

Individual submission to the Davies Commission



February 2013

1. Introduction

This submission seeks to provide an integrated approach that balances the needs of air service users, residents and others in the vicinity of airports and the airline community.

The proposal describes how multiple airports in the South East can be (and need to be) connected by fast rail links to a single point in central London.

It advances the concept of limiting Heathrow to daytime-only operation as a basis for its future operation and expansion and argues that airport capacity planning should allow for airline alliances to be based in multiple locations.

The Universal Hub concept is a customer-focused way to convert the distributed airport capacity approach into a major asset for London.

A Universal Hub for London

Airport expresses can be connected to a Universal Hub in central London: a single central location used by air travellers regardless of which airport they use.

2. Analysis

The question of how best the South East's airports should be developed and connected with the capital requires consideration of three crucial perspectives, those of:

- air travellers
- the residential communities living around each airport
- the airline industry.

Air travellers

Air travellers want fast and dependable access. Today's airport rail links in the South East are all compromised by the need to accommodate commuters as well as airport passengers on congested rail networks. The outlook is bleak. Existing journey times are likely to be extended in

the absence of investment plans and faced with increasing demand for commuter services capacity over the same tracks.

Heathrow Express will be absorbed into Crossrail, and it will no longer be a non-stop 15 minute connection to central London. While Crossrail Heathrow Express will cease to operate (at least in its current form) when Crossrail is fully operational. Currently it offers a 15 minute journey time to central London. While Crossrail brings accessibility benefits for the City/Canary Wharf, travellers to/from the West End (where the hotels and most of the air passengers are headed) will find their journey times extended – indeed, roughly doubled. One of the features of Heathrow is its excellent links with central London which have been in place since the mid-1990s. If this feature is to be retained, there will be a need for a new fast Heathrow - central London connection. The Great Western Main Line (GWML) over which Heathrow Express operates will not have sufficient capacity for such services.¹

Gatwick Express services have been integrated into the Southern franchise because of network capacity constraints and some of their distinctive air passenger market focus has been lost, although the 30 minute journey time is generally retained. The Brighton Main Line (BML) over which they run is one of Network Rail's key problem areas: by the mid/late 2020s, like the GWML that supports Heathrow Express, there will be no capacity for service expansion. Major investment on the BML is needed too.

Stansted is connected by a service which typically takes 47 minutes to reach Liverpool Street.

The needs of residents

At each of London's airports there is a resident community adversely affected by poor air quality and aircraft noise.

The major local objection to a third runway at Heathrow is noise. A realistic approach could be to make a third runway absolutely conditional on retrenchment from the current allowances on night-time airspace use, which permit a limited number of long distance flights to arrive (mainly from SE Asia) between 04h30 and 06h30. A reasonable approach might see Heathrow provided with higher capacity from a third runway, but restricted to being a daytime-only airport. Residents around Heathrow would get a guaranteed night's sleep – which they don't have today, with no flights between 11pm and 6am.

¹ Network Rail London and South East Route Utilisation Study, July 2011

The airline industry

The airline industry would face a choice between staying at an expanded Heathrow and switching to another airport because of the 24h opportunity elsewhere. The balance of advantage is likely to vary between the airline alliances. The net effect would be that London – as now – would be served by more than one airport.

Since one of the reasons why flights are scheduled for the very sensitive early hours is because of runway constraints in the ‘morning peak’ – when many flights arrive (and take off) for other destinations – especially North America), the combination of additional runway capacity but a tightening of operating hours could allow airline hub operation to be made more effective.

Unalterable night-time flights would have to use Stansted or Gatwick – or other places such as a new Estuary Airport if it is built – airports where the numbers affected by aircraft noise are much lower.

Distillation

Even to keep today’s standards of airport accessibility will require significant investment in new rail connections to central London.

There is a better balance that can be developed for Heathrow that adds a third runway but restricts operation to daytime only.

Expansion beyond three runways at Heathrow is not practicable, nor would it meet the need on operating terms that are daytime-only for those airline alliances that wish to offer hub connectivity on a 24h basis.

There is a difference between a hub airport and an airline alliance hub pattern of operation. There is diminishing interlining between alliance operators. This makes provision of multiple hub airports facilities feasible, but will require more than one multiple runway airport.

3. The Universal Hub

Given that inter-alliance transfer is a small part of the problem, the challenge is to configure new rail access infrastructure to/from airports rather than between them (although that will be also be provided under this concept). The aim is to make airport access easy and stress-free

so that London and its economy gain an advantage over other NW European cities.²

The key concept in this submission is the creation of a single central London terminal, connected by fast dedicated links to each airport. Air travellers go to (or arrive at) the same place – the universal hub – regardless of which airline/airport they use, getting a dedicated fast transit to their flight. The universal hub is an air passenger portal in the centre of London.

A candidate site for the Universal Hub would be at Farringdon, where a two track east-west railway would serve a 4 platform-face station built under Smithfield Market.



Universal Hub at Smithfield. *Source: Steer Davies Gleave Studio*

New fast links, tunnelled without costly and confusing intermediate stations would serve Heathrow in say 15 minutes), and Stansted (and/or an Estuary airport) in 25 minutes. Gatwick would need to be reachable over an upgraded Brighton Main Line, from the existing adjoining Thameslink station in (say) 30 minutes; even Luton could be connected (it's only 37 minutes by Thameslink today).

² The question of accessibility for the rest of the Britain is also extremely important and is best addressed by the adoption of the national high-speed rail network as developed by Greengauge 21.

The existence of Thameslink and Crossrail at Farringdon provide valuable travel resilience and further connectivity for the selected location for the Universal Hub. But other sites have some attraction. Waterloo, for instance could be used and the vacant international terminal platforms would be ideal for a 2nd generation Heathrow Express operation. Services from an airport located to the east or north east of London would require new underground connections and a new underground station at Waterloo, and through services would not be feasible (inter-airport across London).



Delivering for stakeholders

This approach provides:

- a reduction in noise for those currently affected by Heathrow at times when it's most needed;
- a progressive and flexible expansion of runway capacity;
- realistic choices for airlines;
- just one place to start/finish the journey for air passengers in central London.

4. An integrated solution

There is a pressing need to plan better connectivity between existing airports to central London as well as to consider links that new airports might need. The notion of a *Universal Hub* is advanced to meet this need, and an outline has been provided that shows how best the needs of residents, air passengers and the airline industry could be balanced.