

Airport CEO growth plans

maintain that pre-eminent position, with all the benefits that's historically brought? Or do we not?

In that case, other airports could well benefit, other smaller airports, and that traffic will go elsewhere. Or the traffic will be lost completely to the UK and we would argue that will make UK a much less attractive place to do business. It will affect the UK on the international scene in terms of inward investment and make it less competitive.

So there's a strong UK PLC argument that actually business aviation needs to be supported. Where it's supported is the next question and Farnborough Airport is in a great position to serve that market and bring all the benefits to the local area.

You talk about Farnborough Airport pumping £200 million a year into the local economy, but how? What does that actually mean materially? How does it benefit your average person in the street and the community around them?

SG: Well, obviously, it puts wages into the local economy. So if you've got 3,000 people who are either directly or indirectly, either through our business partners or our supply chains, who have a job that's connected in some shape or form to the airport's existence, then you're obviously creating an income for yourself and your family and you'll spend that income in the community. That has knock-on beneficial effects for shops and taxi firms and all that type of good stuff.

Our payroll last year, just for the airport group, was around a £14 million. And obviously you can compound that for the likes of Gulfstream, Farnborough International and everybody else based at the airport, so it creates huge economic wealth within the local society. That can't be underplayed.

Reader's question #3: Summer Sunday afternoons are now blighted by jets carrying the rich and famous screaming low over our gardens on their way into Farnborough. Are objectors ever listened to and does the airport have any sympathy for those living under this cacophony that has been imposed upon us despite our objections?

SG: We always listen to people's concerns and it's important, as part of any of any process and even as an ongoing business, to listen to our community. We fully understand people feel disturbed by noise,

and we're not going to argue they shouldn't or they don't. If you feel disturbed you feel disturbed.

But the reality is it's not rich and famous people on private jets travelling at will. Our core market is business aviation. Now these are travellers who are using smaller, lighter aircraft. There are a number of reasons someone might use business aviation, but for example, you could get a direct flight connection at a time that you might need to travel. Or conversely you might need travel flexibility, which business aviation offers, or equally, you might have a complex travel itinerary. And it really goes to the point that we have a lot of flights that might come in Sunday, leave on leave on a Monday or Tuesday, and vice versa.

We have flights that come in on the Thursday and Friday and leave on a Saturday and Sunday. And you can't just ringfence the weekend and think that's a window of the week that isn't somehow linked to the rest of the week. It absolutely is. And that's why weekend growth alongside weekday growth is paramount to the future of the airport and the economic benefits it will bring to the local area.

All the proposals we are consulting on are within the 2019 noise budget that was in the Rushmoor Borough Local Plan. I accept there will be more aircraft flying overhead. Absolutely. But aircraft is getting quieter for sure, and that's why we can grow to 70,000 air movements today and still be within the noise budget that was previously set.

But as I said before, it's trade off and I fully accept it's a trade off some people don't want to make. But equally there are other people providing input to the consultation who believe, as we do, that this is an important issue and something that needs to be supported, not just for the airport, but for the local area and the wider region.

Pre-consultation data from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) suggests some rural areas around the airport that used to have about five flights a day over them now have up to 18 an hour. If that's going to increase even further, can you understand why some people are very concerned?

SG: I can understand why people have concerns and look, it's not just a noise budget that we have, we also have a number of other controls on us. For example, we don't operate at night, we have smaller aircraft, we're not open on Christmas Day and Boxing Day. We have constraints and that's why our noise footprint is a lot smaller than what you'd have if you had a commercial airport, handling a similar number of movements.

I'm not expecting that to allay people's concerns. I'm just wanting to bring in some relativity to the discussion.

The flight paths were a decision that was undertaken as part of the whole airspace change programme, a long consultation process that started back in 2012. The CAA and government policy guidelines state that flight paths should avoid major conurbations or where major populations are and by default, therefore, are going to fly over quieter areas and that's why the flight paths are what they are. We consulted on that at length back as part of the airspace change programme. But I fully appreciate that people who live in certain communities might not have experienced quite the same level of perceived disruption as they previously did pre- and post- the airspace change programme.

But equally, some people have benefited from the changes. And obviously we still await the CAA's final conclusions on the process.

But the Post Implementation Review (PIR) for those airspace changes, implemented in February 2020, was due to be published by the CAA in February 2022. The Covid pandemic meant it was delayed and the report was due in August, but it's still with the CAA. Should you not wait to see what the results of the PIR are before proposing any increases?

The airspace change programme was about a number of issues, but mainly to put in place a controlled and known airspace environment above the airport and above communities, and it obviously had safety benefits. So that was the primary driver of airspace change, not a capacity change.

Look, airspace change and also the wider airspace modernisation programme are things that are running in parallel. We see the proposals we're consulting on as quite separate. So what we're saying is look, here's the market demand opportunity. We believe it's a good idea for us to be able to accommodate that market, here are the changes, this is the economic benefit, this is the impact and you can see that on the consultation website today.

Airspace ultimately is not in our control in terms of where flights go

and where they come. And hopefully with airspace modernisation, things greatly improve.

After the changes, aircraft can now descend quicker, they can climb faster, and they can take more direct routing into the airport. But in a way, it's a separate process to us seeking permissions to be able to support that economic opportunity that we see.

Airspace will always run in parallel. And it's not within our direct control and ultimately could vary and change over time. Even with the latest airspace change and the PIR outcome, nobody can say airspace won't look differently in ten, 20, 30 years.

Extinction Rebellion, the Farnborough Noise campaign group and others have claimed the airport did not measure aircraft noise during the PIR process, even though the CAA committed to MPs that it would. Is that correct? Why wasn't noise measured?

SG: I don't want to get drawn on a CAA process and the PIR specifics. We, as the sponsor, did everything we were required to do, and followed the procedure set out by the CAA. So I can't respond to that. I wouldn't have the knowledge base to be able to give you an accurate response, but from a Farnborough Airport perspective, we've done everything that's been required of us.

Farnborough Noise has also criticised the expansion plans for not restricting the number of flights per hour. Is that something people should be worried about? Could some areas see flights every few minutes early in the morning or late in the evening, rather than spread out across the day?

SG: It's correct there's no restriction on flights per hour. But

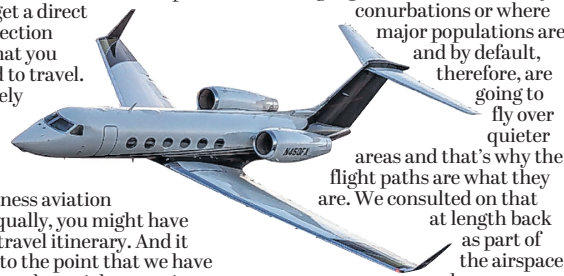
there's a practical point again, around what the flow rates in the airspace can accommodate and also what we can accommodate physically in terms of what lands and what takes off. So there are practical limitations, even if there aren't regulated and control limitations.

There are peaks in the day and there are off peaks in the day, that's for sure. But it's going to be very difficult for us to accommodate a high level hourly throughput, especially on a constant basis. That's going to be operationally very difficult. So it's a bit alarmist to think everyone's going to turn up in three hours and then there will be nothing for the rest of the day.

Finally, what's the airport going to do with all the feedback it gets over the coming weeks? Could we actually see revisions on the back of public comments? Are people going to be listened to?

SG: The process is, we are holding the drop-in events and people will also have the opportunity to provide feedback online. We will then aggregate all the comments we've got and will upload a response to all the different themes and topics on to the website by the end of October. The consultation closes on October 18, but the plan is to upload the Frequently Asked Questions and give the formal responses as we go along.

In terms of what we do with all the feedback, I think it can absolutely shape how we look at the application. The very binary responses – 'I don't want it / I do want it' – are not very helpful. But if there are things we can do that might make a difference that people value, then we can look at it. And I'm more than open-minded to shaping the application based on what we hear.



Farnham Maltings' Barley Room was packed for the Farnborough Airport consultation drop-in on September 21 – with a clear majority objecting to the plans

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