

'The airport has grown rapidly in recent years, providing evidence of its economic importance in terms of providing opportunities for business travel and inbound tourism, specifically to/from Europe, better serving the needs of its catchment area.' 4.3.8, Statement of Reasons¹

The argument for increased capacity at LLA to build greater connections with worldwide markets in any sense other than tourism is a nonsense. It simply doesn't take into account how business has changed at a rapid pace in recent years in line with the growth of the digital economy. Travel for business purposes has been dramatically reduced – and this is the future, not more air travel.

While as recently as 2022, the airline industry was predicting business travel to imminently return to 2019 levels, the reality is that by Q2 2023 it has plateaued at around 75% of pre-pandemic levels. Corporations have recognised that they can make financial savings, and better meet Corporate and Social Responsibility pledges by reducing business travel. "The bosses of Air France-KLM and Lufthansa, meanwhile, said they had written off a full recovery in domestic business travel, with Air France cutting capacity on some routes in response." <https://www.ft.com/content/ea564d48-6dfd-4c7f-b28b-c2028bbc2fe8>

The Statement of Reasons continues:

'It commands a high market share of the passenger demand in the areas around it, specifically the Three Counties of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire and also extending into North London along the Thameslink corridor. Growth at the airport has the potential to enhance the connectivity that the airport will be able to offer and to increase its wider economic contribution'.

I would suggest that the passenger demand in these areas has over the last two decades correlated with the growth of communities of EU migrant workers. Britain leaving the EU has meant that far fewer people are travelling for work purposes between the UK and member states. Visits to see loved ones in home states or the migrants working in the UK are no longer a feature of life for many as they once were. Tourism to Eastern Europe, for example, is not going to replace these passenger numbers. Thus, much of the traffic that LLA has based its future projections on has already disappeared.

If LLA were to open up routes to the Middle East and USA as the Statement of Reasons proposes, I believe the airport will actually be a less desirable departure point for short-haul travellers, due to the associated factors being exponentially more complicated – such as parking capacity needing to be greater (thus longer to reach the terminal); much larger numbers in check-in areas due to longer queues for baggage drop-off; longer waits in baggage reclaim. More people needing to be at the airport for more hours. People are happy to go to Luton currently for their European flights for the very reason that it doesn't have the hassle that one associates with the bigger airports handling more complex travel. This is, in fact, Luton Airport's USP (Unique Selling Point), to borrow a marketing term. Yet they seem oblivious to it.

On the subject of long-haul services, I was bemused to note that despite the town of Luton being strongly associated with the south Asian diaspora, the Airport doesn't mention points in Pakistan,

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Bangladesh, India and so on for proposed services. This shows how out of touch this project's developers really are with the community it purports to serve!

The airport is showing strong recovery from the effects of the pandemic and is on track to attain 2019 traffic levels by 2024. 4.3.8, Statement of Reasons

Passenger numbers for this year are 9.7% down on 2019 figures. With the effects of Brexit, inflation, mortgage cost increase, and general cost of living crisis, it is likely that passenger numbers will be lower in 2024 than 2023, let alone return to 2019 figures. With International Civil Aviation Organization downgrading their long-term traffic forecasts to around 1-2% growth a year, LLA's predictions seem increasingly out of touch with the industry and the wider economic and social realities. Airlines are often cancelling flights due to low tickets, again suggesting the need for expansion is completely unjustified.

4.3.10 The future economic strategy for Luton is seeking to secure significant economic growth, including through initiatives to regenerate the town centre, supported through the Levelling Up Fund, and exploiting the potential of the Enterprise Zone status of the area around the airport. It is seeking to develop higher value added employment, more job opportunities and to clawback current out-commuting to higher paid jobs. The potential of the aerospace sector and aviation, including the airport, to support these aspirations is well recognised as well as opportunities to attract green technology enterprises to the local area. This is fundamental to the objective to reduce levels of deprivation in the local area and the growth at the airport with the Proposed Development can play a major role both through direct job generation during the construction and operational phases as well as acting as a catalyst to attracting new businesses and making it easier for existing businesses to trade internationally and expand. Specifically, growth at the airport represents a significant opportunity to create jobs directly and through its supply chain.

Living close to Luton, I have to ask what evidence there is that the airport to date has contributed to *really* reducing deprivation in the town? Many of the jobs it boasts of supporting are lower-income and I don't see that is really going to change by simply increasing passenger capacity. Those earning higher salaries will simply live further away from the town and contribute to local economies elsewhere. The suggestion that the proposed development will 'clawback current out-commuting to higher paid jobs' (4.3.10) is nonsense. Long-term, the airport will support largely poorly-paid jobs and those workers will live in the low-income areas that currently exist. And of course, many of those workers will live in the cheap housing that is affordable only because it lies underneath and close to the airport's flightpath, and in the parts of the town that have never seen meaningful material benefit from the airport's growth to date.

This is not 'levelling up' at all, it is simply more of the same.

Also, the idea that an enlarged airport would be a pull for 'green' enterprise is an attempt to greenwash a project that fundamentally is anything but environmentally sound.

How can we, in all good conscience, as the earth is *burning*, try to justify MORE air travel? This sort of fantasy belongs firmly in the past and I ask the Secretary of State to be mindful that history will judge us, and specifically him if this folly were to be pursued.