



Runway Alternation

What is Runway Alternation?

It means that planes flying into Heathrow don't use the same runway all day long when they are coming into land from the east. One week they will land on the southern runway between 7am and 3pm and use the northern runway from 3pm until 11.30pm. The next week they will switch round.

Does it only apply to landings?

Yes it does. The regime for take-offs is quite different. There are designated take-off routes - though they only cover areas close to the airport. They don't vary.

What is the purpose of Runway Alternation?

It is designed to give residents under the flight path a break from aircraft noise. This is important as a plane lands every 90 seconds at Heathrow, virtually throughout the day.

Does everybody benefit from Runway Alternation?

Technically, it only applies to people who live to the east of Heathrow between the airport and the area around about Barnes: the point when planes must be on their final approach path - known as the ILS - to Heathrow. In practice, though, people living in some of the areas east of Barnes where planes are lining up to join the final approach path also get some benefit. It doesn't apply to anybody living west of the airport. When planes come in from the west - as they do when an east wind is blowing - they all land on the northern runway. This is because of something called the Cranford Agreement which forbids take-offs from the northern runway when the wind is from the east as it is considered the noise would be unbearable for the residents of Cranford, just beside the airport. It means that an area like Windsor get planes all day long during an east wind.

But this will change, probably in 2010 when the Cranford Agreement is abolished. People living under the flight paths when planes land over Berkshire will also get runway alternation.

What happens at night?

There is a different system of runway alternation at night (between 11.30pm and 6am). One week planes land on the northern runway from the west; the second week on the northern runway from the east; the third week on the southern runway from the west; and the fourth week on the southern runway from the east. This is only altered if the strength of the wind makes it impossible to land with the wind or in emergencies. There are no take-offs scheduled between 11.30pm and 6am, though they do take place from time to time.

What happens between 6am and 7am?

This is the only hour when both runways are used for landings. So there is no runway alternation at this time.

Will Runway Alternation remain?

It was under threat but now all political parties are pledged to retain it. What has got to be watched carefully, though, is the introduction of runway alternation by stealth. BAA may decide to land airports on both runways at the same time during 'busy' periods. The definition and length of those busy periods is all-important to residents.

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