# Technical fault at NATS triggers fresh UK air travel chaos amid calls for leadership overhaul



Travel chaos unfolded across the UK on the afternoon of July 30 as a technical fault at the National Air Traffic Services (NATS) control centre in Swanwick, Hampshire, disrupted flights at numerous airports nationwide, including major hubs such as London Heathrow, Gatwick, Birmingham, Manchester, Edinburgh, and Liverpool. The fault affected the London Control Area, covering approximately 200,000 square miles of airspace, forcing the suspension of departures and landings at key airports and leading to widespread delays and cancellations.

NATS confirmed the issue around 4.40 pm and stated that engineers had restored the affected system shortly thereafter. Despite the swift technical fix, the organisation cautioned that delays would continue as normal operations gradually resumed, with planes and crews out of position adding to the disruption. The operator emphasised collaboration with airlines and airports to clear backlogs safely, apologising for the inconvenience caused. Airports urged passengers to check flight statuses directly with airlines, highlighting ongoing uncertainty. British Airways reported that the incident affected the “vast majority” of its flights, while other airports such as Cardiff experienced smaller numbers of delayed departures.

The disruption echoed a similar major failure in August 2023, when a NATS system outage impacted around 700,000 passengers during the peak summer travel season. At that time, flights had to be processed manually due to automated system failure, resulting in extensive delays and cancellations, which led to significant financial losses and public outcry. Since then, NATS has faced growing criticism from airlines, which have blamed ongoing technical issues and staff shortages at various airports for persistent service disruptions.

In the wake of the latest incident, low-cost carriers EasyJet and Ryanair renewed calls for accountability at NATS. EasyJet’s CEO Johan Lundgren publicly demanded the resignation of NATS chief executive Martin Rolfe, accusing him of downplaying issues and providing misleading information. Ryanair’s chief operating officer Neal McMahon labelled the current situation "utterly unacceptable," asserting that no lessons had been learnt from last summer’s outage. These criticisms come amid mounting pressure on NATS’ leadership, even as NATS’ chair Warren East—set to take over officially in September—defended the current management’s efforts to modernise operations and tackle long-term challenges.

The aviation regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority, has also scrutinised NATS since last year’s failures, calling for improved contingency planning to better handle outages. The sector faces compounded difficulties from high flight volumes, staff shortages, adverse weather, and reduced airspace availability linked to the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. These systemic pressures suggest that while immediate technical fixes can restore service, broader structural reforms and investment in resilience are critical to preventing recurring disruptions.

Passengers caught in the latest outage faced significant delays, cancelled flights, and altered travel plans. Liverpool airport, for example, saw flights to Turkey cancelled due to the air traffic control limitation, and airports like Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Southampton urged travellers to verify their flight status directly with airlines.

As airports continue their efforts to normalise services in the aftermath, the incident highlights the delicate balance in managing an increasingly congested and complex airspace network. With public patience tested and industry voices demanding greater accountability, the sector stands at a crossroads that will determine how efficiently and reliably UK air travel infrastructure can serve passengers in an evolving aviation landscape.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2089062/full-list-uk-airports-affected-flight-delays-travel-chaos), [[4]](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/30/flights-begin-to-resume-from-uk-airports-after-air-traffic-control-glitch-closes-airspace), [[7]](https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk/2025/07/30/london-airports-suspend-after-radar-outage/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2089062/full-list-uk-airports-affected-flight-delays-travel-chaos), [[4]](https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/30/flights-begin-to-resume-from-uk-airports-after-air-traffic-control-glitch-closes-airspace), [[5]](https://www.scotsman.com/news/transport/edinburgh-airport-hit-by-widespread-flight-delays-after-major-air-traffic-control-issue-5249919), [[7]](https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk/2025/07/30/london-airports-suspend-after-radar-outage/)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2089062/full-list-uk-airports-affected-flight-delays-travel-chaos> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/3b9d96a0-acf1-44a7-899f-b329d2a39d13> - EasyJet has called for the dismissal of Martin Rolfe, the chief executive of National Air Traffic Services (NATS), due to repeated disruptions in air traffic control over the past two summers. EasyJet's Johan Lundgren cited Rolfe’s downplaying of issues, lack of transparency, and dissemination of misleading information. This call aligns with Ryanair’s Michael O'Leary, who has also called for Rolfe’s departure. Despite the criticism, NATS chair Warren East defended Rolfe, asserting the board’s confidence in his efforts to tackle the problems. NATS has faced significant pressure after major disruptions, including a failure of the UK’s air traffic control system last summer affecting 700,000 passengers and ongoing staff shortages at Gatwick airport. EasyJet, which holds a 6% stake in NATS, has demanded more accountability and a change in leadership to address these ongoing issues. Other European airlines have similarly suffered from capacity shortages leading to delays, compounded by high flight numbers, weather, and decreased airspace due to the Ukraine war.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/cacc7648-8f1d-4268-9aab-2ad1850f148b> - National Air Traffic Services (NATS) in the UK has appointed Warren East, former Rolls-Royce chief executive, as its new chair starting September 1. East will replace Paul Golby, who held the position for a decade and guided NATS through challenging times, including the Covid-19 pandemic. NATS has faced scrutiny from airlines due to recent operational issues, most notably a major technical failure last August that disrupted over 700,000 passengers' travel plans. The Civil Aviation Authority found that resolving the issue was delayed as key engineers were not present over the bank holiday. Airlines, especially Ryanair, have demanded compensation and criticized NATS' leadership. East's experience in technology and aviation is seen as valuable for NATS, which is focused on modernizing operations and reducing carbon emissions. The appointment comes as NATS transitions through the significant pressures of decarbonizing aviation and advancing technology.
4. <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/07/30/flights-begin-to-resume-from-uk-airports-after-air-traffic-control-glitch-closes-airspace> - Flights are beginning to restart from UK airports after a technical issue grounded and diverted planes earlier on Wednesday before engineers were able to restore the system, the air traffic control operator said. Airports said it would take time for disruption to clear, with many planes and crew out of position. The National Air Traffic Service (NATS) said the glitch happened at its control centre at Swanwick, southwest of London, and required the service to limit the number of aircraft flying to ensure safety. London's Gatwick Airport said the issue affected outbound flights across the UK. Some inbound flights were put into holding patterns or diverted. Stansted, another London-area airport, said "many departures and arrivals" were affected and advised passengers to check with their airlines. About 20 minutes after issuing an initial alert, the agency said engineers had fixed the problem and that it was "in the process of restoring normal operations." Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander said "I am aware of a technical issue which impacted NATS’ operations causing travel disruption this afternoon." "I have been informed systems have now been restored but continued disruption is expected, and passengers should check with individual airports for advice." The NATS system has suffered several software-related failures since it opened in 2002. In August 2023, a glitch meant flight plans had to be processed manually, rather than automatically. Hundreds of flights were delayed or cancelled at the height of the summer holidays and some 700,000 passengers affected.
5. <https://www.scotsman.com/news/transport/edinburgh-airport-hit-by-widespread-flight-delays-after-major-air-traffic-control-issue-5249919> - Widespread delays are expected at Edinburgh Airport on Wednesday as flights across the UK face huge disruption after air traffic control provider NATS suffered a technical problem. All outbound UK flights have been affected, with Edinburgh, Gatwick, Manchester and Birmingham among airports reporting delays. Earlier this afternoon, Edinburgh Airport issued a statement saying all departures were being held. It has since posted that the technical issue has now been resolved and the airport is working to return to normal operations. In a response to a passenger it said flights had resumed but that it will “take time” to work through the departures. It is urging passengers to check the latest flight information with their airline. The company said it was limiting the number of aircraft which can fly in the “London control area”, which covers most of England and Wales. The technical issue relates to NATS’ control centre in Swanwick, Hampshire. For unrivalled coverage, subscribe to the Scotsman’s Transport newsletter
6. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/7/30/uk-flights-disrupted-after-air-traffic-control-technical-issue> - Gatwick Airport and Edinburgh Airport also said operations were resuming. London City Airport had earlier also reported disruption. It was not clear exactly how long the outage had lasted. Ryanair said the disruption lasted for “over four hours” and caused delays and several diversions, inconveniencing thousands of passengers. The Irish low-budget airline said the problem was “utterly unacceptable” and called for Martin Rolfe, the chief executive of the air traffic control provider, to resign. “It is clear that no lessons have been learnt since the Aug ’23 NATS system outage and passengers continue to suffer as a result of Martin Rolfe’s incompetence,” Ryanair chief operating officer Neal McMahon said in a statement. The NATS system has suffered several software-related failures since it opened in 2002. In August 2023, flights across Britain were disrupted after the automatic processing of flight plans malfunctioned. Hundreds of flights were delayed or cancelled at the height of the summer holidays, and some 700,000 passengers were affected. Britain’s aviation regulator last year said NATS needed to review its contingency plans for outages after the outage, which airline bosses said cost them over 100 million pounds ($133 million) in refunds and compensation.
7. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/news/uk/2025/07/30/london-airports-suspend-after-radar-outage/> - Airports across the UK grounded flights on Wednesday afternoon when a major fault hit air-traffic control. Radar systems went down as authorities investigated a glitch in the systems serving what is known as the London Control Area. Heathrow and Gatwick airports said take-off and landings were suspended. There was a knock-on effect across the country, with Edinburgh, Manchester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Stansted and East Midlands reporting flights grounded. Within minutes, passengers were reporting widespread delays and cancellations affecting flights. NATS, the company that operates most UK air-traffic services, said the issue was resolved about an hour after it was first reported and is in the “process of resuming normal operations”. Delays to domestic and international flight services are still expected. While the issue was ongoing, British Airways said the problem was “affecting the vast majority of our flights”. In an earlier statement, Gatwick Airport said: “A technical issue impacting NATS is affecting all outbound flights across the UK. There are currently no departures from London Gatwick while the situation is being resolved.