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Government plans security surcharge on all UK air fares

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Air passengers could face a fresh surcharge on tickets to pay for the escalating price of airport security.

Senior airline industry sources say the plan is being considered by government officials. It is seen as an alternative to taxpayers footing the bill or the airline industry paying the tens of millions of pounds needed for more security staff, training and upgraded equipment.

This would be resisted by airlines which are urging the government to contribute. Steve Ridgway, chief executive of Virgin Atlantic, said: 'It's appropriate that the government steps up to that responsibility and helps provide the right resources to ensure passengers have as smooth an experience as possible.'

BAA, operator of the main UK airports, now pays for unforeseen security costs up to £14m over a five-year period. Paying for the present terror alert will dwarf that figure.

Under regulatory arrangements the airlines would have to pay the extra amount.

But Gehan Talwate, managing director of the aviation consultancy Ascend, said: 'What could be part of the fallout is some kind of security levy, which passengers will probably shoulder. A security levy could be used to pay for an increased number of staff, better training and equipment upgrades and more sniffer equipment.'

The Department for Transport would not comment on financing new security arrangements.

Meanwhile BAA has come under fire from some airline executives for failing to heed advice to recruit security staff. Department for Transport inspectors said last February that the firm needed to hire 160 staff to cope with the increased workload of searching laptops. But BAA confirmed this weekend that it had failed to do so.

BA will hold talks soon with BAA over compensation for income lost through cancellations. Some analysts say BA lost as much as £50m in the days after the alleged terror plot with the industry facing losses of £300m.

BAA has been criticised for failing to cope with security arrangements that led to cancellations, stranded passengers and missing baggage. Some believe this makes it likely that BAA, owner of Heathrow, Stansted and Gatwick, will be broken up by regulators.

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