



(A Working Group of North West Essex & East Herts Preservation Association -
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STANSTED: THE CASE AGAINST IRRESPONSIBLE GROWTH

RESPONSE TO THE SECOND EDITION OF THE DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT'S CONSULTATION DOCUMENT: THE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF AIR TRANSPORT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: SOUTH EAST

SUMMARY

1 Introduction

The Government has repeatedly declared its commitment to sustainable development, defined as 'a better quality of life for everyone, now and for generations to come'. As its own Sustainable Development Commission has pointed out, however, its proposals for the development of aviation fall 'seriously short of sustainability' in every basic respect. They are still rooted in the policy of predict and provide.

2 The historical background

The proposal to turn Stansted into a 4-runway airport goes back to the 1960s. It is significant that, over this period, whenever the Government has allowed the voice of independent voices to be heard - the Chelmsford Inquiry in 1966, the Roskill Commission in 1971, Inspector Eyre in 1984 - the outcome has been either that there should be no major development at Stansted or that development should not be allowed beyond a single runway.

In 1984 Inspector Eyre gave permission for the airport to be developed to 15 million passenger movement a year (mppa), but said that any development beyond a single runway and 25 mppa 'would constitute nothing less than a catastrophe in environmental terms'. He recommended that, as a condition for the grant of planning permission, the Government should make an unequivocal declaration of intent that a second main runway would not be constructed.

In its White Paper of 1985 the Government 'unreservedly' accepted the Inspector's

recommendation. Yet one of the present options put forward by the Department for Transport (DfT) would add not merely the extra runway dreaded and denounced by Eyre, but three extra runways, turning Stansted into the largest airport in the world.

3 Global, national and regional considerations

The Government forecasts that between 2000 and 2030 unconstrained passenger demand will rise in the south east from 117 mppa to 301 mppa. We question this forecast on several grounds. If, for example, the rail network is improved and airports in other regions are developed the pressure on airports in the south east will be substantially reduced.

The Government grossly exaggerates the economic benefits of the aviation industry and largely ignores its economic 'disbenefits'. A major omission is the impact on the UK balance of payments of the aviation deficit, arising mainly because outward tourism runs at twice the level of inward tourism and increasing all the time with the growth in air traffic. A slowing down of the growth of the aviation industry would not result in an overall loss of jobs, but in a redistribution of jobs to other sectors of the economy. In particular the Government fails to take account of the excessively favourable tax regime which aviation enjoys and its exemption, contrary to the 'polluter pays principle', from meeting its external costs.

This is all the more deplorable because the Consultation Document fails to give proper weight to aviation's devastating impact on the environment, ranging from global warming to local noise pollution. Nor would it be possible to mitigate this impact to any significant extent. The contemplated damage would be immense, the damage limitation minute.

With a fairer tax regime the industry would be paying £7.9 bn more each year, and the European Environment Agency calculates its external costs as £6 bn.

For all these reasons the future growth of demand must be monitored and managed. The policy of 'predict and provide' is not sustainable. Doing nothing is not an option. Nor is mere token action an option. Over the past ten years air fares have fallen in real terms by 42% and on Government predictions they are set to fall still further. Even tax at £6 bn a year would slow the growth rate from 4% to 2%. This would obviate the need for any more runways in the South East by 2030 and the impact on fares would only be about 1% a year in real terms. It would not amount to pricing people off planes, but an end to the policy of pricing them onto planes.

We therefore challenge the Government to live up to the fine words of its sustainable development policy and to implement a serious and effective policy of demand management.

We argue against the creation of a second hub airport near London. By concentrating its focus on Heathrow and ignoring London's other airports, the Government has exaggerated the threat of competition from Amsterdam, Frankfurt and Paris.

The addition of a single runway alone would make Stansted a major hub airport and would inevitably be followed by further runways. In no way could we regard the addition of a single runway as an acceptable compromise. In the long term the Government's real choice is not between an extra one, two or three runways at Stansted. It is between no extra runways and three extra runways.

4 Considerations for the Stansted area

John Betjeman, writing in 1967 when the countryside around Stansted was under the same dire threat as today, described it as:

“a quiet, prosperous, agricultural area of old stone and flint churches, pargetted cottages with red tiled roofs, spreading farms and gabled manor houses, little hills, elms, oaks, willow streams and twisty lanes leading to towns of such renowned beauty as Thaxted and Saffron Walden. The very fact that this country is so gentle, unobvious and typical of the best of England makes it all the more important that, being so near to London, it is preserved from noise and 'development'.”

In the same year Henry Moore, the sculptor, found it “appalling to contemplate the destruction of this beautiful and irreplaceable part of England.”

For those of us who live in the area, and for those visitors who have come to love it, it is simply unthinkable that its beauty and tranquillity should be destroyed as part of a highly questionable response to an unconstrained and reckless growth in air traffic. The impacts on our local heritage and ecology are spelt out in the Consultation Document. Two, possibly three, Scheduled Ancient Monuments would be lost, and under the most damaging, 4-runway, option, 65 listed buildings would have to be demolished - in the words of the Institute for Public Policy Research, 'a scale of heritage destruction rarely witnessed since listed protection became adopted in the 1970s'.

In our main document we quantify and describe the appalling devastation that would be wrought in our area by the addition of any runways in terms of noise pollution, air pollution, the damage to public health and the impacts of urbanisation. Under all these headings the harm inflicted would be much greater than that spelt out in the Consultation Document.

Under noise, the Government has failed to observe the guidelines laid down by the World Health Organisation. Its methodology is defective, and it underestimates by a factor between three and four how many people would be disturbed by noise and the extent to which they would be disturbed.

It has also underestimated the effects of air pollution. Its air quality modelling is inadequate and the uncertainties of modelling over 30 years ahead make any results very questionable. But these results, though open to question, clearly show exceedances of nitrogen dioxide that will contravene both UK and EU law. The Government tries to dismiss these exceedances as 'manageable' and estimates that only 'small numbers of people' would be exposed to them. But no reliable assumptions can be made about mitigation, and all residents, whatever their number, are entitled to rely on the protection of the law.

The Consultation Document does not deal with health as such, and so the impact of massive airport development on the health of the population around Stansted has not been given adequate attention. There is powerful evidence that noise and air pollution arising from aviation and the consequent urbanisation have an adverse effect on the health of the local population, particularly children, the elderly and the ill.

In terms of urbanisation, the Government's employment estimates are based on direct and indirect employment alone, and fail to take into account induced and attracted employment. As our consultants, Berkeley Hanover Consultants (BHC), have demonstrated, this means that the

SERAS figures should be about 60% higher. This has consequential effects on housing, where it is estimated that the Government's figures should be increased by about 70%; and on road and rail travel and the need for improvements in the road and rail networks, where again the SERAS figures are much lower than they should be.

Any significant airport development at Stansted would be in stark opposition to present planning guidance. Stansted is not an area that is in need of regeneration. According to a recent survey it enjoys one of the highest qualities of life in the country and unemployment is extremely low. Labour could be drawn in from the Lea Valley, but such long distance commuting would not be consistent with the Government's objective of minimising travel demands. Most of the new housing required would have to be built on greenfield land, and so too would a significant proportion of additional employment requirements.

We also have concerns about the provision of water (Essex is the driest county in the UK); about air traffic control (the system is already under severe pressure, and of the 12 worst danger spots in Europe six are in the south east of England); and about safety on the ground. Unless these concerns can be fully met it would be irresponsible for the Government to press ahead with any major development at Stansted.

In a poll conducted for Uttlesford District Council in October last year 54,000 ballot papers were distributed to households throughout the district; 69% of these were returned (a higher percentage than the turnout for the general election); and 89% of those who voted - 33,546 people - were against the building of any new runways at Stansted. In a more complex referendum conducted by East Herts District Council 84% of the 1,761 responses were against any new runways at Stansted.

5 A possible alternative

It is our firm conviction that no further runway expansion should be allowed in the south east. If, however, the Government fails to rise to the challenge, if it fails to introduce and implement serious demand management measures, then it will have to face up to the appalling consequences of a massive increase in unconstrained demand. A minority of our members, among them Friends of the Earth, believe that in this event the Government should be left to make its own decisions about the siting of any new runway capacity and that it would be wrong for us to submit any views. For the majority, however, the siting of any new development would be a matter of profound concern, and we argue that there must be no expansion at Stansted, or at any other inland airport, but that the Government should explore more thoroughly the various options for an offshore airport in the Thames estuary. Any such study would have to include a rigorous environmental impact assessment.

Conclusion

The expansion of Stansted Airport into the beautiful countryside of West Essex and East Hertfordshire would be an act of vandalism. If the aviation industry were fairly taxed it would be entirely unnecessary. In the words of the great sculptor, Henry Moore, when our area faced a similar threat in 1967, 'It is never too late to turn aside from the precipice, especially when the edge is so clearly visible.'