

London City: softening us up for expansion?

London City Airport is up to something. The quirky story in last week's Evening Standard is part of its new approach. The paper reported that the airport is planning to create a “chilled” atmosphere, featuring “muted colours, less background noise and better directions” as part of the £500 million redesign of its terminal which is due to be completed by 2022. The airport hopes that better the interior design will boost mental wellbeing of passengers

This is all very admirable but begs the question why London City is doing it. **I suspect it is part of a charm offensive before it unveils proposals for a further expansion of the airport.** This summer London City will publish its Master Plan where it will set out its ‘vision’ for the future. This is expected to include an option to lift the current cap on the number of flights permitted to use the airport each year.

To have any chance of getting permission to expand further the airport needs to do two things:

- **convince people it is a ‘caring’ airport;**
- **show it is a key driver of economic regeneration in East and SE London.**

London City has a lot of catching up to do.

Its relationship with its very local area has tended to be quite good. The conditions set by the London Borough of Newham, the planning authority for the airport, attached to the four – yes, four - successful applications to expand the airport since it opened in 1989, have given some protection to those living close to the airport.

But it neglected the wider area its planes fly over. It made little effort to engage with communities or local authorities in these areas. Relations were at rock bottom. Most of the local authorities, furious at being routinely snubbed, opposed all its expansion plans. Things got so bad that when London City refused to send a representative to a key Waltham Forest committee, the council arranged for a fluffy puppet to sit in its chair!

This neglect of its wider catchment areas was one of the reasons behind calls to close it down. These have come from many in the local community, from the former Mayor of London Ken Livingstone and from the Green Party mayoral candidate Sian Berry. All argued that replacing the airport with a different development could create more jobs and do more for the local economy than the airport does and without its environmental downsides.

A major reason why the airport failed to woo its wider catchment area was that the then owners were simply in it to sell the airport at a profit. The new owners, who bought it for £2bn, are seen to be in it for the long-term. They realized things had to change.

London City is reaching out like never before. It has appointed new press and PR people. It has started to sponsor important receptions at party conferences. ‘Feel-good’ stories have begun to appear in the media. The airport is wooing the local authorities by visiting their leaders and chief executives. It is trying to portray the airport as the key economic driver of the region. To stand up that claim, of course, would require a lot

more hard evidence than has so far been produced: London City contributes to the economy –yes; it’s a key driver of the regional economy – the jury is very much out.

A lot of what is being done is welcome.

- More engagement with key stakeholders across a much wider region, with helpful staff in their community, planning, noise and environment teams.
- Good engagement with its very local neighbours led by committed staff
- A revamped Consultative Committee, impressively chaired.
- A commitment to engage fully when the airport reconsiders its flight paths.
- A commitment on less noisy planes.

But the underlying worry is that the airport’s big aim is to seek permission to lift the cap on the number of flights. 111,000 flights are allowed to use airport each year. (Over the last few years the actual number has hovered around 84,000). 111,000 is enough. London City may only be the 14th busiest airport in the UK but noise from its planes impacts more people than any airport bar Heathrow and Manchester. It is only the 94th busiest airport in Europe but, astonishingly, it impacts more people than mega airports like Schiphol, Madrid, Munich or Brussels. And the numbers impacted by noise will rise as there will be a lot of new homes built in East London over the next few years.

Let’s work together but not on an expanded airport.