

Short-Haul Flights: Still Clogging up Heathrow's Runways



Out of the **top ten destinations **only one**, New York, is long haul. The rest are European or British destinations.**

Short-haul: still dominant

In 2006 HACAN issued a report showing that Paris was Heathrow's top destination, with short-haul flights taking up the majority of the remaining top ten routes. Seven years on short-haul flights continue to dominate the top 10.

Destination Average Daily Flights using Heathrow*	
New York	61
Dublin	39
Amsterdam	38
Frankfurt	36
Paris	35
Edinburgh	35
Manchester	29
Munich	28
Madrid	26
Zurich	26

*average taken over two weeks of flights and rounded to the nearest integer

In 2006, Paris topped the league with 60 flights

Paris	60
Amsterdam	50
Dublin	50
New York	42
Edinburgh	40

Heathrow's runways are now running at 99% capacity. Yet, although compared to 2006 there has been a reduction in the number of flights to some short-haul destinations, the overall number of flights to these destinations have increased.

The most significant change has been the impact of Eurostar. Flights to Brussels have decreased from 30 flights a day in 2006 to 19 in 2013 whilst flights to Paris have been reduced from 60 per day to 35.

Could rail take the strain?

The impact of Eurostar has been startling. And a direct London to Frankfurt service is expected to start later this year, with Eurostar also looking to run direct services to Amsterdam and Geneva by 2014. Nationally, according to a report from the New Economics Foundation (1), three in every four flights from the UK are short-haul, with approximately 70% of flights leaving the UK having destinations within the EU-25. The report continues, “45 per cent of all European flights are over distances of less than 500km. Yet evidence suggests that high-speed trains can provide a quality of service better than or equal to the air equivalent for distances of 500km or more. This means that many of these journeys have the potential to transfer to high-speed rail.”



Eurostar's has been dramatic. Since 2006 Paris/Heathrow flights have almost halved

The potential, then, is there for a significant switch from air to rail. Indeed, the European Union's Transport White Paper states that “by 2050 the majority of medium-distance passenger transport should go by rail (2)”. It is unlikely, however, that rail will reach its full potential unless rail fares are cut and budget air fares rise. The latter would happen if the subsidy aviation receives in the form of tax-free fuel and zero-rating for VAT was to be removed.

Should rail take the strain?

It has been argued that Heathrow needs all these short-haul flights in order to remain an international hub airport attracting a significant number of transfer passengers. That view is now being challenged. Over the last three years during which it has been Government policy to rule out building any new runways in the South East, the Department of Transport has worked on the assumption that in due course, as market forces kick in, airlines will concentrate their long-haul operations at Heathrow and move a number of their short-haul flights to other South East airports in where there is spare capacity. The Manchester Airport group, which recently bought Stansted, has made it their first priority to halt the decline in flight numbers at the airport. And the new owners of Gatwick Airports are amongst those now arguing that London is the really important hub, rather than specifically Heathrow. And more passengers terminate in London than in any other city in the world. That makes it less dependent on transfer passengers to provide the critical mass of people which enable frequent flights to operate to a big range of worldwide destinations than its key European competitors. The evidence is mounting that neither Heathrow nor London would suffer if fewer short-haul flights used the airport.

Heathrow is less dependent on transfer passengers than its rivals because of the pulling-power of London

Heathrow: better not bigger

In our 2006 report we found that between a fifth and a quarter of flights using Heathrow were serving domestic or near-Europe destinations. That is, around 100,000 flights (out of a total now of nearly 480,000). Although the mix is slightly different in 2013, the proportion is about the same.

If the number of short-haul flights was reduced, that would free up space at Heathrow for more flights from the 'growth' economies of the world – places like China, India and Brazil. Heathrow has the terminal capacity to accommodate 20 million extra passengers a year. The most sensible use of both that capacity and the constrained runway capacity would be to bring in more passengers, particularly from the 'growth' economies, using larger planes.

Replacing many short-haul flights with long-haul could be, certainly in the short-term, the most cost-effective alternative to more runways in the South East

As we indicated on the previous page, it is likely that, if Heathrow was not expanded, the airlines would give priority to long-haul flights at the airport. British Airways, under the astute management of Willie Walsh, is already moving in this direction. It intends, in due course, to use the slots it recently purchased from BMI for long-haul routes. If Heathrow is constrained, other airlines can be expected to follow British Airways and use some of their coveted slots for long rather than short-haul flights.

Replacing many short-haul flights with long-haul would not cut CO2 emissions (unless the overall number of planes using Heathrow fell). There are other ways of restricting the UK aviation's contribution to climate change. It would, though, be good for Heathrow, good for London and, certainly in the short-term, be the most cost-effective alternative to more runways in the South East.

References:

- 1). <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/plane-truths>
- 2). http://ec.europa.eu/transport/themes/strategies/2011_white_paper_en.htm

**This report, researched by Cameron Kaye, has been produced by HACAN, the organisation representing residents under the Heathrow flight paths.
email info@hacan.org.uk; tel 0207 737 6641; twitter @hacan1**

www.hacan.org.uk

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