

Government Considers Competing Plans for Heathrow's Long-Delayed Expansion

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The UK government is assessing two competing proposals to expand Heathrow Airport, each presenting a different approach to increasing capacity while addressing cost, environmental concerns, and disruption.

One proposal, expected from Heathrow Airport Limited this summer, follows the established plan for a 3,500-metre third runway. The runway

would be constructed to the northwest of the current site and would involve rerouting a section of the M25 motorway underground. It also includes a new terminal complex and major infrastructure upgrades across the site.

In contrast, the Arora Group, a private developer, has proposed an alternative scheme known as “Heathrow West”. Backed by engineering firm Bechtel, the plan proposes a shorter 2,800-metre runway that avoids altering the M25. The group claims their approach is simpler, faster, and cheaper, costing an estimated £25 billion, while still accommodating large aircraft.

Chancellor Rachel Reeves has signalled support for Heathrow’s expansion, citing its potential to boost economic growth and enhance both national and international connectivity. She stated that the government is inviting formal submissions this summer with the aim of securing planning approval ahead of the next general election.

Heathrow currently operates at near full capacity with only two runways. Business groups and airlines, including British Airways owner IAG, have expressed support for expansion, noting that Heathrow lags behind international hubs in Amsterdam and Paris.

However, environmental concerns remain. The Committee on Climate Change and other campaigners argue that airport expansion is incompatible with the UK’s climate goals unless a clear emissions plan is in place. Critics point out that accommodating additional flights from Heathrow and other UK airports could require offsetting emissions equivalent to forest cover more than double the size of Greater London.

The government is also redesigning airspace over southern England to accommodate expected increases in air traffic. The “Airspace Design Service” aims to modernise flight paths to improve efficiency, reduce fuel use, and potentially cut emissions. Supporters see this as a necessary step, but local communities worry about increased noise and disruption.

A final decision on which proposal to advance is expected in the coming months. Ministers will need to balance economic ambition with environmental responsibility and public concerns over how best to deliver a long-delayed expansion of the UK’s busiest airport.