

Airport Commission Consultation – Long Term Options

Summary

The Airports Commission (or Davies Commission) has been established to consider the need for additional UK airport capacity and recommend to Government how this can be met in the short, medium and long-term. The Commission is due to report to the Government on its recommendations after the next General Election. It has published the list of options for long-term airport capacity proposed to it for public consultation. All Members were sent links to all of the proposals in August 2013 and those considered likely to have the greatest impact on Sevenoaks District were discussed at a meeting of the Local Planning and Environment Advisory Committee on 24 October 2013. Members of that committee recommended to the Portfolio Holder that the Council respond to the consultation to recognise the economic benefits of Gatwick Airport but raise serious concerns about existing noise levels and the likely impact of a 2nd runway.

Recommendation

That the proposed response is sent to the Airports Commission.

Background

A total of 51 separate proposals to provide increases in long-term capacity have been submitted to the Airports Commission, with a number presenting similar developments. Amongst these are Gatwick Airport's proposal for a 2nd runway after 2019 and various proposals for a Thames Estuary airport, including on the Isle of Grain. These have been published for consultation by the Commission. The Council's Local Planning and Environment Committee discussed the consultation, with a particular focus on the proposed 2nd runway at Gatwick, at a meeting on 24 September 2013. The proposed response is considered to reflect the recommendations of the Committee.

Proposed Response

Sevenoaks District Council's (SDC) response focuses on those proposals made to the Airports Commission that could impact on the District. Primarily the response addresses issues related to Gatwick Airport but could also be relevant to proposals for Thames Estuary airports, including the Mayor of London's Isle of Grain proposal which would lead to parts of Sevenoaks District being overflown by aircraft (as is clear from figure 6.2 of that proposal document).

SDC endorses the response submitted by Edenbridge Town Council on the Commission's Paper 5 on noise. It also notes that this response was supported by the local MPs. SDC believes that Edenbridge Town Council's response identifies valid issues that should be

taken into account when considering the development of a 2nd runway at Gatwick (an issue for this current consultation) and existing operations.

SDC recognises the local and national economic benefit of Gatwick Airport but has significant concerns over the aircraft noise associated with take-offs and landings at the airport currently. This causes disturbance to residents, particularly in the south west of the District. SDC's response to the Draft Gatwick Airport Master Plan consultation stated that 'a full assessment of all options to increase capacity for international travel in the South East should be undertaken to ensure that the most socially and environmentally acceptable option is progressed' and that a proposal for a 2nd runway would be unwelcome prior to this. The Council notes that the Airports Commission now has the remit to consider different options and their impacts and make recommendations to Government.

In responding to the Government's Draft Aviation Framework consultation, SDC noted that the 57 dB LAeq, 16h contour is a poor descriptor of noise and annoyance because it allows for noisy and disturbing 'events' to be lost in the averaging process. Nevertheless, the only indication that the Council has of the noise implications of a second runway at Gatwick is provided by the Gatwick Airport Master Plan, which shows the 57-60dB contour extending towards Sevenoaks District and the 54-57dB contour to be covering a wider area of Sevenoaks District.

SDC has also previously responded to the Government's consultation on night flights to stress its concern that Gatwick has significantly higher permitted summer night movements and noise quota points limits than Heathrow and Stansted. It also stated that a night respite period should be introduced and that operational bans should be placed on the use of the noisiest aircraft at night with standards becoming more restrictive over time.

SDC recently made an application to join the Gatwick Airport Consultative Committee (GATCOM) in order to better engage on issues related to the operation of the airport. This application was refused. SDC considers this, as Edenbridge Town Council does, to highlight the fact that consultative committees are unable or unwilling to fully consider the impacts of airports on local affected communities.

Edenbridge Town Council's response to the Commission Paper Number 5 (Noise) stated the need for trade-offs to be considered, although not, unless as a last resort, through financial compensation. SDC considers that it would be essential that this principle was applied if a 2nd runway at Gatwick were part of the Commission's preferred solution to the issue of long term capacity. It considers that part of a trade-off approach would need to be severe limitations on night flights, and the introduction of a meaningful respite period, to compensate local residents for an increase in daytime noise and disturbance.

In mitigating daytime noise, SDC supports Edenbridge Town Council's view that better controls over the height of aircraft approaching the airport and measures to produce a more noise-sensitive culture among airlines and their flight crews are required. Independent noise monitoring and regulation are also required, along with meaningful penalties for exceedance. SDC considers that progress is required on these issues regardless of whether a 2nd runway at Gatwick is considered appropriate by the Commission (and then Government). However, firm action in these areas would need to be part of an essential package to mitigate the impacts of a 2nd runway.

SDC remains to be convinced that an increase in passengers per annum from 32 million in 2011/12 (as noted in the Gatwick Airport Master Plan) to a potential 90 million in 2050 (as set out in the operator's proposal for a 2nd runway) will only require the relatively modest improvements in transport infrastructure envisaged by the operator. A robust assessment of the infrastructure requirements of a 2nd runway and the impacts of its development and operation must be a critical consideration of the Commission. SDC has campaigned for improved rail links to Gatwick from Kent (including Tonbridge and Edenbridge) for a number of years now, partly to reduce congestion on the M25 and M26 through Sevenoaks District. It considers that, regardless of the decision made on the 2nd runway, a frequent and attractive service should be introduced to support existing forecast passenger growth but would be an essential component of the infrastructure required to support the development of a 2nd runway.