

9 January 2009

Will Hoon give the go ahead for Heathrow and create even more chaos?

Secretary of State for Transport Geoff Hoon seems about to announce the go ahead for the contentious third runway at London's Heathrow Airport, together with a new rail terminal. The announcement has been deferred for months, following a reported Cabinet split and a rebellion of backbench MPs.

With the third runway and with aircraft alternation on the original runways being retained, a 49% increase in air traffic movements (ATMs) to 702,000 will result. There will be a near doubling of road traffic, crammed onto south-west London's already groaning road network.

The site for the third runway means that over 700 homes will have to be demolished, putting up to 35,000 people on the homeless register. The community of Sipson will be wiped out. Harlington and Harmondsworth will be subjected to horrific noise and air quality impacts. Millions of people in London will suffer increased noise and air pollution.

The Government promised that the expansion of Heathrow would only go ahead if strict environmental limits were met. However, the legal standards used to reflect acceptable noise levels are almost 30 years out of date and the pseudo-scientific calculations of future air pollution are excessively aspirational. This leaves communities with little hope of successfully challenging the intrusion at any future planning inquiry.

Even without a third runway at Heathrow, the UK is likely to have applied for an extension to the 2010 deadline for complying with the European Air Quality Directive. The addition of 40 million road users will make meeting local air quality measures on toxic nitrous oxides and other harmful gases impossible.

How the Government plans to integrate this expansion, which will deliver 2.6 million additional tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, with its legal requirement to cut carbon emissions by 80% by 2050, remains mere conjecture. It is likely that local authorities in the surrounding area will be forced to absorb a great deal of the impact through local transport planning – and this means other people and business will bear the brunt by having their legitimate activities curtailed.

The one positive aspect of the decision is that the Government seems to be supporting better rail access to Heathrow from around the UK and Europe. But this should be used to delay, not support, the need for a third runway until a full review of the 2003 Air Transport White Paper has been undertaken.

Councillor Jamie Macrae, Chairman of SASIG commented: *"Local residents and businesses should not have to suffer the impacts of increased noise, traffic and congestion. A clean, accessible & efficient public transport network must first be provided to serve Heathrow whilst the country, not the Government, decides on the best aviation strategy for the next 50 years. That will show that Heathrow has already expanded beyond any sensible environmental limits."*

SASIG has been calling for a review of the White Paper for the past five years, and considers the promised new National Policy Statement on Aviation as a valuable opportunity to reassess the situation.

ENDS

NOTES TO EDITORS

SASIG is a national group of local authorities that work together on strategic aviation issues. Our membership includes the authorities immediately around Heathrow, those further from the airport where the population will be affected by the proposed changes, along with authorities around other UK airports.

SASIG has a broad membership of local authorities but does not speak on behalf of the Local Government Association as a whole.