

The government talks of preserving an airfield network, but we must all help to avert a crisis, says David Ogilvy

Despite a personal involvement of almost 20 years in planning and operational problems relating to aerodromes for use by general aviation, I am strongly convinced that the majority of people are not as concerned as they should be.

Since I started to keep records in 1988, AOPA has handled almost 600 separate issues. These fall under almost 30 headings, some of which are one-off cases, but others show some strong trends that threaten the long-term viability of GA as we know it today.

Firstly, whether for a flying school or club, a business operator or a private owner, the first need must be for a suitable home base; yet the whole matter of using an aeroplane for almost any purpose fails if there is no geographical spread of available aerodromes throughout the United Kingdom – and especially within reach of all centres of population, commerce or industry. One aerodrome on its own serves a very limited function.

Today we are at a very critical stage and in danger of losing many of the facilities that are essential, so here I summarise:

1. Regional airports have been ordered by central government to put forward master plans for their commercial development, to cater for the growing needs of the air transport industry. Many believe that the predicted growth will happen and some are protecting their positions by proposing to discourage or ban most if not all GA in the longer term. Although there is little evidence to support their actions, already some have imposed strong restrictions e.g. Southampton, Newcastle, Teesside, Birmingham and East Midlands. Also, I am aware of three cases where regional airports have rejected much of GA but have failed to support alternative sites to which GA could move. There should be a requirement for such airports to support these alternatives.

2. The sector on which most limitations are being placed is pilot training, yet unless facilities are available within easy reach of people's homes or workplaces, they will find other ways in which to spend their time and money. This applies equally to those who have aspirations to become professional pilots (many of whom begin by flying purely for personal reasons) and those who learn wholly and solely for private purposes. Despite the coming introduction of the multi-crew pilot's licence, not all will follow this dubious route and even those who do will require a modicum of time actually in the air. Personal flying in any form and for any purpose faces enough obstacles already and any further obstructions will place the whole of GA in peril, and have an adverse effect on the air travel industry.

3. The range of planning problems affecting GA aerodromes and airstrips is very varied and may be almost as numerous as the sites concerned. However, there are three elements that stand out:

(a) wind farms: regardless of their much-challenged value as alternative energy

'I know of three cases in which defeat is most probable, leading to likely closure of three significant licensed GA aerodromes'

Left: general aviation airfields are a vital resource but are under threat everywhere

sources, they are becoming the number one hazard when planned for construction near aerodromes. Although several larger airports are being affected, often these have the clout to have the sites moved or modified, but several smaller aerodromes and airstrips are in less powerful positions. Already I have been involved in ten cases and, so far, I can report on only two success stories. Official sources indicate that many more applications are expected and, in principle, these have government support.

(b) building sites: aerodromes, usually flat and often well drained, provide ideal open spaces for developers to fill with houses or business parks. Despite government assurances, queries remain regarding the greenfield/brownfield status of flying sites and generally the land values multiply by four when compared with their economic values as aerodromes. Although, surprisingly, I can report that there have been two successes for GA in this field, there are many threats in the wind and I know of three cases in which defeat is most probable, leading to likely closure of three significant licensed GA aerodromes.

(c) There is a growing need for GA to monitor all that is proposed or happening and to take appropriate action; AOPA has endeavoured to do this. We have given evidence at more than 30 public inquiries and have given active support to more than 130 planning applications. The issues range through proposals for new flying sites, additional facilities (e.g. hangars), increases in number of permitted aircraft movements, extensions to operating hours and many others including threats of closures or severe operating restrictions. However, AOPA's

work would be more effective if people concerned would notify us as soon as any relevant issue materialises.

Annoyingly, often we need to take rearguard action.

4. The Light Aviation Airports Study Group's recommendation that

flying training and some minor commercial activities should be allowed from certain unlicensed aerodromes is likely to be approved by the CAA, but this is unlikely to have a large scale effect on the national situation. Sites approved for the training role will be required (rightly) to conform to the physical conditions laid down in the earlier edition of CAP 428 (Safety Standards at Unlicensed Aerodromes), and by far the majority of airstrips cannot match these requirements. Also, each such site would

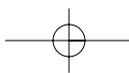
WHAT CAN YOU DO?

1. Monitor the situation in your local area;

2. Notify AOPA of any potential threats or problems;

3. Ensure that your flying colleagues are equally aware of the potential dangers and encourage them to report any difficulties as well.

Where none exists already there should be a GA representative group that can liaise with the aerodrome management to ensure that the views of the GA community do not go unexpressed.



need to go through the formal planning process, either for change of use or for substantial increases in the numbers of permitted movements, or possibly both. The benefits of an existing certificate of lawful use would not apply and any application would give local residents opportunities to object. Clearly - and hopefully - though, some sites will succeed, but these will not be enough to undo the overall damage already mentioned.

5. General aviation fails to help its own case and cause. Most people show little interest unless their own home bases are threatened and even then their efforts may be (a) half-hearted and/or (b) too late. Even more damaging, though, is the human inability to get onto one stage for common action. Sometimes different groups on one aerodrome take up individual stances and walk straight into the arms of the 'enemy' who gain strength on the divide and rule basis. If GA is to have a secure future, this must stop.

6. Frequently organisations and individuals with planning or operational problems fail to take positive action until the situation has passed the point of no return. In one case a site owner told me that planning permission had been granted for a wind farm under the aerodrome circuit, so would I use AOPA's influence to get the decision reversed!? If there is to be any hope of success, contact must be made at the very earliest opportunity. Also, often when initial help or advice had been given, we receive no further communication. This means that we are unable to record all results, which weakens the overall position on behalf of UK GA.

None of this may be new to you. However, here I add one fresh point: that unless GA as a whole (a) recognises the need to take seriously the current situation, (b) keeps abreast of what goes on, and (c) takes appropriate action when it is needed, our future is bleak. GA faces numerous other problems, including maintenance costs, airspace availability, equipment requirements et al, some of which relate to European integration; however all these become irrelevant if we fail to maintain a UK network of aerodromes from and to which all GA users can operate without undue hassle.

Despite two GA reviews resulting in a DfT statement that the UK must have a viable network of available aerodromes, the words will mean nothing unless the Department shows the courage to take positive action.

Since the threat of closures or operating restrictions began, AOPA has fought to retain existing places and, where appropriate, to support new ones. Many individuals have made sterling efforts on behalf of specific sites and these are to be commended strongly, but AOPA - and AOPA alone - has kept the proverbial 'finger on the pulse' nationally. It is becoming increasingly difficult to do this as there are more threats hanging over us all than at any time in the past.

In short, GA is facing a growing crisis that many people have overlooked. AOPA can help, but there is no magic wand. Wake up, GA, or wait to hear 'I told you so'. ■

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