

There's no escaping the Airport this week, with its [acquisition of Stansted](#) making the Manchester Airport Group one of the UK's biggest businesses – headquartered, like the Co-op, right here.

The transaction was not a simple affair, but co-operation between its ten owners brought the bid to a financially-innovative and successful conclusion, attracting a slug of new investment to Greater Manchester and showing again the depth of the broader partnership and creative management so rare amongst local authorities. Development of the Airport is an unsung but important part of GM's history, as a collective project on which the ten have shown persistence, maturity and ambition in prioritising economic growth and shareholder value.

Manchester's is a polity adapting quickly to changing international tides that increasingly reveal central governments and their security and regulatory hang-ups as slow-moving beasts, ill-equipped for the darting opportunism needed today for business, trade and investment. More and more it is regional and city-to-city relationships around which patterns develop and grow. Airport policy is a great example: as national debate is transfixed by Heathrow's third runway, Manchester gets on and just does it.

MAG is not only a consistent operational success and solid strategic player, for example backing the soon-to-be-launched Manchester-China Forum. Also, "developing Manchester Airport will have clear benefits for the whole of the North" said a recent and [weighty IPPR report](#), confirming its role as a gateway to economic growth in the whole North of England. This is important, as it means that cheerleading is not just a local but a broader cause. It rebalances the national economy, increases the North's lagging productivity and helps slow the ever-increasing economic gap with the South. Much-needed direct routes to China will significantly benefit Barnsley and Blackpool as well as Bolton and Bury.

In terms of boosting the North in this way, one policy stands out like a sore thumb: air passenger duty. Although it started out a humble £5, this tax now adds significantly as much as £184 to the price of a ticket. Whereas the business-heavy and international-interchange nature of the passenger base at Heathrow absorbs this with little impact, it hits others like Liverpool, Birmingham and Manchester, hard. Most of all it tips the scales when airlines make investment decisions, as Britain has by far the highest rate, collecting twice as much as the whole rest of the EU put together. For Manchester this hits hardest on the very routes

we need most, above all to China and the rest of Asia. Even worse, there is growing evidence that international passengers are changing travel plans to fly through and out of mainland Europe airports to avoid the tax.

Abolishing tax is always a popular policy but in this case would be a significant contributant to economic growth. Northern Ireland was recently given discretion to reduce the tax, seeing passenger traffic nearly Dublin; unfortunately, not a joke. It will be a coming of age when as well as being a international player, GM and indeed the wider North shows itself to be a national player too by using public and private pressure to change a rotten policy that cripples an engine of growth.

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<http://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/business/business-news/manchester-airports-group-acquired-stansted-1236655>