

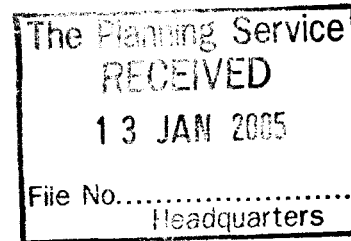


Northern Ireland
Assembly

Parliament Buildings
Belfast BT4 3XX

11 January 2005

BCA Planning Agreement Consultation
Planning Service Headquarters Admin Section
2nd Floor Millennium House
17-25 Great Victoria Street
Belfast
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Dear Sir/Madam

***Response to Public Consultation on
Review of Belfast City Airport Planning Agreement***

For a number of years now I have had a growing number of problems referred to me by constituents concerned by the operational effects of the City Airport. These concerns peaked at the time in February 2003 when British Midland Airways indicated on its website, support for a late night flight from Heathrow, breaching the 9.30pm deadline.

However, complaints had been coming in prior to this, about noise and the 'shockwave' effects of the AIRBUS engines, which rattle people's windows etc.

Concerns about safety of low flying aircraft over densely populated areas and concerns about the limitations of the runway have also been expressed.

There seems to be little local involvement in any rescue plan should a crash occur in the area.

But there are wider issues that need to be discussed at a high level.

Is the advantage of competition between two airports at the City and International, outweighed by the loss of efficiency? Do we need two radars replacing at £3.5m each when possibly once can do both jobs for example?

The planning agreement was intended to set boundaries for the operation of the City Airport. Such airports are recognised by the European Union as different, as indeed they are. The City is adjacent to a residential population whereas the International Airport is not. Hours of operation, transport noise issues and safety are much less a concern at Aldergrove than at the City.

What best serves the long term needs of Northern Ireland with regards to its airport requirements is of strategic importance for both commerce and tourism. This issue needs to be considered by the Government.

I am worried by the thought that the present request for an alteration to the Planning Agreement is but one of an ongoing series. To day it is the number of seats for sale, next it could be the extension of operating hours (which BCA has not ruled out).

The Agreement was designed to set out boundaries for the operations of the airport to secure the balance between the needs of the travelling public and the needs and rights of local residents.

An increased number of passengers equals more traffic on what is the most congested part of Northern Ireland's roads network i.e. people coming from the South and West of Northern Ireland must go along Westlink to get to BCA.

There is already poor enforcement of the flight curfew, and no proper noise management process in operation with monitors along aircraft approach routes etc.

At what point does government say to BCA enough is enough? Where is the line to be drawn?

These questions need answering. I am less concerned about the process for addressing these issues than the urgent need to get them dealt with.

I am a supporter of BCA, and welcome the jobs and convenience it brings to East Belfast. But BCA, in its proposals for increasing traffic, reflects the growth of airbus movements by a substantial amount, and as the airbus noise is the greatest cause of local disquiet it is clear that we are building up the cause of future conflict between residents and the airport.

It seems to me that there is no coherent policy in place to effectively monitor the existing noise generated by the aircraft, and this is before a dramatic increase in large aircraft movements.

I am conscious of recent Department of Transport views on BCA, but each case has to be examined on its own merits. I would also point out that Belfast City Council, both in April 2003 and subsequently has re-iterated its view that further expansion could upset the delicate balance between the residents and the needs of the travelling public.

I repeat that process issues are not my principal concern, but to continue on with one conflict after another would not be in the wider economic interests of East Belfast or Northern Ireland.

The paramount needs are to clarify government policy as it relates to airports in Northern Ireland and to ensure that the views and rights of local residents are adequately taken into account. The Minister may wish to consider the best method of dealing with this. The normal planning public enquiry is one method but there may be others due to this unique situation.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Reg Empey', with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Cllr Sir Reg Empey MLA

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