

How the Government misled Parliament about Heathrow expansion and carbon emissions

March 2019

In its National Policy Statement (NPS) presented to Parliament in June 2018, the government said it: “.. *concludes both that expansion via a Northwest Runway at Heathrow Airport (as its preferred scheme) can be delivered within the UK’s carbon obligations ..*” (ref 1).

Unfortunately, there is no evidence to support that assertion.

The government’s Committee on Climate Change (CCC) concluded that the aviation sector could not emit more than 37.5 million tonnes (mt) of CO₂ pa while keeping within the UK’s overall target of reducing emissions by 80% in accordance with the Climate Act. Furthermore, even this allowance would require other sectors of the economy to reduce their emissions by more than 80% to compensate. This view has been confirmed in a recent letter from CCC to government “*UK aviation emissions in 2050 should be around their 2005 level (i.e. 37.5 MtCO₂e).*” (ref 2).

Official government forecasts in October 2017 (ref 3) estimated the emissions of CO₂ at 39.3 mt with a third runway and 37.0 mt for the ‘baseline’, that is no third runway. These forecasts assume that other airports are allowed to grow up to their current planning limits. But in the final NPS, the government re-forecasted the CO₂ emissions with a third runway at 40.3 mt based on “best use” of non-Heathrow airports - that is where current planning limits are relaxed (ref 4).

This means that a third runway would increase CO₂ emissions by 3.3 mt (40.3 – 37.0) and break the CCC limit by 2.8 mt (40.3 – 37.5).

None of these crucial figures were disclosed in the NPS that was presented to Parliament. Instead, they were buried in the mass of ‘supporting information’ published alongside it. When asked on the day of the vote about the climate change impacts of the project and the CCC’s recommended target for aviation, the Transport Secretary Chris Grayling told Parliament “*We believe that an expanded Heathrow airport and a new runway are consistent with this target.*” (ref 5).

It is theoretically possible to stay within the UK target by constraining aviation’s emissions. This could be done by various means:

- Limiting use of Heathrow’s third runway
- Constraining growth at other airports
- Putting a tax on aircraft fuel to reduce demand

However, there is not the slightest suggestion of doing these in either the NPS (ref 1) or in the subsequent Aviation Strategy (the latter is currently being consulted upon).

The NPS reported on a number of possible “abatement” measures that could be undertaken to keep aviation and the UK emissions within targets. This was based on a report by Ricardo (ref 6). But

the government has no intention to implement these: *“This scenario is not intended as a statement of future policy or a definitive conclusion on the most cost effective measures that are available. .. A number of policy measures are likely to be available and the scenario is merely intended to illustrate the kinds of measures that could be used and the likely magnitude of their costs.”* (ref 7).

With its own forecast showing that UK targets would be broken, the government resorted to claims about ‘offsetting’: *“.. consider that UK aviation emissions could continue to grow unconstrained, with compensatory reductions being made elsewhere via a carbon trading mechanism in which aviation emissions could be traded with other sectors of the global economy. .. increases in emissions from flights should not be considered to be additional ... All schemes could therefore be delivered consistent with future carbon obligations.”* (ref 8).

Unfortunately, there is no global trading system of any sort on the horizon, let alone one which would offset aviation’s increase with genuine reductions elsewhere. While the UN has agreed a scheme called ‘Corsia’ to offset emissions growth from aviation above its 2020 level, it remains very unclear how effective this scheme will be. Even if it does go ahead, it will only offset a small proportion of total global aviation emissions (ref 9). And in any case, the UK’s CO₂ targets, enshrined in the Climate Act, do not allow for offsetting. This is clearly the view of CCC: *“The final white paper should further clarify that this [37.5mt CO₂ pa at 2050] will be met on the basis of actual emissions, rather than by relying on international offset credits.”* (ref 2).

Conclusions

- **A 3rd runway would breach the UK’s legal climate targets.**
- **To avoid this inconvenient truth, the government now claims that aviation’s carbon emissions don’t count because they can be offset in some other sector somewhere else in the world.**
- **In the NPS it presented to Parliament in order to obtain support for a third runway at Heathrow, the government materially misled MPs.**

References

1. NPS - 'Airports National Policy Statement: new runway capacity and infrastructure at airports in the South East of England', para 3.69: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/airports-national-policy-statement>
2. Recent CCC letter: <https://www.theccc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Aviation-Letter-from-Lord-Deben-to-Chris-Grayling.pdf>
3. 'UK aviation forecasts: Oct 2017': https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674749/uk-aviation-forecasts-2017.pdf
4. 'The future of UK aviation: making best use of existing runways': <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/aviation-strategy-making-best-use-of-existing-runways>
5. Hansard: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2018-06-25/debates/C9B5DFC3-043B-4528-BEF1-34D9512E637D/NationalPolicyStatementAirports>
6. Ricardo report on abatement: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/653776/carbon-abatement-in-uk-aviation.pdf
7. NPS supporting document (Box 8.1, page 37): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/653879/updated-appraisal-report-airport-capacity-in-the-south-east.pdf
8. Sustainability appraisal document 'Appendix A. Topic Based Schemes Assessment: AOS For Airports NPS. A-9 Carbon. June 2018', paras 9.9.7-8. [This can be found by going to <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/appraisal-of-sustainability-for-the-proposed-airports-national-policy-statement> This shows a file link called 'Appraisal of sustainability: Airports National Policy Statement, appendix a1 to a12 - topic based schemes assessment'. Open the file, which has file name 'aos-airports-nps-appendix-a01-to-a12-1.zip'. From there open file with file name 'aos-airports-nps-appendix-a9-carbon.zip' which has title 'Appendix A. Topic Based Schemes Assessment: AOS For Airports NPS. A-9 Carbon. June 2018'.]
9. Corsia: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/corsia-un-plan-to-offset-growth-in-aviation-emissions-after-2020>, especially graph by ICCT. Also: <https://www.transportenvironment.org/newsroom/blog/false-dawn-action-aviation-emissions>

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