

Inner Thames Estuary feasibility studies: draft terms of reference

Response from the RSPB

Introduction

The RSPB anticipated that the proposal for an airport in the Inner Thames Estuary would be excluded from consideration by the Airports Commission at this stage. We are confident that any such proposal will not stand up to political scrutiny, following the further assessment to be carried out by the Commission. We consider that the location of an airport in the UK's fourth most important estuary for waterfowl, which is highly protected because of its international importance for biodiversity, makes it unfeasible in terms of providing the necessary compensatory habitat required under the Conservation of Habitat and Species Regulations 2010 (as amended). We also consider the risk of birdstrike would make it unsafe. The RSPB opposes aviation expansion on climate change grounds and will continue to do so unless Government demonstrates that it is possible to expand the sector and stay within legally binding climate limits. We do not support the Commission's assessment that expansion is possible in the current legislative context. However, in the event of Government taking the decision to build a new airport, we consider the currently shortlisted options at Gatwick and Heathrow are likely to provide feasible alternatives with a less harmful impact on the natural environment.

Feasibility Studies and draft terms of reference

Study 1 - Environmental/Natura 2000 impacts

We welcome that there will be a full assessment of the direct and indirect impacts of constructing and operating an Inner Thames Estuary airport on Natura 2000 sites, and the feasibility of meeting the legal tests for such development (see below for further comment on the information required for those tests). The Natura 2000 network includes both Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs). In line with Government policy (as set out in the National Planning Policy Framework) this should include Ramsar sites. These are the most important sites for biodiversity in the UK.

Nevertheless, there are a number of other protected areas which should also be included in any environmental assessment. In line with Government policy¹, the Commission should include Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), which form the national network of protected areas in Great Britain and which underpin the Natura 2000 network. For the same reason, the Commission should also

¹ Paragraph 118 of the National Planning Policy Framework

include sites which are currently being considered or which could be considered for designation as SPAs, SACs, Ramsar sites or SSSIs. The RSPB is happy to input to identifying such sites but we strongly recommend the Commission seeks Natural England's advice on these matters as they are currently undertaking a detailed review of the English SSSI network.

In addition, Natural England should be consulted on the potential implications of European Protected Species in the study area.

As noted above, the RSPB agrees that it is essential to assess the full impact of an Inner Thames Estuary airport and associated infrastructure during its construction and operational phase. This should include both direct impacts (e.g. habitat loss and fragmentation) and indirect (e.g. land use change to reduce the risk of bird strike, additional mortality arising from displacement of birds from current foraging and roosting areas, air pollution, noise pollution, climate change impact and in-combination/cumulative impacts with other developments e.g. new surface access requirements, offshore wind farms etc).

Study 1 also identifies that it will need to analyse the process and hurdles to developing on Natura 2000 sites. We have the following comments on this point:

- The ToR should explicitly address the need to consider direct and indirect impacts on 2000 sites;
- The RSPB would be happy to contribute to discussions in relation to cases affecting Natura 2000 sites as we have been closely involved in many of those relating to national infrastructure and transport projects over the last 20 years.
- The ToR should include explicit consideration of the Habitats Regulations tests on alternative solutions and imperative reasons of overriding public interest (IROPI) which precede the test on provision of compensatory measures (which the ToR consider more thoroughly). The alternative solutions test is key in this respect as, in order to pass it, a proponent must be able to demonstrate that there are no alternative means of meeting the public interest objectives of the project (in this case a new airport) that will cause less harm to Natura 2000 sites. Therefore, an understanding of the potential impacts on Natura 2000 sites of the possible alternative solutions should be included in the study. The RSPB currently opposes aviation expansion as stated above. However, if the Government decides to proceed with building a new airport, if there are alternative solutions to an airport in the Thames Estuary that are less damaging to the natural environment that can meet the public interest objectives, then they should be selected. The focus of both the alternative solutions and IROPI tests is on the public interest objectives the project seeks to meet or contribute to. Private interest objectives are not relevant. The socio-economic studies should be designed to provide the necessary information.
- At this stage, the general scope of the work relating to compensatory habitats looks appropriate. Critical to this work is the identification of the nature and scale and location of the likely adverse effects (direct and indirect) as this provides the foundation for scoping the likely compensatory habitat requirements. The RSPB has considerable experience in the restoration and creation of coastal habitats and will be able to contribute its thoughts to these aspects of the study.

- Any attempt to value the destruction of Thames Estuary habitats for social cost benefits analysis must be based on primary research since its size and unique historic and ecological attributes preclude the use of benefits transfer values.

Study 2 - Operation feasibility and attitudes about moving to a new airport

A key factor that should be assessed is the feasibility of operating an airport in a major bird migration flyway. The Thames Estuary is the UK's fourth most important estuary for waterfowl and therefore poses a major bird strike hazard.

Studies on bird strike for a previously proposed airport at Cliffe (which is on the same peninsula as the Isle of Grain) concluded that *"without a comprehensive and aggressive bird management programme in place, incorporating careful and considered airport design, appropriate habitat management and active bird control, an airport could not operate safely in this location. Even with such world class management and mitigation measures in place, the hazard posed by birds is severe and would probably be higher than at any other major UK airport"*². This was confirmed by a study undertaken by the RSPB³. The implications of any bird strike risk management programme should therefore be factored in to Study 1 as a clear potential adverse effect arising from an Inner Thames Estuary airport option.

Study 3 – Socio-economic impacts

The Socio-Economic Impacts Study TORs are unfortunately vague and do not properly describe the scale, scope or methods that will be used. As such it is difficult to comment.

Scale:

The study should net all costs and benefits across the UK as a whole.

Scope:

- The study should begin by mapping out the potential winners and losers from a shift of the UK's major airport methodically before starting to estimate the impact on each. For instance if the study is to consider the regenerative impacts on the estuary area it should also consider stakeholders such as:
 - Potential losses of major business international headquarters as analysed in Study 2's Business Response
 - Potential losses to major international tourism destinations such as Oxford and Bath which will now be another hour further from the major airport.
- The study currently does not mention the costs to businesses around the estuary during development of the airport and terrestrial infrastructure. Costs per year of disruption could be considerable particularly with overruns.

² Bell JC, Walls R, Allan J R, Watola G, Burton NHK, Musgrove A J and Rehfisch M M (2003). Study on the Potential Safety Risks at and around a Potential New Airport at Cliffe Marshes and Measures for Mitigating those Risks. CSL and BTO report for the Department for Transport

³ Feare C, (2003) Implications of bird hazard management at Cliffe Airport as presented in the Department for Transport's The future development of air transport in the UK: South East.

- The study should also avoid simply presenting an aggregate economic impact but should outline total losses and gains as well as who these stakeholders are. Economic theory tends not to care about such things but political decision making should.

Risk & Uncertainty

All of the estimates will require assumptions based on varying degrees of certainty. The TOR does not currently state how it will deal with this uncertainty but should be clear and present ranges of likely impacts rather than simple averages. Potential risks and the impacts associated should be outlined in detail. Where significant assumptions are made they should be made very clear.

Scenarios should be built based on various potential outcomes such as a shift of flights to the continent and likely build and cost overruns. For instance:

- what will happen if build cost over-runs lead to finance difficulties and how likely is this?
- How will you deal with the risk of the current Heathrow employees not being able or willing to uproot their families to move to the estuary. In response will the newly re-developed housing estate at Heathrow full of high value homes provide sufficient employment for the high and low skilled workers currently living there or will it leave a sink of persistent unemployment on its periphery?
- Is there room to build the extra housing needed to staff the estuary airport and will this be built in time for the new airport? What happens if it isn't?

Presentation:

Given the significant numbers of assumptions that will be necessary to develop any form of estimate of economic impact at any scale the presentation of the results will be as important if not more so than the methods chosen for the study. Economics can make the general public uneasy and often gives an inappropriate impression of certainty. However we do not possess a crystal ball and, as when plotting a course to travel a long distance an error of a few degrees can leave us far off-course, when making estimates about very large businesses small errors early on can aggregate into very large errors.

Care must be taken to:

- Highlight that what is being presented is a very educated guess and no more;
- If possible describe the margin of error within which the actual outcome is likely to sit;
- Present a number of likely scenario outcomes rather than a single averaged result;
- Highlight who wins, who loses and by how much;
- End by describing fully the potential risks, how big they are and what their impact might be.