SLASH AIRPORT TAXES AND REFORM VISAS FOR CHINESE VISITORS, BRITISH AIRWAYS BOSS URGES OSBORNE

News / Airlines, Personalities

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The head of the company behind British Airways has stepped up his campaign to cut aviation taxes and reform visas for Chinese visitors, urging George Osborne, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, to implement the measures to boost tourism to Britain.

Willie Walsh, the chief executive of International Airlines Group, has written a letter to Mr Osborne calling on him to cut Air Passenger Duty (APD), "radically reform" the visa system for Chinese visitors and protect funding for the tourism body VisitBritain.

Mr Walsh made the pleas in his submission to the Comprehensive Spending Review, in which the Treasury has asked departments to find 20 billion pounds in savings over the next four years. APD is "the highest tax of its kind anywhere in the world and acts as a major brake on tourism to the UK and inward investment", Mr Walsh said. He called on the Government to scrap the tax in the light of Scottish plans to halve APD once the power is devolved to Edinburgh, and proposals to devolve the duty in Wales.

Depending on distance travelled and ticket class, the tax costs each traveller between 13 pounds and 142 pounds, and there are worries that English airports will suffer from more passengers choosing to fly from Scotland and Wales if they cut APD. Mr Walsh warned the Government that many voters might consider devolution of the tax as creating an inherent unfairness. He called on APD to be abolished altogether, arguing that this would boost the overall economy.

Mr Walsh also urged the Chancellor to bring the country's visa system for Chinese visitors into line with the United States, which announced last year that it would grant 10-year visas to help boost lucrative tourism from the East.

A 10-year visa to the U.S. costs around 100 pounds. The UK equivalent for Chinese nationals is about 800 pounds. Mr Walsh said given the U.S. and China are the world's two biggest economies, the UK should offer visitors from both equal access.

Visits from China to the UK fell by 7.6 percent to 185,000 last year and spending by Chinese nationals in Britain dropped by 1 percent, according to Office for National Statistics data released in May. Campaigners, including Mr Walsh, have been lobbying the Government to make it easier for Chinese nationals to enter the country so British businesses can benefit from tourism spending.

VisitBritain is the country's national tourism agency, and Mr Walsh said its funding should be maintained, despite the prospect of cuts elsewhere.

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