

New runway winging its way to Stansted?

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Pollution levels at Heathrow mean that Stansted could be 'only option' for airport expansion
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The BAA, main operator of UK airports has announced that Stansted airport in Essex is the 'only option' for a new runway in southeast England. It is needed by 2013 when current capacity is predicted to run out.

What is the issue?

Air travel has been a growth industry for a long time and has had large technological, social, economic, and environmental impacts on societies across the world. It has been one of the main elements of a 'shrinking world' and a major facilitator of globalisation. However air transport does not come without controversy. In the UK, the latest and most pressing is the apparent need for new runways in South East England to accommodate growing demand for air travel.

What are the limits on current airport expansion?

Heathrow would be the natural choice for a new runway; however, it has been discounted until 2016 because the levels of nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) in the area, produced by air traffic from a new runway, would exceed the levels permitted by EU law. Gatwick is also an option now that the Government has been forced to consider it after a legal battle was won by Essex and Kent councils (representing potential airport developments at Stansted and Cliffe respectively).

Expansion at Heathrow would affect 250,000 people, while at Stansted, the figure is 30,000. Thus Stansted is the favourite (in terms of environment impact) and preferred (in terms of social impact) option. For those opposed to expansion at Heathrow, this is seemingly good news, however with quieter and more efficient aircraft being developed (such as Boeings 7E7); pollution could eventually be within EU limits thus allowing a new runway at Heathrow. This means that people in the Heathrow area will still be living with uncertainty regarding their future. A new runway at Stansted may go part of the way to ensuring business and leisure visitors continue to be attracted to the UK and the southeast in particular, rather than, as is feared, opting for other European destinations with greater airport capacity.

What are the benefits/costs to Stansted?

According to the Government's assessment of airport expansion, 56,000 new jobs would be created in the airport and related services by 2015. This could create a general upward economic spiral, enhancing the economy of the area and drawing more people in. Extra housing to accommodate these people might, however, encroach on green field sites. Economic growth influenced by more use of the airport, also means more passengers, and so the likelihood of further congestion on the M25, A10 and A120. The cost of improving these roads may not be justified by just one runway. A new runway would however need improvements to rail infrastructure, with extra capacity on the lines to London and Cambridge. If combined with an integrated transport strategy, this could reduce congestion on the roads. In terms of cultural and environmental impact, 30 grade II would be destroyed to make way for a Stansted runway, and 9.5 sq. km of land would be enclosed.

Aviation is big business and British Airways have said they may mount a legal challenge to oppose the expansion of Stansted in preference to Heathrow. BA do not operate from Stansted and fear higher landing fees could be introduced at their Heathrow base to pay for a new runway that will benefit not them but their competitors.

Meeting demand?

It is perceived that new runways in the Southeast are needed to keep pace with growing demand. However, an alternative to expanding already busy international airports - thereby increasing the impact and disturbance of one location - would be to develop new locations, spreading both positive and negative impacts. Cliffe, on the Thames Estuary was a suggested location for a new £9billion airport but rejected on grounds of cost, and high environmental impact. Another alternative is to encourage growth elsewhere, such as at Manchester, the East Midlands and Edinburgh. But is the demand there? The pull of the southeast as an economic centre and an area of expanding population may not exist in other regions. Could a wider strategy of transport improvements in these locations actually stimulate growth and create demand? Is this a viable alternative to expanding airport capacity to meet demand in the southeast?

What is certain is that as powered flight celebrates its 100th Anniversary next month, the technical challenges of 100 years ago have given way to new challenges of meeting increasing demand and balancing the industry's impact.