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| **Session 2014-2015** Monday 2 February 2015 16:22 (Afternoon) Birmingham Airport (Flight Path Changes )8:22 P.M.Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn. —(Damian Hinds.) **(a) rh Mrs Spelman, Caroline** It is amazing what an Adjournment debate in Parliament can achieve. On Friday, I had a call from the chief executive of Birmingham airport telling me about some significant changes to the plans for new flight paths, but I shall say more on that in due course. The extension of the runway at the airport has necessitated changes to the flight paths under the airspace change proposal. Birmingham airport has been trialling options for two new flight paths, known as option 5 and option 6, since May last year. On Friday, the airport announced that when the trial concludes on 13 February, a modified version of option 6 will be implemented, to include features of the original noise preferential route. I am glad that the airport has come up with an option that risks the least noise nuisance, although we must ensure that there is a trial period to test the modified route, along with continuous work to improve further the airport services, taking into consideration the nearby communities . I was particularly pleased that the chief executive stated that the airport wished to mimic as closely as possible “the old Hampton turn”, referring to a manoeuvre that minimised the impact of air traffic on the nearby village of Hampton-in-Arden.However , the overall process of undertaking the flight path trials has been poor, with long-running problems. Back in July last year, I presented a petition here on the Floor of the House that raised my constituents’ concerns about the trials, which I asked the Department to review. There have been many inadequacies in the trials, including aircraft failing to stick to routes correctly and the repeated postponing of the option 6 trial. The local community feels it has not been listened to, particularly in the rejection of its proposal for an option 6a, an alternative flight path that would have minimised noise nuisance. It made detailed submissions to Birmingham airport, highlighting how a departure route that included a turn at altitude could closely replicate the existing noise preferential route and accommodate the extended runway. That option gained a great deal of community support but was rejected by Birmingham airport without any meaningful qualification .The Civil Aviation Authority was aware of the alternative option that the community came up with but could not force the airport to trial it. After the initial consultation, options 5 and 6 were scheduled for trialling on alternative months beginning in May 2014. The trials were initially intended to last around seven months.Under option 5, the aircraft would have continued straight ahead on take-off, but that would have affected the residents of Balsall common quite badly. Under option 6, the aircraft were to make a 20 degree turn to the right, once 2.2 nautical miles from the end of the extended runway, but that option directly overflies the village of Barston, with obvious negative consequences for residents there .Until Friday’s announcement, option 5 had been Birmingham airport’s preferred option. Before the changes to the flight path, aircraft used to turn away from Hampton-in-Arden at a specific distance from the end of the runway on the noise preferential route—the so-called Hampton turn. Since the runway extension of 450 metres, the airport has said that the Hampton turn could not be replicated; that a turn at a specified distance must be further than 2.2 nautical miles away from the runway because of so-called obstacles. However, when I asked the airport what those obstacles were, it provided me with a list of incomprehensible co-ordinates, and I was none the clearer .In the initial planning application stage for the runway extension, local councillors probed very heavily whether the Hampton turn could be maintained if the extension took place. They were assured that it would form part of the evaluation of options under the separate consultation process for the trials .The airport's latest announcement of a modified version of option 6 should replicate the Hampton turn more closely, and I welcome this indication that the airport is listening to the concerns of the community and hope that progress will continue to be made .**(a) Garnier, Mark** My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and defending the quality of life for her constituents who are affected by Birmingham airport. Many of us agree that expansion of Birmingham airport could benefit the area, so it is vital that the airport has a better working relationship with the community to ensure that its views are heard. We welcome expansion of Birmingham airport, but it must be acceptable to her constituents and not impact on their quality of life . **(a) rh Mrs Spelman, Caroline** I could not have put the case better myself. My hon. Friend is quite right that the airport enjoyed previously a really good relationship with the surrounding community. It is landlocked on three sides by residential accommodation, and quite dense accommodation at the northerly end of the runway. It is so disappointing that the difficulty with these trials has damaged public trust. The most important thing now is to restore that trust . I emphasise here that I am not asking the Minister to comment on the specifics of options 5 or 6, because, as ever, a balance needs to be struck—what is beneficial for one community may not be beneficial for another, and I have remained strictly neutral between the two. The aim of the flight path trials has been to measure the actual impact of aircraft noise on relative communities—in Barston and Balsall common—rather than relying on theoretical modelling. That information is being used in submissions to the Civil Aviation Authority and it has informed the airport’s decision.I want to sketch briefly the timeline of the trials and to highlight some of the issues. The trial of option 5 commenced on 1 May 2014. For technical reasons, it proved very difficult for some aircraft to stick accurately to the initially proposed route for option 6, with accuracy as low as 49% on the northbound turn, so it had to be withdrawn in June. I wonder whether some of the difficulty with trialling the options could have been avoided with better simulation so that they got it right the first time round .Once option 6 had been revised, the trials were rescheduled to 13 November, which was, of course, during the winter flight schedule, when fewer aircraft come in and out of the airport. Although the capacity of winter and summer should not affect the ability to check the range of noise from different types of aircraft, noise monitoring does not measure the effect of repeated disturbance or its cumulative effect .There were further problems with the programming of area navigation aircraft, which meant that the trial of option 6 did not actually begin in November, as scheduled—or rescheduled. One of the flight coding companies, which airlines employ to keep them up to date with correct flight paths, had not provided airlines with the correct information for the revised option 6. The problem was subsequently corrected, but it was not until 11 December that the trial of option 6 commenced fully .Although I accept that that may not have been the airport’s fault, the cumulative effect of repeated mistakes calls into question the validity of the trials, and it has been frustrating and damaging to public trust. If you will forgive the pun, Mr Deputy Speaker, it rather feels like the airport has adopted a trial-and-error approach to the flight path trials . As I have said, following a meeting between the CAA and Birmingham airport last week, the airport intends to continue using a modified version of option 6 once the trials have finished .Another issue is that the local communities feel they have not been adequately listened to. It did not help that the airport announced that it would review the membership of the airport consultative committee, which is made up of local representatives, just before the trial. The airport proposed to remove the residents associations, parish councils and civic societies from the main committee and place them in a sub-committee, with only the chair of the sub-committee remaining on the revised airport consultative committee to represent the views of the community. That sidelined the organisations that best served the community’s views. Indeed, as the elected Member of Parliament, I was allowed to attend only as an observer .As a result of pressure from the council leader, however, the airport has agreed to maintain the groups on the airport consultative committee at least while the trials continue. The airport has also taken other steps to improve community dialogue, including by committing to producing community updates throughout the process .The local community was supported throughout by Solihull council, which passed a motion in October stating :“This Council supports fair flight paths for take-off and arrival of aircraft at Birmingham Airport to minimise the impact of aircraft noise on communities. We further welcome the involvement of community representatives both at the Airspace Change Forum while trials continue and through their continuing contribution to the work of the Airport Consultative Committee.”It was clear that the council did not favour one option over the other .The debate so far has centred on communities affected by changes to flight paths from runway 15, which is for southbound departures. However, runway 33 departures—which are to the north from Birmingham—have also changed, and they make up 60% of flights. Changes to runway 33 departures have affected a number of my constituents in areas including Castle Bromwich and Marston Green. Due to the extension to the runway, aircraft are rotating earlier and therefore homes in the village are suffering more noise as aircraft are above ground level earlier on take off and make a departure on a much lower angle . However, I was encouraged to hear the airport chief executive say on Friday that, there too, modifications have been made to option 6, which may help to alleviate that noise nuisance .In summary, the process of trialling new routes has been poorly done. The impact of the flight path trials has been increased noise pollution and a breakdown in the previously positive relationship between the local community and the airport. I welcome the news that the airport has agreed to consider a modified option 6, but we must ensure that there is a trial period to test the modified route and continuous work further to improve airport services, with consideration given to nearby communities. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) said, the airport is an important attribute and asset of regional and indeed national significance to our country. However, the management of the airport and the adjustments to its expansion in future need to be carried out in hand in hand with the community most directly affected by it, and it is important that the re-engagement with the community rebuilds public trust.**(a) Mr Goodwill, Robert** It is a great pleasure to rise to speak this evening, particularly as the House has just voted to increase the heavy goods vehicle limit to 50 mph, which is very good news for the environment, as trucks operate very efficiently at that speed, for the economy and logistics, and for road safety. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Mrs Spelman) on securing this debate about Birmingham airport’s flight paths. I understand and indeed sympathise with the concerns she has raised on behalf of her constituents, and I would like to thank her for bringing this matter to the attention of the House. I had a meeting with her just before Christmas in which she explained to me this complex matter, about which I know she and many of her constituents feel very strongly. Although this debate has rightly concentrated on the concerns of some of my right hon. Friend’s constituents, we should not ignore the vital contribution made by Birmingham airport to the regional and local economies. The aviation policy framework cited Birmingham airport as an example of an ambitious regional airport, with its ongoing programme to develop more long-haul services that would help boost the west midlands economy and help ease capacity constraints at south-east airports. I was in Birmingham today, alighting at Birmingham International airport, where I was struck by the number of passengers, many with luggage, who got off at the same time as me—obviously they were using that important regional airport.I am sure that the House welcomed the announcement of a Birmingham service to New York in 2015 and increases to services to Delhi and Dubai. We should also not overlook the inaugural flights from Beijing to Birmingham airport in July and August last year. Those were very significant as the first direct flights from Beijing to a UK regional airport. Taken together, they increase the connectivity with important trading partners that a major city such as Birmingham, and the west midlands region, requires. But if we are to continue tobenefit from a continuing thriving aviation industry in this country, we also need to have an efficient airspace fit for the 21st century. That is a key objective of the Civil Aviation Authority’s future airspace strategy—FAS—which is an ambitious project. Although its prime focus is on the airspace over the south-east, it is a national strategy. FAS is expected to deliver about £180 million a year in savings in respect of fuel, emissions and delays by 2020. I am sure the House will agree that that is a welcome boost to the UK aviation industry and its customers.A key component of the strategy is the introduction of new performance-based navigation routes with the use of satellite-based navigation rather than ground-based conventional aids. It is a bit like using GPS in a car rather than relying entirely on physical maps and road signs. When introduced, these new performance-based navigation routes enable aircraft to fly more accurately. That can reduce fuel burn and emissions, and enable a significant modernisation of the UK’s controlled airspace network. However, I know from various meetings I have had in the past 12 months with Members of this House that the introduction of these new techniques can have an effect on flight paths. Indeed, flying more accurately can assist in avoiding centres of population but may mean that some smaller communities are overflown more regularly. Such changes are naturally of particular concern in those local communities. For example, the experience my right hon. Friend has described at Birmingham has similar parallels at Gatwick and Heathrow, but it is the situation at Birmingham we are discussing this evening, and I would like to take this opportunity to update the House on developments at that airport.As a consequence of the runway extension, it was necessary for the airport to develop its proposals in keeping with the requirements from the International Civil Aviation Organisation and the CAA’s airspace change process, as well as the air navigation guidance my Department issued in January 2014. In developing its proposals, the key aim was to replicate, as far as is practicable, the existing departure routes. However, in view of the new departure point on the runway, and the need to comply with all requirements and guidance relating to airspace changes, it was not possible to completely replicate the tracks in this case.The airport conducted an environmental evaluation of possible options and undertook a consultation with stakeholders, including community representatives, as required by the CAA’s airspace change process. As my right hon. Friend said, the consultation carried out between January and April 2013 saw a high level of community response. During the consultation period, it was clear that although there was some support for the proposals there was significant opposition from specific communities to aspects of them. The airport then took steps to determine whether alternative options could be developed to mitigate some of the concerns raised .For northbound departures—Birmingham is unusual in not having an east-west runway—the airport favoured option 4, known locally as the Hampton turn, but it could not be consistently followed due to the operational requirements of performance-based navigation. I understand that no further realistic options are available for consideration for that specific flight path. Although there was an initial issue with the track-keeping of some aircraft as they made the first turn, the level of accuracy has improved significantly since the trials began .I am sure that my right hon. Friend will be pleased to learn that at a meeting between the CAA and the airport last week, the airport agreed to consider some further corrective design work. The airport hopes that that work will lead to a greater concentration of tracks within the noise preferential route that was consulted on. That should minimise the noise impact for many of her constituents .For southbound departures, one of the key issues was the earliest point at which aircraft make their first turn. To answer that, the airport commissioned further design work and developed a new option that was subsequently called option 6. That and the previous southbound departure option, option 5, were consulted on in May 2013 .In light of those developments, the CAA took the decision to halt its processing of the airspace change proposal at Birmingham to allow time for trials of options 5 and 6. Unfortunately, as we have heard, a coding error by the airport’s procedure design organisation meant that the onboard codes used to fly option 6 were incorrect. Appreciating that difficulty, the airport decided to trial option 5 and the “wrong” option 6 on a monthly alternating basis for six months until the corrected version of option 6 could be trialled .The trial started in spring 2014, but it was not until mid-December that all aircraft could fly the revised option 6. The trial of that option is scheduled to complete next week. It is my understanding that in light of the feedback from the trial, including complaint data that seem more favourable this time, the airport is discussing with the CAA the possibility of continuing to operate option 6 after next week. That option can be modified to mimic as far as possible the noise preferential route and, indeed, I have a copy of the letter to which my right hon. Friend referred. The airport would then seek to gain the CAA’s approval for the route to be made permanent .The final decision will of course be made by the CAA, the UK’s independent airspace regulator, and that will probably happen this autumn. As the House will appreciate from the debate, the subject is pretty complex, but it is worth noting that Birmingham airport has tried to respond proactively to the views expressed by its local community. I was sorry to learn of the concerns about the airport’s consultative committee. It is clearly in the interests of the airport to establish and maintain good relations with those in its local communities, many of whom are also its customers. I appreciate that that is not always easy, but I hope that the airport will listen to the concerns raised tonight and will act on them .I thank my right hon. Friend again for bringing these concerns to the House and I hope that the aviation industry has learned some lessons from the experience at Birmingham that will help communities at other airports that find themselves in similar circumstances. I applaud my right hon. Friend’s tenacity and commitment to her constituents’ concerns. I would not go so far as to say that she has been a thorn in my side, but she must take the lion’s share of the credit for this solution. If her constituents need a reason to support her in May, this is another example to add to the myriad reasons they already have.Question put and agreed to. House adjourned. The above content refers to columns: 1 to 1 |

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