



FATAL FLAW

The white paper 'The Future of Air Transport', sets out a strategic framework for the development of airport capacity in the United Kingdom over the next 30 years. The paper identifies a requirement for an additional two new runways in the south-east to meet the demand of the growing economy and a world where people want to travel more, both for business and leisure. Whilst it requires that individual airport operators bring forward specific proposals, which will be subject to normal planning processes, it identifies Stansted as the location of the first new runway, to be opened by 2011/2012. Alison Greig* reports.

The air transport white paper advocates 'balancing' the importance of air travel to our economic prosperity, with the impact of airports on those people living nearby and on the natural environment. However, it provides little guidance on where the fulcrum should lie, asking only that the environmental impact of development is 'reduced', 'minimised' and 'controlled'.

What is the acceptable level of environmental damage we should part-exchange for the benefits of cheaper and easier air travel? What level of deterioration in the quality of life of local residents is a fair price to pay for cheap and easy air travel and the additional economic opportunities provided by the airport? Both those in favour and those opposed to Stansted's expansion declare vociferously just 'how much' advantage or disadvantage to their vested interests will be gained or lost by the airport's expansion. There are numerous excellent arguments, thoroughly researched, scientifically sound and convincingly articulated. None, however, attempt a comparison.

Hatfield forest will be irreversibly changed by pollution from an expanded Stansted. It is a unique example of a medieval

cultural landscape which contains vital information on the conservation of complex ecosystems. How do we assess its value and what denomination should we use? How can we judge its worth against the economic and personal benefits of extra weekend breaks to Eastern Europe, the business opportunities gained by a breakfast meeting in Germany or a better car/house/home entertainment system paid for by employment at the airport? Bear in mind also that the forest is over 500 years old; it has survived the Enclosure Acts, World Wars and threats from intensive agriculture. The National Trust is currently engaged in a programme of re-pollarding old trees which will take 100 years to complete. How do we compare this with the massive growth in air travel created by low cost airlines which did not even exist 10 years ago?

The impact of Stansted's expansion should also be examined in the context of other major changes planned for the area within a similar time frame. On top of the significant new house building included in County Structure Plans, the office of the deputy prime minister has announced massive new housing and infrastructure developments

for the Stansted-Cambridge corridor and in the Thames Gateway. These will compound the environmental impact of the airport expansion. They will also require large additional environmental resources, in particular extra water and waste facilities, with yet further environmental impacts. It is essential that the balancing exercise is conducted using these compounded environmental impacts, yet no methodology or mechanism currently exists which can quantify the amalgam.

With a flawed technique we are being asked to solve an impossible equation. ■

** Alison Greig is a member of CIWEM's air panel. For information about joining the panel, contact Justin Taberham, CIWEM director of policy, email: justin@ciwem.com*

WTPL / Nick Cobbing

