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Rail limitations block Gatwick Airport expansion

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Gatwick Airport: capacity for additional flights but surface access may constrain growth

Constraints on rail access to Gatwick Airport have emerged as a major obstacle to any future expansion of the airport.

Publishing details of responses to the airport's draft masterplan consultation, Gatwick Airport Limited said surface access proved the main topic of local interest. While many respondents praised the airport for ensuring 40% of all air passengers travel to it by public transport, others believed rail capacity, especially in peak periods, was a significant issue for the future.

According to the airport, the number of people travelling between Gatwick and London by train could increase by 30% in eight years and the number of commuters travelling on the same services could grow by 29%. But with the Brighton Main Line, which serves the airport's station, operating at close to capacity, it remains unclear how rail links could be significantly improved without major infrastructure investment.

A report produced by Arup and published last month noted that in recent years Gatwick has seen direct train services to Oxford, Birmingham, Manchester, Watford and Kent withdrawn because of capacity constraints on the rail network.

Gatwick Airport Limited says rail links are crucial to attracting new airlines. The airport currently operates at around 78% capacity and has ambitions to accommodate more flights and airlines. Direct routes to China, Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam have been added in recent years but to continue attracting new routes the company says Gatwick's rail links must improve in quality and extent.

A £53m project to improve Gatwick Airport station is currently underway and includes adding an additional platform. A proposal to build a 'Heathwick' high speed railway linking Gatwick with Heathrow Airport has been mooted by the Department for Transport but no funding has been identified for the scheme, likely to cost in excess of £1bn.

Gatwick is the UK's second largest airport and the busiest single runway airport in the world. The government will publish an aviation strategy this summer which may support plans for Gatwick expansion when the legal agreement the airport has with West Sussex County Council, signed in 1979, not to build an additional runway expires in 2019. If this is the case a major scheme to improve rail links to the station will be required.

A final version of the Gatwick masterplan will be published this summer and, ahead of this, a long term business plan for the airport will be published on 19 April.

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