

A.I.R Meeting of Minds in the Aviation Sector

Event Overview

A.I.R Meeting of Minds was a two-day event held at ExCeL London, bringing together stakeholders from across the aviation sector to consider the challenges and opportunities associated with decarbonisation. The event was the first of its kind and focused on how aviation infrastructure, airspace management, airports and related organisations can respond to the sector's environmental responsibilities.

CAGNE was able to attend the event and observed the presence of key organisations and decision-makers from aviation infrastructure, airport operations, airspace management and associated sectors. A number of keynote speakers addressed delegates, with some sessions providing opportunities for questions from the audience.

Decarbonising Airport Infrastructure

One keynote presentation drew on AECOM's work with more than 30 airports worldwide. A representative explored how decarbonising airport infrastructure and operations can deliver meaningful emissions reductions while supporting growth, strengthening resilience and preparing airports for future challenges.

Aviation remains a particularly difficult sector to decarbonise. The combustion of jet fuel can account for the overwhelming majority of emissions associated with large international hubs. As a result, efforts to reduce emissions from airport ground operations may be significantly outweighed by aircraft emissions.

The discussion highlighted that airports should be considered not only as transport hubs but also as complex built environments, comparable in many respects to small cities. Buildings and forms of transport together account for a significant proportion of global emissions, while aviation itself contributes a smaller share of the overall total.

Airports are also exposed to climate-related risks and increasingly stringent environmental regulation. In this context, decarbonisation measures were presented as a means of improving climate resilience, supporting future operations and enabling airports to remain ahead of regulatory change.

Airport Expansion, Emissions and Future Fuels

Tim Norwood of Gatwick Airport referred to the airport's success in progressing plans for a new runway. Heathrow also addressed the role of the planning process in determining whether expansion proposals can proceed, including the implications of legal challenges for airport growth.

James Richardson, Chief Analyst for the Climate Change Committee, provided a detailed assessment of the feasibility of Heathrow expansion and the way in which regional growth has been incorporated into emissions planning. His remarks suggested a challenging outlook for the aviation industry as it seeks continued growth while relying

on wider decarbonisation across other sectors and on the development of alternative fuels.

He also stated that the industry cannot rely on tree planting as a sufficient offset for aviation growth. Three priorities were identified for the future: engineered carbon dioxide removal, sustainable aviation fuel and efficiency improvements. Hydrogen was not presented as a principal solution in this session, although the Chief Executive of Bristol Airport referred to trials involving hydrogen and liquid hydrogen as well as the fact that all staff are given free public transport tickets.

A subsequent industry panel, including representatives from Sustainable Aviation, also indicated that hydrogen was unlikely to be central in the near term, although it may have a role in the production of sustainable aviation fuel. The panel discussed concerns that SAF supply may not be sufficient to meet mandated requirements and argued that operators should not be penalised where access to supply is limited. The need for greater investment was also emphasised, including the suggestion that emissions trading scheme (ETS) payments should be directed into aviation decarbonisation rather than general government funds. However, industry participants also expressed concern that increased passenger fares due to SAF could undermine competitiveness.

NATS highlighted the potential to reduce contrails by moving aircraft to higher altitudes and argued that modernising airspace could contribute to reductions in carbon dioxide emissions.

Airspace Modernisation

The next session focused on airspace modernisation and included contributions from NATS, the Director of Transformation Strategy and Development, and the Department for Transport's Deputy Director for Airspace, Airport Resilience and Connectivity. Gatwick Airport's former Head of Airspace also presented work undertaken on airspace modernisation, alongside two aviation directors from Egis, an organisation involved in research work for Gatwick's Noise Management Board.

CAGNE questioned the positive portrayal of airspace change presented by the panel. The question raised concerns about the reduction of noise impact considerations from 7,000 feet to 5,000 feet, changes to the CAP1616 consultation process from seven stages to five, the removal of community input from the early stages of airspace change, the absence of compensation for communities affected by airspace change, and the creation of UKADS by NATS without community or environmental representation.

The response from Gatwick was that enabling aircraft to climb higher without levelling off could reduce noise impacts. The Department for Transport referred to compensation associated with a new Gatwick runway, although this does not appear to extend to airspace change and may not cover the wider areas potentially affected by new flight paths or increased concentration. The policy objective of minimising the number of people newly overflowed was also mentioned, while NATS referred to the criteria it is required to follow.

Conclusion

The event demonstrated the aviation sector's growing focus on decarbonisation, infrastructure resilience and airspace modernisation. While the industry presented a range of proposed solutions, including sustainable aviation fuel, efficiency improvements, carbon removal and operational changes, significant questions remain about feasibility, cost, community impact and accountability. From CAGNE's perspective, the event underlined the need for meaningful community engagement, transparent consultation and proper recognition of the environmental and noise impacts associated with aviation growth.

One question they did not want to answer was "If decarbonising is so difficult should you continue to seek growth and expansion?"

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