



A Confident & Forward Looking Britain Would Build an Offshore Airport

Written by Adam Afriyie MP



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Research Secretary: Peter Smith

Edited by: Edward Barrett-Shortt

Adam Afriye MP argues that an offshore Airport is the only long-term solution for Britain.

London and the South East needs more airport capacity, that is simply a fact. We can continue to dither with the sticking-plaster approach of a new runway here and there every ten years or so, or we can have the foresight and economic sense to build an airport that will keep Britain at the top of the world trade and interconnectivity tables for good.

London's population will pass ten million by 2030, with an additional nine million people living in the surrounding South East of England¹. Meanwhile, London's largest airport, Heathrow, is already running at 98.5% of its runway capacity, and Gatwick is predicted to be full within fifteen years.

Airports are hugely important to the UK. Not only do they open our country to tourists, businesses and investors, they provide jobs and help drive economic growth and regeneration. In Hong Kong, for example, a new offshore airport was built in 1998. Within a decade, a new exhibition centre, a Disneyland Theme Park and a new residential area had opened outside of the city centre near the airport, attracted by the huge capacity for growth. If we want to maintain the UK's position as an attractive destination for investment, ensuring good job prospects for our citizens, then a bold, forward-looking aviation strategy is key.

If we fail to hold our own, we risk falling further behind our international rivals in Europe and in Middle Eastern countries like the United Arab Emirates. If fewer flights arrive in the UK, then Britain will gradually become less attractive to investors. And that's not to mention the problems that will be caused for passengers – imagine families who are looking forward to their holiday having to book two flights, or even three, in each direction because the airport does not provide direct flights. This will prove increasingly unacceptable for the public in an age where customers can, and do, demand more.

We want a solution that's best for tourists and inward investors

We should seek a long-term solution that gives the best travel experience for inbound holidaymakers and investors. We want to attract tourists and business travellers to Britain. So, where possible, we should make interchanges between flights and other modes of transport, like rail and sea, quick, simple and efficient. This will send a message to the rest of the world that Britain is open for business and that the UK's infrastructure is geared towards international business and travel. This isn't possible

at Heathrow: its terminals and runways have developed over the last 70 years without a keen eye to efficiency, speed and customer experience. It can often take an hour or more to travel between terminals – not a pleasurable experience for travellers.

We must also consider what the best solution is for local residents. As a Windsor resident and the local MP, I have experienced first-hand the enormous disturbance caused by aircraft overhead day and night, and I am not alone. I receive piles of letters each month from constituents who are rightfully angry about the level of noise they suffer from planes taking off and landing at Heathrow, often in the middle of the night. If a third runway were built immediately, up to one million people would live within the crucial 55 decibel noise contour², with hundreds of thousands more exposed to lower-level aircraft noise pollution.

Heathrow Airport Ltd. claims that it's important to Britain's global prosperity that they retain its position as a "hub" airport - a position designed to further entrench its virtual monopoly with a hefty public subsidy. Heathrow is essentially arguing that a publicly funded vice-like grip on an industry through gradual monopolisation is an acceptable part of a free market. It is not. Of course, Heathrow wants to expand and further dominate the market. It's a business and it wants to succeed. But as we all know, consumers benefit in a market where there is fair and healthy competition – this would not be the case with an expanded Heathrow.

Heathrow expansion is not fit for the 21st Century

How do we solve this aviation capacity crunch? The answer from the Airports Commission has been to recommend a third runway at Heathrow, while leaving Gatwick expansion on the table as a “credible” alternative. But this conclusion is rather myopic. What happens when we need two, three or four more runways? And we will. Haphazardly building a single runway here or there as we hit the capacity wall is not the best approach for an ambitious, vibrant country with a long-term economic plan.

Let’s not forget, Heathrow was never intended to be the country’s largest airport. It was initially built as an airfield during the Second World War. By the time construction was completed in 1946, the war had already ended. What to do with a spare airfield? Turn it into a commercial airport – and so Heathrow was born. Today, its noise affects almost four times more people than any other airport in Europe, over the established 55 decibel threshold. It’s no wonder that so many local and national groups from residents associations, from environmentalists, to a spate of local councils opposing the plans for a third runway. No sensible planner with a smidgen of foresight would choose to locate a nation’s largest airport so that low altitude flights overfly its most densely populated areas.

Heathrow is not located in an area amenable to major expansion. The ludicrous plan for expansion includes the introduction of a congestion charge for people dropping off relatives at the airport, re-tunnelling the M25 (the busiest motorway in the country) to avoid the new runway, relocation of a nearby waste management plant, and restriction on flights at nearby RAF Northolt³. Years of development would immediately be followed by calls for further expansion. It’s clear that sticking with Heathrow expansion would prove a catastrophic decision that works best for Heathrow Airport Ltd. and its shareholders, but not for British citizens.

More importantly, the hub argument is unravelling in a world where new long-distance jets have become the standard. New aircraft can travel non-stop from London to Australia, and within a matter of years, they will have all but replaced the current models that need to stop to refuel during long flights. The killer blow to the hub argument is that the airlines themselves don't buy Heathrow's model with over 90% of new orders for the smaller point-to-point long-distance aircraft⁴. Within this century, those stopovers in Hong Kong, Singapore or Abu Dhabi are likely to become a thing of the past. As point-to-point journeys become ubiquitous, the concept of hub airports will gradually fade.

If we allow Heathrow to increase their monopoly, then we risk customers paying higher prices for poorer services modelled on an outdated view of the aviation industry. Monopolies are never healthy, no matter how they are justified.

Gatwick would save the taxpayer billions

If we are destined to take a short-sighted view, then an extra runway at Gatwick would certainly be a better option. It would drive competition in the aviation market, reducing the price of flights for holidaymakers and business travellers. It would be able to reach more European and domestic destinations than Heathrow without exposing as many residents to intrusive noise levels. But, after that one additional runway, the space runs out. Additionally, Gatwick, like Heathrow, has developed over time in a hodgepodge fashion: its South terminal opened in 1958 and its North terminal in 1988. This means that, again like Heathrow, travellers face time-consuming, inefficient transfers between flights.

Importantly however, Gatwick will not place an unbearable burden on the public purse. Heathrow could cost the taxpayer anywhere between £15-20 billion⁵. If Gatwick is chosen as a short-term fix, as Conservatives, we should also plan for a long-term solution.

Why an offshore airport is the only long-term option

The best solution to our aviation challenges is an airport designed for 21st Century travel with all the necessary amenities, space for expansion and good quality transport connections. I strongly believe that this solution is a large offshore airport, probably in the Thames Estuary.

That's why I was surprised and disappointed that The Airport Commission took the short-sighted decision to rule out this option so early. But we will not give up the fight. An offshore airport with four or more runways is the only long-term solution to keep Britain at the forefront of global trade whilst protecting the public from unnecessary noise and pollution. If we want to be a major trading nation, able to compete with the tiger economies and other, bolder Western nations, we need to build an airport with capacity for the next 100 years. I want the best, not just for my Windsor constituents, but for the country as a whole.

First — the potential of a new airport means that we are not tied to Heathrow's limited infrastructure. The new airport could reach 300 international and domestic destinations, almost doubling Heathrow's current total of 171. This would open up routes to important new markets such as Belo Horizonte in Brazil, Calcutta in India and Chongqing in China. This means that businesses will be able to flourish, boosting our exports and helping to create jobs for British citizens.

As global wealth spreads more to Latin America, South-East Asia, and developing African nations, these links will prove invaluable. Of course, Heathrow is a huge plus for our economy. But it's not a long-term primary solution. In the fullness of time, Heathrow will be a key player in a competitive, customer-friendly aviation market.

Second — there is enviable room for growth in and around the Thames Estuary area. It has room for at least four extra runways. In addition, we could link it to a container port to compete with Rotterdam and integrate it with our existing domestic road and rail network. Imagine having a global trade hub with unrivalled links to Europe, Africa, Asia and North America. Our ability to trade relatively easy with many parts of the globe make us the ideal location for just that.

Third — as the offshore airport would be built anew, from the ground up, the various different runways and terminals could be designed and built together with transfer and efficiency in mind, thus providing an attractive travel experience. The various terminals could be connected by a single, unified atrium, so that travellers could simply walk from one flight to the next.

Above all, an offshore or nearshore airport would be the least intrusive for residents. Political opposition has shut down airport expansion time and time again at Heathrow. We've got to accept that airports need to be built away from large population centres. Compared to the million people who will have to live with daily flights going overhead at regular intervals, it is estimated that a multi-runway Thames Estuary airport would affect just 30,000 people. This staggering noise exposure gap between the two airports is something we should use to inform our decisions.

So why has it been ruled out?

You might justifiably think there had been a coordinated campaign to marginalise the Thames Estuary Airport in the decision-making progress. The original plan was included in the Howard Davies commission at the last minute, as an afterthought. Since then, marginal problems like the local bird population have become seemingly convincing factors.

Of course, there will be challenges delivering a Thames Estuary airport. Organisers have to be considerate of both the environmental repercussions and the economic viability. But given that this is not some flash-in-the-pan, knee-jerk reaction, but a long-term solution to a hugely important and persistent issue, we can, and should, find the means to solve these problems. Just as technology and innovation frequently come to our aid, they can be deployed here to overcome these hurdles. We shouldn't forget that the millions of people affected are just as much a part of the environment as birds and other wildlife.

Building the foundations for Britain 2.0

This argument is not merely about aviation. It's about a vision of Britain in the 21st Century. If we are to remain at the forefront of world trade and build relations with important emerging nations, then we need to be positioned to succeed not just in five years, but in 50 years and beyond. Other countries are doing this right now: Qatar is building a brand new airport to replace Doha International Airport, and Bahrain International is undergoing huge expansion.

Turkey is planning to build one of the world's largest airports, a massive new hub outside Istanbul, at a cost of more than \$5 billion and, at the last count, China has plans to build 82 new airports and expand more than 100 existing ones by 2015. So, why can't we also think big?

In my view, the only solution for the UK is the construction of a Thames Estuary hub that integrates all forms of transportation – rail, road, air, sea, and even space. The hub will be able to compete in a fair market with existing airports at Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton and Stansted to provide an excellent service at an affordable price for a growing number of customers. Tightening the Heathrow grip on our aviation market will only penalise customers in the long run.

I know the plan is risky and there will be bumps along the way. But if we want to be the first-choice destination for international businesses, we must take risks and be bold. Building a Thames Estuary Airport will show the world that Britain is open for business and geared up to compete for trade, tourism and investment.

Let's not waste our obvious advantages as a nation, such as language, location and law, by starting a project that will render us an also-ran in the global race. I want us to be a great trading nation that benefits as many of our citizens as possible, and the Thames Estuary Airport is the only solution. We must fight for the Government to act boldly in our national interest.

References

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5. Transport for London, surface access analysis, para 1.17

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Founded in 1951, the Bow Group is the oldest conservative think tank in the UK and exists to publish the research of its members, stimulate policy debate through an events programme and to provide an intellectual home to conservatives.

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