

COMPRESSION FATIGUE

A squeeze on domestic connections into Heathrow could damage Scotland's export growth and its potential to attract inward investment, writes **Wendy Alexander**



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Cancelling Heathrow's third runway has repercussions far beyond west London. Heathrow is full. On any normal day, its two runways operate at 99 per cent capacity. The result – arriving aircraft are routinely held in holding patterns, departing aircraft get stuck in lengthy taxiway queues, passengers are frustrated and flights are delayed or cancelled in bad weather. Without additional runway capacity, passengers will continue to endure the delays and cancellations that, unfortunately, have become the hallmark of the Heathrow experience.

It's bad for business, bad for tourism and bad for the environment. And it's a terrible advertisement for Britain in the 21st century, particularly as many of Heathrow's rivals are pushing ahead with ambitious development plans. The British Chambers study, published in 2009, found that a third runway at Heathrow would add £30bn to the UK economy.

Heathrow is the UK's only hub airport, serving around 180 worldwide destinations. So opting to build more airport capacity elsewhere in the South East, simply means domestic passengers from the rest of the UK will invariably have to collect their luggage and cross London to reach Heathrow for their onward international connection.

Access to Heathrow is of particular importance to the regions of the UK. More than 500 flights operate each week between Scotland and Heathrow, and over three million people use the shuttle service every year. Scotland needs direct access to the UK's only hub airport if it is to compete effectively. The consequences of not building the third runway are already hitting Scotland's competitiveness. Because Heathrow is full, airlines such as British Airways and bmi – which have traditionally operated feeder services from the north – are under immense pressure to switch their domestic slots to more lucrative long-haul services.

We have already seen the effects of this, with a reduction in the number of early-morning flights from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Heathrow, and the withdrawal of Heathrow services from Inverness and Teeside. Already only eight regional airports outside London have direct access to Heathrow – this is down from 18 domestic routes into Heathrow two decades ago. The squeeze on regional access slots to Heathrow is real and sustained.

Some suggest high-speed rail is an alternative. I support high speed rail. But the dedicated link to Scotland will be 20 years in construction. Until then it is not a substitute for Heathrow. Others argue Britain's regional airports should offer more direct international routes. The past decade has seen a huge expansion of air services to and from Scotland. But no other part of the UK has the population base – or the inbound potential – to support the wide range of international destinations that only a world hub like Heathrow can offer.

The message from Scottish business is that Heathrow is vital as the hub for transfer connections that back-up Scotland's pitch for inward investment and export growth. Yet we are already losing flight connections from Glasgow to Heathrow, and the competitive pressure on airlines to concentrate on the most profitable international flights is a growing threat to domestic connections with Heathrow.

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High-speed rail is not the answer to our immediate concerns if realistically it's not even going to start its first phase until after 2017. Pitching for direct flights is not the answer either, as regional airports can never realistically expect to have anything like the offer available at Heathrow. Scots may have to rely on Schiphol rather than Heathrow in future.

In Europe, new runway capacity is clearly valued – Amsterdam, Barcelona, Frankfurt and Madrid have all added at least one new runway. Meanwhile, China and India continue to develop new airport infrastructure at a blistering pace. What will the Westminster government now do to protect and expand domestic connections to Heathrow to ensure Scotland is not gradually cut off from Heathrow? Will it do more to reduce train journey times to London on the existing West Coast Main line whilst we await developments in high-speed rail? These are the issues the government must now address. 🏢