

Investigation into airport capacity in London

Transport Committee

Introduction

The London Assembly's Transport Committee is investigating airport capacity in London with a view to producing a submission to the Government's independent airports commission led by Sir Howard Davies.

Aim of investigation

The purpose of this investigation is to contribute to the topical debate on airport capacity. The Committee will explore the arguments for and against changing existing airport capacity in the capital including analysing current capacity and current and future estimates of demand for air travel. The Committee will also explore options for addressing the issue of airport capacity in the short, medium and long-term including the scope for more rational use of existing airport capacity.

The investigation will provide for the Committee to identify issues that the Government's independent airports commission should take into account when considering the arguments relating to airport capacity and the potential options.

The Committee will seek to have an impact by conducting a public interrogation of the arguments and options relating to airport capacity and by persuading the Government's independent airports commission of issues that it should consider in its work. The Committee will also seek to hold the Mayor to account for his work on airport capacity.

Terms of reference

The terms of reference for this investigation are:

- To examine the arguments for and against changing existing airport capacity in London including analysing current capacity and current and future estimates of demand for air travel;
- To explore the different options for addressing airport capacity in the short, medium and long-term including the scope for more rational use of existing airport capacity; and
- To set out findings in a written submission to the Government's independent airports commission by May 2013.

Background

Airport capacity in London

London has five principal airports with a total of six commercial runways. These airports are: Heathrow; Gatwick; Stansted, Luton, and London City airport.¹ There are also other airports near London such as Southend.

Heathrow has unique status as a major international hub airport. A hub airport is a location at which flights are organised in waves of arrivals and departures in order to allow large volumes of passengers to make a wide range of connections.²

¹The Mayor's 'A New Airport for London – Part 1', January 2011, Chapter 6

²The Mayor's 'A New Airport for London – Part 1', January 2011, Chapter 6

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The debate on changing airport capacity

Airport capacity is defined by: runway capacity (aircraft slots available for landing and taking-off); terminal capacity (number of passengers that can be safely processed); and airspace capacity (Air Traffic Control (ATC) imposes limits).³

The Mayor, the aviation industry and business groups suggest runway capacity is rapidly running out in London. They argue that London's airports already operate close to capacity – Heathrow is reportedly operating at 99 per cent runway capacity⁴ – and will reach full capacity by 2030 because demand for aviation travel is increasing.

The Mayor and others call for urgent action to increase runway capacity because aviation is central to the capital's economy. In particular, aviation provides the interconnectivity that makes London a global city. The Mayor suggests 'if [aviation] capacity is constrained in the longer run, there is a substantial risk that...investment, business transactions and productive firms will be lost to alternative locations. The relative connectivity of London will deteriorate...'5

By contrast, aviation and environmental campaigning groups suggest there is no crisis in runway capacity. AirportWatch argues London remains the best-connected city in Europe with more flights to key business destinations in every continent except South America.⁶ Moreover, it and other organisations,

query the estimated increase in demand for aviation travel. The Aviation Environment Federation (AEF) suggests that the Government's forecasts of aviation passengers have been revised downwards four times since 2003 and remain too high because of certain assumptions. AEF also argues that the great majority of any growth in demand is for leisure and not business travel so there would be no major loss of trade if runway capacity did not increase.⁷

In recent years many people have argued that it is in London's economic interest to avoid more environmental damage from aviation. They point to the adverse effects of the existing airports in terms of noise and air pollution. For them, demand for air travel should be constrained and alternative more sustainable modes of transport championed.

This investigation will provide an opportunity to explore the arguments for and against changing existing airport capacity in London. The Committee will examine the economic and environmental implications building on existing Assembly work on these issues and analyse current airport capacity and the current and future estimates of demand for aviation travel including the basis for these estimates.

The options for addressing airport capacity

Various options have been proposed for addressing the issue of airport capacity in London. Some of these options are detailed below.

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³ The Mayor's 'A New Airport for London – Part 1', January 2011, Chapter 6

⁴ The Mayor's 'A New Airport for London – Part 1', January 2011, Chapter 6

⁵ The Mayor's 'A New Airport for London – Part 1', January 2011, p7

⁶ Airport Watch and WWF report, 'International Air Connectivity for Business', 2011

⁷ Aviation Environment Federation briefing, 12 October 2012

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- **More rational use of existing airport capacity.**

Some argue existing airport capacity should be managed differently to better meet demand e.g. there should be fewer short-haul flights to free up capacity for more long-haul flights for business. In 2006 Airport Watch argued that the number of flights at Heathrow could be cut by around 25 per cent a year (100,000) if there were no flights to and from destinations with good rail alternatives e.g. Paris and Edinburgh.⁸

- **Change flight patterns to increase flights** e.g. allow both landing and takeoff (mixed mode) on runways or more night flights at Heathrow. There is strong opposition to this proposal. The Assembly has unanimously opposed an increase in flights at Heathrow on the grounds of the adverse effects on the health and quality of life of Londoners.⁹

- **Build a third runway at Heathrow.** This is championed by parts of the aviation industry (Heathrow Ltd (formerly BAA) and British Airways (BA)) and some business groups as the most easily deliverable option. There is strong opposition to this proposal. The Assembly has unanimously opposed the third runway on economic and environmental grounds. The Mayor also opposes a third runway, arguing that it would also fail to provide the extra hub capacity required.

- **Combine Heathrow with Gatwick to create 'Heathwick'** A 180 mph high-speed rail link could

create a double-hub airport with a second runway built at Gatwick. Recently Gatwick Airport Ltd announced its intention to develop options for a second runway.¹⁰ There is local opposition to expansion of Gatwick on the grounds of noise and air pollution. Parts of the aviation industry (Heathrow Ltd, BA, Easyjet and Ryanair) are also opposed.

- **Use RAF Northolt as a passenger airport linked to Heathrow.** A high-speed rail link could link the two sites. Issues have been raised about this proposal including that the runway at Northolt is aligned the wrong way. Both the Mayor of London and local MPs have publicly dismissed this proposal.¹¹

- **Build more runways at Stansted.** Some, including Ryanair, argue that this is the best option because Stansted is located outside London with more space for expansion. Others argue Stansted suffers from a poor reputation as a provider of low-cost flights and is poorly connected to London.

- **Build a new airport in the Thames estuary.** The Mayor has led calls for a new four runway, 24 hour hub airport in the Thames Estuary at an estimated cost of some £50 billion. He has suggested this will deliver the extra airport capacity required and help to regenerate east London. The proposal has been criticised on many grounds including: its potentially adverse impact on Heathrow¹²; its costs including an estimated £30 billion

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⁸ Airport Watch, Short-Haul Flights: Clogging up Heathrow's Runways, 2006

⁹ Assembly motion, 16 June 2010

¹⁰ Gatwick Airport Ltd press release, 17 October 2012

¹¹ <http://ruislip.uxbridgegazette.co.uk/2012/03/heathrow-satellite-plan-for-ra.html>

¹² Assembly motion, 20 June 2012

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from taxpayers for the necessary transport links; its environmental impact in terms of CO2 emissions and on local wildlife; and practicalities e.g the need to remove the sunken SS Richard Montgomery warship which is loaded with explosives.

- **Build a new hub airport somewhere else.** Over the years various sites for new airports have been suggested e.g. Cublington in Buckinghamshire¹³ and, more recently, immediately west of Heathrow.¹⁴ Similar issues are likely to be raised about the building of a new airport in any location e.g. the local environmental impacts, the potential high costs and the long timescales for completion.
- **Expand the role of the UK's regional airports.** Airports such as Birmingham may have spare runway capacity to help meet demand. However, parts of the aviation industry argue many people do not want to fly to and from places that are far away from London.

This investigation will provide an opportunity to consider all the different options for addressing the issue of airport capacity in London in the short, medium and long-term. The Committee will explore the issues that need to be taken into account when assessing each option including the potential costs and the practicalities such as suitable transport links, as well as the overall question of need for airport capacity.

The Government's independent airports commission

In September 2012 the Government announced an independent commission led by Sir Howard Davies would investigate maintaining the UK's status as an international hub for aviation.

On 2 November 2012, the Government announced the membership of the Airports Commission and its terms of reference. The Airports Commission is to produce an interim report by December 2013 with recommendations for immediate actions to improve the use of existing runway capacity in the next five years. The Airports Commission will produce a final report by summer 2015 with recommendations for the approach that should be taken to meet the UK's international connectivity needs.¹⁵

The Airports Commission is the latest development in government work on airport capacity. Ten years ago the then government concluded that the capacity of UK airports was an 'important constraint on future growth' and expressed support for runway expansion at Heathrow and Stansted.¹⁶ In 2010 the current government cancelled plans for the third runway at Heathrow and made it clear it would refuse permission for new runways at Gatwick and Stansted.

This investigation will provide an opportunity for the Committee to contribute views and information to the Government's independent Airports Commission.

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¹³ The Roskill Commission in 1971 concluded that this was the best option

¹⁴ Policy Exchange report, Bigger and Quieter, October 2012

¹⁵ See DfT website: <http://www.dft.gov.uk/news/press-releases/dft-press-20121102a>

¹⁶ Government White Paper, The Future of Air Transport, 2003

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The Mayor's work on airport capacity

Airport capacity is a key issue for the Mayor. In 2011, he published two reports on the case for a new hub airport in London. In September 2012, he appointed Daniel Moylan as his lead adviser on aviation to develop his aviation strategy and “spearhead a new aviation policy unit.”¹⁷

Recently the Mayor's position on the location of a new hub airport has shifted. He is no longer wedded to the Thames Estuary, suggesting Stansted also merits consideration as a location.¹⁸ TfL is due to produce the third report in the case for a new hub airport later this year. The third report will explore a number of location options for a new hub airport, and possible delivery models.¹⁹

This investigation will provide an opportunity for the Committee to explore the Mayor's previous work and reports on airport capacity and his future work on this issue.

Other work taking place on aviation capacity

Airport capacity is the subject of much debate. Many parts of the aviation industry, environmental campaign groups, local authorities and other stakeholders will now be assembling views and information to submit to the Airports Commission. This includes the Transport Select Committee which has launched an inquiry into the Government's

aviation strategy. The Select Committee is likely to hold evidence gathering meetings in the next few months and produce its findings next year.²⁰

Relevant past Assembly work on aviation

The Transport Committee's investigation will build on the Assembly's considerable past work on aviation. In the last ten years the Assembly has frequently opposed plans for expanding Heathrow, finding there was an insufficient economic case for expansion and inadequate proposals for addressing the environmental costs and impacts.

Most recently the Health & Environment Committee published its response to the Government's consultation on its draft aviation policy framework. This set out the Committee's concerns about the impact of aviation on climate change, noise levels and air quality.²¹ The response followed the former Environment Committee's reports *Flights of Fancy* (2010) and *Plane Speaking* (March 2012).

Questions for the investigation

During the investigation the Transport Committee will seek to answer the following key questions:

- What are the arguments for and against changing existing airport capacity in London? What is the evidence in support of these arguments?

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¹⁷ Mayor's press release, 12 September 2012

¹⁸ Mayor's response to the Government's draft aviation policy framework October 2012

¹⁹ Transport Commissioner report, TfL Board meeting, 20 September 2012

²⁰ Further details available online at: www.parliament.uk

²¹ Available online at: <http://www.london.gov.uk/publication/aviation-policy-framework-consultation-response>

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- What are the current levels of airport capacity and the current and future estimates of demand for aviation travel? What is the basis for the estimates?
- What are the options in the short, medium and long-term for addressing the issue of airport capacity?
- What issues need to be taken into account when assessing each option for addressing airport capacity?

Details of the investigation

The Committee will seek written submissions and hold two public meetings to gather views and information for its submission to the Airports Commission. It will appoint an external expert to provide technical advice and support throughout this work.

The Committee will invite written submissions by the end of 2012 from a wide range of organisations including:

- The Mayor/Mayoral adviser on aviation and TfL;
- The aviation industry including London's airport operators and airlines;
- The Civil Aviation Authority;
- National Air Traffic Service;
- London Boroughs and London Councils;
- Aviation campaign groups e.g Airport Watch and AEF;
- Environmental and wildlife organisations e.g RSPB;
- Residents organisations;
- Business representative groups and businesses; and
- Academics and transport commentators.

The Committee will also seek Londoners' views on airport capacity. The investigation will be publicised on the London Assembly website and through social media.

The Committee will use the written submissions received to inform discussion at two public meetings on 15 January and 6 February 2013. It may use its first meeting to hear from relevant stakeholders on the cases for and against changing existing airport capacity and its second meeting to hear from relevant stakeholders on the different options for addressing the issue of airport capacity.

Following its public meetings, the Committee will publish its findings. It will set out the issues that should be considered in relation to airport capacity in a written submission to the Airports Commission by May 2013.

Timetable for the investigation

This investigation will take place from November 2012 to May 2013. The stages in the investigation will include:

- Agreement of terms of reference: 13 November 2012
- Desk-based research/gather written views and information: November 2012 - February 2013;
- Formal meetings: 15 January and 6 February 2013; and
- Produce findings: By May 2013.

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How to contribute to the investigation

The Transport Committee welcomes written views and information to inform its investigation. Written submissions should aim to address the questions outlined above.

Please send written submissions to Laura Warren, London Assembly, City Hall, The Queen's Walk, London SE1 2AA, or email: laura.warren@london.gov.uk.

The Committee would welcome receiving written submissions by **Friday 28 December 2012** so they may be used to inform its meetings in early 2013.

About the Transport Committee

The Transport Committee examines all aspects of the capital's transport system in order to press for improvements for Londoners. The Committee pays particular attention to how the Mayor's Transport Strategy is being implemented, and the work of TfL.

The membership of the Transport Committee and details of its work are available on its [website](#)

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