



## **The General Aviation Awareness Council**

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**President: The Lord Rotherwick**

### **AIRFIELD PLANNING ISSUES STEVE SLATER ON BEHALF OF GAAC. August - November 2014**

#### **Summary**

The continuing trend of airfield pressures, both from economic and housing threats and from inappropriate developments such as wind turbines in the immediate vicinity of flying sites, sadly continues. As has been reported in the past, this is led by government policy in prioritising land for housing ahead of other areas of infrastructure including transportation, which has in turn led to developers attempting to 'cash in' on the land resources.

The GAAC role in these cases has been to provide objective responses to those seeking to keep airfields open, while attempting to advise local planning officers both of the importance of GA airfield as a part of their local business, transport and economic infrastructure, and the recognition of this in the National Planning Policy Framework. In addition the GAAC is also actively driving the importance of leisure aviation as a resource and advocating local airfields' role in providing accessible and sustainable flying training.

#### **Planning Protection**

Overall, the recent Government response to the Red Tape Challenge brought good news in terms of recognition of the importance of the GA industry and the need for sustaining a reasonable infrastructure to support it. However it was disappointing to note that airfields and planning was the one area in which Grant Shapps and his team had failed to address any of the questions raised within the challenge.

The continuing wish to devolve decision making to Local Planning Authorities and the support of continued CAA inaction in the protection of small and medium-sized airfields is flawed. Unless we lobby for a change of policy, current Government activities, by accident or design, will come too late to prevent the hemorrhaging of airfield sites, currently being lost to other land uses.

One means of creating greater protection for the change of use for sites would be to require that any change of use for an established airfield should be subject to the scrutiny of a Planning Enquiry. This is a procedure already used in some EU countries such as Germany.

This would at least ensure the debate, and any subsequent decision, would be subject to the measured and objective decision of a Planning Inspector, who is in a better position to offer an overview including airfields' role as a part of the national transport and economic infrastructure. It would also act as a potential test of whether the aviation community in a particular area can offer a strong enough case for an airfield's viability to convince an Inspector of its retention.

Currently, serious doubts about the objectivity of local councils often lead to a feeling of a 'fait accompli' once airfields are threatened. A decade ago, it was noted in the Lober Report that 41% of local planning authorities indicated they would offer no proactive protection to offer planning safeguards for flying sites and only 7% indicated that they would seek to protect flying sites. The involvement of the Planning Inspectorate in any change of use of airfields would significantly enhance the future protection of airfields as a part of the national infrastructure.

A further alternative may be to compel Local Planning Authorities to enter into formal consultation with the CAA as part of the change of use process, and that the CAA should be legally required to make formal comment on any changes of airfield planning status.

### **Aerodrome Viability**

The recent closure of Blackpool airport on financial grounds by Balfour Beatty has focussed attention on the failure of business model generated in the early 2000s of trying to turn what had been successful GA airfields into 'regional airports' aimed at attracting low cost airlines, at the expense of GA operations.

In addition to Blackpool, there are worrying signs that other similar operations are showing signs of distress. Perhaps now is the time for the GA sector to step forward in advocating more holistic use of the remaining airfield infrastructure and finding ways of demonstrating that GA offers airport operators a reasonable revenue stream?

### **GA Consultation**

As part of recent inputs to Government, The GAAC made a submission on the current status of GA airfields to the All-Party Transport Select Committee last month. The GAAC has also attended meetings with the Aerodrome Operators Association and Richard Kaberry the senior consultant for York Aviation, who is carrying out the Government's GA research project.

### **Blackpool, Manston and Panshanger Closures**

While all three of these airfields are now officially closed, activities continue to attempt to maintain some scope for their use for GA purposes. At Blackpool, limited operations continue for based operators such as Westair, but no visiting aircraft are being accepted. Negotiations continue with local council and other interested parties, but concerns are that if no alternative is found by late November, the airfield infrastructure and assets will be dismantled and sold off.

At Manston, much of the infrastructure and resources have been sold and although Thanet District Council have pledged to debate a compulsory purchase order, the site has already been sold to a 'regeneration company' for other land uses. Political pressure to maintain part of site for GA use is ongoing, potentially converting a taxiway to a GA runway, allowing redevelopment of a large part of the remaining site.

Panshanger was closed at the end of September when land-owner Mariposa Developments refused to extend the lease of their airfield tenants' contracts, forcing airfield closure and removal of all aircraft. WHDC is however being pressurised to maintain airfield planning status, and as part of demonstrating sustainability, we have prepared documents for Save Panshanger and WHDC outlining GA aircraft parking requirements in SE England and contributed to a letter requesting that WHDC prevent Mariposa carrying out any demolition or disruption of landing areas, on safety grounds, till spring 2015.

### **Wellesbourne**

In late July, the owners of the Wellesbourne airfield site presented a 'Scoping Consultation' document to Stratford District Council, presenting their plans for mixed housing and commercial development on the airfield site. We have supported Wellesbourne Matters with a GAAC objection to the proposal, filed with Stratford District Council, reminding them of their commitment as part of their core strategy plan that: *"the established flying function of the airfield should be retained due to its importance to the local economy"*.

Wellesbourne Matters have developed a radical approach to defending the airfield by focussing on fund raising to hire a legal practice, Zyda Law, that normally specialises in representing developers to refute protest group arguments. Among the initiatives they are employing is the development of alternative planning options, combining housing with continued use of the airfield, to demonstrate that the housing developer's option is not the only one available.

### **Wycombe**

The GAAC is closely monitoring concerns that Wycombe District Council are attempting to 'claw back' around 30 acres of land on the south side of the aerodrome, in a similar location to that unsuccessfully proposed for a football stadium in 2011, to develop light industry sites. While Wycombe is already well

served by such industrial areas, the council are thought to be using this development provide justification for an additional southerly spur road from the M40 Handy Cross intersection, which would in turn unlock around 1000 acres of land on the SE of the M40 intersection for potential housing that cannot currently be allocated due to a lack of appropriate road access.

The council are attempting to achieve the airfield 'land grab' by rejecting the renewal of the existing airfield lease, which was taken over by Heli-Air. While the GAAC does not wish to get involved in the likely legal battle between the two parties, were the area of airfield be lost, it would mean the loss of the airfield's N/S runway and the end of gliding operations by Booker Gliding Club.

### **Good News. Bentwaters and Rochester**

Suffolk Coastal District Council have, after a vigorous debate and objections posted by organisations including the National Trust, unanimously approved plans to increase flights at the former US airbase. Bentwaters, near Woodbridge. Flights will be limited to historic, classic or vintage aircraft, or piston-engined general aviation planes, or other aircraft below a maximum take-off weight of 15 tonnes. A maximum of 960 aircraft movements a year will be permitted, no more than 40 a week, with no flying between 9pm and 7am.

Rochester Airport is in the final stages of planning approval for the Council-led plans to redevelop the airfield with a lit tarmac and parallel grass runway, new hangars and admin buildings, as part of a 25-year plan. The planning process is expected to be completed in December and work on redevelopment will begin in 2015.

### **Wind Turbines / Safeguarding**

The initial planning applications for the two large wind turbine developments at Bullington Cross and South Woodmancott, which threaten operations at Lasham and Popham, have been refused by all three local council planning committees and, as both applications will now either move to public enquiry or be 'called in' by the Secretary of State for direct decision, we have successfully lobbied for the LPA to give grounds for rejection including "impact on GA (not just military Radar) at Lasham and Popham - and recognition of their 'value and of national policy thereon'. This gives case precedence for both airfields' involvement in likely Public Enquiries or Secretary of State submissions. The GAAC has also offered all three councils' assistance in preparing supporting submissions on behalf of the GA Community.

The past months have seen the GAAC successfully lead to the removal of two inappropriate wind turbine development proposals in the immediate vicinity of 'farm strip' flying sites in Devon, but three new cases have been come to light. In each case the developer has clearly ignored a visible and long-established flying site, hoping to hoodwink or force through an application without carrying out an appropriate risk analysis or contacting the flying site operator. In each case we have reminded the LPA that the development is in breach of CAA advice and if allowed they place the local authority in a potential position of liability if a resulting incident were to occur.

It was noteworthy that none of these flying sites had been unofficially safeguarded by the submission of plans to the LPA. However the reaction from most 'Flying Farmers' is that they "get nothing but hassle from their LPAs and would rather keep a low profile or they don't want to open a bag of worms." One FFA member stated "Until there is a more professional attitude from LPAs, and with my own experience, I find it difficult to advise our members to go through that performance."

At the November GAAC council meeting, safeguarding specialist Richard Vousden agreed to work with GAAC to create an information sheet for local planning officers, in a similar form to the advice provided on wind turbines. This fact sheet will be available in early 2015.

### **Downwind Turbulence Research**

Results of the research work on downwind turbulence from wind turbines initiated by GAAC, via the cross-industry Air Space Initiative Wind Farm Working Group, and funded by CAA and Renewable UK, will shortly be published. It is hoped that an initial briefing on the Liverpool University project may be available at the ASIWWG meeting on Thursday 20th November and that the final report will be published early next year, in time for inclusion in an updated version of CAP 764. This will offer a more complex and accurate model than the current '16 x rotor diameter' figure based on 2003 research.

## **Industry Co-operation**

In addition, the GAAC are continuing to work with the industry to try to both develop mitigation and awareness of the specific needs of and risks to General Aviation. In addition to our work with the Air Space Initiative Wind Farm Working Group (ASIWWG), for the first time we have been invited to address the Renewable UK national conference, giving an unprecedented opportunity to present the case for General Aviation as a specific category with different requirements to Commercial Air Transport.

## **Oxford RMZ**

We have been made aware of the start of a consultative process by London Oxford Airport regarding the application of a radio mandatory zone (RMZ) for air traffic operations to the north of the airport.

<https://sites.google.com/site/oxfordairportrmz/home>.

As this is based on their wish for a known airworthiness environment for traffic flying NDB approaches to runway 19 from the Daventry NDB, it is likely to directly involve and potentially exclude non-radio traffic currently known to be operating from Shennington, Shotteswell, Bicester, Hinton and Enstone as well as several private airfields in the area. It will also potentially impact on airfield utilisation at Chiltern Park, Turweston, Sywell, Wellesbourne and further afield as en-route traffic will almost certainly be affected.

While GAAC is not directly involved in airspace discussions, Stephen Slater circulated information to the LAA, BMAA and BGA informing them of the situation, to allow them to respond on behalf of members. The VAC will also be preparing their own response on behalf of our 300 Vintage Aircraft Club members, many of whom operate non-radio vintage and classic airfield in this area.

## **Significant Areas for Sport**

Work continues on the future classification by Sport England of flying sites as Significant Areas for Sport (SASP), based on sport flying and competition aerobatic activities, giving additional planning protection. Currently around 15 sites have been identified for consideration by Sport England.

However some of these sites have requested a delay while the land owners are consulted as there are clearly implications for future sale of land in the future. Following further dialogue with the LAA, BMAA, British Aerobatic Association, Royal Aero Club, Helicopter Club of Great Britain, it is hoped that an aerodrome owners' questionnaire for each site will be completed by the end of December.

## **Anemometer Mast Conspicuity**

One of the major steps forward in recent weeks has been development of greater conspicuity for 'met masts'. While we have no statutory capability, the CAA asked the GAAC to provide advice to planning officers in a joint initiative. We initially advocated the use of 'spherical orange markers' such as used on high-voltage power cables. The weight of these however caused concerns of potential structural overload in high winds or icing condition, so we researched the creation of greater visual acquisition of the 15 bird flight deflectors already required to be placed on each outer guy wire.

We identified a specific type of reflective bird flight deflector, which is 135mm in diameter and weighing 0.2kg, which may achieve reasonable visual recognition at about 1km without the additional structural load. As a result of the moves forward in this respect, the CAA has requested wording from GAAC to be incorporated in the next update to CAP 764 "CAA Policy and Guidelines on Wind Turbines" early in 2015.

Stephen Slater.  
14th November 2014