

Urgent Need For Unified UK Airfield Strategy, Panelists Say

Angus Batey March 08, 2023



SaxonAir's Alex Durand (left) and Sky Harbour UK founder Steve Ford (right) listen as GAAC co-chair John Gilder (center) speaks during the panel on regional connectivity at the BBGA conference, held in London on March 2.

Credit: Angus Batey / BAV

LONDON—The UK risks losing irreplaceable infrastructure assets because of a lack of clear national strategy on regional transportation networks, according to panelists taking part in a discussion held during the British Business and General Aviation Association's (BBGA) conference.

Panelists outlined problems regional airports face which, absent coherent and thorough national connectivity discussions, threaten opportunities for nascent technologies such as AAM (advanced air mobility) and electric or other low/zero-emissions aircraft, they say.

Asked by panel moderator and BBGA CEO Marc Bailey whether there were issues with the way the UK was managing its airport network, Alex Durand, CEO of Norwich-based operator SaxonAir, referred to the Conservative government's policy to buoy regional economies—known as “leveling up”—and queried the question's premise.

“I don't think it is managed,” he said. “That's why you have a leveling-up. You don't need leveling up if you've got a whole-country approach. What is happening is the individual airfields, left on their own without support, are fighting individual battles with individual providers on individual merits—rather than connectivity.

“Then you talk [about] an integrated transport infrastructure, which is not just the airfields,” Durand continued. “It's how you get to the airfields; it's surface-access strategy. That doesn't exist in any meaningful way that I've experienced. We're left trying to work with what we have and manage it ourselves.”

“The location of our airfields around the country [is] defined by two things: first, geography; and second, history,” says John Gilder, a surveyor and private pilot who is co-chair of both the General Aviation Awareness Council, a trade association, and the airports working group of the General Aviation APPG (all-party parliamentary group), an unofficial body comprised of members of Parliament and members of the House of Lords. He points out that the UK's airports are disproportionately concentrated in the east of the British Isles, and notes that this may not be optimal.

“What we might have—we don't know for certain—is an unbalanced network across the country,” Gilder says. “What we have proposed to government is a strategic airfield network which will include all flying sites currently used, and we will then do a detailed proposal to see if

we have flying sites in the right place, if we need more and if we can afford to lose some. But we need to know where we stand. We've been waiting for government approval to start the project and the funding to do so."

Following a change to planning regulations made in 2003, airfields can be considered "brownfield sites" and are often targeted for housebuilding and commercial redevelopment. Many small airfields are under considerable economic pressure to close. This, argues Steve Ford, the founder of consultancy Sky Harbour UK, is irrational.

"I come from Portsmouth: if anyone suggested that filling in Portsmouth Harbour was a solution for real-estate challenges for housing or commercial development, you wouldn't get very far," Ford says. "And here we are in a situation within the United Kingdom where the existing infrastructure is systematically being dismantled."

These issues are only going to become more difficult to resolve as zero-emissions aircraft begin to come in to service, panelists say. Electric aircraft will require enhanced airfield power grids and, most likely, some form of on-site renewable electricity generation. Hydrogen-fueled aircraft raise their own additional supply-side infrastructure challenges. Perhaps certain air-connectivity operations—unmanned cargo flights, some point-to-point eVTOL services—might not require airfields at all. But a lack of an overarching plan will make even these operations challenging, and it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the industry to develop solutions without strategic direction.

"You can decide whether drones don't need airfields, or if you have an airfield as a Center of Excellence, and a hub-and-spoke approach where the traditional skills and education and opportunities coalesce, and then feed in and out of," Durand said. "It's an idea, but we need to define that. It has to be government-led and it has to be a deep, long-term strategy."

In the meantime, collaboration and discussion with airfield users and the local communities that they sit within and serve will be vital. When it needed to move to facilitate expansion, Ford says, Sky Harbour settled on Coventry Airport, only to find, a month later, the airport announcing its intention to close and for the site to be redeveloped as an automotive battery production facility.

"The construction industry, and the policies that are being pushed out with central and local government, clash head-on with those of connectivity and the aviation industry," Ford said. "What we did at Coventry was we engaged. We spent a year engaging with anyone and everyone, using guerrilla marketing—whatever we needed to get the message across that the value of an airport to a community was something that needed to be kept. It's an ongoing problem, but we're part of the solution."