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Southend Airport prepares to take off with EasyJet

By Susannah Cullinane
BBC News

From next spring, one of Europe's largest airlines will be flying from a small airport in south-east England. The BBC's Susannah Cullinane went to London Southend Airport in Essex to find out more about the deal.

There are very few people on the 08:32 train from Liverpool Street to London Southend Airport's new £12m rail terminal.

A quick glance at the neighbouring Stansted Express shows it to be comparatively overflowing - or at least carrying more people per carriage than the one person in mine.

But from next April, Southend Airport - a 50-minute train journey from Liverpool Street compared to Stansted's 46 minutes - will be the departure point for 70 EasyJet flights a week.

The Stobart Group, which owns the airport, aims to have two million passengers a year passing through its terminal by 2020.

Aer Arann and Flybe already operate from Southend, offering flights to Ireland and Jersey, but

EasyJet will massively extend the airport's reach.

The airline has announced it will fly from Southend to Alicante, Barcelona, Ibiza, Malaga and Majorca in Spain, as well as Belfast, Amsterdam and Faro in Portugal.

The deal means Southend will be the sixth airport serving south-east England to offer flights to mainland Europe, alongside Stansted, Heathrow, Gatwick, London City and Luton airports.

Arriving at Southend Airport railway station the expansion work is immediately obvious.

A £3m control tower opened on 18 July stands opposite, near a new terminal building due to be completed by autumn. A few hundred metres away, the airport's current terminal is flying an orange EasyJet flag.

'No hustle and bustle'

Inside, however, the impression is more black coffee and full English breakfast than international transport hub.

About 15 people are scattered at wooden tables, apparently unworried by pressing travel concerns, lingering instead over the day's newspapers and chatting amongst themselves.

Cafe Stobart supervisor Jill Ross explains that the relaxed mood is probably because 85% of her customers are local residents rather than travellers.

"That's why it's so friendly - they're sort of friends rather than customers."

But Ms Ross says there have been a lot of changes at Southend Airport since she started working in the coffee shop four years ago.

Since Aer Arann began flying out of Southend this March, she says, cafe staff numbers have doubled.

"Everyone is for the expansion," Ms Ross said. "Everyone's said 'how brilliant that they're going to fly here'."

Smoking a cigarette beneath the orange flag outside, is Ann Duffy who says she flew into Southend from her home in Waterford, Ireland, to visit her son and his family.

She is pleased at news that the airport is to be expanded. "It's good to give some money back to this area. Keep it close to home," she said.

Waiting for a fare at the airport, taxi driver Jim Nolan says he expects the expansion will bring work and jobs to the area.

"It's long overdue that this airport is being developed. It should've happened years ago."

Judicial review

Not all Southend's residents are as supportive of the expansion however.

Stop Airport Extension Now (SAEN) was formed in opposition to the extension of Southend's runway. SAEN says the 300m extension will lead to a "massive" increase in flights and impact on the lives of people living, working or going to school near the flight path.

Spokesman Denis Walker says EasyJet will not be able to land fully-laden Airbus 319 planes at Southend until the airport's runway has been lengthened.

SAEN had been trying to get a judicial review of Southend Council's decision to approve planning permission for the extension, but on Wednesday its appeal was refused.

Mr Walker says the secretary of state must approve the closure of a road at the end of the current runway and a public inquiry into the closure of some public footpath - due to start in November - also needs to be completed before work on the extension can begin.

"We're very concerned about the effect the expansion will have, particularly because it's so close to housing on the south-west side," he said.

Southend's head of business development, Jonathan Rayner, says time has become an important commodity for air travellers and the airport hopes to attract passengers through the relative accessibility of its services.

The airport says it will ensure it takes no more than four minutes to go through its security area while passengers travelling without check-in luggage can expect to be on the arrivals platform within 15 minutes of their plane's doors opening, he says.

A spokesman for Stansted says the airport is disappointed EasyJet is transferring some of its operations to Southend. But he says the airports are so different it is impossible to directly

compare them.

"The decision clearly reinforces just how competitive the airports market is for point-to-point passengers, especially if the UK's largest airline is prepared to start-up at one of the UK's smallest airports."

Gatwick Airport says EasyJet's decision to fly from Southend "shows that competition is working". It says 15 million people live within an hour's drive of Gatwick.

"Some of those people will have the choice to fly from either Gatwick Airport or a smaller airport like Southend."

London City Airport says "London has a chronic long term shortage of airport capacity" and it recognises attempts will be made to bring "peripheral destinations" in the area market.

Luton Airport says it is too early to tell what the impact of Southend's expansion on its own operations will be.

Peter Morris, chief economist for aviation consultancy Ascend, says the actual level of demand for EasyJet's flights from Southend will only become clear once they're up and running.

With six airports servicing the area around Greater London, and in the face of a weak economy and high fuel costs, Southend's expansion is more likely to redistribute existing aviation traffic than to create a new market, he says.

"Whether the market has got a critical saturation - that's something that only gets validated when people try it and see if it works," he says.

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