

Annual Review 2019



Planning Application

Once again the focus of SSE's efforts during the year related to the planning application submitted by Manchester Airports Group (MAG) in February 2018 for permission to grow Stansted Airport to 43mppa. SSE has vigorously opposed this from the outset.

The year 2019 began with a sense of lingering disappointment because, on 14 November 2018, Uttlesford District Council (UDC) approved the airport planning application. The vote could not have been closer, with the five of the ten UDC councillors on the Planning Committee in favour and five against. The Chairman's casting vote carried the day.

However, SSE had been pressing the Secretary of State to review the UDC decision and he issued an instruction to UDC not to grant final approval until he had had an opportunity to consider whether to intervene. Moreover, SSE had two other 'irons in the fire': first, a legal challenge lodged with the High Court, and second, a challenge relating to the conditions attached to the Planning Committee's November 2018 approval decision, in particular the requirement for a satisfactory Section 106 agreement. With, in total, three options to pursue, SSE remained hopeful that the UDC approval could be overturned.

In March 2019, the first of these three options was lost when the Secretary of State announced that he would not intervene and was content for UDC to issue final approval to Stansted Airport to grow to 43mppa. By this time however SSE had identified shortcomings in the proposed Section 106 Agreement. The Planning Committee had delegated the final negotiation of the Agreement to officers and empowered officers to issue final approval to Stansted Airport but this was subject to the Agreement meeting certain defined criteria.

Meanwhile, the High Court agreed to an SSE request to delay hearing its legal challenge until later in the year to allow an opportunity for certain matters to be clarified and possibly resolved.

Throughout March and April 2019 SSE worked with UDC councillors from all parties in an effort to prevent officers from granting final approval to Stansted Airport on the grounds that the proposed Section 106 agreement did not satisfy the requirements set down by the Planning Committee. The effect was to delay any final decision until after the local council elections on 2nd May 2019.

The May 2019 local elections radically changed the make-up of UDC and created a council which was far less inclined to 'rubber-stamp' the airport planning application and laid the groundwork for a fresh approach.

In June 2019 SSE organised the largest ever residents' petition in the history of UDC calling for the airport planning application to be referred back to the Planning Committee for reconsideration. The petition obtained 1,700 signatures in 17 days – more than 30 times the minimum required by UDC.

This led to an extraordinary UDC meeting being held on 28 June 2019, where SSE was allowed to make a presentation to the full council. The outcome was an almost unanimous agreement by councillors to refer the airport planning application back to the Planning Committee for reconsideration.

The process of reconsideration lasted more than six months but the end result was worth the wait. In January 2020 UDC Planning Committee reversed the original decision and voted 10 votes to nil to refuse the application – a vindication of SSE's 'never give up' philosophy. Prior to the vote, SSE had been given the opportunity to make a slide presentation to the Planning Committee which included clear legal guidance presented by leading planning QC Paul Stinchcombe on behalf of SSE.

At time of writing, it is not known whether MAG will appeal UDC's decision. Also at time of writing, SSE continues to keep its legal options open. A High Court hearing in November 2019 went against SSE but submissions have since been lodged with the Court of Appeal.

However, it would not be necessary to proceed to the Court of Appeal if MAG decides to respect UDC's January 2020 refusal decision.

Airport Activity

Stansted Airport had a year of two halves. During the first six months of 2019 passenger numbers increased by 3.8% compared to 2018 but during the second half of the year passenger numbers declined by 2.5%. For the year as a whole there was a marginal increase in passenger numbers from 28.0m to 28.1m but a slight decrease in commercial flights, from 185,000 to 183,000 and a slight decrease in cargo traffic from 226,000 to 224,000 tonnes.

Accolade

In June 2019 the British Medical Journal (BMJ) published a leading article on the health impacts of aviation noise which was co-authored by two of SSE's expert advisers together with a distinguished German cardiologist, Professor Thomas Menzel of the University of Mainz. The SSE experts were Professor Jangu Banatvala, who advises SSE on the health impacts of aircraft noise and pollution, and Martin Peachey, whose expertise is in the field of aircraft noise impacts. They are both highly respected professionals and have been leading members of the SSE Executive Committee for many years.

Consultations and Presentations

Throughout the preparatory stages of the UDC Draft Local Plan SSE has taken a close and careful interest in the proposed policies and has submitted extensive evidence, particularly in relation to Policy SP11, i.e. UDC's proposed future strategy for the development of Stansted Airport. As a result, SSE was afforded a full opportunity to give evidence to the Inspectors during the Public Examination of the Plan and was able to counter the pressure from MAG for amendments to the Plan which would have endorsed the unfettered growth of the airport.

SSE also responded to a number of government consultations in the course of the year including extensive evidence submitted to the Department for Transport in June 2019 in response to its consultation on a new UK aviation strategy and a paper submitted to the House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee in September 2019 on Sustainable Tourism.

Members of SSE Executive Committee attended a number of meetings with Government officials in the course of the year, including with senior civil servants from the Department for Transport and HM Treasury. SSE Executive Committee members were also active in speaking at various conference events in 2019 including Airport Watch, the Environmental Law Foundation and the Airport Communities Federation.

Calendar

Once again, the SSE Community Calendar, was a sell-out success, raising valuable funds for the campaign. The Calendar also provides local residents (and many buyers and recipients from much further afield) with a month-by-month reminder of the outstanding landscape and heritage which makes the local area around Stansted Airport such a special place, and worth fighting for, to protect from over-development.

*Stop Stansted Expansion
January 2020*