



PLANE CRAZY

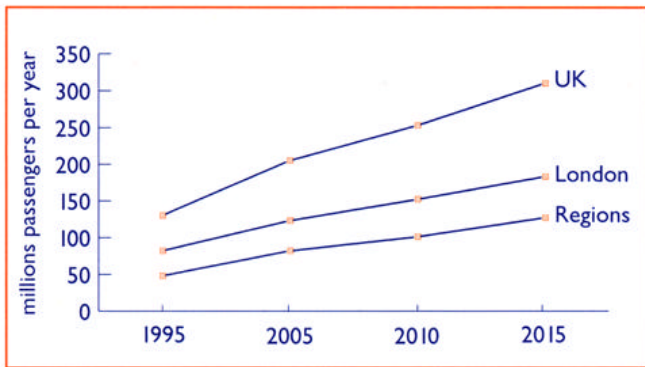
Airport Growth in the UK

Flying is more popular than ever before. The growth in air traffic is fuelling demand for new and expanded airports, with significant environmental impacts. Yet Government policy on airport development dates back to the mid 1980s. It scarcely considers the environmental or social impacts of air travel. A new national Airports Policy, looking ahead 30 years has been promised, but isn't likely to be published for three or four years. Meanwhile the piecemeal expansion of airports throughout the United Kingdom continues.



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Air transport is one of the world's fastest growing industries. Since 1960, world passenger air traffic has grown at an average rate of nine per cent per year, which is more than twice the average economic growth rate. Airfreight has grown even faster at an average of eleven per cent per year since 1960.

In 1997 alone, the world's airlines carried around 1,500 million passengers. In the last 30 years, the number of passengers travelling through UK airports has grown more than sixfold from 22.5 million in 1966 to 146.8 million in 1997. British Airways told the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (RCEP) that it expected passenger travel worldwide to grow at 5-6 per cent a year between 1994 and 2010-This means that demand for air services will double during this period. The RCEP considered that this forecast reflected the view of airlines, aircraft manufacturers and regulators generally.

What does this mean for UK airports? Air traffic in Europe is growing rapidly as new low cost airlines take advantage of the liberalisation of air services within the European Union. The Department of Transport, Environment and Regions (DETR) now expects the number of passengers passing through UK airports will double and could even triple within twenty years (DETR predicts a rise of 87-192 per cent between 1995 and 2015).

Airfreight traffic is growing even faster than passenger traffic with the volume of freight carried in 1997 an increase of twelve per cent on the previous year. The growth rate for airfreight is expected to remain higher than for passenger traffic.

In January 1999 the Government launched a study into the development of the airfreight market, and its future potential within an integrated transport policy. It is due to be completed by autumn 1999.

These predictions suggest that the London airports alone will need to find capacity for an extra 100 million passengers per year by 2015-as many as currently use Heathrow, Gatwick, Luton and Stansted combined each year. An extra 79 million passengers per year -

the equivalent of five times the current passenger throughput at Manchester Airport - are expected to use regional airports by the same year.

AIRPORT EXPANSIONS

As a consequence of uncontrolled growth in the demand for air services, pressure is mounting on the UK's existing major airports, especially London's Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted. BAA plc (formerly the British Airports Authority), which owns these airports wants, to build a fifth terminal at Heathrow and plans to expand Gatwick and Stansted as well. Meanwhile many owners of regional airports and even local airstrips are putting forward plans for airport expansion and development.

The last Government White Paper on airports was published in 1985. This forecast growth in air traffic up to the end of the 20th century and set the scene for airport expansion over that period. It endorsed the rapid expansion of Stansted as London's third airport and supported Manchester and Prestwick as international gateways and airport hubs for the North of England and Scotland respectively. It also supported the expansion of Luton and the opening of a new business airport in the London Docklands.

Although the White Paper did not endorse a fifth terminal at Heathrow it suggested that the removal of the nearby Perry Oaks sludge works (the site which would be required if Terminal 5 were to be built) would be highly desirable.

Since the 1985 Airports White Paper was published Stansted airport has expanded, the London Docklands airport has been opened, the public inquiry into a fifth terminal at Heathrow has been completed and construction of a second runway has been started at Manchester, which will enable the airport to handle 30 million passengers each year.

The Transport White Paper, published in June 1998, encourages growth in regional air services and airport expansion. However, air traffic has grown far faster than expected, especially at regional airports.

DEREGULATION

Growth in the number of airline passengers and airline companies, especially new low fare airlines, has been accelerated by recent deregulation of air services within the EU and through the creation of a Single Market for air services.

In June 1998, the UK Government further opened international access to regional airports. The Government offered access to those countries with bilateral air service agreements with the UK, without the need to renegotiate international agreements, providing UK airlines could operate on the same routes. As a consequence all restrictions on capacity and frequency at UK airports, except Heathrow and Gatwick, were effectively removed.

The Government also announced in June 1998 that it would make it easier for local authority-owned airports to expand by allowing them to request exemption from public sector borrowing controls. In March 1999 the Government announced that four regional airports: Manchester; Newcastle International; Leeds Bradford International and Norwich would have such controls removed.

Faced with the growth in demand, and growing environmental concern over aviation, the Government has promised to publish a new airports policy looking 30 years ahead, that will take into account the social and environmental costs of aviation.

The absence of a sustainable national airports policy was highlighted during the public inquiry into a fifth terminal at Heathrow (Terminal 5), the longest running and most expensive planning inquiry in the UK. The Government announced that the new airports policy would not be published until the Government had considered the Inspector's report into Terminal 5. However the inquiry only finished in March 1999 and the Inspector is expected to take two years to write his report. The Government will then need time to consider its response. So a national airports policy is unlikely be published before 2002 - ie: before the next General Election.

Meanwhile, airport development is rushing ahead. BAA plc has recently received planning permission to increase the capacity of Stansted from eight million to fifteen million passengers per year. The Ministry of Defence is selling off surplus RAF bases to private developers, many of whom want to turn the bases into commercial airports. And many private airport operators are seeking permission to increase flights and build new terminals.

The scene is set for a massive expansion in air travel and airports throughout the UK.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

Global impacts

Air traffic poses a significant environmental problem with around 750 million tonnes of pollutants being emitted each year into the earth's atmosphere from the

world's fleet of aircraft. Pollution from aviation contributes to global warming and can influence ozone concentrations.

In terms of the world's major greenhouse gas (carbon dioxide) aviation is the most polluting form of transport per passenger kilometre. Transport is already recognised as the fastest growing generator of greenhouse gases worldwide. Aviation is currently responsible for at least 3.5 percent of global warming and future growth scenarios suggest that this could rise up to 15 per cent by 2050.

Local impacts

Aircraft need airports (and their supporting infrastructure) which themselves create local environmental damage. The paved area of a large airport such as Heathrow is the equivalent of 200 miles of three-lane motorway. It is inevitable that the construction of such a large facility has enormous potential, if wrongly sited, to damage valuable wildlife habitats.

Regardless of the site, airport facilities can have potentially significant impacts on local water quality through the accidental spillage of oil and the routine use of de-icing chemicals, unless measures are taken to clean run-off before it enters local river systems.

Local airports can have a significant impact on local air pollution, both directly from aircraft and airport operations (on-airport traffic, power generators, and the storage and delivery of fuel), indirectly from increased local traffic around the airport (eg. visitors, users, employees, freight hauliers etc). Studies show that road vehicles are the largest contributors to airport pollution levels. A study of Californian airports by the US Environmental Protection Agency found that vehicles within the confines of an airport produced the same, or greater, levels of hydrocarbons and nitrogen oxides as aircraft operations. UK and European studies have found similar evidence. Many airport pollution levels are similar to those found in busy city centres.

And, of course, noise from aircraft is a major environmental nuisance, especially where flightpaths pass over densely populated areas. Aircraft were the second most commonly reported source of noise in the 1991 National Noise Attitude Survey and were heard by 40% of the respondents (though only half of these heard commercial airliners). The number of complaints made about aircraft noise to Environmental Health Officers rose six-fold between 1984/5 and 1994/5. Except for the major London airports of Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted there is no legislation to protect communities from airport noise.

Building airports can also lead to significant knock-on development. This includes both on-site development such as shopping centres, warehousing and aircraft maintenance hangars as well as off-site development like business parks, warehousing and housing. Indeed the knock-on development is attractive to airport operators as some make more profit from it than from airport air services. However this development generates more traffic and places pressure on shrinking green belts.

DEMOCRACY AND THE PLANNING PROCESS

The absence of a national aviation policy is putting an unbearable burden on the planning system. Without a strategic overview, airport proposals are viewed in isolation, often without any consideration of other options, or whether demand could be met by using existing capacity at other airports. This absence of national direction is compounded by the Government's reluctance to become involved in local planning issues and by moves to give regional planning bodies responsibility for regional transport strategies including guidance on regional airports.

Government quangos such as the newly established Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) are playing an increasing role in government decision making with regard to regional development. These hand-picked bodies are dominated by Government and industry interests and have influence over substantial EU and Government funds. The RDAs are also unanswerable to the wider community and often contain only a token environmental representation.

The role of the regulatory body, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), is limited primarily to the safety and operational performance of the UK aviation industry. Its functions include licensing airports, air transport, aircraft safety and the navigational control of air traffic. It has limited responsibility for environmental matters except where they impact on safety and then it is primarily concerned with aircraft and passenger safety not with third parties on the ground.

Furthermore both aviation noise and emissions are specifically excluded from the Environmental Protection Act (1990). The discretionary powers of the Secretary of State for Transport, the Environment & Regions to regulate airport impacts are limited and rarely used. The Secretary of State can apply conditions affecting noise & vibration from aircraft under Section 78 of the Civil Aviation Act (1982) but this has only occurred at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted.

Most airport impacts can be controlled through voluntary or legal agreements or by imposing binding conditions on planning applications. The Town & Country Planning Act (1990) allows conditions to be placed on airport operations when planning permission for an airport's development is granted. However these conditions can only be imposed where planning consent is required.

In some cases the planning system cannot protect the environment. Permitted development and established use rights for example allow some airports to significantly intensify operations without any formal scrutiny by either the local planning authority or, perhaps more importantly, the public. Indeed in cases where a material use (e.g. commercial airflights) has taken place on land not having planning consent for that activity (e.g. civilian flights at a military airbase) for at least 10 years, then under the Planning & Compensation Act (1991) that material use may continue lawfully as enforcement action can no longer be taken.

Under guidelines released in December 1997 for the sale of former Ministry of Defence (MOD) facilities, there are no provisions to consult with the wider community or to place the environment at the heart of decision-making. The consultation process has occurred mainly behind closed doors between government departments, private developers and affected local councils. In fact, the sale of former MOD airbases appears to be driven by financial considerations without proper consideration of environmental or social impacts. The MOD has acknowledged that it was required to sell all surplus sites within three years.

Even where planning consent is required, the threat of competition from nearby airports is frequently used as justification for expansion. Local councils are also under pressure to approve airport expansions because of the development and jobs they create. Where airports are owned by the authorities themselves this can create a conflict of interest between short-term profit and environmental protection.

Only effective action at a local level can protect communities from the threat posed by airport expansion.

A SUSTAINABLE AVIATION POLICY?

Air traffic is growing so quickly because people are more affluent and because air travel doesn't pay its full environmental and social costs. Airlines pay no tax on the fuel they use unlike train operators, bus companies or ordinary motorists. As a result they can

undercut less polluting forms of transport as well as offering artificially low ticket prices as a way of increasing market share.

The 1985 Airports White Paper focused on increasing airport capacity rather than addressing the social and environmental costs of aviation.

The unsustainable philosophy of 'predict and provide' still permeates Government policy toward aviation and airports despite the Government's decision to abandon this approach in roads planning. The contradiction in transport policy between demand management for roads and uncontrolled growth in aviation has yet to be explained.

Continuing with this 'predict and provide' approach is simply unsustainable within environmental and social constraints. It is clear that technological and operational improvements will be insufficient to stop the forecast growth in air traffic from leading to more environmental damage.

While the Government has embraced the concept of sustainable development and made binding commitments to its implementation, the fundamental objectives of sustainable development have yet to be applied to aviation policy. A new aviation policy is needed - focusing on demand management, promoting alternatives to flying for shorter trips and using levies (i.e. charges and taxes) to encourage industry to reduce pollution.

REGIONAL AIRPORT STUDIES

The Government's Transport White Paper announced a series of regional studies of the role of airports in economic development. The Government aims to maximise the contribution that airports make to local and regional economies, in order to relieve pressure on congested airports in the South East and to reduce the need for long road journeys to South East airports. However, the terms of reference of these studies do not consider how regional airports would reduce overall pollution and contribute to an environmentally sustainable integrated transport system, except in terms of surface access.

Studies on the role of regional airports are underway in the South West, the Midlands, the North (North West, North East and Yorkshire & Humberside), Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. All regional airport studies are being co-ordinated by DETR and should be completed by the end of summer 1999. In March 1999 the Government announced a further airport study would be undertaken for the East and South East but would exclude the proposal for Terminal 5 at Heathrow and any other airport proposals for which planning applications had been made or were imminent. The

study is expected to take two years and will be followed by public consultation on the options arising.

A national overview of these studies will lead to the formulation of a new UK airports policy. The national overview will also consider the environmental and social impacts of air transport and the potential of rail substitution for air travel.

FORMER RAF AIRBASES

Following the end of the cold war, a review of Ministry of Defence (MOD) assets led to the closure or sale of a large number of former Royal Air Force (RAF) air bases. Many of these airbases were established as a consequence of the threat to UK's national security during the first and second world wars. As a result they were built without planning permission or any environmental impact assessment.

Of these, at least four have been earmarked for sale or lease for use as airports: RAF Bentwaters; RAF Farnborough; RAF Finningley and RAF Manston. Private investors have expressed an interest in developing RAF Northolt as a commercial airport. A proposed air freight terminal at RAF Alconbury was rejected after strong local opposition.

However the local community remain concerned that the District Council may allow the introduction of airfreight in the future.

Some private developers have been trying to exploit the planning process by buying up disused RAF bases and converting them for commercial use. The airfields are attractive to developers as permission to re-use existing runways is easier to obtain than permission to construct new ones. The development of business parks, warehousing and housing alongside airports is also financially attractive to developers as they then aren't reliant on the airport alone to generate revenue.

The MOD is currently involved in a major Strategic Defence Review of all its assets and as a result further closures and disposal of further airbases is expected.