

Farnborough Airport CEO Simon Geere has faced a volley of questions after unveiling ambitious growth plans that could drastically increase the number of private jets flying over rural parts of Surrey and Hampshire. In an exclusive interview, **DANIEL GEE** threw some more questions into the mix – both his own and those of readers... As well as addressing environmental concerns and the impact on local lives, Mr Geere lays out his case why 'UK PLC' needs the airport to expand...

It's been a busy month for Farnborough Airport CEO Simon Geere and his team. After announcing the airport's 'long-term growth' plans on September 4, briefings have been held with local councillors, MPs and other stakeholders, and a series of public consultation events have been held across the area, including at Farnham Maltings on September 21.

On the eve of that Farnham drop-in, we asked readers for questions to put to the airport boss, and you didn't disappoint. What follows is the result of our conversation with Mr Geere, who openly acknowledges the contentiousness of the proposed expansion – aimed at elevating Farnborough's annual flight cap from 50,000 to 70,000 and more than doubling weekend flights from 8,900 to 18,900.

"Airport growth tends to polarise views, whether it be at Farnborough or any other airport," conceded Mr Geere, while underscoring the airport's commitment to actively listen to the community's views. And it is not too late to shape the course of the airport's impending planning application, slated for submission to Rushmoor Borough Council this autumn, he added.

"We recognise people will have

concerns, and we hope to be able to address some of those," said Mr Geere.

Hi Simon. So how would you assess the initial reaction to your plans?

Simon Geere (SG): Pretty mixed, to be honest, which is what I expected. Obviously, we have advocates of the airport and the business. But where people do have concerns, they want to express those and we're here to listen. We understand the impact of the airport can stretch quite widely.

Reader's question #1: Private planes are reported to be up to 14 times more polluting per passenger than commercial planes and 50 times more polluting than trains. How does Farnborough Airport justify increasing further damage to the planet by doubling flights at weekends?

SG: We accept business aviation has a different profile to commercial aviation. And we're predominantly a business aviation airport.

There's always a balance to be struck between environmental impacts and economic benefit. There's always a trade off, and the right trade off needs to be made. I fully accept that some people don't accept that trade off. But equally, we and others will see the economic benefits of growth and will want to embrace the opportunity which is

Q&A: Farnborough lifts the lid on future

really what we're consulting on.

Today the airport supports directly or indirectly near-on 3,000 jobs and generates £200 million a year for the local economy. So actually there's a lot of good that comes from the airport's operation. But equally I accept the environmental impact isn't necessarily evenly spread across the local area or the wider region. That's why we need to listen to people carefully as to what their concerns are.

The airport states there is a "forecasted increase in market demand for flights". How do you measure this demand and who is demanding these flights?

SG: You have to ask what is the market for Farnborough Airport? Well, it's dictated by two things: our geographic location and proximity to one of the world's leading capitals, London, and the south east. But also importantly, our market is dictated by the types of flights we're allowed to handle. We have limits on not only aircraft size, but also the purpose of flights. So we're not allowed to handle scheduled passenger services or charter flights or freight operations.

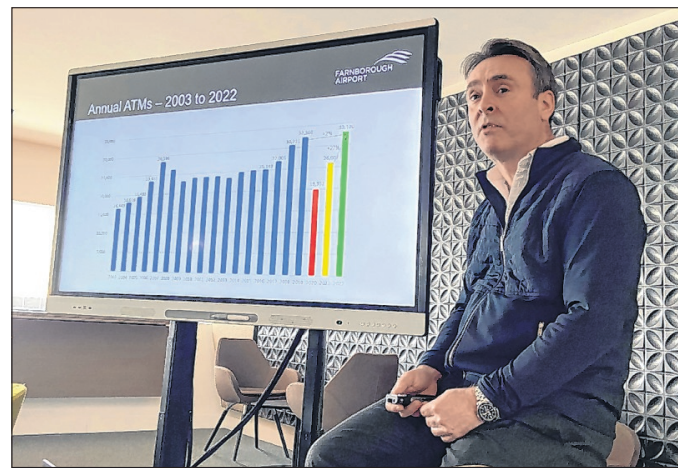
So if you have a restriction on the types of flights you can handle and the size of aircraft, you really have only one market and that's business aviation. That's your core market.

So when we look at that market, historically, its growth is correlated to the UK's gross domestic product (GDP), as is most aviation. Historically it's grown at between two and three per cent, as has GDP. So if we look forward, that market will grow by two to three per cent and track and support GDP growth for the UK.

There's also a small element over time, where the growth in business aviation will get displaced from commercial passenger airports as they become increasingly capacity constrained. As they prioritise larger commercial airlines, they will focus less on business aviation, and business aviation will need capacity and access into London and the south east.

We're forecasting just over four per cent growth per annum, which isn't in my mind unreasonable. In fact, historically, we've probably grown at similar levels, maybe just slightly less. But you can see the issue with the airport capacity starting to bite and therefore Farnborough has a role to play in supporting business aviation growth going forward. And that's consistent with government policy around making best use of airport infrastructure.

Reader's question #2: Farnborough Airport



Farnborough Airport CEO Simon Geere addresses members of the national and local press in February – when the airport's bold expansion plans were first hinted at...

was originally restricted to 28,000 flights annually with a cap of 2,500 weekend flights. Are the proposed 70,000 flights per year with 18,000 weekend flights the maximum limit for the airport, or is this just a step towards further expansion? If so, what is the ultimate limit?

SG: The main constraint on the capacity for an airport like Farnborough will be airspace, and that will be the case for quite a few airports. We are located in one of the busiest aviation markets in Europe, if not the world, nestled between two very large airports Heathrow and Gatwick. So airspace will, over time, become a premium.

But the government is embarking on an airspace modernisation programme with two objectives, one to make airspace more efficient to facilitate growth over time. But also to try to reduce carbon emissions.

There's a lot of aircraft following strange and odd routings that could be better choreographed if airspace was designed in a more optimal way.

We think 70,000 movements is, unless you get an awful lot of peak or hourly spreading across the day, a fairly optimal throughput for Farnborough. I think then you do start to hit this airspace issue which, to a degree, is a balance between what's happening at other airports and what's happening here. But ultimately we can only put a case forward to get a fair share of that airspace as we move forward.

Why do you need to more than double weekend flights, though? Is that not mainly for leisure travel?

SG: No. When we look at our passenger profile, there is not strong evidence to suggest the weekends are any more leisure-focused than the rest of the week. So the demand at the weekend is as much from our core business aviation market than it is anything else. It's just that work patterns have changed over time. The working week is no longer Monday to Friday. It's Monday to Sunday.

So all we're saying about the weekends is that we need to grow at the weekends at the same rate as we want to grow during the week, no more, no less. And that's why the proposals we're consulting on have the weekend cap increasing, but

it's still equivalent to 27 per cent of the annual cap, which is what we currently do today. So we're just saying everything needs to grow at the same rate to meet market demand. That's super important.

But in terms of raising the overall target, you are some way short of your existing target of 50,000 currently – operating just over 30,000 flights in 2022. So why increase that to 70,000?

SG: You're absolutely right, the weekend is a limit that we're closer to. Look, these planning processes take time. This process could take anywhere from 18 to 24 months or more to find a resolution. The same process would have had to have been followed to address the weekend cap as it would the annual cap. And we forecast that market demand will hit our annual cap by around about 2030. So there was little point in us coming forward with just the weekend cap uplift, going through all the consultation, doing the environmental impact assessment, spending two and a half years to get a resolution on that only to immediately come back and start another process to address our annual cap. So here we're putting everything together.

The airport has said it is unlikely to reach full capacity until 2040. So is this more about increasing the saleability of Farnborough Airport?

SG: You're absolutely right and it's an important point, this growth isn't going to happen overnight, neither at the weekend or during the weekday. We don't expect growth to vary much differently from four per cent per annum over the long term. So this is very much what will happen by 2040.







But beyond the economic points around job creation and economic prosperity in the local area or in the wider region, from a business aviation user perspective if you can't fly into Farnborough, you'll either go somewhere else, and the economic opportunity will be for someone else to realise and benefit from, or you won't come in at all to the UK.

So there's two really important questions. One is locally, do we value and want Farnborough to be the most important and largest business aviation airport in the UK and

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