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Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

David Gurtler
Planning & Development Control
Luton Council
Town Hall
George Street
Luton LU1 2BQ

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

30th June 2021 (by email)

developmentcontrol@luton.gov.uk

Dear Mr Gurtler,

Application no. 21/00031/VARCON

Variation of Conditions 8 (passenger throughput cap), 10 (noise contours), 22 (car parking management), 24 (travel plan) and 28 (approved plans and documents) to Planning Permission 15/00950/VARCON (dated 13th October 2017) to accommodate 19 million passengers per annum and to amend the day and night noise contours.

London Luton Airport, Airport Way, Luton

I write with reference to the above application which, among other items, seeks to vary the planning conditions related to the cap on passenger throughput and the noise contour areas at Luton Airport. CPRE Hertfordshire has assessed the application and the reasons for the current passenger cap and associated noise conditions set by Luton Borough Council including the need to safeguard residential amenity, and to align with the Government objective to limit and where possible reduce the level of aircraft noise, and objects strongly to the proposed variation for the following reasons.

1. The airport operator is seeking to increase both the annual passenger throughput and the areas contained within the day and night noise contour areas but nothing has caused any need to change these conditions, which had been breached significantly for the two years before the effects of Covid on flight numbers. Nevertheless, the applicant asserts that the amendments are considered to provide an appropriate balance between environmental protection and growth.
2. When the airport was operating at its existing, capped, capacity of 18mppa there were breaches of the noise contours due to the higher than predicted growth in passenger demand, the delay in delivery of modernised aircraft (e.g. Airbus Neo and grounded B737 MAX) and disruption in European Air Traffic Control from significant weather events and industrial action resulting in flight delays. Therefore the need to enlarge the noise contour exists independently of the proposed increase of the 18 mppa cap to 19 mppa.

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President: Sir Simon Bowes Lyon, KCVO
Chairman: Richard Bullen

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3. The noise contours required for the 19 mppa would not be significantly different to the enlarged contours that would have been needed to operate at 18 mppa. It is proposed that the enlargement would apply until 2028, by when it is anticipated that the introduction of newer, quieter aircraft fleet mix would enable the operator to comply with a smaller contour, but in effect, this would not be as small as the contours under the existing condition.
4. It is asserted that growth in passenger demand was higher than predicted but the operator and the airport owner have been reminded that this growth was far from unexpected and was the direct result of financial incentives from Luton Borough Council to the airlines by way of cost reductions given during 2013.
5. The claim that flight delays had abruptly increased in extent has no foundation. Eurocontrol's CODA (Central Office for Delay Analysis) system clearly shows that at the great majority of airports late-evening and early night flights always experience the greatest delays, usually as the accumulation of a series of short delays during the day and, year-on-year, have not increased in extent.
6. Promises on the replacement of the current fleet with less-noisy modern variants, made since 2012 onwards, have not been kept. Some of the newer variants have appeared at Luton, but the current picture is of predominantly older types, and one of the newer models, the A321NEO, is not living up to the claims of lower noise levels on landing.
7. Luton's relatively short runway inevitably involves, for larger and heavier aircraft, deployment of high levels of landing flap, and higher engine power settings (both of which generate noise), to slow the aircraft for the final stage of landing. There is as yet no experience of the way the B737MAX will perform at Luton but it, like the A321NEO, is a larger aircraft and may show, on measurement, that it is no less noisy than its predecessor the 737/800 under Luton conditions. This replacement rate has a profound effect on the estimates of noise and with the present financial climate facing airlines the replacement rate is likely to be slower than had been assumed, and with several airports with the same noise issues as Luton there is competition between them to persuade or cajole their airlines to base the less noisy models at their particular airport.
8. The Environmental Impact Assessment which accompanies the application says effectively that there is no way that the present noise conditions can be met even with the various expedients in place to minimise the scale of the infringements, but that the size of the increase necessary to make it compliant at 19mppa is very little more than would be needed to achieve compliance at 18 mppa. There is no need to enlarge the noise contour merely to make it possible for the airport operator to claim that it is now compliant. The contour areas could be left unchanged, and regular reports of the scale of infringement made to act as an effective reminder of the need for continuous scrutiny and mitigation of infringements and airlines' need to replace their older noisier fleets.



9. The Environmental Impact Assessment accompanying the application states:

The worst case-year for the number of dwellings above SOAEL (Significant Observable Adverse Effect Level) is 2022, when 724 additional dwellings would be predicted to experience noise above SOAEL during the night-time with the Proposed Scheme in comparison with the existing Condition 10 limits. The number of additional dwellings above the night-time SOAEL remains constant until 2023 and then decreases thereafter.

10. The above adverse effects do not align with the Luton Local Plan which expects the airport to:

achieve further noise reduction or no material increase in day or night time noise or otherwise cause excessive noise including ground noise at any time of the day or night and in accordance with the airport's most recent Airport Noise Action Plan;

include proposals that will, over time, result in a significant diminution and betterment of the effects of aircraft operations on the amenity of local residents, occupiers and users of sensitive premises in the area, through measures to be taken to secure fleet modernisation or otherwise;

11. The above adverse effects are not consistent with the Government objective to “limit and where possible reduce” aircraft noise disturbance. The Government acknowledges the evidence from recent research which shows that sensitivity to aircraft noise has increased, with the same percentage of people reporting to be highly annoyed at a level of 54 dB LAeq 16hr as occurred at 57 dB LAeq 16hr in the past.

12. This “worst case” position is an optimistic guess, and relies on the rate at which the less-noisy types are introduced as well as the rate at which passenger numbers rise from their present levels. In any case, as many as 746 additional dwellings will be significantly affected at night by more noise.

13. The airport operator claims that it can squeeze another million passengers through the existing facilities without further development, needing only to make changes to the arrangements for some passenger queues, and it is suggested that the 5% increase in passenger numbers will not add to the congestion in the local road network, in part perhaps through the opening of the DART system, although nothing is yet known about the fare structure and takeup rate for this service.

14. There are also potential adverse climate change considerations arising from this application. Anthesis, climate change consultants to Luton Borough Council, state:



Emissions from flights are a significant source of emissions, and if aviation emissions continue to increase as currently modelled by national government, the airline sector will reduce the available carbon budget for Luton borough (assuming aircraft technology and efficiency remains at today's levels)...this finite budget is already diminishing and will require significant investment and action from all stakeholders to keep within.

15. The application seeks "room to grow" to assure the airport's existence and the continuation of its position in the local economy though there is doubt as to the rates at which demand for passenger leisure travel may recover and the noisier aircraft types (currently the majority of aircraft using Luton) are replaced. The documents contain optimistic estimates which appear not to be well-founded and the Airport Operators Association recently stated that it did not expect passenger numbers to recover to pre-Covid levels until 2025 at the earliest.

It is suggested that this application is at least two years premature and should be deferred until more certainty over passenger demand is known, and the replacement of the noisier aircraft types is demonstrably well under way.

Yours sincerely,

Chris Berry
Planning Manager