

Adding capacity at Heathrow Airport – consultation by Department for Transport

A discussion paper by London TravelWatch

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Executive summary

- A. London TravelWatch's stance in relation to the airports within its area has been to focus on the need for satisfactory surface access for passengers, staff and 'meeters and greeters', and this is our primary concern in relation to the government's proposals for adding capacity at Heathrow.
- B. We are therefore very concerned that the Department for Transport's consultation deals with this issue in only a cursory manner, by saying that the airport operator would need to develop a surface access strategy as part of preparing for any planning application.
- C. To defer the issue in this way creates a serious risk that the project is allowed to be developed and that only at a late stage are costly additional surface transport needs identified. These might then be fudged in the face of funding limitations.
- D. The limited analysis which has been issued as part of the consultation process is confined to assessing the effects on air quality of increased surface access. Whilst this is important – although perhaps not as important as the air quality effects of allowing more planes to take off and land – it deals with only a very small part of the issue.
- E. It is vital that all the ramifications of surface access – which may spread to all parts of London and beyond – are considered at the start of the process and not left as a residual issue to be mopped up after the big decisions have been taken.
- F. We therefore believe it essential that Transport for London should be commissioned now to review the DfT's surface access transport work. No decision on whether to permit the proposed expansion should be taken until the logistical and financial issues for surface access have been fully assessed and debated.
- G. At the same time, we believe that work should be carried out to assess the case for developing high speed rail as (*inter alia*) an alternative to domestic and short-haul European aviation. London TravelWatch believes that this might substantially reduce the pressure on surface access to Heathrow and could also be a key contributor to solving other serious problems for London's transport network. This should be a key topic for debate, both in its own right and within the context of the current proposals for Heathrow and other airports.
- H. Finally, although London TravelWatch's primary focus is on the needs of passengers and not on the broader green agenda, we fully recognise the desirability of addressing climate change, air quality and other environmental issues. Study of greener alternatives, such as high speed rail, is mandated by the government's own planning policy guidelines but the consultation document shows no evidence that this has been considered.

Response to the consultation

General

- 1 London TravelWatch is the statutory consumer representation body, established under the Greater London Act 1999, for users of services provided by and on behalf of Transport for London (TfL), and for users of the national rail network in and around London.
- 2 Our stance on airport development has generally been to focus on the implications for surface access by passengers, staff and ‘meeters and greeters’ rather than on the air transport issues of any new proposals. However the current proposals for expansion of capacity at Heathrow come at a time when there is increasing public debate about the desirability of building a high speed rail network.
- 3 Such a network would address a number of public policy objectives⁽¹⁾. Two which are of particular interest to London TravelWatch are the improvement which would result in inter-city rail services, and the consequential release of capacity on existing conventional lines around London which could then be used to improve commuter services.
- 4 There is a direct relationship between proposals for high speed rail and the need for airport development. Therefore, as well as looking at the issue of surface access, which itself could benefit from the construction of a high speed rail network linking into the airport, this paper by London TravelWatch takes a high level overview of a high speed rail alternative and recommends that this should form part of the public debate on the government’s current proposals .
- 5 Study of this alternative also appears to us to be mandated by the government’s own planning policy guidelines, which require that “Significant adverse impacts on the environment should be avoided and alternative options which might reduce or eliminate those impacts pursued.”⁽²⁾ Whilst this does not automatically rule out airport expansion, it certainly indicates that such a course should only be adopted after serious study of alternative options.

Surface access to an enlarged Heathrow

- 6 The Department for Transport (DfT) consultation⁽³⁾ does not deal in detail with the issue of improving surface access to an enlarged Heathrow, beyond saying that the airport operator would need to develop a surface access strategy as part of preparing for any planning application.
- 7 However it does offer a broad analysis. This concludes that existing planned improvements to the Piccadilly line and the Heathrow Express line (i.e. its use by Crossrail), plus possibly the addition of Airtrack to serve south-west London and the Staines–Reading line, would be sufficient to cope with additional air passengers.
- 8 This conclusion is maintained even after allowing for a car and taxi policy founded on the basis that existing travel patterns are not sustainable in the long term, and would in principle be addressed by pricing measures such as the cost of parking or a charge to enter the airport. There might also be controls on the

volume of road traffic leaving the airport during peak periods. The consultation paper concludes that these measures would raise the proportion of passengers using rail, in addition to the increase generated by the rise in air traffic.

- 9 The consultation paper considers that present express coach provision at Heathrow has sufficient spare capacity to accommodate the extra demand which would occur after airport expansion.
- 10 So far as buses are concerned, these are seen as primarily an issue for staff journeys. The consultation paper highlights areas to the west of the airport as needing more attention than what it describes as “good quality high frequency services” in other directions.
- 11 London TravelWatch has major reservations about the validity of DfT’s views about the surface access needs of an enlarged Heathrow.
- 12 Firstly its analysis is based on a report prepared for BAA Heathrow⁽⁴⁾. BAA obviously has a direct commercial interest in the proposed development and its judgement may therefore be affected by an understandable desire to keep the costs of the project to a minimum. In such circumstances one would expect DfT to have obtained an independent review by a body (such as TfL) with expertise in the overall capability of London’s transport system. However from the list of sources quoted in the report it is clear that TfL was not asked to provide any input.
- 13 Secondly, the report makes it clear that its concern is not with surface transport *per se*, but only the effect of additional surface transport on air quality. Indeed it very specifically states that the work carried out to produce the report “... was not intended to lead directly to a **complete** Airport Surface Access Strategy as would be required to support the further development of Heathrow...”
- 14 Thirdly, it is not clear whether the work includes consideration of the specific needs of the substantial number of journeys made by ‘meeters and greeters.’
- 15 Given the limited remit of the surface access report, it is no surprise that it gives no real attention to major issues such as:
 - the capacity of the Piccadilly line as a whole – particularly in central London – to carry additional traffic
 - or whether many additional people for the new terminal 6 would even use the Piccadilly line at all given that it would not directly serve it
 - and therefore whether Heathrow Express/Crossrail – which would have a new station beneath the new terminal – could handle all the extra traffic, particularly on the Great Western main line between Paddington and Hayes where these services will have to share tracks with freight and with other passengers operators.
 - or whether the demand management measures which it proposes to restrain car traffic would be sufficiently effective (or indeed politically acceptable) to avoid the need for costly new road construction at or en route to the airport.

- 16 These, and no doubt other, issues are big gaps in the case for airport expansion. London TravelWatch therefore does not accept the DfT consultation's view that more detailed work on surface access issues can be left to the planning application stage. To take this course would create a serious risk that the project is allowed to be developed and that only at a late stage are costly additional surface transport needs identified. These might then be fudged in the face of funding limitations.
- 17 London TravelWatch therefore considers it essential that Transport for London should be commissioned now to review the DfT's surface access transport conclusions. No decision on whether to permit the proposed expansion should be taken until the logistical and financial issues for surface access have been fully assessed and debated.
- 18 At the same time, we believe that work should be carried out to assess the case for developing high speed rail as (*inter alia*) an alternative to domestic and short-haul European aviation. London TravelWatch believes that this might substantially reduce the pressure on surface access to Heathrow and could also be a key contributor to solving other serious problems for London's transport network. This should be a key topic for debate, both in its own right and within the context of the current proposals for Heathrow and other airports. We explain why we regard this as a potentially important issue in an appendix to this paper.
- 19 Finally, although London TravelWatch's primary focus is on the needs of passengers and not on the broader green agenda, we fully recognise the desirability of addressing climate change, air quality and other environmental issues. It is therefore difficult to resist pointing out the paradox of a policy which regards present road traffic patterns as unsustainable yet at the same time promotes a substantial increase in air traffic.

Conclusion

- 20 The surface access issues for an enlarged Heathrow are ones which the DfT consultation skates over on the basis of a report which makes clear that it deals with only one aspect – air quality – of the problem. London TravelWatch considers it essential that Transport for London should be commissioned now to review the DfT's surface access transport conclusions and establish a sound basis on which the likely costs can be properly understood and considered.
- 21 However there is also a much broader issue which we consider should be debated, and which government needs to address in order to comply with its own planning guidelines. This is the scope for high speed rail to accommodate sufficient of the forecast air traffic increases to avoid the need for a third runway and associated new terminal and surface access expansion. At the same time this would enable transfer of inter-city traffic away from the existing West Coast and East Coast lines so that (amongst other things) these can accommodate the rail transport needs both of the government's planned growth areas 50–70 miles north of London and the continuing population and travel demand growth nearer to the capital.
- 22 London TravelWatch hopes that this paper will help stimulate this debate.

APPENDIX

The case for considering High Speed Rail as an alternative to airport enlargement

- i) European high speed rail is a proven technology which was introduced in France in 1981, linked to Britain through the channel tunnel in 1994, extended progressively to serve Belgium, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and Spain, and fully embraced in Britain in 2007 with the opening of High Speed One to St. Pancras.
- ii) The latest high speed lines allow speeds up to 200 mph, but the potential for the future is even faster as a special test train in France has achieved 357 mph.
- iii) Today, London to Paris and Brussels are comfortably within the 3 hour journey time threshold which is accepted as being competitive with air for time sensitive business passengers. By 2010 this threshold will extend to the Netherlands and to western Germany. It could be pushed out even further if through trains are introduced from London to destinations beyond Paris and Brussels, thus removing the time wasting inconvenience of having to change trains. This might require shorter trains than the present Eurostars and perhaps some changes to the design regulations for trains using the channel tunnel, but if the political will is there these issues should not be insuperable.
- iv) By 2020, planned extensions to the network – see map 1 below - will link London by direct high speed lines to the whole of western Europe bar only Scandinavia, and almost any journey will be achievable within about ten hours. Although slower than by air, if promoted – legitimately – as an environmentally friendly, easily booked and stress-free pleasant experience, and using similar flexible fares policies as the airlines, this would be very attractive to large numbers of leisure passengers.



Map 1 – European High Speed Rail 2020

- v) The outcome would be a significant reduction in demand for short-haul flights, both at Heathrow and at other south-east airports. Also, this could substantially reduce the pressure on surface transport access to Heathrow and therefore avoid the extra expenditure which would otherwise be needed.
- vi) The full value of high speed rail, however, only becomes apparent when we consider its extension to the north of London. This concept has been developed by Greengauge21 who propose a national network of high speed lines, of which the first would be High Speed Two to link London with Birmingham and Manchester and onwards to Scotland – see Map 2 below.

High Speed Two

A Greengauge 21 Proposition



Map 2 – High Speed Two

- vii) Key elements of High Speed Two are that it would link directly with High Speed One, and that it would also serve Heathrow. This provides some important benefits:
- High speed trains operating direct between the north and Heathrow. Journey times such as Birmingham 40 minutes, Manchester 1 hour 25 minutes and Edinburgh/Glasgow 2 hours 45 minutes would largely eliminate the use of domestic flights for interlining.
 - Similar journey times to central London would see the end of air as a viable mode for domestic journeys on these corridors – and on other routes such as the west country when the domestic high speed network is further developed.
 - Direct trains between Heathrow and Europe, either extension of existing Eurostars to Paris and Brussels, or separate trains to a wider range of destinations (which could conveniently serve Stratford for Docklands) would further reduce the demand for short-haul flights, as rail would take over the European interlining connections with long-distance flights which form a significant part of Heathrow's business.
 - Extension of Southeastern high speed domestic trains from Stratford and St. Pancras to Heathrow would improve Heathrow's links with the segment of its catchment area which is currently the most problematic, and help to minimise the conflicts which occur when luggage-laden passengers have to mingle with commuters and other local users on metro services such as Crossrail.
- viii) The cumulative effect of international and domestic high speed rail on demand for air travel could well release sufficient capacity at Heathrow and other south-east airports to enable the rising demand for long-distance flights – which are what air does best – to be met without increasing the number of runways. This would of course be a plus for the green agenda, and the resources presently earmarked for airport expansion could be released to the rail option.
- ix) It might also be that introduction of overnight trains over the longer distances into Europe may further contribute to release of runway capacity at Heathrow.
- x) It is also possible that high speed rail could take over some of the time sensitive freight such as mail, newspapers and high-value low-bulk goods which have migrated to air in recent years.
- xi) The traffic transferred from air to rail would go a long way towards providing the business case for investment in a British high speed network. This is important because such a network – although capable of being phased in bite-size chunks - would in total be expensive. It would therefore need a high level of utilisation to justify the investment. Also, the higher the financial returns the greater the ability to attract private sector funding and thus help address one of the dilemmas faced by government when considering large scale public works.

- xii) More detail about high speed rail and Heathrow can be found in a Greengauge21 report “The Impact of High Speed Rail on Heathrow Airport”⁽⁵⁾.
- xiii) Some readers of this paper may wonder why an organisation called *London TravelWatch* is suggesting a course which appears to benefit mainly long-distance and international users. There are two reasons for this.
- One is that our remit embraces all users of national rail services in and around London. Therefore users of present day inter-city trains – who will benefit hugely from high speed rail - are as much entitled to our attention as other groups of passengers.
 - The other is about the capacity of existing main lines to cope with growing traffic. The DfT itself has said that planned and anticipated enhancements on the West Coast Main Line could add 50% to route passenger capacity, but the benefits of this will be exhausted by 2024 as growth continues⁽⁶⁾.
- xiv) More specifically, there are government plans (already being implemented – they are not just talk) for major population increases in Milton Keynes and Northamptonshire which will increase the demand for London commuting to a degree which will cause conflict with the – also growing - needs of passengers up the line closer to London. To give just a flavour of what is happening, in Milton Keynes alone there are 10,000 new dwellings (say 30,000 people) planned for 2016, and the current population of 220,000 will increase to 330,000 by 2030.
- xv) The strains on West Coast Main Line capacity are already being seen in the controversial reduction of inter-city stops at Watford (from December 2008), the difficulty in finding paths for trains from south London via the West London line, and the reluctance of rail planners to support the creation of a main line interchange with London Overground at Willesden Junction.
- xvi) All these issues would be resolved if inter-city services can be removed from the existing line and transferred to a new high speed route.
- xvii) It is the same on the East Coast Main Line. Similar government plans for population increases in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will have similar consequences for passengers closer to London. Transfer of inter-city trains to a high speed route would again provide the solution.
- xviii) Whether an East Coast high speed line should be totally separate from the Greengauge21 High Speed Two proposal or whether (at least initially) it can use the same route from London and have a branch to Leeds and Newcastle, will be part of the debate which London TravelWatch – along with many others – believes should now emerge.

Greengauge21

In preparing this paper London TravelWatch has drawn on the work of Greengauge21. We have done so as theirs is the only material which helps the lay reader to visualise what high speed rail might look like in the British context and what it might achieve.

Greengauge21 describes itself as “..... a not for profit organisation which aims to research and develop the concept of a UK high speed rail network and promote its implementation as a national economic priority. Founded by Jim Steer, one of the country’s leading transport sector specialists, Greengauge21 has been established to progress the debate on High Speed Rail and to promote it in the public interest. The organisation has been conceived as an umbrella under which all those with an interest in supporting and promoting a High Speed Rail network can come together⁽¹⁾.”

At the moment, the idea of high speed rail in Britain is no more than that – an idea. The work to cost it, and to quantify its benefits, has not yet started. We therefore do not at this stage advocate the construction of a high speed railway, nor do we advocate the specific route suggestions put forward by Greengauge21. Our only purpose at the moment is to encourage discussion, and in particular for consideration to be given to the role high speed rail might play – amongst other things - as an alternative to expansion of Heathrow and the surface access issues which the latter would necessitate.

References

- (1) See various papers at www.greengauge21.net/index.htm
- (2) Planning Policy Statement 1 – paragraph 19 - Department for Communities and Local Government 2005
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/147393>
- (3) See <http://www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/open/heathrowconsultation>
- (4) See <http://www.dft.gov.uk/consultations/open/heathrowconsultation/technicalreports/surfaceaccess.pdf>
- (5) See http://www.greengauge21.net/assets/Impact_of_HSL_on_Heathrow.pdf
- (6) Towards a Sustainable Transport System – Department for Transport October 2007 <http://www.dft.gov.uk/about/strategy/transportstrategy/htmlsustaintranssys>

Comments on this paper

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London TravelWatch may wish to publish comments on its website <http://www.londontravelwatch.org.uk/>. Anyone who does not wish this is asked to say so clearly in their response.