

Air travel

Getting back down to earth

1. INTRODUCTION

It is now widely accepted that air travel is the most destructive form of transport. It is the most inefficient in terms of fuel use, especially over relatively short distances, and is also the most polluting per passenger kilometre.

Aviation is the fastest growing contributor to climate change,¹ and – taking account of the additional impacts of CO₂ emissions at high altitudes – aviation accounted for 14% of UK CO₂ emissions in 2000. In Scotland air travel grew eight-fold between 1970 and 2005.²

Aviation has had a charmed life. It pays no taxes on fuel, it pays no VAT on tickets, and it benefits from duty-free and tax-free sales. It expects to grow into the indefinite future, building more runways and airports as if there are no problems with climate change, air and noise pollution. It is favoured by politicians and is able to ride roughshod over opposition to airport expansion.

Aviation is also totally dependent on oil, with no alternative fuel in prospect, yet the peaking of global oil production may be imminent.³ Gearing our transport system around oil is short-termism gone mad.

2. THE WORST ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE - AND 'TECHNO-FIXES' WON'T WORK

Aviation already has a serious local environmental impact in terms of air pollution, noise disturbance and road traffic generation. The noise suffered by people living around airports is too high, and for many it has got worse in recent years as the sheer number of flights has off-set any benefits from the introduction of quieter aircraft.

The Department for Transport is projecting a tripling in UK air travel between 2004 and 2030,⁴ so local impacts are set to get much, much worse.

The global impacts are the most serious, and they are worsening fast, particularly in terms of CO₂ and climate change. If aviation continues to grow at the present rate it could take up the entire carbon emissions budget for all sectors of the UK economy by 2037.⁵

Engine improvements won't compensate for the predicted growth in flight numbers, and in any case the majority of the UK aviation fleet is very young and won't be replaced for more than 20 years.

Major improvements are decades away, well beyond the timescales within which we must take urgent action on climate change.

3. OUR 'RIGHT' TO FLY?

Low-priced operators have generated an explosion of air travel. Aviation lobbyists are keen to suggest that this has now become 'a right to fly' – an essential freedom that has democratised long-distance travel for all sections of society.

This of course is a gross distortion of reality – operators can charge low-prices because they are exempt from tax and don't pay for the monumental environmental damage they cause. The people from the top three social classes take on average four times as many flights as those in the bottom three,⁶ and most flying is done by the top 10% of income earners, often going to second homes in mainland Europe. It is the people in the poorest countries in the world who will be hardest hit by climate change: "The rich fly; the poor suffer droughts, floods and hurricanes, and lose their homes as a result of rising sea levels."⁷

It has been calculated that the combination of no fuel tax and no VAT on air travel, plus the tax-free sales concession, loses the UK Treasury a net £9.2bn annually,⁸ in other words all tax-payers (including low income earners) are providing an effective subsidy of over £9bn a year to an industry which predominantly benefits the better-off.

This distortion of the market towards air travel is even more unnecessary when one considers the growing potential for rail services to provide an effective and much less damaging alternative to air travel.



Just cut down on the flying, that's all we ask

Climate change already kills over 160,000 people a year. In Africa, 185 million people will die of diseases directly attributable to climate change. Drought will leave hundreds of millions without food. You may have turned down your thermostat, but did you know aviation is the UK's fastest growing source of greenhouse gas emissions? One person's emissions for a return flight from London to Dublin are the same as leaving your kettle to boil continuously for 6 days... New York is 75 days... Sydney is 272 days.

Flights taken by UK citizens already create the equivalent of almost 20% (twenty) of the UK's climate damage.

The UK Government wants passenger numbers to double by 2030 and treble by 2050, destroying all other efforts to reduce emissions.

Fly less. Take trains when you can. Use video conferencing.
Email 'Halt Aviation Expansion' to david.miliband@defra.gsi.gov.uk

airportwatch enoughenough.org

Eurostar (the London-Paris/Brussels rail operator) now thinks that with airline security problems, extended check-ins and lower on-time performance, the train can compete head-on with air travel for journeys of up to 4 hours or so.⁹ This is critical in terms of the key Edinburgh/Glasgow-London market where the existing East Coast and West Coast main lines have the potential to speed up journey times to 3 hrs 30 mins and 3 hrs 45 mins respectively, even without constructing new high-speed rail routes.¹⁰

When the Channel Tunnel Rail Link and St Pancras International Station are completed later this year it will be possible to reach France, Belgium, Holland and Germany by train from Scotland comfortably within a day. Subsidising 'the right to fly' is an economic and environmental nonsense when these practical alternatives are available

4. CURRENT UK & SCOTTISH POLICY - KEEP ON SUBSIDISING AIR TRAVEL

Aviation policy primarily remains with the UK Government. In the 2003 White Paper¹¹ the Department for Transport encouraged growth at Scotland's airports, and specifically recommended that additional runways should be safeguarded at Edinburgh and Glasgow airports.

The Scottish Executive owns (and subsidises) Highlands & Islands Airports Limited, and has a key role to play in determining planning permission for all airport capacity through additional runways, improved land access, etc. In November 2002 the Scottish Executive took its support for aviation further by introducing an Air Route Development Fund which has since then subsidised the operating costs of around 40 new direct air routes from Scotland. The Executive says the Fund is good for the Scottish economy, and reduces the impact of environmental travel.



Image: FreeDigitalPhotos.net

Companies such as Ryanair don't pay for their environmental impacts. That hasn't stopped public subsidies being handed out to them for more short-haul flights.

While the development of new air routes will undoubtedly bring travellers –and therefore tourist income – to Scotland, it also provides increased opportunity for Scottish residents to travel overseas, thus acting as an overall drain on the Scottish economy.

Research by Friends of the Earth¹² found that the net economic impact of aviation was a cost to the Scottish economy of around £1.4bn in 2004. While over 1.5m incoming visitors used Scottish airports in 2004, bringing around £866m into the Scottish economy, nearly 4 million trips were made by Scottish citizens travelling out of the country, spending over £2.1bn overseas.

The Executive claims that the ARDF brings environmental benefits. However, while it is true that an individual taking a direct flight will produce fewer emissions than someone flying via a hub, this efficiency gain will be cancelled out as new trips are generated by the ready availability of direct flights. Also, there is no evidence to suggest the ARDF has displaced any existing flights, so with an increase in the number of flights overall, emissions will increase accordingly.

The ARDF is helping aviation expansion in Scotland, and cannot be compatible with delivering the 'Scottish Share' of reductions in UK climate change emissions

5. ACTION NOW - GETTING BACK DOWN TO EARTH

Much of the action needed to rein in the obscene growth of air travel will have to be taken at the UK and European levels (for example, the abolition of all tax benefits such as duty-free sales and zero VAT rating on air tickets, and the introduction of aviation fuel tax), but the Scottish Executive can play a key role in reducing demand to more sustainable levels, for example through:

- Ruling out the safeguarding of land at both Edinburgh and Glasgow for future runway expansion
- Controlling and reducing local environmental impacts through setting specific limits to passenger throughput at each of Scotland's airports
- Scrapping the Air Route Development Fund and diverting funds into the development of new rail services to cities not currently served directly from Scotland, such as Nottingham, Cardiff, Paris and Brussels
- Together with the DfT, requiring airports and airlines to introduce 'health warnings' on tickets and advertising, informing the travelling public of the harmful noise, air quality and climate change impacts of their journey
- Funding rail infrastructure improvements that will provide faster services and increased capacity on Scottish inter-city routes and, together with the DfT, on the key Anglo-Scottish routes.

It's time for Scottish aviation policy to get back down to earth.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

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