

Sir Howard Davies
Chair, Airports Commission
c/o Department for Transport
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Dear Sir Howard

London Assembly Transport Committee submission on surface transport access at airports

Thank you for meeting us on 3 July 2013 to discuss airport capacity. As we discussed at the meeting, I am writing to you, on behalf of the Transport Committee, with further information about improving surface transport access at airports to inform the work of the Airports Commission.

This letter also responds to the Airports Commission's recently published summary of proposals for making best use of existing airport capacity which invited further views on this issue by 27 September 2013. We note that your published summary includes some possible options for improving surface transport access and we refer to some of these, as well as highlighting other possible options, in this letter.

As you will be aware, we identified in our report, *Airport capacity in London* (May 2013), that improving surface transport access could be key to ensuring more effective use of existing airport capacity. We found that people need to be encouraged to switch from using Heathrow to using other airports and that if people found it easier to travel to and from central London to Gatwick, Stansted and Luton airports, they might make more use of these airports. It is worth noting however that there are differing views within the Committee on whether this would be a short-term fix or a long-term alternative that would reduce the need for more airport capacity including a new hub airport.

In the remainder of this letter, we comment on improving surface transport access, especially rail access, across all London's airports. We then highlight specific surface transport access issues at each airport and potential solutions. The appendix summarises all these possible short and long-term options for improvements. This letter is based on information received during the course of our work on airport capacity.

Improvements to surface transport access at all London's airports

We want to see the development of a national strategy to realise improvements to surface transport access at all airports. As you mentioned at our meeting, this follows the findings of the Eddington transport study of 2006 which recommended government transport policy prioritise surface transport access at key international gateways that are showing signs of increasing congestion and unreliability. However, as London First and others have suggested recently, national transport policy has yet to address surface transport access effectively, especially rail access. As our report shows, many people continue to travel by private car to airports. In 2010, 31 per cent of passengers at

Heathrow used private car and 26 per cent used taxis. There were similarly high proportions of passengers using private car at Gatwick (42 per cent), Luton (48 per cent) and Stansted (40 per cent). By contrast, at London City airport only 13 per cent of passengers travelled by private car and more than half – 52 per cent – used the DLR.¹

Improving surface transport access at airports requires joint work by the Government, airport operators, airlines, Network Rail and transport providers including TfL and the train operating companies. They need to develop suitable schemes, prioritise funding for them and then promote the public transport options to airline passengers. To this end, we welcome Network Rail's recently published market study for London and South East, which prioritises rail access at airports as part of its plans for rail improvements. We agree that this should be a priority area for future rail investment. We also welcome easyJet suggesting airlines could do more to inform their customers about rail travel. For example, airlines could publicise to their passengers that Luton can be just a 21 minute journey from St Pancras on the quickest trains and that it is possible to travel by rail from Gatwick all the way through London.

One relatively simple way in which transport operators could work together to improve surface transport access is to extend Oyster card to Gatwick and Stansted airports. At present passengers travelling to Gatwick using Oyster cards have to alight at East Croydon station to purchase a new ticket that will then allow them to continue their journey to the airport. Extending Oyster to Gatwick would allow for uninterrupted travel thus improving the connectivity of the airport. Similarly, allowing airline passengers to use Oyster cards when travelling between London and Stansted will make for easier journeys and ensure the airport is integrated into the wider transport network.

Other proposals to improve surface transport access across a number of airports include linking Gatwick to Heathrow via a direct rail link and High Speed 2 (HS2). We received mixed views on the potential to link Gatwick to Heathrow to create a dual-hub airport ('Heathwick'). Some people raised concerns that the connection times for passengers transferring between the airports would be too long and it would be prohibitively expensive to create and operate. However, others suggested that these issues could be overcome and that transfers could take just 15 minutes on a rail service running every five minutes on a line following the route of the M25. Many people have also emphasised the potential for HS2 to help connect airports. They suggest it could reduce the number of short-haul flights at Heathrow by bringing Birmingham and Manchester airports much closer to London.

Improving surface transport access at Gatwick

We have heard that the Gatwick Express service is poor in comparison to other rail services. Gatwick Airport Ltd highlighted to us a fall in customers' satisfaction with growing complaints about poor accessibility and luggage capacity on the trains. In Passenger Focus's rail passenger survey for 2012, only 31 per cent of Gatwick Express passengers said the service represented value for money. We have also heard of problems with Southern's services between Brighton and Victoria that serve Gatwick. Network Rail reported capacity constraints at peak hours on the Brighton main line and Gatwick Airport Ltd suggested that, as a result, Southern services are often very crowded when they reach the airport.

The new Thameslink franchise offers scope for better services between Gatwick and London. Gatwick Airport Ltd told us that it wanted this franchise process to deliver investment in a premium rail service for Gatwick Express which replaces the existing fleet of trains with rolling stock that meets airline passengers' needs. London First suggested the franchise process should result in a premium, dedicated, non-stop service between Gatwick and Victoria with, at the very least, four trains per hour and a 30 minute journey time. By contrast, TfL suggests a dedicated service for airline passengers at

¹ London Assembly Transport Committee's *Aviation Capacity in London* report, May 2013, p23

peak times is an inefficient use of capacity but concurs with the need to improve rolling stock on the Gatwick Express service.

We welcome the current work to upgrade Gatwick station that should improve accessibility and navigability of the station for passengers. The upgrade includes construction of a new platform and renovation of the concourse area. An existing stairway will be replaced with an escalator and a new lift will be installed to improve passenger movements on platforms 5 and 6. The track and signalling is also due to be upgraded to improve the performance and reliability of trains.

In the longer term, more investment is needed in the Brighton main line. Network Rail told us that significant additional capacity can only be created through an upgrade of the line. It is currently undertaking studies and modelling of how this might be achieved with a view to bidding for funding for implementation at the time of major signalling renewals in 2020.

Improving surface transport access at Stansted

We have heard of problems with capacity, reliability and journey times on rail services between Stansted and London. Network Rail reported that the West Anglia main line is running at full capacity at peak times. Stansted Airport Ltd told us that the reliability on the West Anglia main line has become a significant concern with 1 in 6 trains delayed by at least 10 minutes. The airport estimated that it could attract an additional 1.5 million passengers a year if rail journey times to central London were reduced from 45 minutes to 30 minutes.

The provision of additional tracks could help resolve the issues on the West Anglia main line. London First has called for more early morning rail services for passengers using Stansted airport but Network Rail reported that a current mix of slow and fast trains coupled with the single track tunnel leading into Stansted station made it difficult to realise improvements at present. Network Rail told us the provision of additional tracks - 'four tracking' - would enable the separation of fast and slow rail services on the line to the benefit of both; fast services could be accelerated, slow services increased in frequency. In the longer term, this proposal can be linked to Crossrail 2. If the route selected for Crossrail 2 ran via the Lea Valley, it would require 'four tracking' and thus result in additional rail capacity serving Stansted airport.

Improving surface transport access at Luton

Network Rail told us of future developments to improve rail services between London and Luton Airport Parkway station. Phase two of Thameslink, due for completion in 2018, will provide new rolling stock, 50 per cent longer trains and improved connections with more trains running from Luton through central London to destinations south of the capital. Network Rail also advised of its plans for electrification of the Midland main line which should allow for modern trains to run at a higher frequency with reduced journey times.

Others have also called for an increase in rail service provision between London and Luton as part of the new Thameslink franchise. TfL has reported that on Saturday nights there are no overnight services at Luton Airport Parkway so rail travel is not an option for airline passengers. It wants the new Thameslink franchisee to provide more frequent services overnight on weekdays and weekends.

Improving surface transport access at Heathrow

There is an urgent need to address surface transport access at Heathrow to improve the local environment, the resilience of the airport, and the service for airline passengers. Road and rail congestion around the airport contributes to poor air quality; the area around Heathrow regularly

breaches European Union limits for nitrogen dioxide. In the past the airside road tunnels at the airport have flooded inconveniencing thousands of airline passengers.

There are significant capacity problems on the rail routes serving Heathrow. Recently published figures for rail crowding in autumn 2012 showed First Great Western, the train operator of services to Heathrow, had the highest level of passengers in excess of capacity of any train company in London and south-east England. In this period the most crowded individual rail service was the 08:27 Heathrow Connect service from Heathrow to Paddington Station.

In addition to capacity problems, customers frequently complain about the high fares for the Heathrow Express. The single 15 minute journey between the airport and Paddington costs £20. To address this, the London Borough of Hounslow told us that Heathrow Express should be integrated within TfL's existing fares structure. This could result in the £20 single fare reducing to £5.50 and ensure Heathrow Express is a mass transit rather than premium service. In addition, the borough also suggested to us that there should be more frequent, 24 hour bus services at Heathrow and the implementation of a charge for 'Kiss and Fly' (airline passengers being given lifts to the airport in private cars by friends/family). It suggests revenues from this charge could be hypothecated for further local public transport improvements.

In its report, *Plane Speaking* (March 2012) the Assembly's Environment Committee raised issues about Network Rail's proposals to address the rail capacity problems at Heathrow. Network Rail has suggested enhancing the Crossrail service at peak times from a four train per hour stopping service west of Paddington to a 10 train per hour stopping service and that this could in time replace the existing Heathrow Express service. Heathrow Airport Ltd has estimated that replacing the non-stopping Heathrow Express service would reduce the proportion of air passengers travelling by rail to the airport by three per cent. In light of this, the Environment Committee called for an economic appraisal of Network Rail's proposal. It also recommended the development of a Heathrow forum so relevant stakeholders could work together to develop integrated rail transport solutions for the airport.

In the past, other options for improving rail links at Heathrow have been proposed including the 'Airtrack' scheme to provide a rail link to Waterloo. Network Rail told us that whilst the original 'Airtrack' proposal had now been dropped, a proposal for southern rail access at Heathrow is still possible albeit problematic due to capacity constraints on the route. The London Borough of Hounslow argued that this plan for southern rail access – a revised 'Airtrack' proposal – did not have the problems of its predecessor (for example level crossing down times) and could dramatically improve access for a large number of London's residents, promoting modal shift from car to rail with an associated reduction in pollution emissions. TfL supports the revised 'Airtrack' proposal subject to it having a positive business case, being operationally feasible and any dis-benefits to other users being acceptable.

Other options for improved rail links to Heathrow have been advanced by TfL and Network Rail. TfL is lobbying for orbital services to be connected to the planned Old Oak Common interchange with HS2 and Crossrail services. There is also a proposal to extend Crossrail services to Staines via Heathrow Airport Terminal 5. TfL reports any changes to Crossrail services would need to be agreed with the airport operator because Crossrail is currently planned to serve Terminal 4 rather than Terminal 5. Network Rail has also suggested scope to create a western access rail route to Heathrow on the Great Western main line via Reading and Slough and the potential for a spur to Heathrow under phase two of HS2. In addition, the upgrade of the Piccadilly line is vital to improving public transport at Heathrow.

We trust this letter will inform the Airports Commission's consideration of surface transport access at airports. As our report made clear, improving surface transport access could be key to encouraging

airline passengers to switch from using Heathrow to using other airports with 'spare' capacity. The Government, airport operators, airlines, Network Rail and transport operators should be working together to improve surface transport access. They should be devising and delivering transport schemes that result in quicker, more frequent and reliable journeys between Gatwick, Stansted and Luton airports and central London. Airline passengers at all London's airports including Heathrow and London City should have access to high quality rail services that are affordable, accessible and fully integrated within the wider transport network. We would like the Airports Commission to address this issue in detail in its interim report and include specific proposals for improving surface transport access at airports.

We look forward to the publication of the Airports Commission's interim report in December.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Valerie Shawcross". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline.

Valerie Shawcross CBE AM
Chair of the Transport Committee

Appendix – a summary of options for improving surface transport access at London’s airports

For all airports

- The development of a national strategy that sets out how the Government, airport operators, airlines, Network Rail and transport providers including TfL and the train operating companies will work together to plan and deliver improvements to surface transport access at all airports.
- Extend Oyster card to Gatwick and Stansted airports so they are integrated within London’s transport network.
- More advertising of rail transport links to airline passengers by airlines and airport operators.
- High speed rail link between Heathrow to Gatwick to create ‘Heathwick’.
- HS2 to make it easier to travel to and from London to other regional airports.

For Gatwick

- The new Thameslink franchise to deliver improved Gatwick Express service with a new fleet of trains and possibly more frequent, quicker services.
- The upgrade of Gatwick station including construction of a new platform, renovation of the concourse area and installation of escalator and a new lift.
- In the longer term, an upgrade of the Brighton main line to deliver more capacity.

For Stansted

- The provision of additional tracks - ‘four tracking’- on the West Anglia main line to separate slow and fast services to Stansted.
- Crossrail 2.

For Luton

- Phase two of Thameslink to provide new rolling stock, 50 per cent longer trains and improved connections to destinations south of London.
- The new Thameslink franchise to provide more frequent services overnight and on weekdays.
- Electrification of the Midland main line to allow for more frequent, quicker journeys.

For Heathrow

- Integration of Heathrow Express within TfL’s fares structure.
- Introduction of more frequent, 24 hour bus services.
- Charge for ‘Kiss and Fly’ with revenues hypothecated for further public transport improvements.
- Economic appraisal of Network Rail’s proposal to enhance Crossrail service at peak time which could in time replace the existing Heathrow Express service.
- An ‘Airtrack’ scheme to provide for southern rail access to the airport.
- Orbital rail services connected at Old Oak Common Interchange with HS2 and Crossrail services.
- Extension of Crossrail services to Staines via Heathrow Airport Terminal 5.
- The creation of western rail access on the Great Western main line via Reading and Slough.
- Potential spur under Phase 2 of HS2.

- **Upgrading of the Piccadilly line to deliver more capacity.**

