

Gatwick Area Conservation Campaign

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Number 104 January 2016

Runway: state of play

On 10 December the Government announced that a decision on whether to build a new runway at Heathrow or at Gatwick had been postponed until the summer (or perhaps even later).

This was widely denounced as a political move to avoid the embarrassment that Zac Goldsmith, MP for Richmond, and Conservative candidate for London Mayor, has threatened to resign as an MP if there were a decision to go ahead with Heathrow.

That may perhaps be part of the reason but only part. The issue of whether a third runway could be built at Heathrow without causing an infringement of legally-binding EU pollution limits was not clear cut. If the Government had gone ahead and if, as predicted, Gatwick Airport Ltd (GAL) had applied for judicial review, it could have caused an even longer delay.

Stringent conditions at Heathrow

Another factor in the decision to delay was that the Environmental Audit Select Committee had published a report on 30 November^[1] in which they recommended that a third runway at Heathrow should only go ahead if certain stringent conditions were met:

- ➔ The airport to be no noisier with three runways than with two
- ➔ No night flights
- ➔ No infringement of legal pollution limits
- ➔ Heathrow Ltd to fund all necessary road and rail improvements
- ➔ If, as the Airports Commission assumed, action (e.g. higher tax on air fares) was taken to limit the climate change damage caused by an extra runway, the Government should assess the impact on regional airports and on the wider economy.

The Government is not bound to accept these recommendations but it obviously needs time to negotiate with Heathrow Ltd. to ascertain which can be implemented. The Government needs to keep Gatwick in the frame as a viable alternative to maintain their bargaining power; and as a fall-back if Heathrow cannot comply.

Therefore - stringent conditions for Gatwick too

GACC has demanded that similar stringent conditions should apply if a Gatwick runway were to go ahead. But complying with similar conditions would not be easy here because -

- ➔ The Airports Commission forecast that at Gatwick three times as many people would be affected by noise (above 57 leq) compared to now.
- ➔ Gatwick has about 50 flights a night (between 11.30 pm and 6.00 am) in summer compared to 16 a night at Heathrow.
- ➔ A new Gatwick runway might not breach EU pollution limits but, according to the Airports Commission, 50,000 people would suffer worse air quality.
- ➔ The climate change constraint would be the same at Gatwick as at Heathrow.

Infrastructure costs – who will pay?

It has frequently been said in recent months that the costs of the necessary road and rail infrastructure would be much greater for a new runway at Heathrow than for one at Gatwick. GACC has, however, brought to the attention of the Government that this comparison is invalid because it is based on 2030 at which date a new Heathrow runway is forecast to be handling 35 million passengers but one at Gatwick only 8 million.ⁱⁱ[2]

If Gatwick with two runways was operating at full capacity the M23 and M25 would need major widening, the M23 would need to be extended into London, several new A roads would need to be built east and west of Gatwick, and the Brighton main rail line would need extensive engineering work – all of which could be just as costly as anything needed at Heathrow.ⁱⁱⁱ[3]

Pollution near Gatwick above legal limit

Last May the Supreme Court ruled that the UK must comply with the EU Air Quality Directive. The Government's plan on how to do so was published on 17 December.^{iv}[4] It is mainly concerned with emissions from motor vehicles in city centres but the Government has accepted the recommendation by the Environmental Audit Committee to test the Heathrow proposals against it.

Much of the pollution around Heathrow is caused by road vehicles. The same is true at Gatwick. In 2015 the average nitrogen dioxide concentration at a number of points around the Hazelwick roundabout in Crawley – about a mile south of the proposed new runway - were found to exceed the legally-binding limit.

A slap in the eye

For months GAL had been spending vast sums on advertising trying to convince people that there were no serious obstacles to going ahead with a second Gatwick runway. If the Government's sole objective, as the press suggested, was to avoid political embarrassment they could have gone for Gatwick - and would have saved themselves a lot of opprobrium. That they did not do so was a slap in the eye for Gatwick.

The truth is that GAL's multi-million pound advertising and lobbying campaign has proved a total flop. Gallons of champagne down the drain! It was all dreamt up by the American company which owns Gatwick who are used to the lobbying methods in Washington. But in Britain, MPs and members of the Cabinet tend to react against brash commercial pressure. We have an old-fashioned belief that decisions should be taken on their merits, on the basis of careful research and analysis, not on who pays for the biggest adverts.

Do we really need a new runway?

In their statement the Government accepted the Airports Commission recommendation that a new runway will be needed in the South East – but significantly by 2030, not by 2025. And the statement added that, without a new runway, 'the entire London [airport] system will be full by 2040'.^{v[5]} But if airlines use larger aircraft the date could be even later. So a decision is not actually needed for ten or twenty years.

It is not at all certain that there would be a clear Parliamentary majority for either Heathrow or for Gatwick. A Parliamentary debate on 26 November saw MPs from every Party supporting either option, or none. But we are glad to report strong speeches from the Gatwick MPs opposing a Gatwick second runway. A recent poll showed 65 per cent of MPs back the expansion of Heathrow, compared to 53 per cent who back the growth of Gatwick.

Looking ahead

GACC is now planning our new campaign for the coming six months. We are analysing who will be taking the crucial decisions, and how best to influence them. We are working out if there are any issues on which more research would be helpful. In due course we will be launching an appeal for funds. We will also be writing to GACC members to ask for help with various tasks.

Flight path anger unabated

As GACC members know, changes in Gatwick flight paths in recent years have caused widespread anger. Around 1,000 people attended the GACC protest meeting in Crawley in November 2014.

A dozen or so local protest groups have been set up: a GACC guide to Gatwick Environmental Groups is on our website.^{vi[6]} In the past two years the number of people complaining has risen six-fold, and the number of complaints has risen six-fold – despite Gatwick now only registering one complaint per day per person.

Departing aircraft - disappointment

Concentrated routes were introduced in autumn 2013 - spring 2014 for all aircraft departing from Gatwick. This was part of a world-wide move to a system of aircraft navigation based on satellites (like Satnavs for cars).

Gatwick was the first airport in the UK to use the new system and it was approved by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) after minimal consultation.

Instead of being dispersed over a 3 km wide swathe (the previous Noise Preferential Routes - NPRs) aircraft now follow exactly the same route leading to substantial distress and loss of house values for those underneath.

The CAA were required to review the new routes after a year, and has now published its Post Implementation Review (PIR). Apart from a change in one route, it is a deeply disappointing document - 198 pages long but with little recognition of the impact of concentrated routes on those below, and no serious discussion of whether the impact could be softened by dispersal or respite.

A detailed response to the PIR has been prepared by GACC and is available on our website.^{vii}^[7] The CAA is due to consult soon on whether their procedures are as good as they should be.

The one route where the CAA insists on a change is the one where aircraft take-off to the west, turn right over Holmwood, and then fly back to the east over southern Reigate and Redhill. This route was outside the NPR bringing noise to previously peaceful areas, and created huge protest.

At the instruction of the CAA, Gatwick are now working on plans for a new flight path requiring aircraft to make a tighter turn. What was unsatisfactory was that the PIR made no recommendation for change in the reciprocal route (take-off to the east, turn left) and did not even analyse the environmental impact of that route.

Arriving aircraft – review awaited

At around the same time air traffic control started instructing arriving aircraft to join the glide-slope (the straight 3⁰ approach path to the runway) further out, bringing more concentrated disturbance to previously peaceful towns such as Tunbridge Wells, Crowborough, and many nearby villages to the east; and to Slinfold, Loxwood, Billingshurst and Pulborough to the west.

There was no consultation because the airport and NATS (air traffic control) maintained that there had been no official change. An application for judicial review on this point was refused but permission has been given to appeal.

The strength of protest generated by these changes forced Gatwick to set up an Arrivals Review. It is being undertaken by two independent senior air traffic control experts, Bo Redeborn and Graham Lake. Their recommendations are due to be published on 28 January. It looks likely they will include:

- ➔ Aircraft to join the glide slope at 8-14 nautical miles instead of 12-14 at present;
- ➔ More 'straight-in' approaches at night
- ➔ Speeding up the modification of the A320 to get rid of the infuriating whine
- ➔ Fewer houses to be built under flight paths (not easy when future flight paths are unknown)
- ➔ A new Gatwick Noise Management Board consisting of representatives from the Department for Transport (DfT), CAA, NATS and GAL with some form of community engagement.

GACC has had a number of useful meetings with the review team but decided to stay at arms-length because – with our remit to represent all areas affected by the airport – we have traditionally avoided getting involved in plans to move flight paths from one area to another.

Point-merge abandoned?

In due course aircraft arriving at Gatwick will also use satellite navigation. A consultation in May 2014 explored the idea of introducing a point-merge system. All aircraft would fly in an arc, then to a merge point somewhere near Haywards Heath or Crowborough and then fly on a single route to the airport. GACC asked for dispersal or respite.

It now looks, however, as if a system of 'timed-arrivals' will be introduced instead.

Aircraft would have their speed adjusted so that they arrive at the runway at exactly the moment that their landing slot becomes free. That would be better for the environment – so long as they do not all fly on a single concentrated route.

Replace concentration by dispersal or respite?

The March 2013 Aviation Policy Framework laid down that the Government's 'overall objective on noise is to limit and where possible reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise.' Looks good at first sight, but experience at Gatwick has shown that concentration, although it reduces the number affected, can cause great distress.

A constant procession of aircraft, sometimes almost nose to tail, creates the impression of a 'noise ghetto', is seen as unjust, can have adverse effects on health, reduces property values so that people feel trapped and unable to move.

A fairer system would be one in which aircraft were dispersed over a wider area. But too wide dispersal may mean bringing noise to areas at present quiet where people have bought their houses in the expectation of continuing peace.

An alternative policy under consideration is respite, where aircraft fly on different tracks at different times of day, or on different days of the week. A Government statement assessing these possibilities is expected later this year, perhaps at the time of the runway announcement.

If all else fails the answer may be compensation. If a new motorway is built close to your house, and if you can prove that your house has been devalued, you can claim compensation. It is illogical that there is no compensation for new motorways in the sky.

Softening up the runway opposition

The Government is thinking of introducing a number of palliatives designed to soften the blow of a new runway, whether at Heathrow or Gatwick.

A noise levy. GACC would support this but only if it did not replace the existing noise charges and community support provided by the airport. We have suggested that it should be at a rate of £1 per passenger and £5 per passenger at night, and should be used to reduce the council tax of those living under flight paths.

An Independent Aviation Noise Authority. GACC remains sceptical unless the Authority is given some real power to reduce noise or fine noisy aircraft.

A new Community Forum. We have suggested to the Department for Transport that, rather than setting up a new body which would overlap with the Gatwick consultative committee (GATCOM), it would be better to strengthen GATCOM by making its chairman independent of the airport, providing independent finance from the noise levy, and encouraging it to hold quarterly noise seminars at which community groups could hold the proposed Gatwick Noise Management Board to account.

Runway trumps all

One thing is clear: a second Gatwick runway would ultimately mean twice as many aircraft in the sky. Present problems with flight paths would appear small by comparison.

Brendon Sewill CBE
Chairman

i[1] <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmselect/cmenvaud/389/38902.htm>

ii[2] Letter from Sir Howard Davies 7 September 2015. Assumes runway completion in 2025.

iii[3] GACC response to Airports Commission consultation, February 2015. www.gacc.org.uk/the-runway-issue

iv[4] <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/air-quality-in-the-uk-plan-to-reduce-nitrogen-dioxide-emissions>

v[5] Statement to the House 14 December 2017. It assumes that the local authority cap of 35 million passengers a year at Stansted is not raised.

vi[6] www.gacc.org.uk/flight-paths

vii[7] www.gacc.org.uk/flight-paths