

Mary Macleod MP written submission to the Airports Commission – July 2013

As a local Member of Parliament, I believe it is important for me to ensure that the voices of local residents are not forgotten in this UK aviation debate which is why I am taking the opportunity to write to you now.

My comments have been driven by three major objectives:

1. Maintain and develop an aviation industry in the UK that is world-class.
2. Reduce noise, congestion and pollution for local residents.
3. Boost the economy through trade and tourism.

Given that I am a West London MP, my comments predominantly relate to the future of Heathrow airport, however I do believe it is important that we consider the full UK aviation map when assessing future options for the industry.

I have been involved in the Heathrow debate for many years now and have consulted many hundreds of residents. Overall, my aspirations are for a 'better, not bigger' Heathrow, with continued respite from noise from runway alternation and a ban on night flights.

Why I believe that expansion of Heathrow is not an option

In 2011 a CAA study reported that almost 30% of people unduly affected by the noise of aircraft across the whole of Europe live under the Heathrow flightpaths. This figure has now been validated by the Airports Commission own discussion paper which shows that Heathrow is in a league of its own when it comes to aircraft noise.¹

Teachers in the Hounslow area already find that Heathrow noise reduces pupils' ability to learn by a third and have resorted to noise insulated 'igloos' to give children respite from the constant disruption.

If you add to this the issues of poor air quality that already exist in the area, which would only be exacerbated by increasing the number of flights and consequent surface journeys to the airport, you have a very bleak picture indeed for local residents. The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson summed this up when he described any potential expansion of Heathrow as an "environmental disaster".

Short to medium term proposals

Improving operations at Heathrow

Heathrow airport is currently operating very close to its overall cap on flights of 480,000 per annum. However, it is not technically correct to say, as we hear often in the media, that Heathrow is 'full'. In fact Heathrow does have room for expansion in terms of the number of passengers it handles. Indeed, with the opening of Terminal 2 in 2014, it will be able to handle 95 million passengers – a significant potential increase in capacity of 36%.

In the short to medium term therefore, Heathrow does have the potential for expansion if it works with the airlines to plan operations in the most efficient way.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/aviation-noise-discussion-paper>

Heathrow airport has put the case very strongly that we need to extend the number of destinations we fly to, especially in China and other expanding economies.

Certainly it seems crazy that VIP planes carrying only a handful of passengers, short distance flights and holiday charter planes are still able to obtain slots at Heathrow if each of those 480,000 slots is so critical to the wellbeing of the UK economy.

The South East Airports Taskforce looked at ways to improve the efficiency of operations at Heathrow, resulting in the Operational Freedoms Trials over the last two years. Interestingly, many of the measures trialled such as the dual use of runways have not delivered the efficiency benefits that many had hoped for. Heathrow airport themselves have said that it caused too much pain to local residents who lost their respite from noise to justify the minor operational improvements achieved.

I believe there are two critical factors in the debate on airport efficiency that have yet to be fully addressed:

- The management of slots.
- Ensuring the right planes are used at Heathrow.

The management of slots

The legality of the system is somewhat opaque but in practice the airlines own and control the slots at Heathrow airport. Therefore airlines like BA, who control the majority of the slots at Heathrow, already have it within their power to extend the number of destinations served by the airport should they choose to do so.

We need a revolution in the way that slots are allocated and managed with airlines no longer able to hang on to slots they don't really need. This could be linked to load capacities to encourage airlines to ensure that planes are always as full as possible before they fly. The average load capacity at Heathrow is around 70% overall compared to the figure quoted by EasyJet for their own planes of around 90%.

Ensuring the right planes are used at Heathrow

The technology of aircraft design is changing significantly, providing greater options in terms of the size of plane and the distance that can be travelled without the need to refuel.

The Boeing B787 'Dreamliner' has been designed to carry up to 290 people – far fewer than the larger Airbus A380. Its lighter design and lower fuel consumption mean that it is able to fly distances that were uneconomical on older aircraft of a similar size. It has been described as the 'hub buster' as it doesn't rely so heavily on transfer passengers via a hub to ensure its viability.

Of course, this doesn't mean that larger planes shouldn't be used – assuming that the load capacity can be achieved. On high demand routes, having larger planes makes perfect sense. For example Singapore Airlines has replaced all its fleet with the Airbus A380's that can carry around 500 passengers each.

We already have operational bans on certain planes at Heathrow during the night quota period. We could look at extending such procedures to encourage the use of the optimum aircraft size, for example banning the smallest planes and those with insufficient load capacity percentages.

Looking beyond Heathrow

Looking at the picture beyond Heathrow, we must make effective use of all UK airports. Although London is certainly the powerhouse of the UK economy, we have a responsibility and an opportunity to drive economic growth and create jobs across the regions.

Birmingham airport has recently announced direct flights to Delhi with Air India and are in detailed talks with several Chinese carriers to open up direct flights to China. William Wang, managing director of the Chinese-owned, British-based carmaker MG Motor UK points out that “The UK’s manufacturing base is not near Heathrow. So why do I have to fly from there?”

Similarly, Gatwick airport already operates direct flights to Beijing with Air China. I believe that customers, given the choice would always prefer to fly direct – if it is competitively priced why would customers want to have a non-direct flight when they can fly directly to their choice of destination?

We need to continue to focus on marketing other cities like Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool and support them in developing economic ties, particularly with the developing BRIC economies and those across Asia.

Connectivity across the whole country will therefore be vital and we must prioritise developments like HS1 and HS2 in a joined-up approach to developing UK infrastructure.

Where we can we should encourage people to use high speed rail services for shorter distances. Many already choose to do this. For example companies in West London often choose to travel to Paris via the Eurostar rather than flying from Heathrow because it is a better service that takes them right into the heart of the city.

Long term options

There is still some debate about whether we really need to extend the number of runways across London. Indeed the Richmond Heathrow Campaign has undertaken detailed analysis that shows that, given the right measures in place to constrain demand, and significant improvements to efficiency, we could fulfil demand without the development of any further runways.

This is probably not the most widely held view and I know that the Airports Commission team will have studied in detail the air traffic forecasts to identify the certainty with which there is a need for additional aviation capacity.

If we assume there is the need for additional aviation capacity, I am open to the suggestion of a new airport to the east of London. This would enable the development of an innovative airport that is a truly world class airport, showcasing all that is great about British industry. Also, far fewer residents would be unduly affected by noise by any of the options outlined to the east of London.

In this situation, the future of Heathrow then comes into question. Critical to this debate is whether you believe the views being put forward by Heathrow airport and others that a four runway ‘hub’

airport is the only viable approach to development. In this scenario, Heathrow airport would close and hub operations transfer to the new location.

I believe that the argument for the criticality of hub operations has been overplayed, primarily by those that stand to benefit most from maintaining them. Carolyn McCall, Chief Executive of EasyJet described hub operations as the “business model of 30 years ago” when she gave evidence to the Airports Commission. She stressed that point-to-point flights account for around 90% of all passenger journeys in the UK.²

I tend to believe that in a metropolis as large as London, a ‘network’ airport model makes most sense. Passengers already treat the whole network of London airports as a flexible hub model, often travelling in and out of different airports according to the convenience of flight times and the cost of flights. It is more convenient for businesspeople travelling to the City to fly into the East of London, whether at City airport or at a new airport. But for those businesses to the West of London, Heathrow will always be a better option.

Transport connectivity across the whole of London is vital to make this model work and we must relook at transport connections and future plans with this in mind.

The Heathrow experience overall may not be at the level that we might like right now. However, in Terminal 5 and the soon-to-be-opened Terminal 2, we have some excellent facilities and logistical capability. I would like to keep Heathrow into the long term, perhaps a slimmed-down version with fewer flights to disturb local residents and a greatly improved customer experience. Operating with greater contingency would enable less circling before landing, reducing pollution and aircraft noise and would ensure that unexpected delays or weather conditions are handled more effectively.

Heathrow airport could specialise in flights either by region, by type of flight or by carrier. It could be used exclusively by BA for example, with other carriers moving to the new airport or it could focus on business flights with a premium level of service and minimal delays and inconvenience throughout the journey (similar to the existing model at City airport).

Keeping Heathrow would ensure increased market choice and competition and would support point-to-point flights to and from the destination of choice – destination London and the UK.

² http://corporate.easyjet.com/media/latest-news/news-year-2013/10-07-2013-en.aspx?sc_lang=en