

"We need to deliver expansion at Heathrow, for the..."

Heathrow must grow for the country's future

The UK is falling behind other countries on airport capacity. As a vital hub, it is imperative that it expands

CHRIS GRAYLING



Britain has always been a nation with a strong global focus. We have influenced change and built strong ties all round the world. As we enter the post-Brexit world, that global focus is more important than ever. We need to be self-confident, ambitious, and relentlessly internationalist in our outlook. And we need to demonstrate clearly that our future lies very much at the heart of the world stage. There is no better way of doing that than by finally taking the decision to equip our hub airport with the capacity it needs for that future.

The world is changing rapidly. New technologies, ideas and commercial centres are emerging in every continent. Business and trade opportunities are everywhere. But you can't meet your ambitions in an increasingly connected world if you don't have the right connections to that world. The reality is that Heathrow airport is full, and has been for years. It's just not possible to connect Heathrow with all of those new and emerging markets. And where new routes have been introduced, it's often been at the expense of connections within the United Kingdom.

The whole point of a hub airport is that it should provide those connections for the whole of the country. Business people should be able to fly from Belfast, or Aberdeen, or Newcastle or Newquay to their markets around the world, with no more than a simple change at Heathrow. Yet all too often they have to go to the Netherlands or Germany for those connections, through airports that have not hesitated to expand their capacity, leaving the UK behind.

Heathrow is also a vital hub for freight. It's our biggest freight port by value, carrying products from all round the UK to export markets internationally. If you eat Scottish smoked salmon in Asia, chances are that it got there in the hold of a passenger plane from Heathrow.

Having prevaricated as a nation about this for nearly half a century, it really is time for the big decision on Heathrow. When it comes to expanding airport capacity, there's never an easy answer. The perfect place or an option that leaves local communities unaffected. That's why expansion cannot come without conditions. When the House of Commons votes tonight on whether to give Heathrow the go-ahead, it will also place the first tight conditions on that expansion. If the vote passes, more conditions will be added as the detailed planning consents are considered.

There have to be quid pro quos for the local community. A ban on scheduled night flights may be inconvenient for airlines, but it's a must for local residents. So is a world-leading compensation package for people who are affected by expansion. And money from the airport needs to be put back into better community assets in the area around. All of this is part of the plan.

So is a big programme of improvement to rail links into the airport, so that the expansion doesn't come with more cars. Crossrail, HS2, the Great Western main line and the South Western Railway network will all have new links into the airport - along with upgrades to the underground route.

The new runway must meet tight environmental standards, including legally binding air quality limits, or it cannot be completed. There will be tighter rules around noise, though new quieter aircraft will make these much easier to achieve. A new, independent noise watchdog will help set the rules, and legally enforceable planning conditions will ensure the airport sticks to them. And Heathrow's expansion scheme will come at no cost to the taxpayer.

If Britain is to remain a strong global player in the post-Brexit world, we cannot duck the big decisions. This Government has already taken big decisions on nuclear energy and the NHS. Now we need to deliver expansion at Heathrow, for the better links it will provide for our businesses and the jobs that it will create, because we are ambitious for the future of this country.

Tonight, I hope the House of Commons will back that ambition, and give the green light to an expanded Heathrow airport.

Chris Grayling is Secretary of State for Transport

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"We need to deliver expansion at Heathrow, for the better links it will provide for our businesses and the jobs that it will create, because we are ambitious for the future of this country," writes Transport Secretary Chris Grayling for today's Daily Telegraph