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IAG response to CAP2524F
Draft guidance on Other Regulated Charges ("ORC") protocols and dispute resolution

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your draft guidance on ORC protocols and dispute resolution.

All information we have provided in this response should be considered strictly private and confidential.

Executive Summary

We agree with the CAA that the new ORC protocols should be **incorporated into HAL's licence** and that this is "a necessary, targeted and proportionate approach to driving good governance, accountability and transparency in the provision of ORC services by HAL to ORC users"¹. We also agree that "it is also in the interests of consumers of air passenger services to ensure that ORCs continue to deliver benefits to consumers and to avoid disputes between HAL and airlines (and other ORC users)"².

We also agree with the CAA "that the dispute resolution function is intended to deal with disputes on all **ORC operational, commercial or procedural (whether the ORC protocols have been followed) matters**"³. We note the CAA's confirmation that "Complaints relating to matters concerning HAL's compliance with its licence will be dealt with by the CAA under the relevant investigation and enforcement procedures under the Civil Aviation Act 2012"⁴.

Introduction and background

We agree with the CAA that "weaknesses in the current governance process and dispute resolution mechanisms for Other Regulated Charges ("ORCs") needed to be addressed"⁵.

As the CAA has noted, "The weaknesses, which had come to light following disputes between Heathrow Airport Limited ("HAL") and ORC users were largely the result of under-recovery of ORC

¹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 4

² CAA CAP 2524F, para 4

³ CAA CAP 2524F, para 35

⁴ CAA CAP 2524F, para 35

⁵ CAA CAP 2524F, para 1

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costs as a direct result of the covid-19 pandemic between 2020 and 2021. A number of stakeholders had highlighted differences in interpretation of the current ORC protocol and expressed concerns about how HAL can be held to account for delivery of arrangements that are consistent with the ORC principles.”⁶

We are reassured by the CAA’s position of “require HAL, in consultation with ORC users to redesign and develop a new set of ORC protocols. These new protocols will be underpinned in HAL’s licence and would be based on established ORC principles of:

- costs pass through;
- user pays;
- transparency of costs and service provision; and
- high quality and effective collaboration including on consultation and engagement.”⁷

We agree with the CAA “that the new protocols should include provisions for an effective and binding dispute resolution function”⁸.

We agree with the CAA that “Anchoring the new protocols in HAL’s licence was a necessary, targeted and proportionate approach to driving good governance, accountability and transparency in the provision of ORC services by HAL to ORC users. It is also in the interests of consumers of air passenger services to ensure that ORCs continue to deliver benefits to consumers and to avoid disputes between HAL and airlines (and other ORC users) ending in deadlock”⁹.

We note the relevant background in relation to “Condition F1 (consultation and governance) in HAL’s licence sets out the requirements for HAL to develop and agree the relevant arrangements for consultation and governance but leaves the content and structure of those arrangements largely up to HAL and airlines to work out, other than to follow any guidance from the CAA”¹⁰. We note it is HAL’s obligation to consult on F.1.1 (a) (i) – (vii), and that HAL shall consult on, agree and publish one or more protocols setting out how it will satisfy the obligation in Condition F.1.1. Condition F1.6 states that HAL shall, in consultation with the relevant parties, review the protocols from time to time and update them as necessary, or if directed by the CAA to do so. Where HAL cannot reach agreement with the relevant parties under F1.2 or F1.6, it may refer the matter to the CAA for determination and the CAA may, by notice, determine it.

High level principles for the ORC protocols

Background

We note the CAA’s decision to “modify HAL’s licence to strengthen ORC governance to give certainty to HAL and the airline community as they work together to develop a new ORC protocol”¹¹.

⁶ CAA CAP 2524F, para 1

⁷ CAA CAP 2524F, para 2

⁸ CAA CAP 2524F, para 3

⁹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 4

¹⁰ CAA CAP 2524F, para 5

¹¹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 9

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We agree with the CAA “that there is a pressing need to ensure greater clarity, consultation and transparency across the ORC governance process. Underpinning the ORC protocols in HAL’s licence creates a strong incentive on HAL to do this”¹². We also agree that “it is in the interests of all parties to make the ORC governance process work to ensure that the right costs are allocated to the right parties, which is ultimately in the best interests of consumers”¹³. We will collaborate with other ORC users “to agree a new binding set of ORC conditions in the new ORC protocol”¹⁴.

We agree that the current ORC protocol drafted in 2014 needs to be addressed, in particular:

- “how ORC service requirements are established, procured and agreed;
- how ORC charges are (transparently) challenged, the level of independent assurance on cost allocation and how adjustment mechanisms are developed and implemented;
- description of the appropriate consultation arrangements;
- ORC users’ rights of recourse when things go wrong in the provision of ORC services including payment of penalties and rebates; and
- access to an independent dispute resolution process”¹⁵.

Stakeholders’ views

We are pleased that HAL have agreed it is “important to outline some key principles which would help stakeholders to focus on the important areas and develop a common understanding on the objectives of the protocols”¹⁶.

We note HAL’s position that “the current governance process and information provision on ORCs has been in place since Q6 and should be the starting point for improvements”¹⁷. We disagree with this for the reasons the CAA has already set out i.e. that the existing protocols are not fit for purpose as they fail to effectively address “how ORC service requirements are established, procured and agreed”¹⁸ and “how ORC charges are transparently challenged, the level of independent assurance on cost allocation and how adjustment mechanisms are developed and implemented”¹⁹.

We also disagree with HAL’s position in relation to it meeting “the transparency requirement in its licence”²⁰ for the reasons already set out above by the CAA. It is critical that the principles represent the requirement for transparency to ensure that the ORCs continue to deliver in the best interest of consumers.

We note that HAL disagreed “with the principle that there should be service level equivalence and pointed to the regulatory framework that already incentivises performance through Outcomes Based

¹² CAA CAP 2524F, para 10

¹³ CAA CAP 2524F, para 10

¹⁴ CAA CAP 2524F, para 10

¹⁵ CAA CAP 2524F, para 10

¹⁶ CAA CAP 2524F, para 14

¹⁷ CAA CAP 2524F, para 14

¹⁸ CAA CAP 2524F, para 12

¹⁹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 12

²⁰ CAA CAP 2524F, para 15

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Regulation”²¹. “HAL said that penalties collected from suppliers when performance had not been met were passed back to users through the relevant ORCs”²². However, our view is the current principles do not give rise to the transparency required in order for the users to be able to assess in an open and transparent way as to whether this is the case or not. Our view is that it is “collaboration, consultation and transparency that is required to ensure that the ORCs continue to deliver in the best interests of consumers”²³

We appreciate the CAA setting out the principles that the airline community put forward, which would ultimately underpin a proposed standalone ORC company, we fully support these principles as set out in the LACC/AOC letter to the CAA dated 1 December 2022 as the optimum way to reach complete transparency, which we incorporate by reference and attach a copy to this response.

CAA response to stakeholders’ views

We welcome the CAA’s adoption of “feedback from both HAL the airline community on the need for guidance in the development of the new ORC protocols”²⁴

We are also encouraged by “HAL’s commitment to review the quality and breadth of information that it currently provides ORC users”²⁵ as we have found the quality and breadth of information that HAL currently provides to be inadequate, more frequently than not. In particular, the information provided can often create greater confusion, since it does not step through underlying assumptions in a transparent manner, and sets out variances to HAL’s budgets rather than focussing on drivers of underlying cost.

We agree that “it is in the interests of consumers that there is an independent assurance on ORC charges and cost allocation going forward. The timing and frequency should be the subject of discussion between the airline community and HAL in the development of the new ORC protocols”²⁶. We are particularly concerned by the opaque nature of the ORC finance process, which results in long lead-times to generate numbers after month end, where ORC finances are intermeshed with HAL’s core finances and not automatically and easily separable. This introduces the possibility of error or misjudgement in allocation of costs to ORCs, rather than allowing them to be clearly reportable under their own financial controls independent of HAL’s core business.

However, for this reason, we are disappointed that the CAA is “not convinced that a structural separation of HAL’s ORC business, as suggested by the airline community, is a necessary or proportionate step at this stage of the H7 process”²⁷. Ultimately it is in the best interests of consumers for ORC charges to be entirely transparent and only attributable costs passed through, which, in our view, cannot be assured through the current ORC framework. We would request the CAA reconsider a structural separation to achieve the best outcome for consumers.

²¹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 16

²² CAA CAP 2524F, para 16

²³ CAA CAP 2524F, page 4

²⁴ CAA CAP 2524F, para 20

²⁵ CAA CAP 2524F, para 20

²⁶ CAA CAP 2524F, para 22

²⁷ CAA CAP 2524F, para 23

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We are pleased that the CAA agree with the airline community that there needs “to be a sense of proportionality when considering the views of affected parties”²⁸ so that any one party is not “disproportionately affected by a proposed change”²⁹. We would also request that this issue is addressed by the CAA directly so that HAL cannot use non-airline views to overly influence ORC charging to their benefit.

Proposed Protocol Principles

Collaboration

“The new protocols are to be jointly developed and owned by HAL and airlines and must be binding on both parties. This is particularly important for the dispute resolution function that we describe below”³⁰.

We agree that the new protocols should be jointly developed and owned by HAL and the airlines and must be binding on both parties. Any changes to the new protocols can be made by mutual agreement.

Consultation

“The new protocols should adopt best practice in consultation and engagement, where HAL demonstrably takes into account the views of both airlines and non-airline users. Licence Condition F.1 (Consultation and Governance conditions) contains the consultation requirements that HAL is expected to follow.”³¹

We agree with this principle, however, it should be a new protocol requirement that any consultation pursuant to F1.1 requires agreement, rather than consultation being a ‘tick box’ exercise by HAL. If agreement cannot be reached, then either party may escalate to the CAA. HAL should not be able to implement any changes unilaterally.

Governance

“Have clear frameworks for governance groups and terms of reference (including government committees and their respective roles) for decision making and processes, and should contain:

- *relevant rules, principles and processes for decision making and charge setting including year-end adjustments; and*
- *clear and unambiguous processes to support the above rules and principles for decision making.”³²*

We agree with this principle. It should also be clear that any changes to the governance process and frequency of meetings and attendance should be by agreement. There should also be periodic reviews

²⁸ CAA CAP 2524F, para 24

²⁹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 24

³⁰ CAA CAP 2524F, para 25

³¹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 25

³² CAA CAP 2524F, para 25

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to ensure the framework remains fit for purpose. The terms of reference should include that the minutes should be sent out within 72 hours of the meeting and any slide packs sent 7 days prior to the meeting. Evidence-based transparency should be addressed as that underpins the charge setting.

Transparency

“Linked to governance above, the new ORC protocols should:

- *facilitate reasonable transparency of cost information so that ORC users understand the charges that they are asked to pay;*
- *enable consultation of ORC service users on the scope of any ORC-related procurement so that they have clear visibility of what is being purchased, and that services are fit for purpose; and*
- *drive transparency and accountability by HAL over ORC service and performance levels.”³³*

The new protocols should facilitate **complete** transparency, not just ‘reasonable’ transparency. Users should be permitted to ask questions to a sufficient depth to enable a clear understanding of the charges. Inclusion of ‘reasonable’ enables HAL to assert that a level of transparency is ‘reasonable’ as opposed to complete transparency which is what is required in relation to ORCs. Airlines have witnessed this behaviour in certain ORC balances as HAL have been reluctant to disclose further information despite significant cost increases. As above, there should be evidence-based transparency.

ORC users are partners in the procurement process, jointly agreeing service levels and costs. ORC users must have full visibility of ORC contracts. For HAL to fulfil its duties in relation to Part C of the Licence granted to HAL by the CAA, it should be specified that any contracts between HAL and suppliers for ORC services must be shared and made available in an open and transparent manner. All contracts should contain a clause stating that HAL and the relevant supplier agree that ORC Governance can have sight of terms given the contract relates to ORCs. This should be agreed with suppliers at the start of contract negotiations if they would like to supply a service that is paid for directly by ORC users as an ORC.

There should be an agreed level of service and performance for each ORC category, and any specifications can be amended by mutual agreement.

Equivalence

“Ensure that ‘fit for purpose’ ORC services are delivered to ORC users and that they are in the interest of all parties, in particular to consumers. ORC users who pay for a particular service should benefit from an appropriate level of service, including compensation when services do not meet an existing contractual standard”³⁴.

We agree with this principle. It is critical that the ORC services are ‘fit for purpose’ and that compensation applies when services do not meet an existing contractual standard. It is therefore important that HAL factors in compensation for service level failure in relevant ORC contracts.

³³ CAA CAP 2524F, para 25

³⁴ CAA CAP 2524F, para 25

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Furthermore, ORC users spend a significant amount of money to remedy service level failures by ORC service providers which is inequitable and is clearly not in the best interests of consumers.

If ORC contracts are jointly negotiated and agreed with ORC, and even where this may not be the case, there ought to be full transparency of final ORC contracts between the parties. This should be a completely transparent process and simple to implement. Any impacts to the overall costs of ORC services to the consumer from compensation clauses can then be understood, traded off, negotiated and agreed when the contract is being jointly agreed.

We agree that there should be no “double jeopardy”³⁵ for HAL and that any compensation mechanisms should be aligned so this does not occur.

Our focus is not over recovery, but instead only seek more accurate recovery that is in the interest of all parties, including consumers. ORC users who pay for a particular service should benefit from an appropriate level of service, including compensation when services do not meet an existing contractual standard, as with the majority of contractual arrangements.

Independent assurance

“Build in periodic reviews, which should:

- *ensure ORC pricing is done on a reasonable basis adhering to ORC principles; and*
- *be timed to inform CAA regulatory price control review processes and decisions.”³⁶*

We agree with this principle. Any periodic review should be carried out independently of HAL to validate the process for all parties, and in particular consumers. We also suggest the need for discussion and agreement between the parties on who would undertake any periodic review, to ensure that any chosen reviewer has complete independence and competency. The reviewer should also have the necessary expertise to complete the analysis autonomously to the level of detail required, without the need for over-reliance or explanation from either HAL or the ORC users which could influence the outcome of the review.

Principles for ORC dispute mechanism process

Introduction

We agree with the CAA’s preference “for HAL and ORC users to agree how a dispute resolution function should work and to build that into the new governance arrangements”³⁷. We also agree there “is a need to allow the CAA the opportunity to intervene where meaningful commercial negotiations between parties have broken down and where genuine disputes exist including in establishing the new ORC protocols themselves”³⁸.

³⁵ CAA CAP 2524F, para 16

³⁶ CAA CAP 2524F, para 25

³⁷ CAA CAP 2524F, para 26

³⁸ CAA CAP 2524F, para 27

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We also agree that “Timely resolution of disputes, in an agile and reasonable manner is in the interests of consumers and, in particular, settling disputes and removing any deadlock situations between HAL and ORC users on a fair and reasonable basis”³⁹.

Stakeholders’ views

We note HAL has said it understood the need to be flexible and agile in decision making but considers this should not come at the cost of strong and compelling evidence. HAL also said the dispute resolution function should only be required to resolve disputes solely relating to procedural matters (we disagree with this, as do the CAA, see below).

We agree that a dispute resolution process should only be used where genuine disputes are raised. Full transparency is needed in the process to avoid repetition.

CAA response to stakeholders’ views

We agree with the CAA and HAL “that there should be clear timescales across the entire dispute resolution function, including timescales on the decision maker, whether this is the CAA or another independent person”⁴⁰. We agree “as with all dispute resolution schemes, there will need to be an ability to extend timescales due to exceptional circumstances to allow flexibility around matters beyond the influence of either parties or the dispute or the scheme operator”⁴¹.

We agree that “a flexible and agile dispute resolution function relies heavily on:

- the standard of proof that it makes decisions on; and
- the availability of information sought from the parties to the dispute.”⁴²

We agree with the CAA in that we also “do not agree with HAL that the dispute resolution function should be limited to procedural matters”⁴³. We agree that “to do so risks leaving some significant issues in deadlock, remain unresolved and would counter the purpose of dispute resolution function.

The dispute resolution function is intended to deal with disputes on ORC operational, commercial or procedural (whether the ORC protocols have been followed) matters”⁴⁴. We note the CAA’s confirmation that “Complaints relating to matters concerning HAL’s compliance with its licence will be dealt with by the CAA under the relevant investigation and enforcement procedures under the Civil Aviation Act 2012”⁴⁵.

³⁹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 28

⁴⁰ CAA CAP 2524F, para 33

⁴¹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 33

⁴² CAA CAP 2524F, para 34

⁴³ CAA CAP 2524F, para 35

⁴⁴ CAA CAP 2524F, para 35

⁴⁵ CAA CAP 2524F, para 35

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Principles

“Create a framework where the dispute resolution decision maker should be independent of either party raising a dispute;”⁴⁶

We agree with this principle, and our view is that the dispute resolution maker should be the CAA. The CAA protects consumers’ interests and already has a good understanding of ORCs. Engaging a third party to oversee disputes is likely to add unnecessary cost and complexity to the consumer.

“Allow the dispute resolution decision maker to issue guidance on the process that he/she will follow with the process being quick and relatively inexpensive when compared to regulatory investigation/determination;”⁴⁷

We agree with this principle.

“Facilitate evidence-based decisions (made to a ‘fair and reasonable’ standard of proof) which are binding on both parties;”⁴⁸

We agree with this principle.

“Ensure an accessible, transparent and proportionate process from raising a dispute, right through an enquiry/investigation process and the final decision;”⁴⁹

We agree with this principle.

“Allow the dispute resolution decision maker (whether this is the CAA or another independent person) to refuse to hear certain disputes (for example, on the grounds of materiality and/or subject to certain de minimis levels;”⁵⁰

We agree with this principle.

“Facilitate outcomes that are transparent so that lessons can be learned and repeated disputes on the same issue(s) avoided where possible; and”⁵¹

We agree with this principle, this should avoid repeated disputes on the same issue.

“Enable the timely, efficient, and effective resolution of disputes backed by appropriate time limits (for example, within which disputes should be raised and logged with the dispute resolution scheme).”⁵²

We agree with this principle. Time limits ought to be implemented in the interests of consumers.

⁴⁶ CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

⁴⁷ CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

⁴⁸ CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

⁴⁹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

⁵⁰ CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

⁵¹ CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

⁵² CAA CAP 2524F, para 36

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“Expect the parties to have entered meaningful negotiations prior to raising a dispute and respond to information requests in a true and complete manner. There will be a need for the dispute resolution scheme to have rules on dismissing frivolous requests for disputes, and timelines within which to submit a dispute.”⁵³

We agree with this principle. The dispute resolution scheme should only be engaged as a ‘last resort’.

“Expect the parties to have taken reasonable steps to avoid disputes including demonstrating involvement of senior management in negotiations prior to referring any dispute for resolution.”⁵⁴

We agree with this principle.

Next steps

We note that the guidance is intended to be used by HAL and the airline community to develop the new ORC protocols and dispute resolution function and that should HAL and the airlines be unable to resolve disagreements then these may be escalated to the CAA.

We look forward to receiving the guidance document and remain available for consultation throughout this process.

Yours sincerely,



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⁵³ CAA CAP 2524F, para 37

⁵⁴ CAA CAP 2524F, para 38

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