

Heathrow Flight Paths and Runways

A Layperson's Guide

2019 has been the year of consultations. There have been consultations on the third runway, on flight paths and on Independent Parallel Approaches. We look at each.

Where are we now?

What happens next?

The Third Runway

The Process

Heathrow is the process of assessing the responses to its summer consultation and drawing up its detailed application for a third runway. It hopes to present that to the Planning Inspectorate in summer 2020. The inspectors will take some months to read and digest it before a **Public Inquiry** opens in late 2020/early 2021. It will be time-limited – probably to 6 months. Objectors can put in evidence in written form. Cross-examination will be limited.

The inspectors will then make a recommendation to the Government but **the final decision** on the third runway will rest with the Secretary of State for Transport (in reality, with a decision as important as this, the Cabinet). That decision is expected in the second half of 2021. If the third runway gets the go-ahead, Heathrow hopes to open it in 2026.

Hurdles facing a third runway

There is a **legal challenge** against the Government brought by some councils, the Mayor of London and some environmental organisations which started in the Courts of Justice on 17th October. A verdict is expected by the end of the 2019. If the court finds in favour of a third runway, it is unlikely that of itself kills off a third runway. More likely, the courts will argue that the Government - and by extension Heathrow – will need to carry out more work on specific topics.

The **public inquiry** itself will be challenging for Heathrow. However, objectors rarely win public inquiries into national projects. For example, in the last 40 years only two national road schemes have been stopped at public inquiry. Many proposed national road schemes have been stopped but it has been through campaigning before an inquiry or, very occasionally, post-inquiry.

Heathrow will be more worried about **the political situation**. The current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, has in the past forcefully expressed his opposition to a third runway and may be looking for a way to drop it. And John McDonnell, Labour's Shadow Chancellor, is a staunch opponent of a third runway. Any Labour Government with John McDonnell in a senior role is likely to drop a third runway despite the intense pressure there will be from unions like UNITE for it to go ahead.

Flight Paths

Heathrow is planning the biggest changes to its flight paths since it opened in 1946 whether or not a third runway is built. It is enabled by new technology. As air traffic controllers move from a ground-based system to a satellite system to guide planes, new flight paths are being introduced at airports across the world. It is called Performance Based Navigation (PBN). PBN routes will be narrow and concentrated. Airlines can reduce fuel costs and CO2 emissions per plane. Airports can improve their resilience. And routes can be more efficient as they will be much less criss-crossing of flight paths. In our view they will only work for residents if multiple routes are introduced so they can be rotated each day in order to give communities periods of respite.

Heathrow has had two consultations on new flights paths.

The first one asked about **the design principles** people wanted to see when the routes were designed. The top two things people wanted were respite and for new areas to be avoided. At times, though, these two principles will be in conflict.

The second consultation in early 2019 asked for views on the way Heathrow was drawing up the flight paths based on the design principles people opted for in the first consultation. We don't yet have detailed routes but these principles emerged:

- a guarantee of no all-day flying over any community
- landing flight paths to each runway rotated at least once a day
- departure routes from each runway be rotated at least twice a day
- an aspiration to try and avoid the same community getting both arrivals and departures.

In short, respite but with some new areas overflowed.

Heathrow is drawing up its flight paths on the assumption a third runway will be built. I suspect it would need to go back to the drawing board on the design of flight paths if it was dropped.

The summer third runway consultation made it clear that, if the runway goes ahead, **respite on the southern flight path** will be cut from the current half a day to the equivalent of a third. The **current northern flight path** would retain its half day's break. **Respite on the new northern flight path**, serving the third runway, would be the equivalent of a third of a day. Respite would be introduced at night with the likely result that two weeks out of three each community would not get pre-6am flight.

Detailed flight paths will not be considered at the Public Inquiry (though overall noise levels will). The flight path procedures are overseen by the Civil Aviation Authority.

There will be consultation on the detailed flight paths in 2022. NATS is coordinating the flight path changes for all airports in London and the SE. They are likely to be phased in from about 2024.

Independent Parallel Approaches (IPAs)

These are a new type of flight path which Heathrow wants to use between 2022 and 2026. That is, before a third runway opens. They are designed to avoid delays at the existing runway. They are only for arrivals.

Heathrow is planning narrow routes direct from the holding stacks to join the final approach paths closer to the airport. There will be a number of them though each of them will not be used every day.

Heathrow expects that on a typical day around 18 planes will land at Heathrow between 6am – 7am using them and a total of about 15 for the entire remainder of the day.

Heathrow will consult on the detailed routes for IPAs in summer 2020.

If a third runway is built, IPAs will cease. If it is not, they will continue.

**John Stewart
Chair HACAN**

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