

Statement by Peter White

My name is Peter White. I am a lifelong resident of Luton, and therefore one of the true shareholders of Luton Airport, those being, we the residents of the town.

I know this to be true, as the Leader of Luton Borough Council (LBC), and many of her colleagues, have stated that they as Councillors hold and operate the airport on our behalf, for the benefit of us and our town.

When the application before you was passed by the Development Control Committee of LBC, those Councillors who voted in favour, all stated that the social and economic benefits of this application, outweighed in their opinions, the detrimental environmental and social impacts.

The Chair of the Committee made his casting vote to pass this application, on the same ground as his colleagues.

As a resident of Luton, I and my fellow residents should be at the forefront of these benefits. So rather than the expensively collated "data" you have before you in the raft of documentation on the socio-economic benefits of this application, I thought I would tell you some of those real world benefits, we do or do not see.

We residents despite being the true shareholders of the airport had no active say in the matter on this decision. We are not consulted on any decisions LBC or its airport company London Luton Airport Ltd/Luton Rising (LLAL) make regarding our airport. I have raised questions with my Ward Councillors at the regular Ward discussions, they then arrange for Council Officers and members of the Council Executive to attend. I and other residents then ask our questions again, to be met with silence, or to be frank, waffling answers to everything but the questions we ask.

If we ask for the information behind decisions by LBC/LR, which account for hundreds of millions of pounds of our money, we are told that it is commercially sensitive and therefore we cannot be told. I personally have asked for the business case documents for one such project. I had to push my case to the UK Information Commissioners Office, before finally receiving a document so heavily redacted, as to be useless. I have attached that document to accompany this statement, but do not have it with me, as frankly to print it off would be a waste of paper and ink.

We are only allowed to see and hear what LBC and the applicant, the airport concession operator, London Luton Airport Ltd (LLAOL) want us to hear and see on the subject of the airport and expansion. If any financial/development/contractual points are discussed at LBC meetings, the general public are excluded from that part of meetings, or if on line, the screens and audio are switched off. On the occasions that public consultations do take place, the questions we are asked to comment on are heavily weighted and biased. When LBC/LR gave presentations on their airport expansion plans at the Ward meetings mentioned previously, they were asked if the response documents would have a simple no expansion tick box, as most other surveys do. That question was finally answered in the negative.

How can the public say no, without that simple yes or no question?

One of the key social benefits to any expansion has to be job creation. There is an industry wide formula widely touted, that 1 million extra passengers = 1, 000 extra jobs.

In 2015, Oxford Economics on behalf of LLAL conducted a report which found that Luton Airport supported 27,000 jobs on site and in the supply chain. In 2014/15 the passenger throughput was 10.7 million.

In May 2020, when the world was in the grip of Covid-19, the airport operator , and indeed all the handling and associated companies at Luton Airport, were talking of staff redundancies/layoffs. Concerned at this, Unite the Union published a plea for support to save employment at Luton Airport, in that report they gave a figure of 27,000 jobs.

In 2019/20, the passenger throughput was 17.4 million passengers.

A 62% increase in passenger numbers had not provided one extra new job at Luton Airport, yet this 1 million passenger increase you have been told will increase employment, where in fact, 6.7 million did not.

The calibre of actual jobs in that time was down trended to a prevalence of low paid/split shift/seasonal/zero hour's contracts. This is predominantly due to the nature of the airlines that use Luton Airport. They are all what are called low cost/ultra-low cost carriers, that is to say they offer low ticket prices to passengers, on the back of low staff costs on their own staff and their supply chains, ground handling for example.

Income to LBC from its concession agreement with the airport operator has reduced since Covid-19 hit. Too such an extent that LBC had to apply, successfully, to Central Government for financial help to keep up its services commitment to us the residents.

The reason the cash flow has dried up is only partly due to lack of passengers at Luton Airport, it is also due to the airport operator winning legal dispute with LBC/LLAL over Force Majeure clauses within the concession agreement.

This lack of income forced LBC to outsource/make redundant circa 420 members of staff, from dinner ladies to staff in this very building, all for the need of £50 million, as documented in local media at that time.

In this same time frame, the airport operator announced that it would have to make redundant 250 of its directly employed staff, due to cost savings during the Pandemic.

In response to this announcement, LBC/LLAL decided to give the airport operator £45 million over the years 2022 to 2025, from concessions income to keep these staff employed. I believe that the airport operator still made redundancies and other cuts, so that only 100 of those 250 jobs were saved.

This application may possibly be good for the economics of me and my town, yet to me these facts state the exact opposite, that the applicant is all about its own bottom line for its multi-billionaire owners, in any way it can, rather than me and the fellow little people of my town.

I base my reasoning on the simple fact that knowing how the loss of airport income due to Covid-19 would severely affect the budgetary abilities of LBC, the airport operator pursued Force Majeure costs, and then accepted the £45 million offered to them by LBC.

If they had the best interests of the economics of Luton and its residents at heart, surely a more financially amicable agreement could have been reached?

Since 2014, LBC/LLAL has regularly given airport concession fee income back to the airport operator, and indeed LLAL have kept much of it for themselves, for airport expansion projects.

The first of these was in 2014, when LBC/LLAL agreed to let the airport operator keep a significant share, to provide financial incentives to airlines to grow quicker than they naturally would.

This was directly responsible for the rapid passenger growth years ahead of schedule, which of course meant that the planning conditions on noise contours being wilfully ignored and broken.

Please may I now tell you about aircraft noise where I live, in real life terms?

I live in the Crawley Ward of Luton, in an area called Vauxhall Park. A five minute walk to the southern end of my short road, through a small industrial estate, I am on the airport site.

In my house and garden, I can hear both landing and departing aircraft on both ends of the runway. I can also hear ground taxiing aircraft, aircraft starting up, and those doing maintenance engine runs. At many times the noise is a continuous background throb, interspersed with aircraft taking off, and those reverse thrusting on landing.

However, when you look at the glossy noise contour images before you, you will not find my house, indeed most of Luton, covered by noise contours. As industry and Government standards does not recognise the ground operations noise we hear, so therefore we cannot complain or get help with noise insulation grants from the airport operator. Over the past decade the increase in aircraft movements has increased these impacts exponentially. These increases have led of course to more income for the airport operator to potentially share with more of the local households affected by airport ground operations noise impact, but sadly that has not been the case.

The airport operator has increased the funds available, but not reviewed and expanded the criteria for those who wish to apply.

I would like to close my statement with three comments on what Luton Airport expansion, and future plans for even more, have done to the real socio-economic time line of my town, and for a very long time to come.

Since 2015 LBC has through loans of in excess of £500 million from The Public Works Loan Board, funding its company LLAL with two airport projects. These are DART, the transit link between the airport and Luton Parkway station, and a Development Consent Order application to grow passenger throughput numbers to 32 million per annum.

DART replaces a free to LBC/LLAL bus link, with a tracked system which is 18 months overdue, at a cost in excess of £280 million. It will have no public service use to me or my fellow residents, unless we wish to go between those two fixed points. It will have no bearing on airport passenger numbers, as it will only be used by those who arrive on mainline trains. It will therefore have no socio-economic benefits whatsoever to Luton or its residents, but has been built anyway.

The DCO application has consumed in excess of £50 million, and once again will be of no socio-economic benefit, until LBC/LLAL can find third parties to fund its £1.5 Billion plus price tag in the future.

These two actions, along with the one you are currently reviewing, form LBC's Master Plan to eradicate poverty in Luton by 2040. Surely the question should be, why is there poverty in Luton

now, when LBC have had all this airport income to stop it? Surely the money diverted to these projects, could have achieved that and more?

My second point is about socio-economics and the airport where I live, Vauxhall Park.

Being so near the airport we were plagued by passengers who rather than pay airport parking charges left their cars in roads and on footpaths in my area. They were joined in that by airport staff, mostly seasonal staff, which was not given access to the airport operator's staff car parks without paying for the privilege, so parked in my estate. This caused problems with driveway access, the ability to safely walk on footpaths, and indeed as it is an old estate, blocked access for emergency service vehicles. Most fortunately, these occurrences did not result in loss of life or serious injury. LBC ran a resident survey, and then came up with parking bays and permits to "solve" the issue. We the residents, and our local Ward councillors, then asked that the costs be met by either airport operator or LLAL, as the parking was directly from airport issues. This was met with a resounding no, and now we have to pay £60 a year for a permit per car, and £23 for tickets for those who visit us.

A simple case where for circa £150,000 per annum, both the airport operator and LLAL could have a direct positive socio-economic impact on the local community, rather than a negative one by adding more costs to our domestic budgets.

The parking issue? As predicted by residents at the time, now the airport is getting busier and passenger/ staff numbers are up again, it has migrated to the neighbouring estates. The answers... yet more parking schemes will be introduced at our own expense.

Finally I would like to close by thanking you the Inspectors for agreeing to hold this Inquiry at our Town Hall. This means that I and my fellow residents will not see more critically needed LBC funds diverted from budgets to pay for venue hire.

We have already seen upwards of £600,000 taken from us to fund the phalanx of legal minds and experts you will hear from over the next few weeks.

That does bring another question to my mind however. Why is LBC spending so much of my towns vitally needed money bringing a whole legal team, and expensive consultants, to this Inquiry? If due diligence and legal process had been followed, there surely is no need for LBC to do this, and leave any representations to the applicant, the airport operator.

The airport expansion plan of LBC/LLAL is already putting a valued local community asset at risk. Wigmore Valley Park, voted one of the best loved parks in the East of England in a National survey, which sits in the path of those plans.

The expansion plans before you are just the starting point for the further destruction of the quality of life in the East of Luton.