Terminal expansion like 'changing plane engine as we are flying it'

Scotland's busiest airport is ditching past piecemeal approach to development in favour of a comprehensive overhaul

Alastair Dalton
Transport Correspondent

It promises to be a huge and remarkable transformation, enabling Edinburgh Airport to expand from 18 to 30 million passengers, but its bosses admit: "We will be changing the engine of the aircraft as we're flying it".

Scotland's busiest airport is embarking on the biggest terminal expansion in its near 80-year history, ditching its past piecemeal approach to development in favour of a comprehensive overhaul that will "completely transform" the building.

Over the next five years, the airport will spend £500 million enlarging the terminal by 60 per cent, which will include a double-height departure lounge extension and bigger immigration and arrivals halls.

In a second phase of the project, expected to total around £1 billion overall, the front of the terminal will be pushed out onto a vehicle-free plaza, and more shops added before security.

The work is aimed at providing more space to accommodate growth and enable passengers to move more easily through the building, which opened 49 years ago.

However, the airport has warned that things could get worse before they get better, with the then chief executive Gordon Dewar admitting in February the project was likely to cause "huge disruption".

Chief communications and sustainability officer Gordon Robertson told the airport's consultative committee on Monday: "We will be changing the engine of the aircraft as we're flying it".

The airport has grown rapidly since the 1990s when you could park right outside the terminal and the baggage reclaim belts were just a few metres long.

Passenger numbers have nearly doubled over the last 15 years and are expected to near 18m this year and 20m by 2030, having recovered after the Covid pandemic lockdowns faster than expected.

The airport is the sixth busiest in Britain after four in London, and Manchester, and is now as busy in October as it used to be in July - its peak month.

However, as Mr Robertson acknowledged, the terminal had previously expanded piece by piece.

He told the committee: "We have been a bit guilty in the past of building a security hall and bolting it on".

Steven Naismith, who is masterminding the new expansion, said the approach had affected other areas too.

He told The Scotsman: "We have largely grown incrementally, and what that has led to in the departure lounge, in particular, are things being added a bit at a time.

"One of the changes here is that we have been building as growth came in over the last decade or so. [We're] now saying, let's build ahead of that growth so we have capacity to grow into.

"It's all about creating a bigger, more resilient Edinburgh Airport."

Mr Naismith said the expansion project, called Our Future, would enable the airport to handle 30m passengers, which is expected by the mid-2040s.

However, he said it was difficult to gauge how close to capacity the terminal had reached. He said: "In some areas, it's almost like more levels of discomfort rather than being full."

In the first stage, eight new departure gates are due to be completed by September next year.

The airport has not published visualisations of the revamped terminal interior, but a further expansion of the departure lounge could see the most dramatic change.

Mr Naismith said: "Because the departure lounge is the biggest dwell space, in which passengers spend the most time, we have spent a lot of time on its design and I think it's the most impactful. It's a double-height, 5,000 sq m extension - there will be lots of natural light pouring in. It will feel like a completely transformed space."

As an example, Mr Naismith said more restaurants had been added over the years in response to passenger demand, "but maybe not as consciously planned as this will be in the future".

He explained: "In the extension, it will be much less individual units boxed off and much more open so passengers can flow through the space." Central seating will be put back.

Mr Naismith said: "Our ambition is to celebrate more of the best of Scotland in the lounge, and there's a really clear, uniquely Edinburgh offer versus [that at] any other airport.

"We have lots of tourists coming into the country, and when they are having that last experience of Edinburgh Airport in our departure lounge, we want them to genuinely know it's Edinburgh and it's their last taste of Scotland."

Mr Naismith said it will include a "vibrant food market" featuring street food provided by local traders and inspired by the Bonnie & Wild food area in the St James Quarter shopping centre in Edinburgh and the Dockyard Social street food hall in Glasgow.

In the arrivals area, which has come in for the greatest criticism, Mr Naismith said the focus would be on increasing efficiency because "passengers want to get through that process quickly".

That would be achieved by increasing capacity, such as with more e-gates at passport control and the two immigration halls consolidated into a single, larger space.

The two international arrivals halls will also be replaced by a single, larger area on the east side of the terminal, freeing up space to expand check-in.

The airport previously said the departure lounge would be completed in 2028 and the arrivals hall in 2029, but has since declined to confirm the dates.

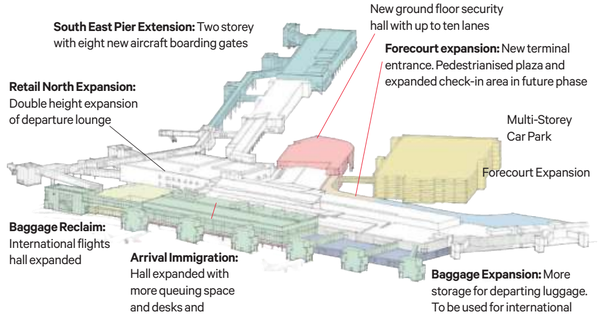
Domestic arrivals will be switched from the east to the west side of the building, with a new terminal entrance and assisted travel area. Security screening will be moved to the ground floor with the eight lanes increased to ten.



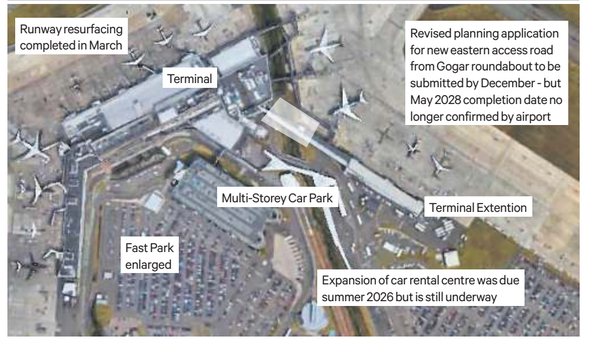
A pedestrian plaza in front of the expanded terminal will be created in a further development phase

> ***We have been a bit guilty in the past of building a security hall and bolting it on***

Passenger terminal expansion



Edinburgh Airport today



Airport must 'invest to remain Scotland's flagship gateway'

Alastair Dalton

The major expansion of Edinburgh Airport's passenger terminal is essential for the operation to stay ahead - and is also badly needed, aviation experts have told The Scotsman.

The £500 million revamp over the next five years comes as Scotland's busiest airport continues to break passenger records and is expected to handle nearly 18 million this year.

Airport chiefs said virtually nothing would be left untouched as they embark on a top-to-toe overhaul to enlarge the building by 60 per cent.

Analyst John Strickland of JLS Consulting said: "Edinburgh remains the flagship gateway airport for Scotland and absolutely needs to invest to maintain and develop this position for the future.

"Its infrastructure has come under increasing pressure as passenger numbers have grown. It has to balance new investment with the uncertainty facing the industry currently, in particular geopolitical challenges and the question of sustainability.

"Investment must be planned in a way that it is affordable to passengers and flexible enough to adapt to changes in airline business models and in the type and size of aircraft used."

Saj Ahmad, chief analyst at StrategicAero Research, said: "Expansion of baggage and immigration halls as well as stand and gate increases will be key to opening up more slot availability and make the airport more attractive.

"Investing now is critical because passenger numbers are clearly rising and the airport does not want to be in a position where it's playing capacity catch up."

18m passengers expected to travel through Scotland's busiest airport

Andrew Charlton, managing director of Aviation Advocacy, said: "Does Edinburgh need capacity? Yes, it does. The growth projections are not outrageous and even if they are optimistic, given geopolitics etc, it is impossible to imagine that Edinburgh falls off the map.

"It is arguable that with no growth at all there is a need for expansion."

Gonzalo Velasco, practice lead for airports at consultancy Steer, said: "Airport expansion is one of the most complex investment decisions facing operators.

"Infrastructure must be planned and financed years in advance, while passenger demand, airline strategies and operating costs can change significantly over much shorter periods.

"Since the pandemic, the aviation industry has become increasingly conscious of its exposure to external shocks, from geopolitical instability and rising costs to changes in consumer demand.

"The challenge for airport investors and operators is to strike the right balance between providing sufficient capacity to accommodate future growth, maintaining a positive passenger experience and ensuring that investment remains commercially sustainable.

"Increasingly, this means considering a range of possible demand scenarios and adopting phased approaches that allow infrastructure to respond to changing market conditions.

"By comparison, airlines can adjust their networks and capacity relatively quickly in response to market conditions.

"Ultimately, successful airport expansion is not simply about building more capacity. It's about making the right investments, at the right time, supported by a business case that can withstand uncertainty and deliver long-term value."