

18 January 2016

TURNING CITY AIRPORT FROM A BLIGHT TO A SHINING LIGHT

Sian Berry, Green Party candidate for Mayor, calls for the potential of east London to be fulfilled by changing London City Airport into a new quarter for homes and businesses.

Local Greens in Newham are proposing to form a consortium with City Hall, councils, business and academia to buy the airport, which is for sale, and replace it with a new city neighbourhood for housing and innovative industries.

They have also launched a petition to one of the potential purchasers, urging them to look at the compelling business case for changing the use of the site.

SUMMARY

- City Airport is of negligible importance to Britain's aviation – it ranks 15th among UK airports and carries just 1.5% of all UK airport passengers.
- But it is holding back London's economic potential, undermining the designated enterprise zone in the airport's immediate vicinity, and causing untold health and environmental problems to thousands of local residents.
- If the site were freed for other use it could be used to create at least 16,000 more jobs than the airport provides and add an additional £400 million to the UK's economy.
- It could also be used to create thousands of new homes within easy reach of central London, easing both the housing crisis and pressure on our groaning transport system.
- So if the land were used sustainably - for innovative businesses, residential areas, leisure and cultural facilities and shops – it would go a long way towards solving many of London's problems at the same time.

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THE PROBLEM

London has a housing crisis, an air pollution crisis and a jobs crisis. Local young people are struggling to afford spiralling property prices, and the jobs that could pay for accommodation are few and far between - unless you're a banker. This isn't sustainable for our economy or our environment.

Londoners need homes that are secure and affordable to ordinary people, and the jobs that will pay for them.

London City Airport was built just 25 years ago after the closure of the Royal Docks. Initially designed for small aircraft only, it has constantly sought expansion, with bigger planes and more flights.

Despite that, it still carries just 3.3 million passengers a year – compared with 72 million at Heathrow, 35 million at Gatwick, 18 million at Stansted and 10 million at Luton.

It currently occupies 500,000 square metres of land less than three miles from London's new finance centre at Canary Wharf, in the immediate vicinity of the neighbourhoods of West Silvertown and North Woolwich, and surrounded by residential communities in the densely populated boroughs of Newham, Tower Hamlets and Greenwich.

“The Royal Docks is an important area of the UK capital. London City Airport occupies land that could be redeveloped as a sustainable and socially just neighbourhood, complementing current regeneration plans for east London and inspiring transformation across the capital and beyond.”

“Luton is the only London-area airport which could not cater for the total number of London City's passengers by itself. Of course, passengers would not divert to one single airport and spreading London City's passengers across all the airports would contribute a marginal addition to each one.”

New Economics Foundation

Some 125,000 people live within a two-mile radius of the airport.

Aside from the health and security issues (explored in more detail below), this is a terrible use of potentially prime location land – not just in the runway area, but with acres of empty space reserved for a crash zone and car parking. This land could provide thousands of homes and even more jobs if better used.

THE SOLUTION

The New Economics Foundation has drawn up a report showing how the land, if used better, could create 16,000 additional jobs and contribute £400 million more to the UK's economy.¹ Not only that, changing the use of this land would improve the health and well-being of many thousands of people in east London.

The vision, drawn up alongside local community organisations, includes spaces for entrepreneurs, schools, shops, a medical centre, thousands of new homes and the UK's largest community land trust, creating permanently low-cost housing.

This isn't the first time such a plan has been carried out. In Denver, Colorado, Stapleton Airport was prevented from expanding due to environmental problems and then closed in 1995. The land has been redeveloped into open space, residential neighborhoods, and businesses.²

Munich-Riem Airport (the site of the Munich Air Disaster in 1958) was closed in 1992 and has been redeveloped into housing, recreation areas and a convention centre.³ And the City of Helsinki is planning the same fate for Helsinki-Malmi Airport, which has already closed to scheduled international flights and is mainly used for private planes and training. The area is to be redeveloped with many green areas, public transport links, homes for 25,000 new residents and 2,000 jobs.⁴



THE OPPORTUNITY

Currently, City Airport is for sale by its owners, Global Infrastructure Partners. The price of buying the airport is approximately £2 billion.⁵

Local Greens in Newham are making the case for the buyers of the airport to close it.

¹ Royal Docks Revival, New Economics Foundation, 2014

<http://www.neweconomics.org/press/entry/close-london-city-airport>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stapleton_International_Airport

³ <http://www.forgottenairfields.com/germany/bavaria/upper-bavaria/munich-riem-s531.html>

⁴ <http://www.hel.fi/www/uutiset/en/kaupunkisuunnitteluvirasto/malmi-airport-green-areas>

⁵ News reports in [Financial Times](#) and [Telegraph](#)

Investment from City Hall has been pledged by Green Party candidate for Mayor of London, Sian Berry. Local authorities looking for land to build affordable housing are also likely to be interested in becoming part of a consortium, as well as businesses and academic institutions who could locate new jobs in the area, and developers and housing associations who could build new houses.

A stake in the area for Londoners

Sian Berry says that funding through City Hall would include opening up co-operative style investment to local people and Londoners as a whole, enabling people to have their own stake in the area's development.

An appeal to the current bidders

Campaigners have also started a petition to potential bidder Allianz,⁶ a German company which has recently declared it will divest its holdings from the coal.⁷ If the company bought the airport and joined forces with the proposed consortium, this would match up with its stated commitment to reduce its investments in fossil fuel-based industries.

Find the petition here:

<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/918/177/501/close-down-city-airport/>

THE NUMBERS

The evidence in the report by New Economics Foundation shows that the land would be far more valuable if not used as an airport.

- Currently London City Airport contributes £110 million per year to the UK's economy.
- In contrast, ExCeL Docklands, only a few minutes walk away, and with a smaller footprint, contributes £513 million to the UK's economy.
- 1,900 full time job equivalents are hosted directly and indirectly by the airport.
- By contrast, the Silvertown Quays development that is half the size of the airport will create 9,000 jobs.

Drawing on these figures, we can see that keeping the airport prevents 16,000 more jobs from being created and has an opportunity cost for the local economy of around £400 million.

⁶ Allianz made an indicative bid in December 2015: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-city-sale-cki-idUKKBN0TL2AW20151202>

⁷ <http://gofossilfree.org/commitments/>

It also costs £4 million per year to police the airport and provide security, and London City Airport contributes only £1.9 million of this.

- Closing the airport would free up £2.1 million in budget for the Metropolitan Police, creating better security for Londoners.

Noise levels in the vicinity of City Airport make life a misery for the existing population and are a clear impediment to unlocking the development potential of the land, which could otherwise be an excellent place to live

- Official UK government guidance is to recognise the onset of significant annoyance from 57dB of noise.
- According to the City Airport Development Programme, some 17,900 people were significantly disturbed by noise of 57dB in 2012.
- By 2021, if the airport gets planning permission for proposed development, the number of people affected by noise at this level is expected to almost double to 34,000.
- Nine schools in the area are within the 57dB contour, expected to increase to 11 by 2021 if the airport develops as proposed.

Recent studies show that air pollution in London contributes to the premature death of nearly 10,000 people a year and the Civil Aviation Authority admits: *“The impact of the aviation industry on local air quality, especially in the vicinity of airports, has long been recognised.”*

- Tower Hamlets is in the top three worst local authority areas for early deaths from air pollution.
- Death rates in Newham from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and asthma – diseases exacerbated by air pollution – are among the highest in London.
- UK deaths from air pollution, including aviation emissions and vehicles travelling to and from airports, cost the NHS £53 billion per year.

Using the airport’s land for non-polluting industries could help London save facing EU air pollution fines of £300m.

THE VISION

The airport today

The site is currently taken up with runways and airport buildings, and is ideal for the kind of development the Green Party wants to see on public land across London.



Photo: London City Airport image gallery⁸

Our vision for this extraordinary site is of the site broken up into smaller plots, with a range of tenures for housing, including non-profit models such as co-operatives, co-housing, community land trusts and self-build, sitting alongside innovative businesses.

Open community space, food growing and green energy generation would be integrated throughout the site.

⁸ <http://www.londoncityairport.com/news/imagegallery>

And tomorrow...

Architects Ash Sakula⁹ have drawn up a new vision of the airport in this inspiring visualisation:



A high res version of the image is available¹⁰

Cany Ash from the firm says:

London's docklands, gated and highly controlled during the last years of Empire, could have been incrementally absorbed back into the city fabric. Instead what has happened has been a piecemeal affair of tax breaks in exchange for lumps of commercial activity.

London, like Amsterdam and Hamburg, might have recognised the opening up of the docklands as a unique opportunity to reinvent the city. The deep East End should be a place of experiment worthy of its entrepreneurial past. Floating villages, urban beaches and cable cars are foolish distractions from the business of city making. Meanwhile seemingly random commercial developments continue to line the docks with little interest in incubating authentic forms of neighbourhood or reconnecting to the big city life.

The runway of City airport is a dramatic strategic territory easily reabsorbed back into the urban fabric of London, no longer a block but a catalyst to the organic expansion of London eastwards, reaching out to isolated communities and pockets of activity down the Thames. The very shape suggests an episodic site for research and development, the R&D strangely lacking in our most complex industry, the design, delivery and management of cities.

⁹ <http://ashsak.com/>

¹⁰ <http://www.sianberry.london/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Ash-Sakula-City-Airport-neighbourhood-160112.jpg>

Here new forms of crowdsourced commercial investment are shown to work. Various forms of subsidised housing with local governance flourish through a myriad of Community Land Trusts models. Hybrid spaces which fit our increasingly volatile work lives, and desire for less prescribed spaces for the dynamics of family life, are developed and constantly evolving.

New ways of living and working more densely and harmoniously are discovered. The neighbourhood is built around car free streetscapes, cycling culture, open air markets and shared roof gardens which are intensely inhabited and cultivated. The DLR is extended along the central spine with several stops. Tourists come to hang out as this is unique destination, a relaxed but vibrant addition to London with space for festivals and ingoing experiments in commerce and playful shared spaces.

Intelligent companies start to see the value of smaller exhibitions in sustainable naturally lit environments rather than 3 day Wasteful installations in Excel. The mix of residents and hybridity of programme attracts creative people and increasingly sustainable scenarios for city life.