

Why Northern Ireland needs a regional aviation strategy

A briefing paper from Belfast City Airport Watch



The untrammelled, ad hoc expansion of George Best Belfast City Airport is endangering the health and quality of life of tens of thousands of residents in Belfast and north Down who live under or close to its flight paths. But that expansion is also weakening the ability of Belfast International Airport to maintain and attract lucrative long haul routes which are crucial to the regional economy. The Environment Minister's recent decision to remove the City Airport's passenger limit will only exacerbate this situation.

We are calling on the Northern Ireland Executive, as a matter of urgency, to develop a regional aviation strategy which protects the interests of both the regional economy and local residents, by providing the framework for an economically and environmentally sustainable regional aviation strategy.

Over the past ten years, the number of passengers at the City Airport has more than doubled. But this rapid growth has come at a considerable cost to the tens of thousands of local residents in Belfast and north Down who live under or close to the airport's flight paths. The airport is one of just three to be designated by the European Union as a 'city' airport because of its proximity to a large urban area with a dense population where:

...a significant number of people are objectively affected by aircraft noise and where any incremental increase in aircraft movements represents a particularly high annoyance in the light of the extreme noise situation.¹

For many residents, the noise problem has only become an issue since the City Airport embarked on its recent expansion. Originally, the City Airport focused on a niche, business-centred domestic market and operated at a level which did not cause undue noise problems for most residents. However, in recent years, it has significantly expanded its domestic traffic and is now looking to compete for international traffic, particularly if it gets the go-ahead for its proposed runway extension.

What is particularly frustrating for local residents is that Belfast already has an international airport just 30 minutes' drive from the city centre. **While the City Airport has continued to expand over the past three years, Belfast International Airport has lost around a fifth of its passengers.** The recession has clearly played a part in the International Airport's decline, but it is evident that many of those passengers have been lost to the City Airport.

Bmibaby's recent decision to transfer its routes from International to City, and easyJet's decision to move one of its key routes likewise are stark examples of the extent to which the City Airport is beginning to weaken International's position as Northern Ireland's major airport. The Environment Minister's recent decision to remove City's seats for sale or passenger limit will further strengthen City's position and weaken International's. The International Airport is now over-reliant on its key

scheduled airline, easyJet, which has already said it may move further routes to City. Industry sources say that easyJet accounts for three-quarters of International's scheduled seat capacity.

For local residents, our prime concern is an environmental one. The Department of the Environment has failed to initiate and enforce sufficiently robust environmental regulation. Given the large number of affected residents involved, many of whom live in areas of social deprivation, we believe the Northern Ireland Executive has a duty to ensure that effective environmental regulation is in force.

At the same time, we also believe that further ad hoc, untrammelled growth on the part of the City Airport is not in the interests of the regional economy as a whole. In particular, it is impeding the ability of International Airport to develop long haul routes. As the City Airport's proximity to a huge urban residential area makes it most unlikely it will ever be permitted to operate long haul routes, International is the only airport in Northern Ireland which can develop this market. Long haul routes are vital to the economic health of any region; in the UK and Ireland, short-haul European routes tend to be filled with outgoing holidaymakers, creating a net loss to a regional economy. Long haul routes are much more likely to bring in the valued American and other long-distance tourist and business visitors who can add value to the local economy.

International Airport's major competitor for long haul traffic is the far larger Dublin Airport. To develop a sustainable, quality portfolio of long haul routes, a regional airport needs a critical mass of passengers and a strong portfolio of short haul routes which will feed into and help sustain the long haul routes. Dublin has both these characteristics. However, International's passenger base and short haul offering are both being eroded by competition from City Airport, weakening its potential for building up its long haul portfolio and competing successfully with Dublin. Currently, International has only one scheduled long haul route (to New York). By contrast, Dublin operates 10 routes to North American destinations alone.

A similar pattern has been seen in certain other parts of the UK where smaller airports have been able to attract business away from nearby larger regional airports. The problem is particularly pressing for Northern Ireland where the only long-term winners of any further weakening of International's position will be Dublin Airport, and the Republic of Ireland's tourist and business economy.

We therefore believe that, rather than continuing to encourage City Airport's ad hoc expansion and International's resultant ad hoc contraction, it would be far more sensible for the Northern Ireland Executive to put in place a regional aviation strategy that ensures that the International Airport is able to rebuild its passenger base and short haul offering, and enhance its ability to attract the long haul routes which bring in high spending tourist and business visitors.

We are calling on the Northern Ireland Executive to develop its own regional aviation strategy as a matter of urgency. Further untrammelled growth and duplication of services at the City Airport will result in a weakening of Northern Ireland's ability to compete for lucrative inbound long haul air traffic, and in a further and unacceptable erosion of the quality of life and health of the tens of thousands of residents in Belfast and north Down who are affected by aircraft noise.

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***Belfast City Airport Watch is an umbrella group of 19 residents' associations and community groups opposed to further expansion at George Best Belfast City Airport.
Website: www.belfastcityairportwatch.co.uk E-mail: info@belfastcityairportwatch.co.uk***

¹ *Directive 2002/30 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 March 2002 on the establishment of rules and procedures with regard to the introduction of noise-related operating restrictions at Community airports, Article 2 (b).*