

Speech: Airports are key to Britain's future prosperity

Good morning everyone.

It's a real pleasure to join you again for your annual conference.

And to start what I'm sure will be a day and a half of stimulating debate.

When the AOA was first formed in 1934, the conference's theme – the Airport of the Future – might have been an equally apt topic.

But a keynote speaker 84 years ago would have needed a vivid imagination to predict the airports of the 21st century.

Who would have dreamt that Gatwick, a former horse racing track, would become Britain's second busiest airport?

Or a couple of farms and a vicarage in leafy Cheshire would be transformed into Manchester Airport – with flights to every corner of the globe?

Or that a collection of fields would one day make way for Birmingham Airport – now the Midlands' gateway to the world.

So Britain's airports have undergone a remarkable change within a single lifespan – transformed from their early roots to the incredibly successful and safe industry represented in this room today.

Importance of industry

An airports industry that supports hundreds of thousands of jobs.

That every week directly generates £270 million for the UK economy.

And that plays a vital role in attracting inward investment to our country by connecting businesses at home and overseas.

You are the reason why Britain today has the third largest aviation network in the world.

Why we imported and exported £170 billion of air freight last year to countries outside the EU.

Why passenger numbers have surged by 64 million in just 5 years.

With 284 million people passing through our airports in 2017.

And recent events have shown that the pace of change in the airport sector is accelerating.

We've ended decades of dithering over Heathrow expansion with [overwhelming support in Parliament for the National Policy Statement](#).

There is massive investment going into airports around the country.

At Manchester, Luton and Leeds Bradford for example.

And you've rolled out new routes to cities in some of the fastest growing parts of the world – for instance the Middle East and China.

Airports are becoming increasingly innovative.

Finding new and diverse ways to benefit the economies and communities you serve.

For example hosting business parks, where SMEs can grow with easy connections to markets and suppliers.

And by providing education and training opportunities to attract more people into aviation careers – as we're seeing at Stansted.

And let's not forget the smaller airports that maintain essential links for more isolated parts of the country.

From Newquay in Cornwall to Inverness in the Highlands – these busy transport hubs help boost their local economies – making them even more vibrant.

Brexit

And it's absolutely crucial that UK airports continue to thrive after we leave the European Union.

Of course securing the best possible access to European markets is the ultimate goal of our negotiations.

And with 164 million passengers travelling between the UK and EU last year – maintaining current agreements on air transport is clearly in the interests of everyone.

But as we've made clear, it's just common sense that we also plan for all possible scenarios – even if they are unlikely.

The [recent aviation technical notices we released set out the pragmatic approach that the UK would take in the event of a 'no-deal' exit](#).

Those actions would help avoid disruption to air services, while supporting businesses and consumers. Not just here in the UK, but across Europe.

We will also continue to seek new and improved bilateral Air Services Agreements with the rest of the world.

Aiming, as we always have, to improve connectivity, choice and value for money for businesses and consumers.

We want to continue participation with the [European Aviation Safety Agency](#).

But whatever the conclusion of negotiations, EU safety rules will be brought into domestic law through the withdrawal act.

So we look forward to an outcome which not only maintains connectivity, but also allows British aviation to grow and thrive.

And of course that includes capitalising on new, global opportunities.

It has never been more important to demonstrate that Britain is open to the world.

Open to collaboration.

Open for business.

And there can be no better way of doing that than through international air connections and our world class aviation industry.

Aviation strategy and airspace modernisation

Projections show that 435 million passengers a year could be passing through our airports by 2050.

Passengers who are a benefit to Britain.

Boosting tourism.

Building business relationships across continents.

Hundreds of millions of opportunities for Britain to grow.

But we can't take future success for granted.

We need a long-term plan for sustainable growth.

So that we better manage the impact of airport expansion on local communities.

So that we improve surface access – making journeys to airports quicker, easier and greener.

So that we address the environmental concerns of growth.

And consider the passenger in everything we do.

These things won't happen on their own.

They can only be achieved by government and industry working in partnership.

And that's why we are [developing our aviation strategy](#).

A comprehensive, long term vision for the sector up to 2050.

A vision for enterprise and growth.

That provides the right framework for the sector to grow responsibly.

Let me give a couple of examples.

Just as important as building new infrastructure or making best use of existing runways is how we optimise use of our skies.

As air traffic grows, modernisation of airspace is an increasingly pressing issue.

We need to get it right, for the benefit of the industry, passengers, and communities living under flight paths.

We've already made good progress on this front with the [publication of our airspace change framework last year](#).

And as part of the aviation strategy we will be examining whether further policy is needed to support these changes.

But we need your help and engagement too.

To help us make best use of airspace.

And growth cannot take place without considering the environment and local communities.

Our recent [Airports National Policy Statement](#) highlights the government's expectation that expansion will be supported by a strong package of environmental and community mitigations.

And the forthcoming aviation green paper will set out proposals to enable sustainable growth across the country.

But to do those things we need you to work with local neighbourhoods, the government and each other to the benefit of every airport across the UK network.

And ultimately to the benefit of passengers.

That's what the aviation strategy is all about.

We have to look at every stage of the passenger journey.

Analyse key trends, and examine how airports can continue to respond to travellers' changing needs.

For while you generally do a great job at innovating to meet new customer demands.

For instance your investment in new screening technologies that could speed up passengers' journey through security.

There is still more to be done to ensure all consumers can travel with confidence.

Inclusive travel and borders

Like providing full accessibility, for instance.

Last year there were 3 million requests for assistive services in airports – a leap of two thirds in 6 years.

And our aging population means demand is likely to further grow.

There's already been some excellent progress.

This year 16 airports, including Edinburgh, Liverpool, Cardiff and Derry, were rated as very good in the [CAA's accessibility review](#).

Up from just 6 in 2017.

But there are still distressing stories.

And the CAA reviews have found that some airports still need to make vital improvements.

So it's important we all up our game.

That's why in July we launched our [Inclusive Transport Strategy](#) – to ensure disabled people can travel confidently, easily and at no extra cost.

And the aviation strategy provides a great opportunity to explore these issues across the airports sector.

We are considering a range of measures including improved training for airport and airline staff and boosting awareness of assistive services at airports.

While the CAA has recently released new guidelines on supporting passengers with hidden disabilities.

In addition it's vital that we demonstrate that the UK is fully open for business and to the world.

So we want to limit delays at our borders too.

As part of the strategy we are working with [Border Force](#) on ways of creating a smoother crossing for travellers through passport control.

Without compromising security.

And I thank the AOA and the aviation industry for your help so far on this work. Your input has been greatly valued.

Green paper

And I know that many of you have already contributed to the strategy's development so far.

But we hope to hear even more from you.

We will lay out the next steps of its development in a green paper this December (2018).

To be followed by another consultation period before the final document is published next year.

So I urge you to participate.

This will be a great chance to shape the final strategy.

And an opportunity for us to benefit from your experience and that of your customers.

I can't predict what will be top of the agenda at the AOA conference 8 decades from now.

Or imagine how our airports will look in 2102.

But I can promise that through the aviation strategy we are looking ahead to the challenges of the coming decades.

I can tell you that your future in this country is bright.

And I can guarantee that by working together we will set a course that allows Britain's airports to continue to flourish.

Thank you.