

How to reduce flights by boosting alternatives

With a decision due soon on whether Heathrow should be expanded, Campaign for Better Transport has released research showing how the Government could reduce business and other flights by boosting alternatives such as rail travel and teleconferencing.

Our research – a literature review and a survey of 11 companies from a range of sectors – found that businesses already attribute many benefits to rail travel and teleconferencing over flying. By improving these alternatives and raising awareness of their benefits, the Government could cut the demand for flights and the need for airport expansion.

Teleconferencing works

All of the companies we surveyed said that teleconferencing is convenient, can save time and money, enables greater control over time and is less stressful than air travel, and can enhance an organisation's corporate image. And all of them said that teleconferencing can reduce the need to travel.

While this reflects recent findings by organisations such as WWF, it goes against earlier reports which showed that teleconferencing was likely to increase flights. Whether this shift is attributed to an increased awareness of climate change, improvements in teleconferencing technology or the technology reaching a 'critical mass', it highlights the necessity for Government to rethink the supposed need for airport expansion.

There's great potential to get businesses on track

Business people prefer rail travel to flying, finding train tickets more flexible than plane tickets, stations easier to access and less stressful than airports, and trains more comfortable than planes. Crucially train travel allows travellers to make more productive use of their time than plane travel. And contrary to many people's beliefs, trains can compete strongly on both cost and punctuality.

But business travellers place a high value on time, and they will choose to fly if the same journey would take more than three hours by train. For this reason rail struggles to compete with flying for many journeys both within the UK and beyond. The solution lies in high-speed rail. Were the Government to invest in a high-speed rail line connecting central London, Heathrow and the Channel Tunnel with the Midlands, the North and Scotland, many travellers could be lured off planes. There is much evidence to support this claim, such as this from Spain: when a high-speed rail service was introduced between Madrid and Seville, the proportion of people flying the route fell by a half. High speed rail is expensive, but £9 billion – the annual tax subsidy enjoyed by the aviation industry – would pay for a line from London to Birmingham.

The need to reduce flights is urgent

Aviation accounts for 13% of the UK's impact on climate change. It also causes noise and air pollution and problematic levels of road traffic around airports. Despite its commitment to reduce CO2 emissions by 60% by 2050, the Government wants to allow bigger airports and more flights.

A cut in flights is not to be feared

If aviation were to shrink as a result of people choosing rail or teleconferencing instead, we'd be better off. The claim that a cut in flights would be bad for the economy is dubious. Right now we have a £17 billion tourism deficit, thanks to UK residents spending more money abroad than foreign visitors bring in. A cut in flights would improve this situation, as well as increasing house prices in areas currently blighted by aircraft noise and reducing congestion on roads around airports.

The claim that a cut in flights would disproportionately affect the poor, denying them the right to travel overseas, is also misguided. Planes are full of rich people: the average household income of people flying abroad from Heathrow is £54,488, compared to a national average of £28,700.

Campaign for Better Transport calls upon the Government to:

Urgently tackle the growth in aviation

- Set targets for reducing climate change emissions specifically from the aviation sector and form a clear policy framework to support the development of alternatives to aviation
- Withdraw support for aviation expansion plans, including a third runway at Heathrow
- Tax fuel for internal flights and remove tax exemptions on VAT and duty free
- Proceed with the promised introduction of a replacement of air passenger duty with a duty per plane, encompassing both freight operations and transfer passengers
- Invest aviation tax revenues in improving alternatives to flying

Make rail a more attractive alternative to flying

- Build a north-south high-speed rail line connecting central London, Heathrow and the Channel Tunnel with the Midlands, the North and Scotland, as recently promised by the Conservatives
- Make other rail lines that compete with domestic flights faster, more reliable and more frequent
- Improve the accessibility of rail stations and the integration of rail services with airports
- Provide financial incentives to enable business-friendly facilities such as Wi-Fi and power points to be rolled out across the rail network
- Reverse its decision to make passengers pay a higher proportion of the cost of running the railways, halting above-inflation fare increases
- More actively promote the benefits of rail travel relative to aviation

Work with businesses to increase teleconferencing

- Work closely with businesses to raise awareness of the benefits of alternatives to aviation, teleconferencing in particular, and to disseminate best practice
- Set non-mandatory targets for businesses to reduce their flights and provide formal recognition for those who achieve them
- Make financial support and training available to support the increased uptake of teleconferencing
- Collaborate with developers of teleconferencing technology and invest to improve that technology

For a full copy of our research, contact Campaign for Better Transport.

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