

Newsletter 62 : November 2020

Arrivals: Yet another consultation

This one is a bit more obscure but well worth scrutiny: it concerns the creation of a new “arrivals stack” - though we're all asked to describe such a thing as a “delay containment area”, a few miles north and west of the current stack known as LOREL which is close to Royston, which Luton shares with Stansted. The sharing is generally regarded as an unnecessarily complicated accident of history and the proposal, made jointly by the airport and NATS, appears to be relatively innocuous to communities in our neck of the woods, especially as they have no effect on the last 7-10 nautical miles of the arrival flight-path during which the aircraft descend in a dead-straight line from about 3500ft above the ground. At the western end of Luton's runway the start of that long straight descent is somewhere between College Lakes and Pitstone, and that remains fixed: the “keep it safe” rules of the landing game include the aircraft aligned with the extended centre-line of the runway at least 7 nautical miles from touchdown. What's of interest is any changes in paths by which arriving aircraft reach that point – and the navigation systems which are used to bring aircraft to that point. The likely location of the new stack is close to Grafham Water, so interest is in the paths aircraft would take from there, at around 8000ft, to the start of the final approach.

At present the aircraft are largely guided (“vectored”) from the stack to the start of the final approach by air traffic controllers, hence the fairly wide spread of tracks. A key feature of the change proposal is the introduction of what NATS term “systemisation” - use of the equivalent of sat-nav guidance rather than human interventions to guide the aircraft.

The likely future scenario, for the 30% of the year that the wind is predominantly from the east, is:

The controllers would take most of the Luton arrivals at 8,000ft and direct them south of Grafham Water past St Neots, to the east of the A1 main road and roughly parallel with it. To the east of Sandy, the controllers would descend the arrivals to 5,000ft and turn them right (in the vicinity of Biggleswade or Henlow), mostly north of the A1-A505 junction near Letchworth similar to today. The Luton arrival flow continues west, level at 5,000ft for about 40km, over the northern part of the Chilterns AONB, with the controller vectoring most aircraft south of Leighton Buzzard (but some are vectored to the north). As the traffic reaches an area northeast of Aylesbury the controller turns the aircraft left, roughly perpendicular to the extended runway centreline, and descends it to 4,000ft, then turns left and descends once more to establish on final approach typically somewhere between the east of Stoke Mandeville area around 4,000ft and Pitstone Hill around 3,000ft. The swathe generally gets narrower until it aligns with the runway on final approach. The final approach path to runway 08 always overflies part of the Chilterns AONB, from Pitstone Hill to Kensworth Common, in a very narrow path.

For the 70% of the year that the wind is predominantly from the west the likely future scenario is:

The controllers would take most of the Luton arrivals at 8,000ft and direct them south of Grafham Water past St Neots, to the east of the A1 main road and roughly parallel with it, some traffic heading further east, so the 8,000ft arrivals may be spread between the east of

Sandy and the west of Bourn.

The controllers would descend the traffic to 5,000ft in this same spread, between Biggleswade and Royston, where it would likely stay level at 5,000ft for about 10-15km. The controllers would turn the traffic to the south, either in an S-shape, or it may be straight.

As the traffic reaches the Letchworth-Baldock-Wallington area the controller turns the aircraft roughly perpendicular to the extended runway centreline, and descends it to 4,000ft, then turns right and descends once more to establish on final approach typically around Buntingford from 4,000ft to 3,000ft and Stevenage 3,000ft and below.

The swathe generally gets narrower until it aligns with the runway on final approach. The final approach path to runway 26 always overflies Ardeley, Walkern, Stevenage and St Paul's Walden in a very narrow path.

The likelihood is that for many communities in our part of the world they may experience slightly less noise from arriving aircraft as a result of that “systemisation” - more automation, by use of sat-nav technology and less direct controller intervention resulting in less of a geographic spread of arrivals. The other side of that coin will be a measure of concentration of arrival flight-paths on their way from the stack to the final approach join, though it is likely that intervention will sometimes be necessary to marshal the arrivals into an orderly line safely separated from one another. There will also still be “direct” arrivals, which could be from any point of the compass, heading for the final approach join.

There have always been hopes that arrivals could be managed from much further from the airport by making small changes to arrivals' speeds so that there would be little or no need for “stacking”, and trials of an Extended Arrivals Management System involving pan-European air traffic controllers managing arriving aircraft speeds within a 350mile radius of Heathrow were began at Heathrow 6 years ago and are reported as having been very successful – can we have some for Luton, please?

Empty seats

A recent quotation from The Guardian on the subject of the fall in passenger numbers: “.....most obviously, there was the fear of contagion. No other business depends on putting you into knee-by-thigh proximity with strangers for hours, while whisking potentially diseased humans from one continent to another.” This goes a long way to explain something we heard recently from one of the “base captains” at Luton: flights to Malaga, with over 100 persons booked (and paid) to travel have been departing with as few as 15 passengers and one return flight: again with over 100 booked to travel came back with 6 passengers. One imagines that the no-shows will all be hoping to re-book their flights some months later. As he observed, there is no way on earth that it made environmental, or economic, sense to have burned 6 tonnes of aviation fuel to bring the aircraft home with only 6 passengers.

The airlines have traditionally kept a very keen eye on the load factor: crudely, the percentage of available seats that are occupied, with the (inevitably, unachievable) target of 100% save for the occasional charter flight. In recent years most of Luton's carriers have achieved load factors in the low 90%'s which is around 170 passengers per flight; in August the number per flight was about 90 which suggests a load factor of about 50%. One wonders whether these numbers represent any kind of profitable operation, even with the generous loans handed to at least two of the carriers by Government to keep them liquid, and to ask whether the global warming contribution represents anything remotely worthwhile – 90% of the flights from Luton are “leisure and domestic” rather than by hard-headed business persons in pursuit of deals and, unlike passengers arriving at Heathrow en route to London's West End and/or Bicester Village, Luton's arriving passengers are not bringing their bulging wallets to contribute to our local and national economy.

Brother, can you spare a dime?

Luton Borough Council's secretive offshoot LLAL needs to borrow another £59.6 million in 2020/21, and a further £23m in 2021/22, both from the ever-bountiful Luton Borough Council. Quite how happy Government, and its Public Works Loans Board, is with this deficit financing remains to be seen but questions are being asked. Major local authorities (e.g. metropolitan, borough, county, city and combined authorities) may take out PWLB loans. Since 2004, under the prudential regime, major local authorities are responsible for their own financial decision making. They are free to finance capital projects by borrowing, provided they can afford to service their debts out of their revenues. In deciding how much debt is affordable, major local authorities are required by law to "have regard" to the Prudential Code, published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA), but have discretion to decide how to fulfil this statutory requirement. Government is increasingly concerned at the extent to which a small number of local authorities have turned themselves into investment vehicles with somewhat opaque methods of carrying out financial appraisals of their projects and with inadequate public accountability for decisions made. In Luton's case one is entitled to question the extent of adherence to that Prudential Code. CIPFA's Prudential Code, to which all local authorities must have regard, **specifically precludes borrowing for financial yield**. However, CIPFA states that "it has been clear for some time that some councils have been playing fast and loose with this guidance".

The pandemic has demonstrated that even those investments that seem low-risk and high-yield, such as stadiums **and airports**, have the capacity to be brought low by a catastrophe. The simple fact is that borrowing to invest purely for profit pits public funds against high levels of potential financial risk. Despite this, councils have continued to gain access to funds for such investments via the Public Works Loans Board (PWLB) whose due diligence was entirely reliant on local governance arrangements in councils.

The DART people-mover, which was approved long before the airport reached its 18million annual passenger limit, and was never justified on operational or financial grounds at that activity level, is almost 2 years late and due to cost an extra £18m due to a spend overrun. We recall having asked for sight of the business case for DART as soon as it was mentioned at the Airport Consultative Committee: it was then being "sold" as the answer to the airport's surface access problems. We received a distinctly unhelpful response from the Borough Council representative: we were told that it was all "in commercial confidence". To be fair, we were not singled out for the information blackout: most of Luton's Councillors, and all of its community-charge payers, were, and remain, in complete ignorance of the facts though an appeal to the Information Commissioner, by Luton ratepayers, for information on how their money is being spent seems likely to succeed.

A revised investment programme includes £64.23m of capital projects postponed to 2021/22 which includes over £45M for what was approved as the "Century Park Access Road" but which will have to be built if the second airport terminal were to be granted development consent.

LLAL needs to borrow from the council to insulate itself from any claims on the airport if there were to be a default on payments.

Are the green-paint manufacturers ready?

LLAL decided, in view of the near-universal derision that resulted from, in particular, the environmental sections of their consultation over the near-doubling of the airport's throughput, to retreat to a bunker and re-write the proposal as an Environmentally-Managed Development Project. That's what Heathrow did for its "Third Runway" scheme and it got a well-researched and thoroughly well-deserved severe mauling by the Mayor of London's experts, whose report is well worth a read. We have heard whispers that LLAL's re-cast scheme may be floated as a Green Development Project, so it will need gallons of greenwash to represent itself as remotely environmentally beneficial.

We can expect all sorts of “pastel-green tinted” statements about how much less electrical power the new buildings will need: lots of low-energy lighting and how installation of fixed electrical ground power for aircraft will reduce or eliminate the need for diesel-powered generating sets or running of aircraft auxiliary power units. We'll undoubtedly be told how well waste will be handled and how much less of it will be created, how many more passengers would arrive by sustainable transport methods, how any development would be incremental and that key aspects of the operation will all have rigorous(?) targets set and continuously monitored (how, and by whom?) such that if any of them fails the development will be halted (by whose authority?)

It'll undoubtedly be bathed in a soft green glow: but the inescapable fact is that doubling the airport's capacity, in the face of a climate crisis, directly supports the growth of global warming through aviation's uniquely polluting injection of pollutants: not only CO2 but oxides of nitrogen and sulphur, particulates and water-vapour; into higher levels of the atmosphere where, in the absence of forests to absorb them, they linger as a thermal blanket for tens of years. For some years the green panacea for aviation's CO2 emissions has been carbon offsetting, usually through tree-planting projects: this approach would allow Heathrow – which hopes that with a third runway it will be able to take an extra 265,000 flights a year – to say that it plans to use offsets to make it “carbon neutral” by 2030 and to be “zero-carbon” by 2050, even though it will build one of the world's largest car parks and directly increase global emissions by millions of tonnes of CO2. Few such tree-planting projects have been rigorously audited for effectiveness: and there's a risk that we'll run out of land on which to plant them if we also want to grow food crops.

And the most obvious un-green aspect of the scheme: concreting-over of an established Country Park to accommodate a second terminal, stands, taxiways and car-parks, “replacing” it with a chemically-fertilised potato field somewhere in North Hertfordshire. There isn't enough greenwash in the country to make that anything other than grubby opportunism.

Near to disaster?

In January an unfortunate communications failure came close to the creation of a smoking hole in the ground close to the eastern end of Luton's runway though the news has only recently seeped out. According to the Air Accident Investigation Board report, Wizz Air HQ in Hungary chose, “for operational reasons” to use an A321 aircraft in place of the scheduled A320 for a flight to Prague. Automated systems which should have conveyed news of this change failed to reach the Wizz Air office at Luton, and a consequence of this was that a seating plan appropriate to an A320 was created and the pilot given a matching load sheet. It's important that the seating plan and load sheet are suited to the aircraft, to achieve a balanced load with the aircraft centre of gravity within a safe range, but they had been seated according to the plan for an A320. This left the last section of the A321 – we estimate, about 10 rows – completely empty. Thus the aircraft was seriously nose-heavy and on takeoff it was reluctant to lift its nose until emergency full power was applied, at which point it reluctantly lifted off. What strikes us as curious is that none of the cabin crew thought to advise the pilot of the unusual seating arrangements, though we're sure that meaningful discussions will have taken place during the flight. We're also pretty sure that procedures have been tightened up to ensure that automated messages sent are automatically acknowledged and, if not, that alarm bells are sounded.

Lockdown message about airport operations

This from Neil Thompson, Operations Director at Luton, as at 5th November, passed on at the request of the Martin Routledge, Consultative Committee Chairman:

As you will be aware, new restrictions will be in place across England from 5th November, limiting non-essential travel.

There are a number of exemptions to this, such as business trips, education or what the Government describe as “other legally permitted reasons” such as family emergencies etc. It is also worth pointing out, that there is no outright ban on passengers arriving into the UK, although passengers will need to observe quarantine regulations where applicable, and observe the new national guidance.

As such we do expect a number of scheduled flights to continue alongside cargo, maintenance, re-positioning and some general aviation operations. While we expect the overall number of flights to reduce significantly during this period, airlines are still adjusting their schedules at this stage, so it is too early to give a clearer indication.

As outlined in our previous correspondence earlier this year, London Luton Airport and all of our airlines have, and will, continue to operate in full accordance with all Government guidance and restrictions and as a heavily regulated industry it would be impossible to do otherwise.

CHAIRMAN

VICE CHAIRMAN

SECRETARY

TREASURER

G.P. Blackburn
36 Maple Way
Kensworth
Beds.
LU6 3RT

01582 872670

gerryblackburn@outlook.com

M D Nidd

The Old Bakery,
152 Piccotts End
Hemel Hempstead, Herts
HP1 3AU

01442 252724

oldbakery@aol.com

Your comments and contributions are always welcome – you can contact the EDITOR at The Old Bakery etc.