

London's airport problem

Heathrow: our solution

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Expanding Heathrow westwards could give London the airport capacity it needs at reasonable cost



LAST year, when Britain's government was being lobbied to revive controversial plans to expand Heathrow airport, ministers dodged the issue using the time-honoured technique of setting up a committee of grandees. Further heat was taken out

of the debate when the Department for Transport downgraded its forecasts for passenger growth. Having predicted just before the financial crisis that 495m passengers a year would want to use Britain's airports by 2030, it now puts the potential demand by then at just 320m. But that is still 100m more than passed through British airports last year. Even by the latest forecasts, London's five airports will have to turn away about 13m passengers a year by 2030, rising to 46m in 2040 and 92m in 2050. Some scope exists for them to switch to regional airports but the potential for lost growth, as business trips are skipped and foreign tourists give London a miss, is great.

Although a fix for London's airport crunch is a little less urgent than it seemed last year, more capacity needs to be built. Heathrow, the main international hub, handled 70m passengers last year, and is operating beyond all sensible limits to its capacity. The slightest setback can cause extensive cancellations and delays.

The capital's other airports, Stansted especially, have some spare capacity, but passengers and airlines prefer Heathrow because of its many flight connections and better links to central London. And the other airports' spare room will have been used up by the late 2020s. This is the earliest it would take to build any new runways, given the difficulty of getting planning permission for big projects.

Stuck in a holding pattern

On coming to power in 2010 the coalition government scrapped a plan, approved by its Labour predecessor and supported enthusiastically by the airport's owners, to let Heathrow build a third runway to the north of its existing two. The coalition was right. Even if a third runway increased Heathrow's capacity by around 50%, growing demand would significantly have outrun the increase in supply of landing slots. And it would bring no relief for the 725,000 or so residents of west London who suffer excessive noise (though aircraft are getting a bit quieter).

London's mayor, Boris Johnson, has been among those arguing that the answer is to build a massive new airport to the east of the capital, perhaps on an artificial structure in the Thames estuary, dubbed "Boris Island". His proposal would indeed beat a third runway at Heathrow on two important grounds: it would have enough capacity to handle the growth in passenger numbers for many decades ahead, and, being in a relatively unpopulated area, would torment far fewer people with noise. Building a completely new airport and all its road and rail links would be costly, though. A recent parliamentary report reckoned that up to £30 billion (\$45 billion) of public subsidy might be needed.

If this were China, whose economy is growing and changing swiftly, that might make sense. But Heathrow's location has shaped the economy of the capital and the M4 corridor. Moving Britain's main airport would thus cause great disruption. Heathrow would have to close to make its replacement viable. Its managers reckon that it employs around 110,000 people, including the caterers and hotels on its periphery. Countless other businesses in west London and up the Thames valley have set up there to be close to Heathrow. If the purpose of airport expansion is to help lay the foundations for faster economic growth, then sabotaging one of the country's most successful business clusters is an odd way to go about it.

Sorry Ma'am, one must go west

The second reason not to go for a completely new airport is that there are alternatives. One is to let Gatwick, and later Stansted, build extra runways. A few more people at each of these airports would suffer higher noise levels as a result, but their numbers would be small compared with those at Heathrow. The people who run Heathrow strongly oppose this, arguing that it is "one hub or none": London would lose its direct connections to lots of emerging-market cities if flights were increasingly split between airports. This is an exaggeration. Having a single hub does bring advantages, but competition and choice bring benefits too. Under a split-hub policy, the existing jobs and businesses around Heathrow could stay put, but any growth would mostly come at the other airports.

The best option, however, is to expand Heathrow not to its north, but to the west, by building up to four new runways over what is now a reservoir. Although detailed noise studies have yet to be done on this proposal, simply moving the runways a couple of kilometres to the left offers the scope for almost doubling Heathrow's capacity while significantly reducing the numbers of those subjected to oppressive din (see pages 29-32). Capacity would be provided where the demand is: the high price of landing slots at Heathrow shows how badly airlines want to be there. People and companies would not be forced to migrate across town. The public subsidy required should be relatively modest. Works to improve Heathrow's rail links are already under way. This proposal would create some new victims of aircraft noise—including perhaps the residents of Windsor Castle, who have some influence with decision-makers—but far larger numbers of commoners in west London would enjoy a quieter life. It could also be built in stages, as demand grows.

The chairman of the Airports Commission, Sir Howard Davies, has said he will look at the Heathrow West idea. Although the commission has been told to delay its final report until after the 2015 election, it is promising to draw some firm conclusions in its interim report, which is due later this year. It should start by ruling out all proposals for entirely new airports, and rejecting any revival of Heathrow's old third-runway plan. Then it should offer a clear evaluation of the two remaining, sensible options—expanding Heathrow westwards or adding runways at Gatwick and then Stansted. On the evidence so far, going west is best. ■

1080 words

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