

16 December 2003

Aviation white paper is.....a disaster

Alistair Darling has today announced the biggest ever disaster for air travellers, residents, airlines and the UK economy.

SASIG, which represents some 70 authorities, said that today's announcement is even worse than predicted. A statement which was supposed to decide the future of airports for the next 30 years, will do nothing of the sort.

The Secretary of State lays claim to setting out a 30 year strategy – but does he really know what will happen over the next 5 to 10 years let alone 30? He may have tried to give certainty for all airports in the UK but the small print will leave the battles to be fought over time and time again. Everyone will now have to wait and see what might happen – perhaps for 25 years to see if the airport near them is to expand or not.

Whilst most of the regional airports have been given limited guidance and generally told to make decisions locally, the uncertainties are greatest in the South East.

Alistair Darling wants a new runway at Stansted by 2011 but the airlines say they won't go there and the local people will once again defend their territory. So why should BAA try to get planning permission for something their customers don't want?

At Heathrow the Government are threatening to throw away current environmental controls so as to increase capacity in the short term and then sanction another runway in the longer term. It seems likely that the aviation industry will try to shorten those timescales.

But Gatwick has given the Secretary of State the greatest chance to confuse us all. He doesn't want to break a legal agreement that runs to 2019 – but he wants to safeguard land for another runway in case his plans for Heathrow (and presumably Stansted) fail. So, residents and airlines have to wait for 15 years to know what the strategy is!

Chairman of SASIG, Cllr Richard Worrall, concluded "I think the Government has said that there is no change in the policy that has been followed for the last 30 years – the aviation industry should bring forward and justify their proposals and, as before we, the Government probably won't say no."

SASIG has campaigned for a new airport rather than expanding existing South East airports, and criticised the Government for failing to publicise possible options in the Thames Gateway that have been shown to be superior to any other solution. On hearing the contents of the White Paper Chairman of SASIG, Cllr Richard Worrall said: "I believe the Government has missed the opportunity of a lifetime for both British business and British travellers. Whereas most people are saying what they don't want, SASIG has consistently argued for the best solution for the country. It is sad that the Government lacks the courage and flair to do what is right."

Ends

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NOTE TO EDITORS:

For further information about SASIG, including its widespread membership of nearly 70 local authorities, please visit our web site (www.sasig.org). SASIG's earlier responses to the Department for Transport on the Future Development of Air Transport in the United Kingdom is also on the web site, together with other policy statements.

SASIG has a broad membership of local authorities but does not speak on behalf of the Local Government Association as a whole.