

The Myth About Business Travel And Airport Capacity

There has been a campaign of near evangelical fervour in support of a new runway at Heathrow. Proponents claim it is necessary for the economy and in nearly all cases they cite the importance of business trips to the rapidly growing economies outside Europe, especially China. Claims are made not just that a new runway is actually needed to support more trade but hype such as “we need a new runway to show the UK is open for business”.

So how important are trips by UK business people in the context of runways and airport capacity? This paper looks at some evidence instead of the hype.

Each year the Office of National Statistics carries out a ‘travel trends’ survey: *“Travel Trends is an annual report that provides estimates and profiles of travel and tourism visits (those of less than 12 months' duration) and associated earnings and expenditure between the UK and the rest of the world.”*

The latest survey is for 2015 and the datasets enable one to see the proportions of various types of trips by air. The relevant datasets are ‘Visits and spending abroad: by mode of travel, region of visit and purpose of visit 2015’^[i] and ‘Visits and spending in UK: by mode of travel, region of residence and purpose of visit 2015’^[ii].

The total number of trips on the survey was 80,189.^[iii] The number of business trips by UK residents outside Europe was 1625.^[iv] The proportion of UK business visits outside Europe is therefore $100 \times 1625 / 80,189 = 2.0\%$.

Because the survey is a sample, there are appreciable error limit on the results. But the figure of just 2% shows clearly how tiny is the proportion of trips by UK business people beyond Europe. The reality is that the air travel market is, and will remain, dominated by short-haul leisure traffic. Any “need” for new capacity is not about trade with China. It is about short haul and tourist traffic.

This analysis illustrates how the claims about the need for new capacity to trade with growing economies as China and the need to show that Britain is “open for business” are just hype and do not stand up to analysis.

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^[i] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/leisureandtourism/datasets/ukresidentsvisitsabroad>

^[ii] <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/leisureandtourism/datasets/overseasresidentsvisits-to-the-uk>

^[iii] UK total visits abroad from Table 5.1 (cell C65) is 53,937. Foreign residents from Table 4.1 (cell C65) is 26,252. Total

visits is therefore $53,937 + 25,252 = 79,189$.

[\[iv\]](#)

UK business trips outside Europe from Table 5.1 (cell C62 minus cell C22) $5873 - 4249 = 1625$.