

As a supporter of the Weston Williamson “Luton Hub Airport” proposal and author of the “MERLIN – Surface Access” scheme, I’d like to take the opportunity to make some comments about the Airport Commissions “Emerging Thinking” and also the Mayor for London’s TfL Responses.

Response to Emerging Thinking

I welcome the Commission’s work reviewing environmental issues and believe that it has struck the right balance in coming to its provisional conclusion that “we will need some net additional runway capacity in the south east of England in the coming decades”. The implication from this being that in addition to the construction of new runways to provide added capacity, there may be scope for building new runways to replace existing runways that are poorly located. This provides an opportunity for more imaginative schemes that will do the business but in a more economically and environmentally efficient manner. To my mind it would be a great disappointment if after 3 years of review the Airport Commission ended up simply recommending additional runways at one or all of Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted.

Options

I suspect that the Airport Commission will come under intense lobbying from many sources to “make Heathrow work”. Heathrow themselves have developed three interesting options. My concern is that although each option has, compared to the existing runways, a lower environmental impact, it will be in addition to the impact of the existing runways. Therefore I suspect that the only realistic option for Heathrow expansion is the Tim Leunig “Bigger and Quieter” 4-runway proposal. The viability of this option can only be verified by an in-depth study, something I would hope the Commission would cover as a matter of course.

The Tim Leunig proposal might well be “Bigger and Quieter” but there is the possibility that it still might not be “Quiet Enough”, particularly given the increasing understanding of the negative effect of aircraft noise. This wouldn’t surprise me, nor would the social and political resistance to a great increase in flights over a heavily urbanised area. Therefore, and if the Commission concludes that a single large hub is beneficial for the UK, it may be necessary to look at non Heathrow alternatives.

Unfortunately all the alternatives have drawbacks. Gatwick could take a second runway, but would be difficult to expand past that to become a genuine hub and in any case it is poorly

located for much of the UK. The Isle of Grain could accommodate a very large airport, but is remote from much of the UK and dependent on heavy investment in new surface access infrastructure. Unfortunately the Isle of Grain is an “all or nothing” project as a new two runway airport to start with couldn’t justify the necessary scale of investment in surface access, yet without that investment it would be unattractive to potential passengers. Stansted could be developed into a 4-runway hub, but would also be reliant on major investment in improved surface access and is difficult to get to from much of the UK. In the absence of any other new site, this leaves Luton which must be the best located airport for the UK as a whole and could be capable of accommodating a multi-runway airport.

Transport for London studies

In the TfL Report “A new airport for London and the UK - Technical note - shortlisting the options” Luton is ranked 3rd equal, behind Stansted in 2nd position, and the Isle of Grain in 1st position. However I am convinced that this ranking reflects the (understandably) London centric view taken by TfL and the Mayor, and that a UK perspective would yield a different result. Examining all the criteria where Stansted was ranked ahead of Luton or where the rankings simply don’t appear right:

Maximises Economic Benefits

Stansted scores higher than Luton probably due to the policy objective of boosting East London. Yet North London and Luton itself have areas in need of regeneration. Luton would also be more accessible to the Midlands, helping to rebalance the UK economy. A non-parochial view would not put Stansted ahead on these criteria.

Access to economic centres and Access to major population centres

Luton and Stansted are ranked equal on both of these criteria. However even a casual inspection of a map would reveal that this is far from the case with Luton actually positioned on major transport arteries to the Midlands and North, with Stansted located somewhat remotely to the East.

Night OPS

Stansted scores higher than Luton reflecting the fact that the latter is surrounded by a higher population. However banning all but emergency aircraft movement from 11:00 at night to 6:00 in the morning would remove this consideration. Expecting any inland airport to operate 24/7 I think is a mistake as the additional benefits of 24 hour operation would be

greatly outweighed by the cost to the surrounding community. Conversely a restricted hours airport could widen the options available.

Population within noise contour and Air quality

Luton loses out to Stansted significantly here and is an issue of great concern. Weston Williamson estimates that 50,000 people would be affected by noise from a Luton Hub Airport. This is a far higher figure than the number currently affected – a recent publication from Sustainable Aviation (Noise Road-Map, A Blueprint for managing noise from Aviation Sources to 2050) reported that using 2001 census data around 1,300 people were affected by noise at the 55 decibel level – far less than the number affected by noise by Manchester and Birmingham airports. In complete contrast the TfL paper “mayor-london-response-to-long-and-short-to-medium-term-proposal” estimates the number could be 300,000, stating that “For a single runway airport, it has been possible to set flightpaths that – as much as possible - weave in between these major settlements. But a 4-runway hub, requires considerable separation between approaches and reduces flexibility in their routing, making severe noise impacts inevitable”.

I suspect that the 300,000 figure is a consequence of the TfL’s preferred airport design with 4 parallel but independent runways. Such a design would necessarily restrict the scope for fitting flight paths around built-up areas. The more usual plan for a hub airport with two sets of close spaced parallel runways with terminal areas in the middle would not have this limitation. Aircraft landing / taking off from the north-west and north-east would use the northernmost pair of runways and the flight paths would be very similar to those of today, with limited flying over urban areas. The only major difference (except for the more intensive level of operation) would be aircraft landing / taking off from the south-west and south-east which would use the southernmost pair of runways with the result that the current flight paths would be displaced a couple of miles further to the south. Further, advances in aircraft navigation which enable aircraft to follow very precisely defined routes would help minimise the additional nuisance from this change.

I am sure that ranking airport options from a UK rather than London centric perspective would see Luton coming ahead of Stansted. The Isle of Grain of course comes first according to the TfL evaluation, but could fail entirely due to its all or nothing nature and the inherent risks involved. At the other extreme, Heathrow which performs very poorly in the TfL rankings, could succeed because it is already here, works well and is very popular. Therefore one has to conclude (as per Tim Leunig’s Policy Exchange paper) that if further expansion of Heathrow proves to be politically and socially untenable, then Luton is the next best (least worst) option.

The Midland Express Rail Link (MERLIN)

A recent paper by London First (London-First-A-World-Class-Rail-Link-for-Stansted) outlined a £620m plan for reducing the journey time for the Stansted Express service from Liverpool St to Stansted from 47 to 40 minutes. Yet today it is already possible to catch a train from St Pancras, destination Nottingham, which arrives at Luton Airport Parkway in only 20 minutes. The MERLIN proposal builds on this and it would be entirely feasible to provide journey times from Central London to Luton Airport comparable if not quicker than to Heathrow using either the current Heathrow Express or future Crossrail services. However MERLIN extends this connectivity to the Midlands and North by effectively rerouting West Coast fast trains via a new Luton Airport. In so doing it negates the TfL's second major criticism of an expanded Luton Airport, "Weston Williamson focus on utilising existing infrastructure rather than needing extensive new infrastructure provision".

Indeed MERLIN has qualities that are largely lacking in the TfL Surface Access proposals. First, as it serves a far larger hinterland it is multi-purpose and will also benefit non-airport traffic flows. Arguably by improving connections between existing economic growth areas it will foster further economic growth. Secondly, it can be developed in an incremental manner as Luton Airport, already served well by good road and rail links, develops. This significantly de-risks the proposal.

As a layman, I haven't the resources to complete a full optioneering exercise, and am very much limited to drawing lines on a map. What is apparent is that there are a number of surface access options. As a minimum, MERLIN would provide additional tracks from Central London to Luton Airport, and then branches to the West Coast Line at Milton Keynes, the Midland Line at Luton itself, and the East Coast Line near Hitchin, with direct connections to the route to Cambridge. It could even provide a solution to the central section of the East-West Rail link, with trains running from Milton Keynes to the Airport, and then reversing and heading towards Hitchin and onto Cambridge.

One Hub or None

After determining whether the UK requires additional net runway capacity in the South-East, the next step must be to determine whether the country would be best served by one hub or two. This must be one of the most complex tasks government commissions have been presented with and I await the results of the commissions' research and deliberations with great interest. In an ideal world, a single hub would almost always be the optimum solution. However, given the geographical constraints in the South-East this might be very difficult to implement and a two hub solution might strike the best balance in a very complex equation.

My layman's perspective would make me think that if there were very clear advantages to having a single large hub, then all Heathrow options should be evaluated. If, as I expect, none of the options will provide sufficient environmental amelioration for the expected increase in flights, then a hub at or near Luton should be considered, with Heathrow downscaled somewhat. It is notable that whilst there is huge opposition to Heathrow

expansion, there is also opposition to any reduction to its role and the economic impact this would bring.

If Luton were to be developed as a second hub, perhaps with one or more airline alliance relocating, the area around Heathrow would experience a slowly diminishing environmental impact as technology improved and airlines renewed their fleets. A two runway Luton could have a higher utilisation than Heathrow since, as there are very few people living near the immediate ends of the runways, there would be no need for runway alternation as each runway could be used for both landings and take-offs. An expanded Luton Airport, with three independent runways, although offering less capacity than an airport with two sets of closed spaced runways, would be able to handle the waves of incoming or outgoing flights associated with full hub airports. In this way 2 runways might be used for landings and 1 for take-offs, and at other times 2 runways to take-offs and only 1 for landings depending on traffic patterns.

Access to a Luton Hub Airport

Previous papers have detailed how MERLIN would enable Luton to be the most accessible SE Airport from the North and Midlands. However London is still the biggest single market and it is critical that good access is available from all parts of the Capital. In many respects this either is or will shortly be available in the form of the East Midlands Trains and the Thameslink Project which provide direct services from north-west, central, south and south-east London. A critical market that isn't currently well served is south-west London. However this could be rectified by rerouting a proportion of Crossrail 2 services north of Euston towards Luton. In this case, Airport Express, West Coast express services diverted to run via Luton and Crossrail 2 services could all use the new MERLIN infrastructure from Central London to Luton.

A major challenge will be providing good access to Luton Airport from West London. This is because individuals and businesses here already have Heathrow on their doorstep. Also many businesses in particular will have located here to be in close proximity to Heathrow, and if the UK's hub airport is to be relocated, then any inconvenience to this group needs to be minimised. Fortunately these are a number of options. TfL have already indicated that with Old Oak Common becoming a major business centre, the Overground could be extended from Old Oak to the Midland Main Line at Cricklewood. Although this might provide a rather slow connection there is no reason why this link couldn't be upgraded with a new tunnel facilitating Airport Express services to serve Old Oak as well as central London. This would also greatly improve accessibility to Luton Airport from the West Country. It might even be possible to run direct through services from Reading to Luton via Old Oak Common. Other options further west include the original MERLIN proposal building on the route of the proposed HS2 spur to Heathrow or indeed a combination of new and upgraded infrastructure from Hayes and Harlington on the Great Western Line to Cricklewood via Wembley.

Conclusion

Luton is usually dismissed as a location for building a new UK hub airport, despite its very strong locational advantages. This short note has indicated that:

- a) using the Mayor's TfL criteria, but from a UK rather than London perspective and
- b) in the interests of keeping noise pollution within reasonable bounds, adopting a slightly more modest airport layout compared to the TfL 4 independent runway scheme

Luton, previously 3rd equal beats Stansted, the previous 2nd choice, by a good margin. Given the all or nothing nature of the previous 1st choice, the Isle of Grain proposal and the highly constrained nature of all the other options available, Luton could well end up being the least worst option.