

✉ by email ✉

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AIRPORTS COMMISSION

Aviation Capacity in the UK: Emerging Thinking

The Public and Commercial Services union (PCS) is the largest trade union in the civil service and represents around 250,000 members working in the civil and associated public services, as well as members on privatised government contracts. This includes around 2,000 members working directly in the aviation industry (for the CAA, BAA and other airport operators, and NATS) as well as members in related areas such as the UK Borders Agency.

It is worth stating at the outset that PCS is not anti-aviation *per se*, for two primary reasons: one, we have many members who work in the industry providing a valuable service to the public (at airports, in the CAA and NATS, and in areas such as the Borders Agency), and, two, we recognise, as the report does, that flying does have benefits in bringing other parts of the world, other cultures and experiences, into reach, hopefully enriching our understanding and knowledge. However, we also believe that the case being made for expansion has little to do with either of these factors and everything to do with the disproportionate influence of commercial interests that generate massive profits from the airline industry (often at the expense of our members' jobs).

Four arguments have been advanced against the case for airport/runway expansion and are discussed in the report:

1. Traffic growth forecasts have been shown to be over-optimistic in light of the economic crisis.
2. Under-utilised capacity at existing airports and runways can accommodate growth.
3. The 'pure' environmental argument against expansion as an agent of further climate change.
4. Planning could redistribute demand to under-utilised parts of the UK.

In PCS' view these are not alternate viewpoints but can be built successively one upon the other to reach an outcome that successfully meets the UK's transport needs and does not involve the building of new runways and/or airports.

Point 1 is true, forecasts are being revised successively downwards such that the immediate imperative to expand is greatly lessened. However, we do accept that the issue is deferred not eliminated, as slower growth rates will eventually rise to the levels predicted previously, if in slower time.

On point 2, in PCS' view the use of existing facilities to their full potential must precede (and preferably prevent) any consideration of building new airports or runways. Our view is that the market alone will not maximise the efficient use of available capacity, only government planning can achieve a solution that could make best use of existing capacity. Opening up the ownership of the UK's aviation infrastructure to competition has resulted in the two largest airports, Heathrow and Gatwick, having different owners, and this is a huge obstacle to constructing a coherent policy towards the needs of aviation and the protection of the environment. Each airport is vying to provide the additional runway(s) to accommodate greater demand (and gain commercial advantage) instead of serving first the needs of the public and the environment. Any proposals to protect the environment are framed within the context of this competitive imperative resulting in the hasty dismissal of the 'dual hub' option, which PCS believes is the most valid way forward.

To ensure the best possible outcome a number of elements need to be combined in a coherent strategy:

- (i) Maximise the use of existing capacity.
- (ii) Provide the infrastructure to ensure that the various facilities are attractive to passengers.
- (iii) Use of larger aircraft to accommodate further increases in passenger numbers.
- (iv) Research into the production of aircraft engines that are less noisy AND more fuel efficient.
- (v) Adoption of the use of less polluting fuel types.
- (vi) Ensure the most fuel efficient routes are given by air traffic services.
- (vii) Seek to offset air travel with other, more environmentally-friendly, modes of travel (e.g. HSR) and more extensive use of videoconferencing and other means of communication (we accept the limitations of videoconferencing as noted but would argue there is a definite place for it in this scheme).

With all of the above in place, and taken along with point 1 that forecast growth is not as high as had originally been predicted, PCS believes that a strategy for accommodating passenger demand while also regulating and minimising climate change can be put in place. The second of the four arguments, the better utilisation of existing runway capacity, forms the basic cornerstone of this strategy.

We also believe that the utilisation of our existing airports to their full capacity is the best way of safeguarding the jobs of the many members we have working at those locations. The commercial expansion of the industry, for example adding a new runway or airport would, we believe, be accompanied as part of the ideological 'package' by wholesale outsourcing of any jobs created, on poor terms and conditions that fail to value the service that those workers provide, and the concomitant dangers that go with making a 'cost efficient' bid.

Important to the above strategy is the assertion that industry will choose to fly from certain airports that 'best meet the needs of their passengers'. This misses out the positive role that government can have in planning the infrastructure around under-utilised airports to encourage their use. Government involvement is also essential to the development of larger aircraft, engine and fuel types, and the transition to other modes of transport and use of technology to avoid travel where possible. We agree that 'the market alone will not resolve this issue'; only a planned approach will provide a safe, environmentally-friendly transport system that serves the needs of the travelling public in preference to the needs of shareholders.

In terms of point 3, the climate change-oriented argument, we feel that even in the event that all of the above measures were put in place and thereby postponed the requirement for additional capacity for a period, there will eventually come a time when unconstrained

demand will outstrip capacity. At some point therefore, once all the mitigating measures have been taken, we will be forced to confront the fundamental issue underpinning any decision regarding the future of the industry – the impact of aviation on climate change.

Even the strategy outlined above, with no new runways or airports, still adds to the absolute number of flights and therefore perpetuates the escalation of carbon emissions, albeit within more acceptable bounds. But the introduction of new runways carries with it the threat of a quantum leap in the amount of CO₂ emitted to a new, higher, level.

Once again, the profit-driven market approach cannot be relied upon to resolve this issue. The suspension of the European Emissions Trading Scheme illustrates the degree to which a market solution is, however dressed-up in positive noises it might be, diametrically opposed to a committed and sustained effort to combat climate change. The ‘uncertainty’ around the achievement of an agreeable alternative scheme demonstrates just how difficult it is to ever persuade commercial interests to commit to a policy based around pure altruism rather than expanding their profitability. PCS feels it is unacceptable, with the future sustainability of the planet at stake, that a global agreement should be hamstrung by the reluctance of commercial interests to participate.

The proposal to constrain movements by not building new airports and runways would not be ‘second best’ in PCS’ view but an essential starting point for recasting the industry and its relationship to climate change. We also feel that while the target defined by the Committee on Climate Change is far preferable to the current EC Single European Sky targets (a three-fold increase in capacity by 2020!), with scope for 60% growth by 2050 it remains a ‘least worst’ rather than an actively ‘desired’ option.

It is disappointing and perplexing that, within the context of a report that is generally well-balanced, the ‘provisional’ view is that additional capacity will be needed in the South East. While the report is quite precise in many ways, the case for this additional capacity is ill-defined and generalised. Phrases such as ‘restrict passengers choices’ and ‘where passengers are going to want to fly to and from over the coming decades’ imply a passive role for government.

PCS believes that the state can be active in helping people make the journeys they want while specifying origin and destination airports to serve the wider purpose of protecting the environment. Flying is a means to an end, not the end in itself, so we do not believe that regulation of the industry in the interests of reducing climate impacts is in any way ‘restricting passenger choices’ – they fly to reach a destination not to visit an airport.

Finally, we feel that point 4, government intervention to redistribute air traffic to other parts of the country beyond the South East, is a viable and welcome addition to the strategy we propose above, which could further defer the need for additional runway capacity, and further undermines the provisional conclusion that more South East capacity is needed. It would, however, need careful thought to ensure that total UK capacity is efficiently utilised, probably within the overall framework of a hub-and-spoke model of capacity provision. We acknowledge the EU legislation that might prevent this but as the report states there are options for looking at achieving this if the will is there.

In brief, PCS’ priorities that determine the nature of our response are three-fold:

1. The need to reduce the negative impact of the industry on climate change,
2. Protection of the jobs of our members in providing a service to the travelling public, and
3. Ensuring that the service to the public remains at its current high standard, and that safety and environment are not compromised by constant expansion of airspace capacity.

For full details of the research that has provided the background to the formulation of PCS' policy on aviation and the environment, please see our report *PCS Aviation Review: Protecting Jobs, Protecting the Planet*, authored by Caroline Molloy and Roger Sealey, May 2013.

30th October 2013

Public and Commercial Services Trade Union