



PRESS RELEASE

GA Community Suggests Formula for Saving UK Airfields

TURWESTON AERODROME, Friday 23rd APRIL 2021. The General Aviation Awareness Council (GAAC) has suggested a fourth category of land to the UK Government that would aid in balanced economic development: **‘Infrastructure’**.

PROTECTING NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

The UK Government’s Planning White Paper, issued in August 2020, focusses on streamlining the planning process and speeding up the provision of new housing. At the heart of this paper is was a proposal to create three ‘Zones’: *Growth*: areas suitable for substantial development; *Renewal*: areas suitable for development; and *Protected*: restricted development.

As the leading voice within the UK’s GA community the General Aviation Awareness Council (GAAC) suggested an amendment to the Government’s Planning White Paper *‘Planning for the Future’* to create a further planning ‘Zone’ for ‘Infrastructure’ that included GA airfields.

Following a virtual meeting with the Chief Planner of the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) to discuss the proposal he requested a further paper setting out the proposal in more detail and this was submitted during March.

The GAAC points out that aerodromes constitute “a huge resource – contributing to connectivity and transport needs, facilitating business aviation, flying training, STEM-related training and jobs, supporting emergency services and charities, offering recreational, leisure and sporting facilities and, most importantly in the current context, ensuring connectivity in key locations for future infrastructure needs – in the ‘transport, digital, energy and utility’ sectors.”

After the government’s failure to confirm airfields as a specific use under the PPG of 2003 the perception that they were “brownfield” sites left them an easy target for developers a major issue for the GA sector, even with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Review Amendments of 2018. The White Paper proposals therefore required a comprehensive response from the GA community, and this was submitted by the GAAC in October 2020.

As GAAC Vice-Chairman and Chairman of the APPG-GA’s Airfields Working Group, John Gilder led the GAAC’s response to the White Paper. During the meeting with the MHCLG’s Chief Planner his team were asked to elaborate on the GAAC’s proposal that a fourth ‘Zone’ for Infrastructure should be added to proposed in the White Paper.

Frequent references to Infrastructure in the White Paper underline its relevance to planning strategy and decisions and supporting growth and the GAAC response points to the need for all forms of infrastructure to be protected – especially *transport, digital, energy, and utilities*.

With a focus on airfields the GAAC is concerned that without an ‘Infrastructure’ category, they will be deemed ‘*Protected*’, rendering them unable to evolve as commercially viable airfields and leaving them vulnerable to housing developers.

The GAAC argues that, “A combination of the demand for housing and the perception that airfields are underused, cheap land ripe for development due to a lack of planning protection has meant a large number of aerodrome sites have already been lost and many others are under threat.”

Currently it is almost impossible to create a new airfield. “Therefore, the existing resources must be regarded as irreplaceable.” But, as the GAAC explains, “there has never been clear planning policy determining how Local Plans should deal with most of the smaller GA aerodromes.”

A lack of knowledge among Local Authority planners exacerbates this situation so, along with the new ‘Infrastructure’ category, the GAAC would like to see supporting guidance for planning officers.

The GAAC believes that current protection of GA aerodromes is “clearly inadequate” and notes further: “The CAA’s current guidance (for both licensed and unlicensed aerodromes) is to lodge a ‘Safeguarding Map’ with the LPA and agree for the aerodrome to be consulted on any planning applications which infringe the Map. However, other development which does not infringe the ‘Obstacle Limitation Surfaces’ on a Safeguarding Map could have a major adverse impact on the safety and, therefore, viability of aerodrome operations. The recent extension of the ‘Agent of Change’ principle to aviation activities is helpful but needs to go further.”

The GAAC would like to see strategically important aviation infrastructure sites supported by a planning policy which “gives general protection and a general principle that additional *related* development should normally be allowed.”

The GAAC points to future opportunities for increasing economic contribution from UK aviation infrastructure — such as Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs), including commercial drone deliveries and air taxis, which are “on the verge of coming into use.” Similarly, more environmentally sustainable ‘green’ aircraft powered by electricity, hydrogen and multi-fuels like used cotton are either already UK licensed or about to be.

The GAAC warns that the UK could repeat mistakes similar to those that led to the closure of many railway branch lines in the 1960s. Identifying key aerodrome sites as ‘strategically Important Infrastructure’ that are part of a Network of Airfields could help to prevent such wholesale destruction.

“Infrastructure should be defined as areas that can support growth and renewal – this would cover strategically important sites including regional airports and other strategically important aerodromes, ports, major transport hubs, energy generation and utility facilities.”

In respect of GA aerodromes, the GAAC is already working with the DfT to identify a network of strategically important sites, “and all of these should be included within the Infrastructure zoning,” the Council says. “It is hoped that selection will take account location, proximity to centres of population and economic hubs, the range of facilities it currently provides, the presence of, or need for, emergency support services, and the opportunities for growth and expansion — as well as the contribution to the UK training network and the local community in which the site is located.”

If ‘infrastructure’ becomes a new Zone, the GAAC envisages provisions for reviewing the zoning on a regular basis, “possibly five-yearly, to take account of changes in material factors such as technology, demography and demand.”

Importantly, “any proposal to permanently remove the asset should require the proposer to adequately demonstrate the justification or otherwise for this and an Independent Planning Inspector then instructed to assess and adjudicate – based on viability, the degree of criticality within the overall network, and contribution to the local economy and local community.”

The GAAC also says there is “currently little consistency in the way GA aerodromes are treated in planning policy and administration. Inadequate understanding of the requirements and functions of GA aerodromes and their value to the community frequently leads to issues, and there are recurring anomalies around the application of planning policy and the necessity for operational safeguarding at airfields.” In addition, all airfields should have clear and consistent planning Permitted Development Rights and LPAs should be widely circulated that this is the case.

In conclusion, GAAC’s paper states: “A major reform of the planning system, coincidental with its aims of consistency, speed and transparency, offers a valuable opportunity to recognise the strategic infrastructure importance of GA airfields, and provide long-term certainty and confidence to airfield owners, investors, aviation businesses and the local community.

ABOUT THE GAAC

The GAAC is recognised by Government, the CAA and others to be the organisation that speaks for General Aviation on planning and environmental issues. The UK General Aviation associations, supported by commercial and professional bodies, established the Council to promote and protect the interests of general aviation in the UK — whether in business flying, pilot training, sport, recreation or other forms. The critical factors for the future growth of UK General Aviation includes the need for more aerodromes, strategically sited to serve areas of economic development and enough free airspace in which to operate safely and efficiently.

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