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Heathrow Studies Options To Build Capacity

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Credit: Heathrow Airport Holdings

Looking down on Heathrow Airport from its 87-meter-high (285-ft.) air traffic control tower, the challenges that face the world's busiest two-runway airport suddenly become very clear.

With an aircraft landing or taking off approximately every 2 min., runway and parking-stand capacity is at a premium, and the site offers little room for expansion. On every side, the airport is hemmed in by development, which has a dramatic effect on airport efficiency. A single day of inclement weather can bring about a domino effect on operations resulting in hundreds of canceled flights, leaving passengers stranded and the airport's reputation in tatters. No wonder managers are considering moving operations to another site.

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Heathrow Airport Holdings has been quietly exploring options for future airport configurations and two new locations never previously examined for the siting of a major new airport. Aviation Week has seen the Heathrow 2025: Masterplan Options & Indicative Layouts documents produced by the Mott MacDonald consultancy that propose 10 options, ranging from a reconfiguration of the current airfield with two runways and new a terminal layout to an entirely new four-runway facility built on greenfield land at one of two locations in the nearby counties of Berkshire and Buckinghamshire to supplement, or more likely replace Heathrow.

The two new sites suggested by the consultants would feature a four-runway layout, not unlike the configuration of Madrid's Barajas Airport (see map). Two runways would be located on either side of a main terminal core, while the other two runways, parallel to the first two, would be slightly offset but more than 1 km (0.6 mi.) apart allowing parallel landing and takeoff operations. The newly built facilities could potentially handle 140 million passengers and 800,000 air traffic movements a year, just under twice Heathrow's capacity today.

One site suggested is at White Waltham, a small general aviation airfield about 15 mi. west of Heathrow and close to the town of Maidenhead. The other is Haddenham, the location of a old World War II glider airfield about 15 mi. from the city of Oxford but more than 30 mi. from the center of London. Local parish councillors contacted by Aviation Week were taken aback by the suggestion that the countryside near their homes could be turned into a major international airport.

The Haddenham site would perhaps be the most controversial, as the layout suggests the virtual removal of two villages, Chearsley and Long Crendon. Both sites are in open countryside, however, and have the advantage of being close to major transport links. White Waltham, would be built almost on top of the M4 motorway and is close to major rail links, while the Haddenham location is close to the M40 motorway and within a few miles of the government's planned but controversial High Speed 2 (HS2) rail route to Birmingham, a move that would boost transport times into Central London.

Heathrow Airport officials tell Aviation Week the documents are early drafts developed by consultants last year. "They are not designs that have been endorsed by Heathrow Airport," the officials say. "Heathrow will be making its considered submission to the Airports Commission in July."

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