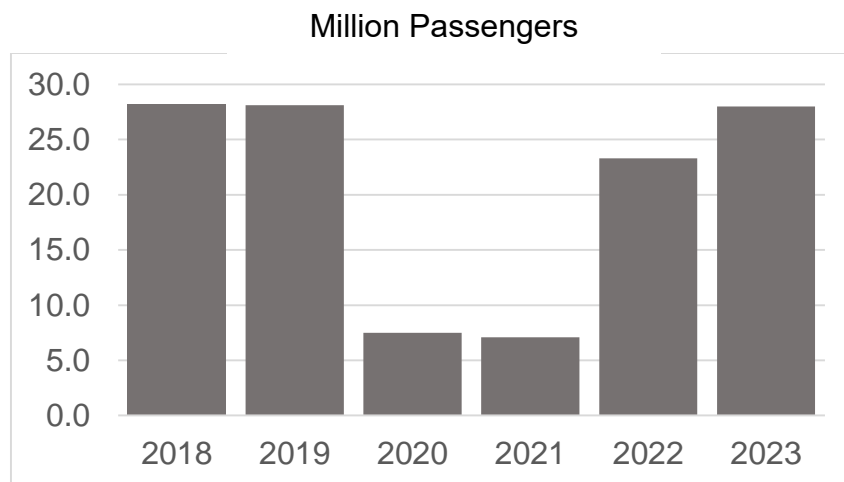




CAMPAIGN UPDATE

STANSTED RETURNS TO BUSINESS AS USUAL

Figures released in January show that Stansted Airport handled just under 28 million passengers last year, only slightly below the number of passengers handled in 2018 and 2019, i.e. before the Covid-19 pandemic caused such major disruption to air travel.



The severity of the impact of the pandemic upon air travel can be seen in the table above. Stansted passenger numbers slumped to 7.5 million in 2020 and just 7.1 million in 2021. The speed of the recovery – just two years to return to pre-pandemic levels of flying – has confounded most forecasters, especially since this coincides with a cost of living crisis.

And it's not just Stansted which has seen a fast recovery from the effects of the pandemic. Heathrow also is almost back to pre-pandemic passenger numbers and has just recorded its busiest ever December.

It's much the same picture worldwide. According to the International Air Transport Association (IATA), in November 2023, global demand for air travel reached 99% of 2019 (i.e. pre-pandemic) levels. It seems that neither economic challenges, nor concerns about global warming, are stopping people from flying.

Stansted Airport has however been taken by surprise by the speed of the recovery and now faces the prospect of severe overcrowding in the terminal over the next three years.

This is because the airport cancelled a planned increase in terminal capacity when the pandemic struck. Preliminary groundwork started for a new dedicated arrivals building in March 2019 but this was abandoned within a matter of weeks.

The airport has now decided to extend the existing terminal by adding three more bays to the rear of the terminal, rather than build a separate arrivals building. This is a major project and is expected to take until early 2027 to complete. It will also mean the removal of the airport transit trains system. This will be replaced by moving walkways.

If passenger numbers continue to increase, the existing Stansted terminal will struggle to cope, especially during the busy summer periods over the next three years.

From the standpoint of local residents adversely affected by aircraft noise, the key issue is not the number of passengers handled by the airport but the number of flights, which includes cargo flights as well as passenger flights. In this regard there is some good news.

Stansted handled 9,816 Cargo flights last year, considerably less than the pre-pandemic (2019) figure of 10,406. In fact, the number of cargo flights has been in slow decline for the past 20 years.

The vast majority of Stansted flights are, of course, passenger flights, and the vast majority of these (about 80%) are Ryanair flights. Stansted handled 168,715 passenger flights last year, more than 4,000 fewer than 2019, when passenger numbers were almost the same.

This obviously means more passengers per plane. On average, each flight carried 166 passengers at Stansted last year, the highest figure on record. The average number of passengers per flight has grown steadily, year on year, ever since the Wright brothers first took to the air in 1903! It will continue to increase steadily over the coming years.



Ryanair recently placed an order for 300 Boeing 737-MAX-10s at a staggering cost of US\$40 billion for delivery between 2027 and 2032. These aircraft are only slightly longer than the Boeing 737-800s currently operated by Ryanair but they have 21% more seats (228 seats compared to 189). The new aircraft are also claimed to be less noisy and to have lower carbon emissions than the 737-800s. We will need to wait until at least 2027 to find out for ourselves whether these claims are borne out.

Like it or not, Stansted has planning permission to handle up to 43 million passengers a year. If and when Stansted ever reaches that throughput, it would clearly be better, in terms of noise, air quality and carbon impacts, if this could be achieved with the fewest possible number of mid-size planes.

Quite how our local roads will manage to cope if and when Stansted Airport ever reaches a throughput of 43 million passengers a year is another matter!