

SPEAKERS CORNER



Anything other than 'no' will be a shocking and damaging outcome

This week, leaders of four councils in the West of England approved a motion opposing Bristol Airport's proposed expansion. It's the latest twist in the project, whose fate will be decided by the end of the year following a national planning inquiry currently under way. Environmental scientist and founder of climate action website One Home, **Angela Terry**, explains why she believes the outcome must be a 'no to expansion'



August 2021 - wildfires approach a beach on the Greek islands

PHOTO: AP/THODORIS NIKOLAOU

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AS we bask in the last few days of an Indian summer, it's hard to imagine that we are in a climate crisis. But when you look at events across the globe, including floods in Germany, China and Japan and wildfires in Siberia, Turkey and Greece, it is plain to see. And it is unequivocally caused by greenhouse gases emitted by human activity.

When we talk about climate change, the finger is often pointed at the aviation industry as being one of the worst polluters. It's one of the most carbon-intensive forms of transport and very difficult to decarbonise. Aviation is expected to be the single largest contributor to UK greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 2050. At the same time, the Government has committed to achieve net zero GHG emissions by that same date, meaning we no longer contribute to global warming. The message is clear - this ambitious but essential target will not be achieved if airport expansions and passenger growth continues unabated.

To reach net zero, every single sector needs to act and the pressure is on aviation to play its part. Otherwise carbon pollution will continue with catastrophic effects for the health of our planet and all that inhabits it. UK aviation emis-

sions are rising. The Government's advisors on climate change, the Climate Change Committee, states that emissions from UK domestic and international flights in 2018 were 124 per cent above 1990 levels.

There is no pathway for the sector to achieve 'jet zero' - electric planes are unproven and sustainable aviation fuel will barely make a dent in the drastic emissions cuts that are needed and will put more pressure on food production.

Carbon offsetting is also deeply flawed and does not offer a regulated, scientific or permanent solution to aviation emissions. It's essentially an idea that gives 'conscientious' consumers the permission to pollute. Planting tree saplings doesn't rectify the damage caused by flying.

The only solution is to reduce flight numbers and reject airport expansions. It's just got a whole lot trickier for Bristol Airport to con-

tinue with its plans following a new Government policy on carbon pricing. The airport has used the old carbon pricing structure in all its proposals.

The new carbon price, released by the Government just a few weeks ago, will not only double ticket prices in the future, therefore dramatically reducing demand, but also means the airport's calculations of the costs to society of its emissions are blown out of the water - or shall we say air.

It puts the expansion's cost benefit analysis deep in the red.

What is needed is strong leadership from Government to stand against this proposal. It has declared a climate emergency and therefore nothing but a robust refusal to airport expansion can match the rhetoric (or net zero legislation).

It is unthinkable for the expansion to get the green light while the UK tries to convince the rest of the

world that it is a climate leader as it prepares to host COP26 (the United National Climate Change Conference) in November.

With local leaders having already opposed the plans, if the planning inspector overrules North Somerset Council's refusal of the scheme last year, it will be a disaster for the environment as well as local democracy.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson made headlines this week in a speech to the United Nations, declaring COP26 to be a 'turning point for humanity' in the battle against climate change.

Yet the Government also wants to cut taxes on domestic flights, which is the opposite of the 'polluter pays' principle. This sort of mixed messaging is confusing and detrimental to efforts to stop runaway global warming.

Alongside systemic change however, we all need to make personal decisions about how we travel.

Individual action goes hand in hand with policy change - one drives the other. This doesn't have to mean vowing never to fly again (although it could do!), but making a commitment to only fly when essential is a meaningful contribution to the health of the planet. Also, make it short haul and direct, rather than long haul.

Research carried out in 2019 shows that taking one return flight generates more carbon pollution than citizens of some countries produce in a year. A short haul flight from London to Edinburgh contributes more carbon dioxide than the average emissions of a person in Uganda in one year.

Flying is a luxury, and it needs to be priced as such. Currently, there is no VAT on air travel so it is disproportionately cheap in relation to other, more sustainable transport options, such as trains. This has to change - the price signalling is all wrong.

But it does have to happen in a way that is fair. It is estimated that around 15 per cent of people take 70 per cent of all flights from the UK, so frequent flyers are a particular issue.

A carbon tax that increases with every additional flight would mean that the worst polluters pay more.

At the 2020 Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change, 80 per cent of participants supported a frequent flyer levy so it's a policy change that is gaining in popularity.

There is evidence of a global movement towards less air travel. A survey published in 2020 by European Investment Bank found that 75 per cent of Europeans said they would fly less in 2020 for environmental reasons.

Of course, the pandemic has brought about a dip in passenger numbers, but it is anticipated to be only temporary unless Government takes action and attitudes change.

The steps we all take to cut our carbon emissions do add up to make significant cuts. Making a positive decision to be part of the solution is hugely empowering. We can feel part of an urgent and shared endeavour. It also means a healthier start to your holidays - choose a haven of tranquillity in the UK countryside rather than a plane cabin germ haven.

I sincerely hope that sense will prevail as we enter these last few weeks of Bristol Airport's planning appeal. Anything other than a 'no to expansion' will be a shocking and damaging outcome.

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