



Shaping London is a new regular column by Sir Terry Farrell. In this his first piece he looks at the fundamental role of the capital's airports. He was a member of the Mayor's steering group looking at a new airport in the Thames Estuary

The great airports debate...

The Thames Estuary should be rethought as the 'metropolitan engine room' of a new low-carbon economy. Its infrastructure should be planned and not ad hoc, argues Sir Terry Farrell.

One of the first things the new coalition Government announced on its election in May was the cancellation of the third runway at Heathrow and the refusal of additional runways at Stansted and Gatwick. This is an interesting reflection on how major planning decisions are made in this country, and it is in keeping with our long democratic traditions and an increasing awareness of 'local' agendas.

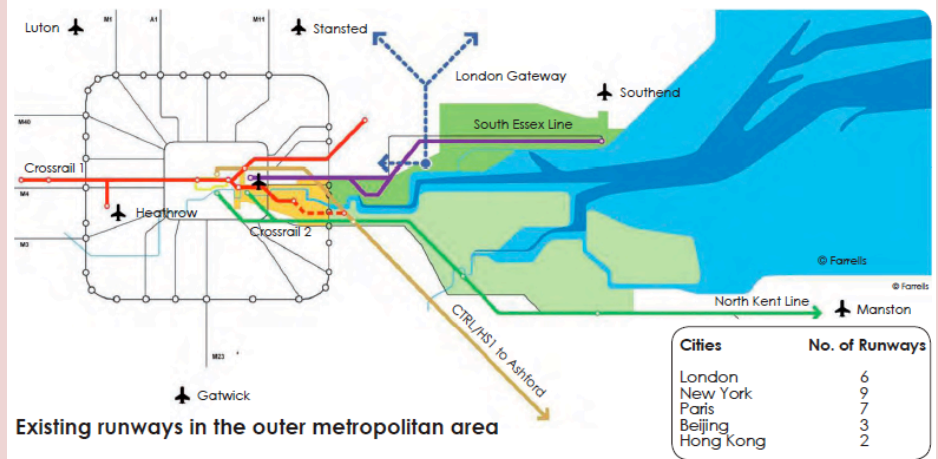
There has never really been a proper debate about strategic planning in the UK. It is in our cultural DNA to debate, negotiate, compromise and then make a decision – not necessarily the right decision – at the last possible moment, having expended large quantities of time and money on the way. This is how the debate of energy security and energy infrastructure has emerged over the last few years, and we are nowhere near a clear position at national level on what is one of the big issues of the 21st century.

Government's announcement that there will be no further runways in the South East may well be right, but the truth is that no one really knows whether this is the way forward in the long run despite the well argued positions for and against expansion.

I believe strongly that there should be clear leadership from government when it comes to investment in new transport infrastructure generally. The key to any decision on new airport capacity lies in wider decisions about the need for London as a global city to improve its infrastructure in the interests of its continued future success in an increasingly competitive – and rapidly changing – world. This should include energy and utilities, road, rail and transport infrastructure, and the supply of food and water.

One area that requires further work in relation to airports is the issue of access. Anyone who has had the misfortune to arrive at Stansted when its rail link is out of action will be acutely aware of this and the motorways in the Heathrow area are amongst the most congested anywhere in the world. We have argued for orbital high speed rail

The Thames Estuary



Existing runways in the outer metropolitan area

"London handled 130million passengers in 2009, significantly more than any other city in the world" Mott MacDonald

access between major airports in the South East so that all runways at its major airports could be seen as part of a co-ordinated 'super-regional' hub. By taking this approach you are making the most of existing capacity, rather than always arguing for new investment along the traditional 'predict and provide' model.

As part of work we initiated independently more than five years ago we proposed new islands in the Thames Estuary. This was our response to what was seen at the time as a high risk of rising sea levels, tidal surge and extreme weather events resulting from climate change. Various groups came forward suggesting that this would be an ideal location for a new airport to replace Heathrow or alternatively to form a new hub to the east of London. Again, I think there are arguments for and against doing this. A multi-million pound technical study (and several years) would be needed to arrive at anything approaching a credible answer, if the preliminary scoping work undertaken by Douglas Oakervee on behalf of the Mayor of London is any-

thing to go by.

To me the most interesting issue in terms of strategic infrastructure in the region is the potential to transform the Thames Estuary. One big idea that is taking hold is the concept of the estuary as a place for environmental innovation. In a way, we need to re-imagine the estuary's traditional role as a metropolitan engine room as the main focus for the low carbon economy in the UK. This could include new technology such as tidal power. There is nothing wrong with being ambitious about this and the scale of Thames Gateway provides some extraordinary opportunities for us to redefine the way in which large scale infrastructure investment can take place in an exemplary way.

The UK faces many years of fiscal constraint, but it is precisely at this time that clear leadership from government is required in terms of thinking at a 'big picture' level about the future of our great city and the South East. Now is the time for a coherent, integrated approach to infrastructure planning in the South East. ■