

16 January 2009

Government takes out loan on toxic asset

Secretary of State for Transport Geoff Hoon has given the go ahead for the contentious third runway at London's Heathrow Airport - essentially taking out a loan on a toxic asset.

Approval of the new runway and associated passenger terminal is a disastrous decision and further compounds the inadequacy of the Government's national policy on aviation. The negative community impact and environmental pollution associated with Heathrow is already unacceptable and can only be made worse by expanding the airport.

Much of the clear opposition to the airport expansion proposals was dismissed by the Government in their assessment of the consultation responses despite having invited any comments that interested parties may wish to make.

SASIG has real concerns that consideration of the local impacts of this development has not been, and will not, be adequate. To date the execution of national aviation policy through the regional and local planning system has not afforded debate on the local impacts of nationally significant aviation developments. This is likely to worsen with the introduction of the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) as the body that will determine BAA's planning application for the third runway at Heathrow.

There is serious disparity in the Government's approach to local democracy. The Government has proposed measures intended to support local communities taking part in local governance, whilst at the same time lowering the quality of consideration of local implications during national policy deliberations. There is now no provision for cross-examination of the issues presented on major infrastructure projects, leaving the IPC to make their decision based on untested evidence. Cross-examination has been shown to be essential for improving the viability and acceptability of major development schemes.

The Government is also requiring local authorities to take action on climate change issues, whilst refusing to address the conflict between the national carbon reduction policy and the national aviation expansion policy. This must be addressed in concert with reviewing the national aviation policy, in order to achieve provision for aviation along with social and environmental protection.

The expansion scheme now also includes a new railway link for Heathrow, despite such detail not having been included in the consultation. This 'sweetener' is being regarded by the Government as complementary to the third runway. SASIG is clear that this rail link to Heathrow should be used to provide for domestic trips thus releasing slots at the airport for long-haul flights.

Commitments already made for the surface access required to serve existing development at Heathrow, in particular Terminal 5, have still not been honoured. Rail improvement schemes such as AirTrack and Crossrail are still on the drawing board. When environmental and movement limits have been set in the past they have all too quickly been swept aside as an inconvenience rather than a benefit.

SASIG Chairman, Cllr Jamie Macrae, said: "We have no confidence in the Government's aspirations for a third runway at Heathrow meeting environmental limits, based on past performance and the assumptions underpinning the Minister's decision. Appropriate expertise, resources and powers must be provided if the additional role for the Civil Aviation Authority as environmental regulator is to have any chance of being effective.

The Government is so far behind where it should be based on past promises that the decision on runway 3 is not only wrong but offensive."

CONTINUES

SASIG will continue to raise issues of inadequacy in the national aviation policy, representing its membership of 14 million people in 52 local authorities across the country. The Government's proposed new rail link to Heathrow could help reduce demand for the runway and give breathing space to prepare a sensible long-term strategy.

ENDS

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NOTES TO EDITORS

SASIG has a broad national membership of local authorities but does not speak on behalf of the Local Government Association as a whole.