



UNIVERSITY OF  
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An aerial photograph of an airplane wing in flight, viewed from the passenger side. The wing is white and extends across the upper half of the frame. Below the wing, a vast expanse of white clouds covers the landscape, with patches of green and brown land visible through the cloud cover. The sky is a clear, deep blue. A white curved line graphic separates the top header from the main content area.

# Shaping an aviation sector fit for a carbon-constrained world

**A discussion with Heathrow Airport**

August 2020

This interview is between **Paul Begley**, Director Strategy Programmes at the University of Cambridge Institute for Sustainability Leadership (CISL) and **Carol Hui**, Chief of Staff and General Counsel at Heathrow Airport.

Heathrow is a critical gateway to the UK and Europe's busiest international airport, handling about 80 million passengers annually. It has been a long-standing supporter of action on climate change and is a member of The Prince of Wales's Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change.

Carol Hui commissioned CISL to run leadership programmes for Heathrow, and has been an individual contributor to CISL's wider education programmes.

**Paul Begley (PB): You have been an ambassador for early action on climate change at Heathrow for a while. Why is Heathrow supporting the transition to a Net Zero carbon emission economy?**

**Carol Hui (CH):** Engaging on climate change proactively is a moral, ethical and economic necessity. We really don't have a choice. For Heathrow, the impact of aviation on climate change is an existential issue. To survive, we have to move to a Net Zero carbon future. Aviation is a hard-to-abate sector, but the challenge is not impossible. So, we need to focus on feasible solutions and to deliver these in an orderly way, as rapidly as we can.

**PB: Heathrow has done considerable work on decarbonising. What do you think have been the biggest wins?**

**CH:** We have been on this journey for a while now and there are many things that we are proud of. The first is the recognition that having a strong sustainability culture embedded across the organisation is vital. For this reason, we have rolled out a Leading Sustainable Growth programme for our managers and included this in our governance structures so that we have senior focus to drive progress on our climate targets.

Emissions from our infrastructure are 90 per cent lower than they were in 1990 as a result of our investment in new buildings, more efficient energy use and an on-site biomass power plant. Heathrow now runs entirely on renewable electricity and green gas.

Our airport infrastructure became carbon neutral in January 2020 and we intend to operate fully zero carbon infrastructure by the mid 2030s.

But the real emissions challenge for our industry is from flights. Heathrow is leading the drive on the interventions needed for a material shift in emissions. We need allies and cooperation from others in this effort, because 95 per cent of aviation emissions are not within our control. Nevertheless, we are using our scale and influence as a major hub airport to advocate for change.

Earlier this year, UK aviation was the first in the world to commit to Net Zero by 2050. Going a step further, Heathrow is working with industry leaders globally to build a coalition to support that same Net Zero goal at a global level.

In all of this, we must not forget that aviation is a force for good in many ways: helping to power economic growth and bring people and cultures together. Heathrow will not shy away from the challenge to protect the benefits of aviation in a world without carbon. Aviation is not the enemy, carbon is.

**PB: We were really pleased to host the Executive Committee in Cambridge. Why did you bring your senior leaders to a CISL course?**

**CH:** We have had a long-standing relationship with CISL and I attended the excellent CISL's Prince of Wales's Business & Sustainability Programme in 2018. Having benefited hugely from this, I made a commitment to myself that I would bring the Heathrow senior leadership team to CISL so that they too could gain from a similar experience.

I wanted all our leaders to join in this important conversation about climate change and to be galvanised into taking action to decarbonise our industry.

**PB: Did you face any difficulties in securing buy-in from the participants?**

**CH:** Persuading my colleagues to take part was not difficult as we all have a sustainability mindset. Nevertheless, it was a big ask of the leadership team to take time out of their hectic schedules to go on the CISL programme.

We made sure it was worth their while: we worked hard with CISL to design a programme that was engaging and fit for purpose; ensured there were the right speakers to stimulate discussion and new thinking; added elements that made the programme unique and memorable; and ironed out any possible logistical issues in advance so that there was no distraction. And it worked!

**“Aviation needs to be part of a Net Zero world. We need cleaner engines, new sustainable fuels and nature-based offsetting. Heathrow will have an important role to play in delivering that reality”**

**PB: Given your role as Chief of Staff, how do your colleagues and partners perceive your activities on climate change?**

**CH:** Climate change is a matter for each and every one of us. Although we have functional responsibilities and specialists in the area of carbon, we also have a wider view of the need for all of us to take ownership of this issue. Most of our team recognise that we have an unrivalled opportunity at Heathrow for action now and many realise that our industry needs to do more on climate change.

Our Chief Executive, John Holland-Kaye, has articulated that aviation needs to be part of a Net Zero world. We need cleaner engines, new sustainable fuels and nature-based offsetting. Heathrow will have an important role to play in delivering that reality.

**PB: The Covid-19 pandemic has been really hard for the global aviation industry, with passenger numbers falling by over 90 per cent. When do you think it will recover and what lessons might this system shock present for aviation?**

**CH:** The pandemic has knocked the industry hard, but Heathrow is doing all it can to support the safe movement of people and the efficient flow of vital cargo. We have been advocating common international standards in health screening and are putting in place intensive safety regimes at the airport. We're seeing that in times of crisis, we have to work collaboratively with the Government and the industry, be more agile and learn from other countries that have preceded us in dealing with this crisis.

The recovery for aviation from Covid-19 is likely to be slower than for other sectors but there will be a return to flying. In that return, we are keen that economic recovery does not come at the expense of the next global crisis – climate change. For this reason, we will continue to focus on the development of sustainable aviation to reduce carbon emissions.

The one big thing we can do in the 2020s is to scale up rapidly sustainable aviation fuels and we continue to advocate this with the Government. There is a golden opportunity to kickstart a whole new industry in sustainable fuels as part of the recovery from the pandemic and to give the UK a competitive advantage in this new area.

**PB: It is interesting that you mention the need to work in collaboration. I know that Heathrow is a member of The Corporate Leaders Group on Climate Change, which is convened by CISL. Why do you work with businesses from other sectors on the climate change agenda?**

**CH:** Heathrow has huge opportunities to influence the agenda within the UK and across the world. We're an important part of the national infrastructure, but we also have a leadership position.

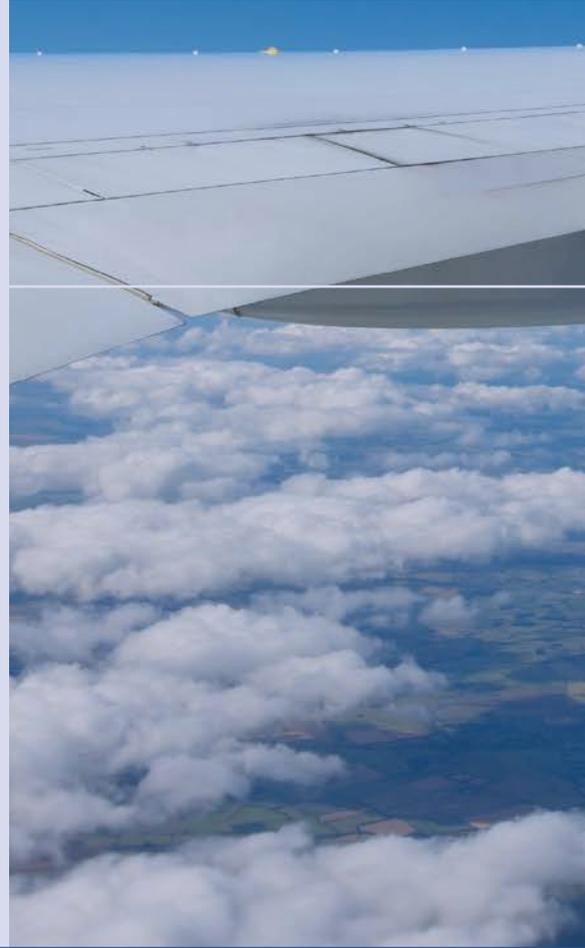
The Corporate Leaders Group provides a space whereby we can engage and learn from others. Accomplishing Net Zero will require different actions. Quite simply, we know that 'business as usual' will not deliver it.

For our industry, Heathrow's practice is often at the leading edge. Our size, scale and degree of influence mean that others will look to what Heathrow is doing and will tend to follow suit. For this reason, we are very conscious of the role we have to play as a responsible business.

**PB: Carol, you've been at the frontier of the debate at Heathrow and now in the decarbonisation of global aviation. What recommendations would you offer people looking to lead change within business?**

**CH:** Remember the butterfly effect: it takes one person to initiate a conversation, stimulate the debate that could result in action and change. No one is too small or insignificant to lead change.

Continue learning: the world is evolving quickly and the topic is deep and wide. One of the reasons I like to speak on the CISL courses is that it tests my own thinking and inevitably I come away learning far more!



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