AIR Aviation Infrastructure Resilience
IN ASSOCIATION WITH british aviation group

Heathrow signs regional airports agreement backing third runway

29 Oct, 2026

Heathrow Airport has signed a memorandum of understanding with the Regional and Business Airports Group (RABA) aimed at strengthening domestic air links across the UK, as the airport seeks government approval for a third runway.



image: Heathrow Airport

The agreement sets out a joint commitment to ensure regional airports and their communities benefit from Heathrow expansion through improved access to the UK's main international hub. RABA represents nearly 40 regional and business airports across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Heathrow said the agreement reflected support for expansion from airports in every UK nation and region, with Liverpool John Lennon, Newcastle International, Belfast City, Leeds Bradford and Cornwall Airport Newquay among those backing the proposal.

The airport argues that additional runway capacity would allow it to protect existing domestic services, increase competition on regional routes and create opportunities for new connections to areas with limited access to international markets.

Almost five million passengers used Heathrow's 13 domestic routes in 2025, generating an estimated £1.2bn in gross tourism spending across the UK, according to the airport. Heathrow said capacity constraints meant domestic services had to compete for limited take-off and landing slots with potentially more lucrative international flights.

It has supported domestic routes through discounts and partnerships with regional airports but maintains that expansion is necessary to provide sufficient capacity for a stronger domestic network.

Heathrow chief communications and sustainability officer Nigel Milton said the airport was committed to improving access for other UK airports and that expansion would create opportunities for regional economies to connect with global markets.

RABA chair Neil Pakey said direct connections to Heathrow could provide smaller airports with access to international destinations that their local markets might not support independently. He said the agreement represented a commitment to strengthening connectivity and urged the government to maintain progress towards expansion.

The agreement comes amid debate about how the benefits of Heathrow's expansion and a third runway would be distributed across the UK. The benefits for regional airports will depend on how additional slots are allocated and whether airlines consider individual routes commercially viable.

RABA has previously told Parliament that support for expansion should be conditional on demonstrable benefits for airports and communities across the country. In evidence submitted to the House of Commons Transport Committee in September 2026, it called for protected regional slots, affordable access and independent assessment of the effects on smaller airports.

The group also highlighted the importance of regional airports to dedicated air freight, business aviation and other specialist operations, arguing that these activities require separate consideration in national aviation capacity planning.