

Should the UK build a new runway?

This introductory briefing is the first in a series setting out key issues for decision makers in relation to airports policy, and explaining why the expansion question remains 'whether' and not just 'where' to build a new runway. The Government-appointed Airports Commission has recommended one new runway before 2030 at Heathrow or Gatwick (although it hasn't ruled out a Thames Estuary airport) and will submit its final report following the 2015 election. However, critical concerns about the environmental sacrifices that would be necessary to allow for airport expansion are likely to be left for politicians to determine. This briefing gives an overview of the context, the current issues, and where the challenges for politicians may lie once the Commission has submitted its final report.



Image Credit: Martin Hartland via Flickr

Was recommending a new runway a foregone conclusion?

When the current Government came to power in 2010, part of the coalition agreement included withdrawing support for a third runway at Heathrow and refusing new runways at Gatwick and Stansted. But pressure from some Cabinet members to allow for a change in tack after the next election led to the Airports Commission being set up in 2012 to advise on the need for airport expansion. Following intense lobbying by Heathrow, the Commission was given a remit to

focus on maintaining the UK's hub status, with no runway options ruled out.

A timetable was drawn up that effectively excluded the Commission from recommending a "no new runway" option. The first year involved an 'assessment of need' and making a shortlist of expansion options, culminating in an interim report in December 2013. The second year (2014-15) was set aside in the timetable for detailed analysis on the short-listed options with a final report coming in the summer of 2015.

Will the next Government accept the Airports Commission's recommendations?

Successive governments have commissioned studies that recommended new South East runways¹ but each has fallen short of the environmental standards that voters demand or has been economically undeliverable. No political party has committed to accepting the recommendations of the Airports Commission so far, and rightly so: many questions are set to be left unanswered and it is essential that the Commission's findings will be subject to detailed parliamentary scrutiny.

¹ RUCATSE - Runway Capacity to Serve the South East (1993); South East Regional Air Services study (2002)

About the AEF:

We are a policy-focussed NGO supported by individuals and community groups concerned with the environmental impacts of aviation. We work at national, EU and international levels (including participating in UN aviation talks) to secure effective regulation of the environmental impacts of aviation. We were one of only two NGOs to give oral evidence to the Commission on environmental issues.

The Airports Commission's interim report

It came as no surprise that the Airports Commission recommended that a new runway should be built to meet future passenger demand (though the idea of an urgent 'capacity crisis' was laid to rest). This should, the report recommended, be either at Heathrow – where two options were shortlisted, a new North West runway and an option to extend the existing runway – or at Gatwick, where the shortlisted option is South of the current runway.

The option to build a new airport in the Thames Estuary, championed by London Mayor Boris Johnson, was not specifically shortlisted. Yet it is to be explored in more detail after an apparent last-minute decision not to rule it out, despite huge anticipated costs and opposition from the RSPB (whose membership is around 3 times that of all three main political parties combined).

Their work in phase two

The Commission's work this year involves an assessment of each of its shortlisted options and further consideration of whether a Thames Estuary options should be taken forward (with a decision expected in September). The Commission will then publicly consult on its shortlisted options in autumn. Much of the Commission's work this year would help with the efficient development and publication of an Airports National Policy Statement in the next Government's term of office. This would cement policy support for a new runway.

While economic and environmental impacts will be assessed in relation to each of the proposals, the Commission considers that a new runway is justified irrespective of these.

Our upcoming briefings

We are producing four other briefings which look at the key issues which the Airports Commission is considering and highlight the challenges the next Government will still need to overcome.

- Our **noise briefing** will review the Commission's proposals to deal with the 'noise problem', and explain why they would come into play too late to deal with the current noise problem. We will try to answer the key

Key claims in the interim report

1. There will be sufficient demand in the South East to justify one new runway by 2030 and possibly a second by 2050.

But passenger demand forecasts have been successively revised downwards since 2007 and all major political parties now reject the idea that demand should be met whatever the environmental cost.

2. A shift eastwards in global economic power is making connections to emerging economies increasingly important, requiring better connections whether hub or point-to-point.

But business flights make up a small proportion of passengers and unnecessary flights are being replaced with video-conferencing. The assumption that the UK will suffer if business travellers interchange elsewhere is open to challenge.

3. Airport expansions should take account of noise and climate concerns.

But the Commission has not shown how emission levels can be kept to a level compatible with the Climate Change Act, or how expansion could be compatible with health-based noise limits.

question: can a new runway be operated within acceptable noise limits?

- Our **climate briefing** will demonstrate the lack of policy recommendations for keeping aviation emissions to a level consistent with the Climate Change Act, and show why building a new runway would stop the growth of regional airports in their tracks, despite spare capacity and permissions to expand.
- Our **air pollution briefing** will look at how the issue could prove to be a show stopper at Heathrow and what a new runway could mean for local air quality at Gatwick.
- Finally, our **economics briefing** will question whether the expected economic return from a new runway is sufficient and reliable enough to justify the risks to people and the environment.