

22nd December 2006 – Fog disruption highlights urgent need for third runway

Four days of travel chaos at Heathrow has only served to further highlight the urgent need for a third runway to remedy its capacity problems. Thick fog set in at Heathrow earlier this week and has stayed in place ever since leading to large numbers of flight cancellations as the airport reduced capacity by 40% to cope with the reduced visibility.

Passengers, airlines and the airport operator all bore the brunt as the huge UK Christmas getaway ground to a halt with tens of thousands of passengers stranded as airlines cancelled services. The fog caused NATS, the air traffic control operator, to reduce the flow of traffic into Heathrow by 40% spacing out aircraft on their approach to six nautical miles instead of the usual three. Then, once on the ground, the reduced visibility slowed ground movements leading to huge congestion.

Currently Heathrow operates its two runways at 98.5% capacity and the moment significant operational disruption occurs its limits are exposed. Heathrow's competitors are in a far more beneficial position with Frankfurt having three runways, Paris four and Amsterdam five - and all of these runways operate at less than 75% of their current capacity.

The proposed third runway would provide the extra capacity at Heathrow to allow the airport to be able to deal with these adverse weather conditions in a far more robust manner. Even allowing the airport to operate in a mixed mode format would make it far more resilient to the disruption seen this week.

A third runway is essential to Heathrow's future as a world-class air transport hub for the UK. This week's disruption has brought that need to the fore for passengers, airlines, business and the general public.