

AIRFIELDS

Airport Growth

Growth at regional airports looks set to take off with several having their expansion plans approved and others are developing future proposals. The expansion of regional airports is in contrast with the main London airports.

The plans of Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted have all been put on hold, whilst those of many of the regional airports are aiming to realise their potential for new routes, increased passenger numbers and a significant contribution to the local economy. In addition, increased flight capacity at regional airports, particularly for holiday flights, could help reduce congestion at the overcrowded London airports.

Bristol Airport is a case in point. It has recently been given the go-ahead by North Somerset Council for £150 million expansion scheme that includes an extended airport terminal, increased car parking and new aircraft stands to accommodate a predicted 60% increase in passengers. It is believed that the expansion will allow the airport to deal with 10 million passengers a year by 2019 and could create 4,000 jobs and inject £340 million into the local economy. The plans have been granted outline planning permission.

Lydd Airport in Kent has been granted planning approval for a £25 million extension of the runway and building of a new terminal building. Meanwhile, expansion plans of £28 million have been approved for Leeds Bradford Airport. Plans for a runway extension at Birmingham Airport have the backing of Birmingham City Council. East Midlands, Liverpool John Lennon and Farnborough airports all have plans to increase flight and passenger capacity.

The ambition of regional airports is demonstrated by Southend Airport in Essex. During the 1970s it was the third busiest airport in the UK. However, the introduction of larger jet-engine aircraft and tougher runway regulations saw its status downgraded to becoming primarily a site for aviation maintenance and repair. A new expansion plan hopes to place Southend firmly back on the aviation map. A 300m runway extension will allow the airport to handle larger aircraft such as the Airbus A319 and the Boeing 737. The new railway station, opened in August 2010, runs direct to

Liverpool Street via the Stratford Olympics Park and a new air traffic control tower and passenger terminal will be completed in 2011. The airport plans to provide a strong alternative to Stansted and Luton.

Concrete paving will play a significant role in the expansion of regional airports. The long-term, maintenance-free performance of concrete pavements makes them particularly well-suited to runways, taxiways and aircraft stands due their resistance to fuel spillage damage, resistance to heat from engine blast, reduced runway water due to slipform slot drainage and high bearing capacity to cope with new and heavier aircraft. The long-life performance of concrete pavements means reduced unplanned maintenance, an important issue for airports which are frequently running at full capacity.

The expansion plans of the regional airports goes against the perceived coalition government's opposition to airport expansion following its dismissal of the Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted proposals. A report from the Institution of Civil Engineers, 'Rethinking Aviation', highlighted the dangers of Britain failing to increase its airport capacity and urged the government to think carefully about the UK's long-term airport infrastructure needs.

The value of the aviation sector to the UK economy is significant. In 2007 it directly generated £8.8 billion of economic output. When you add the economic activity of aviation's supply chain, the total economic footprint equals £18.4 billion or 1.5% of the UK economy. Beyond the headline figures, there are the issues of how greater connectivity encourages increased trade and investment by both UK and overseas companies.

Philip Hammond, the Transport Secretary, has promised that the UK is to get its first significant aviation policy review in seven years. The review will be the first since the Labour Government published an air transport white paper in 2003. It will begin early in 2011 with the Department of Transport issuing a 'scoping document' setting out the questions to be covered in the study. This will be followed by industry consultation. A draft policy document for formal consultation will be published early in 2012. It is hoped that the review will take full account of how investment in airport infrastructure is an investment in the UK economy.

“Growth at regional airports looks set to take off”

