

News Release

Heathrow growth must benefit UK's regions HITRANS tells Government

Flights between UK regions and Heathrow should be increased and protected if a proposed expansion of the London airport goes ahead, the Highlands and Islands regional transport partnership HITRANS said today.

UK Government intervention to reserve a proportion of the new landing slots created by the expansion for air routes to the remote regions of the UK could reverse the decline of vital domestic services and improve the balance of economic opportunities across the country, the organisation argues.

HITRANS state their case strongly in a proposed response to a Department for Transport consultation on plans to expand Heathrow by adding a new terminal and third runway.

The transport partnership are concerned that the current free market approach to allocation of Heathrow landing slots, which has seen a steady decline in domestic routes over 20 years, will be continue to be applied should the expansion be approved.

This, they say, will lead to, "an ever-increasing economic imbalance and dominance of South East England at the expense of the rest of the United Kingdom, and contribute to the flight of industry and commerce from the regions to the London area."

Inverness Airport has seen the frequency of flights to Heathrow reduce from 22 a week in 1988 to none in 1998. Airline bmi reintroduced a daily service, but recently announced it was quitting the route. Other regions have experienced a similar reduction in services during the same period and, according to HITRANS, "10 significant peripheral communities have had their lifeline to Heathrow completely removed."

HITRANS say the Department for Transport should aim to reserve around 30,000 landing slots a year from the increased capacity expansion would create. These should be used to reintroduce the level of domestic flights lost since 1998, with the routes protected by Public Service Obligations (PSOs) or similar mechanisms.

HITRANS Chair Duncan MacIntyre said: "Government as a whole is working strenuously to spread economic benefits throughout the UK – indeed different parts of Government are helping fund uneconomic road, rail and ferry public transport services around the entire nation to ensure that social and economic cohesion are strengthened."

The Partnership Director, Dave Duthie commented "For regions without the possibility of practicable land-based access to the Heathrow hub, HITRANS would argue that Government should establish a means of ensuring access

and, as a result, redress some of the imbalance in economic opportunities across the country."

He added: "HITRANS is strongly of the view that – in return for allowing a private operator to expand its capacity from 480,000 flights a year up to 702,000 a year – the Government should reserve a proportion of these new flights to be preserved to ensure the provision of access for the regions to the Heathrow hub and the reintroduction of flights to domestic destinations."

The response to the consultation will be discussed at meeting of HITRANS in Inverness tomorrow (Friday). If agreed, it will be sent to the Department of Transport before the closing date for submissions of 25 February.

Ends

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