

Heathrow must meet environmental conditions

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MPs on the Environmental Audit Committee have said the Government should not give final approval to Heathrow expansion until the airport can demonstrate that it accepts and will comply with key environmental conditions.

Environmental Audit Committee Chair, Huw Irranca-Davies MP:

"The purpose of this inquiry was not to reopen the debate over where extra airport capacity should be located or whether it should take place at all. It was to examine the implications of the Airports Commission's recommendation for a third runway on climate-changing emissions, air quality and noise – and what Government and Heathrow should do about them."

Heathrow expansion and legal air pollution limits

The MPs say the airport must demonstrate that: it can reconcile Heathrow expansion with legal air pollution limits; commit to covering the costs of surface transport improvements; commit to introducing a night flight ban; and show that an expanded Heathrow would be less noisy than a two runway Heathrow. Huw Irranca-Davies MP said:

"The Government has a duty to reduce illegal levels of air pollution in London to protect the health and well-being of its population. The Communities living near to the roads around Heathrow already put up with noise and extra traffic, it would be quite unacceptable to subject them to a potentially significant deterioration in air quality as well. Increased pollution should certainly not be permitted on the grounds that other areas of London are even more polluted."

On carbon emissions, the inquiry found a gap between the Government's current policies and the policies modelled by the Commission to show expansion could be achieved within CO2 limits. The Government should set out its approach to international negotiations on aviation emissions and put in place a strategy to deliver aviation emissions no higher than 2005 levels by 2050 in line with the economy-wide target set by the Climate Change Act.

EAC Chair, Huw Irranca Davies MP commented:

"Planes are becoming more fuel efficient, but this alone will not keep aviation emissions in line with the Government's climate change targets given the growth in passenger numbers. Even without expansion, aviation is on track to exceed its climate change target. We heard evidence that those targets might be met in theory, but at present there is a policy vacuum and evidence-based scepticism as to whether they can be met in practice."

Air quality

On air quality, the inquiry heard concerns that the Commission's interpretation of the Air Quality Directive implied that significant increases in nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) resulting from Heathrow expansion would be allowable because of worse performance elsewhere in London. The Committee said the Government should make clear that this is not the position it intends to take when assessing Heathrow's compliance with the EU directive on air quality.

On noise, the Committee strongly supports a ban on night flights and calls on the Government to improve trust between local people and the airport by setting up within the year a Community Engagement Board. Ministers also need to establish and explain how noisy a future three-runway Heathrow would be relative to a future two-runway airport, and ensure that communities still receive predictable respite from planes flying overhead.

Climate change, air quality and noise

In each case - climate change, air quality and noise – the Government needs to set out concrete proposals for mitigation alongside clear responsibilities and milestones against which performance can be measured.

The Government should report regularly to Parliament on its progress through the Environmental Audit Committee and other committees. It should use the consultation period that would likely follow any decision to address the recommendations in the report, before seeking Parliament's approval for the scheme.

Chair's comments

Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, Huw Irranca-Davies MP:

"To defer dealing with the environmental impact of a third runway would be irresponsible and could lead to legal challenges as a result of the potential damage to public health from increased air pollution and noise. If the Government decides to accept the Commission's recommendation for a third runway in principle, we will seek assurances from the Secretary of State for Transport that environmental conditions will be met before it is given final approval."