

The Future Development of Air Transport in the UK: a response by the Ramblers' Association

Context

1. The Ramblers' Association passed the following motion at its General Council meeting in April 2003:

This General Council is concerned at the adverse effects that major development of air transport in the UK would have on the British countryside. New or expanded airports and their associated infrastructure would damage substantial amounts of countryside in terms of visual, air and noise pollution, and would undermine efforts to develop sustainable rural tourism.

Council therefore instructs the Executive Committee to campaign against the Government's proposals for airport development outlined in the Department for Transport's national consultation 'The future development of air transport in the United Kingdom'. Council urges the Government to manage future developments of air transport in the UK in a sustainable way and to reject the "predict and provide" approach.

2. It is therefore with the weight of this motion behind us that we write in response to this consultation.

Introduction

3. The Ramblers' Association is a voluntary organisation founded in 1935 whose aims are to promote walking, to protect public rights of way, to campaign for access to open country and to defend the beauty of the countryside. It has over 139,000 members. The Association believes that it is the largest single organisation representing walkers in the UK and we campaign to protect the countryside to ensure that it is retained for all to enjoy. In particular, it is because we represent a significant sector of countryside users that we are driven to respond to this consultation on the future development of air transport and the implications that such development would have for the countryside and communities which would be affected.

The principles of our objection

4. The Ramblers' Association strongly supports the representations that have been made to this consultation by a number of other organisations. It is a member of Airport Watch, the Aviation group of the Transport Activists' Roundtable, and has signed up to the Aviation Position Statement of Wildlife and Countryside Link. We do not wish to repeat all the points made by these organisations. Rather, there are a number of principles which we are particularly concerned should be taken into account when decisions on the future of air transport are being developed, and these are stated below.

An end to the ‘predict and provide’ approach to air transport

5. The Government has accepted that a ‘predict and provide’ approach to planning for development is unsustainable, in particular with regards to housing. Yet the Government’s own forecasts for the increase in air travel mean that the equivalent of five airports the current size of Heathrow would have to be built by 2030 to accommodate that growth. Clearly, simply providing for this predicted growth will have unfathomable consequences for the countryside, wildlife, communities, landscape, heritage and tranquillity. Far reaching consequences beyond that of the proximity of developments would also be evident, particularly in terms of minerals extraction to supply the development, new roads and infrastructure to access the developments and, of course, the global impacts of climate change to which growth of air travel will be a significant contributor.
6. ‘Predict and provide’ is a discredited, out-of-date and irresponsible approach to take. This has been agreed by the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, as well as by economists, environmentalists and politicians. Demand management is therefore crucial if society, the environment and the economy are not going to suffer immensely from the expansion that the forecasts demand.

Environmental capacity

7. Not only will growth of aviation capacity mean loss of Greenbelt, wildlife, landscapes, rights of way and other assets, it will also contribute to the vast amount of greenhouse gas emissions which account for climate change. These emissions will be added to by the increased emissions from cars travelling to the airports which will significantly affect the levels of air pollution around airports.
8. We are seriously concerned by fact that new airport development will physically remove the important resource that is the countryside which is highly valued for its own sake by local people, the wider public and those whose livelihoods depend on it, and by tourists. The Foot and Mouth epidemic that spread through the UK in 2001 stimulating the Government to effectively ‘close down’ the countryside while it raged, demonstrated the economic importance of the countryside. In particular it showed how, when the resource was removed, the population at large suffered. There was much coverage of how much people valued the peace and quiet of the countryside, the fresh air and the interest that it offers in terms of landscape, biodiversity and character, and how by removing that opportunity, their quality of life and well being suffered. Given the sheer size of land take of the airport expansion proposals, we call upon the Government to consider carefully the resource that will be removed from use by the public.
9. We urge the Government to take steps to safeguard communities and the countryside, particularly designated areas, from devastation by airport expansion and to consider the capacity of the environment, in its broadest

sense to accommodate the proposed expansion.

Rural recovery

10. The above point is also relevant with regards to the economic value of the countryside (particularly within the context of environmental capacity). We believe that airport expansion could serve as a tragic double whammy as far as the rural recovery is concerned: not only will it eat up large areas of countryside, pollute them with particulates, noxious gases and noise, and prevent their development as more sustainable activities; it will also encourage more people to fly away from the UK, thus affecting the possibilities of attracting more people to the idea of not travelling, but rather supporting tourism at home. Air transport is a net exporter in the tourist industry: Britons flying abroad in 2000 spent almost double that which visitors from abroad spent in the UK. Expanding aviation will only exacerbate that situation as fewer tourists will want to come and see our ruined countryside, and more Britons will want to escape from it.

Ensuring that the polluter pays

11. The Ramblers' Association is deeply dismayed that the Government has done nothing to take forward its policy in the Transport White Paper 1998 which says that "Aviation users should pay the full environmental and social costs". In particular, the lack of tax on aviation fuel, VAT on the purchase of planes or on any components of air travel, set aviation apart from the majority of other industries and certainly offer no encouragement at all for alternatives to be sought or for air transport to be limited.
12. With the assent of cheap, 'no frills' airlines, the public too is not being educated as to the real cost of flying. This has clearly been reflected by the number of short break flights which are now being taken, and the consequent decline of the domestic market for such business. We believe that those flying should be subjected to the environmental costs, and that this is likely to have the added benefit of reducing demand.

Recommendations

13. The Ramblers' Association strongly urges the Government to put demand management at the heart of the forthcoming Air Transport White Paper. The Government should:
 - Press internationally for fiscal measures such as VAT on aviation fuel and vehicles;
 - Introduce an environmental tax on noise and emissions;
 - Set targets for emissions reduction and provide means for emissions trading;
 - Ensure full environmental capacity assessments are undertaken before airport development is allowed, including assessments of the value of the countryside, and with adequate public participation;
 - Mitigate the environmental and natural resource implications of new airport development and expansion;

- Undertake large scale promotion of alternatives to flying and invest seriously in such alternatives, particularly high speed trains which could replace domestic and short-haul flights;
- Introduce a more sophisticated approach to planning for new airport capacity rather than capitulating to the demands of the aviation industry.

Conclusion

14. We urge the Government to take the opportunity of this review to set in place measures which will curb the dramatic growth predicted in air travel by ensuring that the aviation industry pays for the damage it does to the environment and by protecting the environment from unnecessary growth.

We believe that such action will generate a win win win outcome whereby our environment will be protected, rural business will have the opportunity to flourish, and society as a whole will benefit.

ER
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