

Easterly Alternation Infrastructure Project

What is Runway Alternation?

Runway alternation is a system used at Heathrow to provide noise respite to local communities during westerly operations. The system works so that the arrival runways are alternated between the northern and southern runways at 3pm local time on a weekly basis from Monday to Sunday. The alternation arrangements are in place during daytime hours for one-week cycles.

As an example, if the northern runway is designated as the arrival runway from 6am to 3pm then southern runway will be used from 3pm until after the last departure. This arrangement will then run for one week at which time the pattern will change so that the northern runway becomes the designated arrival runway from 6am to 3pm; and the southern runway is used from 3pm until after the last departure. The runway alternation schedule is published in advance allowing predictability.

The Cranford Agreement

In the early 1950's, Cranford was the nearest and largest population centre to Heathrow's runways. Due to nature of early jet aircraft, noise from departures was more disruptive than noise from arrivals to local communities. The Cranford Agreement was introduced in 1952 by the Government prohibiting aircraft from departing over Cranford except in exceptional circumstances. The Agreement was therefore an early noise abatement measure which was intended to avoid exposing the nearest population centre to the highest levels of aircraft noise.

Over the last 70 years, developments at the airport over this period include the extension of the runways to the west in 1961. Other terminal development projects (e.g. Terminal 5, and Terminal 2) which have transformed the airfield. Importantly significant non-Airport development has also occurred during the same period such that Cranford is no longer the only major developed area surrounding the Airport.

Over this time a series of noise management measures have been introduced at international, national and local level. These measures have included: Noise Preferential Routes; night flying restrictions and noise limits. Measures also included the introduction of "runway alternation" during westerly operations in 1972 initially as a trial, to be then formalised in 1973. Runway alternation during easterly operations was not introduced due to the Cranford Agreement and this is reflected in the layout of the airfield.

Easterly Alternation

At Heathrow, easterly operations occur, on average, 28% of the time. It is wind direction that dictates the direction of Heathrow's operations. Because of the Cranford Agreement, or more particularly now because Heathrow does not have the infrastructure that allows alternation to occur, during easterly operations all departures are from the southern runway, and all arrivals to the northern runway.

Government Policy

In 2007 the Government considered ending the Cranford Agreement. The significant reduction in aircraft noise, particularly from departures coupled to the benefits of respite were a key driver for revisiting the restriction. The Cranford Agreement was formally ended in 2009 with the Government's formal support for the introduction of easterly alternation confirmed in the Aviation Policy Framework (APF).

Proposed development

The proposed development is required for the practical implementation of Easterly Alternation. As Easterly Alternation has not been a routine feature of airfield operations at Heathrow, the existing taxiway infrastructure is not configured to allow Heathrow to operate its schedule. New Runway Access Taxiways (RATs) are therefore required at the 09L runway end. The development does not enable additional air traffic movements (ATM) and the ATM cap is to remain at 480k. The Proposed Development enacts Government policy which has been put in place to more equally distribute air noise from Heathrow's operations. It is hoped that easterly alternation will bring predictable periods of respite from aircraft noise to thousands of people when Heathrow is operating on easterlies, and affected communities will share the noise and noise relief fairly and equally, as they do today when we are on westerly operations.

CISHA's involvement as an Independent Chair

In discussion with Heathrow and Hillingdon Council CISHA was asked to set up a coordinated and independently chaired meeting with neighbouring Local Planning Authorities, so that the content of the Easterly Alternation scoping opinion can be communicated and discussed in a constructive way.

The purpose of this call was also to discuss Heathrow's emerging plans for wider community engagement ahead of their submission of the planning application. A Teams call was set up on 28th March and Heathrow discussed the engagement which had already taken place and their future plans.

Heathrow's engagement thus far

Early engagement started in April 2023 with key stakeholders and Longford community. The Heathrow website was updated with project details in June 2023, and as part of an environmental assessment, they invited certain households in Longford to have a small monitor installed at home to gather sample air quality data for around 6 months. In December 2023, Heathrow sent out letters to approximately 300 addresses in Longford, asking for feedback on the proposed noise barrier.

The next stage of their engagement will be post-Summer 2024 and involve the following:

- Letter drop
- Social media campaign

- Updated website (text and video)
- Public information events (Cranford, Longford, Stanwell Moor and Old Windsor)

Heathrow informed local communities of the project and an overview of proposed changes. This was seen as an engagement exercise rather than a consultation.

NB Heathrow took the decision, supported by the independent Chair, to move the engagement from June until after the summer holiday period. This has been driven by the pre-election period and Heathrow did not want to launch our engagement during the school summer holidays.

Having met in March and June a follow up meeting with affected Local Authorities will be held in September.