



The Consumer Council

Consultation: Airports Commission Discussion Paper 04: Airport Operational Models

Date: 18 June 2013

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Our (PID) reference number: 1595PD20010

The Consumer Council is an independent consumer organisation, working to bring about change to benefit Northern Ireland (NI) consumers. Our aim is to make the consumer voice heard and make it count.

The Consumer Council for Northern Ireland has statutory responsibility under the General Consumer Council (Northern Ireland) Order 1984 to represent the interests of passengers travelling to, from and within Northern Ireland.

In addition, the Consumer Council has been designated to handle passenger complaints made under Regulation (EC) No 1107/2006 (the Access to Air Travel Regulation) relating to an airport in Northern Ireland or a flight departing from an airport in Northern Ireland by the Civil Aviation (Access to Air Travel for Disabled Persons and Persons with Reduced Mobility) Regulations 2007 (SI2007/1895). The Consumer Council also handles passenger complaints made under Regulation (EC) No 261/2004 concerning the rights of passengers in instances of flight delay, cancellation and denied boarding

Given Northern Ireland's geographic location, the region's passengers are dependent on air travel to access GB destinations and further afield. The Northern Ireland's air links, both international and domestic make an important contribution to the region's economic growth and social well-being, supporting trade and inward investment and facilitating tourism. In its report *Air Passenger Duty: implications for Northern Ireland*, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee recognised "that for many people in Northern Ireland travelling by air is not a luxury, but is an essential element of family and economic life"¹.

The high level of dependence on air travel amongst Northern Ireland consumers is highlighted by the Consumer Council's examination of 2011² transport statistics. In 2011 19 million passengers took domestic flights in 2011, accounting for 38 million air passenger movements. 5.2million of these passenger movements were between Northern Ireland and Great Britain in 2011. Therefore, although Northern Ireland's population of 1.8 million represents only 2.9 per cent of the UK population, flights taken by Northern Ireland passengers account for 14 per cent of all UK domestic flights.

Furthermore, the 5.2 million domestic flights taken by Northern Ireland passengers represent 75 per cent of all flights taken by the region's consumers. By comparison, the 19 million domestic flights taken by UK passengers represent only 9 per cent of all UK passenger movements. These

¹ House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee *Air Passenger Duty: implications for Northern Ireland* (July 2011).

² Civil Aviation Authority passenger statistics

are journeys which GB consumers are not required to make by air given they can access GB destinations by road or rail. Northern Ireland's domestic air services are therefore vital in terms of enabling mobility between NI and GB.

The Consumer Council welcomes the Airports Commission's recognition that aviation links to London play a particularly important role for Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland consumers benefit from good links to London provided by services operated to Gatwick, Stansted, Luton and Heathrow. However, it is the region's Heathrow services which are of greatest importance given they facilitate international connectivity for Northern Ireland passengers. Currently Northern Ireland is served by air routes to Heathrow operated by British Airways and Aer Lingus from George Best Belfast City Airport. In 2011, approximately 10% of passenger traffic through Northern Ireland airports was to or from Heathrow³. It should be noted that interlining opportunities for Northern Ireland passengers via other UK airports are very limited.

The Consumer Council does not have a view regarding whether or not Heathrow should remain as the UK's focal / hub airport. Nonetheless, the Consumer Council believes it is essential that Northern Ireland passengers retain access to the UK's hub airport in the future, wherever it may be situated, to ensure the region's passengers continue to be able to access international connections.

The Consumer Council believes it is essential that action is taken to ensure slots are reserved for airlines operating regional services from areas from which it is not practicable to access Heathrow by road or rail. The Consumer Council has made representations to Members of the European Parliament and the UK Secretary of State for Transport to ensure the EU Better Airports Package enables Member States to reserve slots at hub airports for services to airports in regions where access to hub airports is not available by road or rail.

Currently Northern Ireland has only point-to-point services to European Hub airports. In order to increase consumer choice, the Consumer Council would welcome the development of additional services to European hub airports to provide improved options for interlining.

For more information or to arrange a meeting to discuss any of the issues outlined in this paper please contact Scott Kennerley, Head of Policy (Transport), on 028 9067 2488 or skennerley@consumercouncil.org.uk.

³ In 2010 751,214 passengers travelled on Northern Ireland's Heathrow services.



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Making the consumer voice heard and making it count

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