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Will public transport be able to match Gatwick expansion?

27 November 2026



East Surrey's council leader has expressed fears that current public transport infrastructure will make it "extremely challenging" for Gatwick Airport to meet ambitious targets linked to its second runway.

The government has thrown its weight behind a £2.2 billion programme that will bring Gatwick's northern runway into everyday use, alongside other projects to expand the airport.

One condition attached to this is a requirement for 54 percent of passengers using public transport to reach the airport ahead of the new runway being made fully operational.

But Councillor Steve Wotton (Liberal Democrats: Horley West, Salfords & Sidlow), who leads the East Surrey shadow authority, has written to Transport Secretary Heidi Alexander urging the government to invest in the public transport infrastructure needed to make this happen.

In a letter seen by the Local Democracy Reporting Service, he accepted the decision to expand Gatwick has now been made and said he does not wish to "relitigate" the matter. "We want to help the airport expansion succeed," Councillor Wotton wrote.

But he stressed: "A particularly important commitment is the requirement for Gatwick Airport Limited to achieve a 54 percent public and sustainable transport mode share for airport passengers.

"We are concerned that, with the transport network as it stands today, achieving that target will be extremely challenging."

His letter comes following a motion put forward at an East Surrey council meeting by Councillors Cameron McIntosh (Conservative: Oxted) and David Lewis (Conservative: Cobham & Oxshott South) that aimed to set out the authority's stance on Gatwick expansion.

East Surrey shadow authority will absorb the boroughs of Elmbridge, Epsom & Ewell, Mole Valley, Reigate & Banstead and Tandridge from April next year. It will act as one unitary council, responsible for local government services covered both by the county council and the five districts.

Councillor Wotton further wrote that a "meaningful shift" away from cars would require "coordinated investment in rail and bus services" from multiple parties, including the government, Gatwick, Network Rail and local councils.

He pointed to the major rail bottleneck around Windmill Bridge Junction and East Croydon – which affects passengers heading to Gatwick – as one example that "illustrates the scale of the challenge".

"Public transport cannot simply mean rail," Councillor Wotton further wrote. "Rural communities south of Dorking and across southern Tandridge need bus services that are frequent and reliable enough to provide a realistic alternative to the car.

"Better bus connections are also important for the thousands of people who work at the airport and associated businesses."

He urged the government to allow East Surrey Council to be "directly involved" in discussions around public transport related to Gatwick, and said he wants his authority to be a "constructive partner" in helping it happen.

"The investment needed to achieve the 54 percent public and sustainable transport target would do more than support airport expansion," he concluded. "It would improve connections for residents and businesses and help drive economic growth across the immediate area, the south east, London and the UK."

Gatwick Airport did not immediately respond to the Local Democracy Reporting Service's request for comment.

A Department for Transport spokesperson said: "Strong transport links will be vital to supporting Gatwick's expansion and unlocking economic benefits across the region, which is why £250 million has already been invested in upgrades to Gatwick Airport station and track and signalling improvements to boost performance on the Brighton Main Line.

"We recognise the important role local authorities play in helping communities benefit from Gatwick's expansion and will continue to work closely with councils, transport operators and Gatwick Airport Limited to maximise benefits for the region."

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