

Transition Town Letchworth Response to the FutureLuToN Consultation, December 2019

Sustainability of Flying

The premise that Luton airport can be grown in a sustainable manner relied on the previous government position that the UK emissions target was able to “exclude international aviation and shipping”. However, the government has now declared a Climate Emergency and set a target for zero emissions by 2050. The UK must now take responsibility for the damage caused by UK citizens flying or purchasing goods which are air freighted. Transition Town Letchworth believes that people should be encouraged to avoid flying and purchasing air freighted goods and we do not support any expansion of aircraft and passenger movements at any UK airports.

The business case for expanding Luton airport is based on Department of Transport forecasts for substantial growth in passenger demand up to the year 2050. However, with the growing recognition of the environmental damage associated with flying it is expected that it will become less acceptable both by individuals and governments that this level of demand should be met. We consider that the following scenarios, which you appear not to have allowed for, are now much more likely and will affect the viability of the business case for expanding Luton Airport.

The government transport strategy to deliver net zero emissions will include ‘carrots’ to persuade people to switch to more sustainable transport modes (e.g. subsidising rail travel) and ‘sticks’ (taxing airfares or restricting allowed aircraft movements), all of which will change behaviours and reduce passenger movements. For example, the introduction of a carbon tax on flying would increase the price of flying, so that supply and demand would reach a new lower equilibrium number of passenger movements.

People adjust their behaviour to reduce their flights as they begin to recognise that frequent flying is no longer socially acceptable. Taking longer holidays rather than frequent holidays; using land transport for ‘short-haul’ journeys; utilising technology to replace actual meetings with virtual meetings; and taking more holidays in the UK, are actions that people can easily take to reduce their dependence on flying. In fact, many people may find these actions will increase their quality of life.

Land Transport

The consultation states that 32% of current passenger land movements (5.76 million) are by public transport or sustainable transport modes and the plan is to increase this percentage to 45% (14.4 million of the planned 32 million movements). However, even if the percentage of people using public and sustainable transport increases the number of people accessing the airport in private vehicles will increase from 12.24 million to 17.6 million because of the passenger growth.

The transit from train station to the current airport terminal is a welcome development. However, the train station only serves north-south train lines so this is unlikely to influence travel behaviour for those travelling from the East and West. The plan identifies road improvements that are expected to help alleviate the congestion that is already a feature of travelling to and through Luton. The target for the number of passengers travelling to the airport by public transport is far too low and Transition Town Letchworth would like any airport planning to include much more imaginative solutions, so that actual car movements are reduced year on year throughout the plan period. It would be much better to invest in public transport solutions than to invest in the road widening and car park building which underlies the current proposal.

Green Field Development

Provision of a new park, on existing green field sites, whilst land in an existing park is built upon to provide the new terminal, leads to an overall loss of green field sites and has no justification.

Destinations Serviced from Luton Airport

The CO2 associated with flying appears to be 250kg per passenger hour whether the flight is short haul or long haul (source: <https://www.carbonindependent.org/22.html>). Flights to long haul destinations are therefore more damaging and Luton should not be seeking to open up long haul holiday destination options. If people must fly on holiday, short haul destinations are much preferable to long haul.

Final Comments

In summary, Transition Town Letchworth does not support the proposal to increase the capacity of Luton airport. Instead the airport should be looking to improve public transport links from local towns, particularly from the East and West to tackle existing sustainability issues.

Transition Town Letchworth would like to see an alternative plan for a future where to fly is an infrequent luxury. Luton could then remain as a small, easily navigable, airport servicing longer distance European destinations. This plan would not require vast sums of investment and would start to address the government's declared climate emergency.