank you.

Mr Beggs: Thank you for your information; it is useful to have it. I am trying to understand how funding has been distributed. All three airports have been given rates holidays, as you have indicated, but two airports have been picked out for specific funding from the Department for Infrastructure: Belfast City Airport and City of Derry Airport. Do you have any understanding as to why they received it and you

did not? Has criteria been set? Why have you not received any funding, given that you are running at a loss, just like they were?

Mr Keddie: I believe that the initial payment to the two airports was under lifeline services. Our main carriers, easyJet and Ryanair and Jet2, had all stopped operations during the first lockdown, and I think it was last man standing. Beyond that, I do not know the criteria. It was based on cost, and I think it was a contract between the Department for Infrastructure and Belfast City Airport with regard to that.

Mr Muir: Sorry, can you expand on that a little bit more? What are lifeline services? I have not come across it before.

Mr Keddie: I assume that is basically the last flights left going from Northern Ireland to London. There was one carrier left, which I believe was Aer Lingus operating in Belfast City Airport.

Mr Menanteau: During the first lockdown, Aer Lingus was the last carrier to provide service to London. That was the reason that was given to us for supporting Belfast City Airport, but, at that time, easyJet, which of course provides services to London and different airports, and still does, had stopped. It was not asked to continue. We actually filed complaints because we were prevented from providing competition during the first lockdown; we could have pushed easyJet to continue the service.

Mr Beggs: In terms of your current operation, are you breaking even, or do you continue to lose money, even with closure during the day?

Mr Keddie: We are continuing to lose money.

Mr Beggs: OK. So if —.

Mr Keddie: To put it in context, Roy, we had, during that period, three easyJet flights a week to Liverpool; normally, we have eight a day. We had four flights a week to Birmingham; normally, we have upwards of five a day. We had four a week to London Gatwick; normally, we have upwards of eight a day. We had four a week to Bristol; normally, we have four a day. We also had four a week to Glasgow when, often, we have up to six a day. That gives some indication of the difference.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): What is the level of support for other airports regionally?

Mr Keddie: The Irish Republic have announced €80 million up until the end of March for their airports. In the rest of the UK, I am not sure what is happening in Scotland, but in England they have just announced a rates package of up to £8 million per airport. That means that, for most of the smaller airports, all of their rates will be given back. However, the rates bills of the big ones, such as Heathrow and Gatwick, are multiples of that. I believe that some loans have been organised by regional governments, mayors etc — in Liverpool, I think — but, beyond that, there has been no real support.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): Has there been a level of support that has focused primarily on operational costs, or has it really just been around rates and loans?

Mr Keddie: There has been, I believe, some support for policing costs. I think that the airports have been taking to their local police authorities in that regard. We are very unusual in that we have our own police force. There have been some talks, and I believe that various local authorities are talking directly to their airports, but nothing concrete that I know of has been announced.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): That is interesting. I thank both of you very much —.

Mrs D Kelly: Sorry, Chair. It is my understanding that Minister Mallon has written to Graham, and that he has responded. I understood that a meeting had been agreed, with the date to be set. I just want to clarify that.

Mr Keddie: I have accepted a meeting. I have got a letter, but there is no date. There has been no phone call; dates have not been organised.

Mrs D Kelly: The problem is probably with trying to get three Ministers at the one meeting.

The Chairperson (Miss McIlveen): I thank both of you for attending this morning. Obviously, these are very difficult circumstances that you find yourselves in. There is a level of support from the Assembly for the airports. We will follow up on that in due course. Thank you very much for attending this morning.

Mr Keddie: Thank you very much for having us.