

Heathrow Airport Expansion and Increased Capacity

The Government launched its consultation into expansion at Heathrow on 23rd November 2007. It will last until 27th February 2008. The Government expects to make a decision later in 2008. If the plans go ahead, the number of planes could rise from 473,000 a year to over 720,000. This will require the demolition of hundreds, even thousands, of homes. It will also bring more noise disturbance and increase climate change emissions.

Former Aviation Minister Gillian Merron told Parliament early in 2007 that flight numbers could reach 800,000 if a third runway goes ahead and runway alternation on the existing runways is abolished.

The increased use and expansion of Heathrow is opposed by the Mayor, Ken Livingstone and GLA Assembly Members. Simon Jenkins wrote in the Sunday Times "All we do know is that the government's case for a third Heathrow runway is so thin as to amount to a single sentence: BA wants it." John McDonnell MP, (Labour) Hayes and Harlington said "If Heathrow gets its third runway this will mean the forced relocation of 10,000 people. It will be the biggest clearance since the Highland clearances."

A third runway would be built between the A4 and M4, north of the existing airport. It would require the demolition of over 750 houses, including the entire village of Sipson. Many thousands of people would lose their homes and schools would be demolished.

The expansion is not necessary. 78% of businesses in London oppose it (London Chamber of Commerce Report 2006). There is no hard evidence to show that the UK economy will suffer if Heathrow doesn't expand. Indeed, the evidence suggests that proximity to a major airport is not the critical factor when businesses are deciding where to locate.

It will contribute to climate change. Aviation already accounts for 13% of UK global warming emissions and is the fastest-growing contributor to climate change. The number of cars and taxis using the airport will increase significantly. Almost three out of four airport staff drive to work at Heathrow every day, clocking up a total of 45,000 car trips. The number of employees will increase significantly with Terminal 5, Terminal 6 and a third runway, yet BAA has set a target for their car use reduction of only 1% a year. The Government claims that its studies show that, even if these expansion proposals go ahead, pollution levels will stay within the EU legal limits. In many places they already exceed those limits.

Aircraft noise will become a problem for many more people. At least 150,000 people will be under the flight path to the new runway, most of them experiencing aircraft noise for the first time. And the prospect for people living under the existing flight paths is frightening: a plane every 90 seconds virtually throughout the day.

The Government has not made it clear where new flight paths will be, claiming it is only in a position to show 'indicative' routes. But, because planes need to be lined with the runway at least 6-8 miles from touchdown, it is clear that the new landing flight path will be over Holland Park and High St Kensington, the northern parts of Earls Court, Hammersmith, Central Chiswick and north Brentford, before planes sweep in over Heston.

At present, 'planes landing over West London switch runways at 3pm in order to give people in West London a half day's peace and quiet. The Government is proposing to stop this.

The Economics

Current airport

- Less than 40% of users of Heathrow are travelling on Business.
- 35% of people travelling to Heathrow are interchange passengers – they never leave the airport. Therefore they contribute little to the UK economy outside of the aviation industry.
- 100,000 flights a year, nearly a fifth of all flights, are to destinations in the UK or near-Europe where there is already a viable rail alternative. There are 60 flights per day to Paris and 36 flights a day to Manchester.
- London's airports handle 128M passengers a year – more than airports serving Paris and Frankfurt combined.

Heathrow expansion

- Only 1% of members of the Institute of Directors think airport expansion is a priority.
- 78% of London firms are against expansion at Heathrow.
- Less than a sixth of London firms would even consider leaving London if the airport did not expand.

Aviation generally

- £9 billion a year in tax subsidies is given to the aviation industry (It is zero-rated for VAT.)
- Aviation fuel costs 26p a litre whereas petrol for cars is about £1 a litre.
- 89% of the general public think that business that create pollution should be more heavily taxed.
- 63% of the general public would be prepared to sacrifice one foreign holiday a year to save the planet.
- Only 17% of the general public are opposed to constraining growth in air-travel.
- Tourists visiting the UK spend at least £15 billion pounds less per year than UK tourists going on holiday overseas. Expanding aviation simply means increasing the trade deficit for UK tourism.