

Heathrow: third runway consultation response, May 2017

The pro-forma consultation questions do not lend themselves very well to our response, so here below are our comments on the third runway proposals.

*Marilyn Mason, Co-Chair, Kingston Environment Forum**

Heathrow: third runway consultation response from Kingston Environment Forum

Kingston Environment Forum (KEF) opposes the proposed third runway and expansion of Heathrow for the following reasons:

Air travel is a major contributor to CO2 emissions, and thus to climate change

“Total climate change impact (including radiative forcing from other greenhouse gases) is 3%, and projected to grow to 5% by 2050 (IPCC)”. Members of KEF are concerned about climate change and therefore oppose the growth of air travel generally. It is not good enough simply to displace airport expansion elsewhere and impose the negative impacts on other people, or to rely on carbon off-setting (which is of dubious value), and we should instead be encouraging and investing in more environmentally sustainable forms of transport.

Local traffic and air pollution would increase to intolerable levels

The air in the environs of Heathrow is already some of the most polluted in Greater London, and this pollution is largely from road traffic. Traffic congestion in S W London, including Kingston and the M25 and M4, is already a problem, and expansion of Heathrow will increase freight, passenger and airport workers’ traffic and thus air pollution, making meeting the legal limits set by the EU Directive on Air Pollution unlikely. Nitrogen oxide and particulate matter (PM) levels on busy roads in S W London already exceed UK/EU safe limits, contributing to health problems and premature deaths, and KEF members would like to see this reduced to safe levels (to this end we support Kingston Council’s Air Quality Action Plan). The idea that most of the increase in travel to the airport would be by public transport and clean/electric vehicles is hopelessly optimistic, and there is little or nothing in current government policy that would make this likely.

Noise pollution would spread over a wider area and affect more residents

A third runway would bring an extra 250,000 flights a year, an increase of over 50%, and new flight paths; though it is not clear where these would be, it is clear that more people would be affected in areas such as Kingston, which have hitherto been relatively free of airplane noise. Noise has health impacts: there is extensive evidence that exposure to aircraft noise has adverse effects on cardiovascular health, sleep and stress levels in those living near airports, including Heathrow. These impacts cannot easily be mitigated by, for example, triple-glazing which only helps indoors when windows are closed. Apart from a night flight ban of 6 ½ hours (too short to allow necessary sleep?), and the hope/claim that newer aircraft will be less noisy (though still far from quiet), there is little information on how DfT noise targets could be met.

The business case for a third runway is weak, and has been exaggerated

In 2010, the proportion of business passengers (as compared to leisure, including visiting friends and family) was 29.9% at Heathrow, 20.4% at Gatwick, 29.5% at Manchester, 19.6% at Luton and 17.7% at Stansted. Data from the Health Protection Agency shows the proportion of business passengers has been falling steadily since 2000. Most air travel is in fact for leisure purposes, and much of that is undertaken by wealthier people, some of whom travel by air 3 or 4 times p a., and there is a “tourism deficit” with more outward tourist travel than inward, which airport expansion is likely to increase. It is harder to justify the negative impacts on the environment and people under the flight paths if they are mainly caused by elective holiday travel with little or no benefit to the wider economy, which is presumably why the business case has often been stressed. Forecasts of the economic benefits to the UK of Heathrow expansion have been downgraded since the Davies report.

The main business that would benefit appears to be Heathrow itself, particularly from its role as a hub airport which contributes little to the wider UK economy but a lot to the income of Heathrow and its retail and café concessions.

* Kingston Environment Forum (<http://e-voice.org.uk/kef/>) is a network of local environmental organisations which works with Kingston Council to promote environmental sustainability in Kingston upon Thames.