

Gatwick expansion moves forward

- A Monitor Desk Report

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London: Gatwick airport's expansion plans have gained momentum with backing from a UK minister.

Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander stated she was "minded to approve" the project, provided adjustments are made.

In a ministerial statement, she outlined that a new consent—incorporating operational controls—would be required. She also emphasized the need for additional time to gather input from all parties before a final decision is made.

This comes after the Planning Inspectorate initially rejected the airport's application to bring its emergency runway into routine use.

The inspectorate had then recommended Ms Alexander should give the project the go-ahead if adjustments were made on issues such as the proportion of passengers who travel to and from the airport by public

transport, and noise mitigation.

It is understood to be the first time the body has recommended an alternative plan when assessing a project.

Gatwick, which is 45km south of London, has until April 24 to respond to the new proposals, shortly after which Ms Alexander is expected to make a final decision.

Under the £2.2 billion (\$2.79 billion) privately financed project, Gatwick emergency runway would be moved 12 metres north, enabling it to be used for departures of narrow-bodied planes such as the Airbus A320 and Boeing 737. This would allow it to be used for about 100,000 more flights a year.

Among the airlines to use Gatwick are Emirates, Qatar Airways, Air Arabia, Fly Erbil, Royal Air Maroc, Saudia and Turkish Airlines, as well as UK flagship British Airways.

In a speech at a gathering of aviation leaders on Tuesday night, Ms Alexander said she “believes in airport expansion” and is “not some sort of flight-shaming eco-warrior”.

In addition to making a decision on Gatwick, Ms Alexander also has a deadline of April 3 to determine whether an expansion of Luton Airport, to the north of London, can go ahead.

Meanwhile, Heathrow Airport is developing detailed plans for its third runway scheme.

Ms Alexander said her job as the “decision maker” on airport expansion is to “strike a balance” between the potential benefits of jobs, trade and tourism, with “tough questions”, such as whether the schemes will be compatible with the UK’s climate and air quality obligations, whether noise can be minimised and if costs will be “shared fairly”.

Gatwick’s plan also involves remodelling and replacing existing taxiways – which connect runways to terminals, hangars and other facilities – extending both terminals and installing new aircraft gates.

The airport says its scheme is “shovel ready” and construction could start this year. It hopes the upgraded runway will be operational by the end of the decade.

Gatwick says its plans would create £1 billion a year in economic benefits and generate 14,000 jobs.

Local campaigners opposed to Gatwick's expansion have expressed concerns over the impact on surface transport, noise, housing provision and wastewater treatment. But the airport insists it has conducted "full and thorough assessments" of those issues.

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