



WELLESBOURNE AIRFIELD REVIEW



Stratford-on-Avon District Council

Executive Summary

December 2019





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0. Executive Summary

Introduction

- 0.1. York Aviation was appointed in October 2019 to advise Stratford-On-Avon District Council ('the Council') on aviation matters relating to Wellesbourne Airfield. The brief concerned the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed by the owners of the airfield and the Council on 30th August 2019 and requires us to assess:

"...the existing operations at Wellesbourne airfield to confirm if they comply with current planning policy and regulatory standards and whether the MoU is being satisfactorily complied with."

- 0.2. In preparing this report, we consulted widely with users and tenants at the airfield. However, it is important to note that it is not our intention in this report to comment on any ongoing legal matters or disputes between tenants and owners; nor is it appropriate for us to comment on the legal status of the MoU itself. Rather, our purpose at this stage is to identify the scale and nature of the aviation activity (or to use the term in the MoU the *"established flying functions"*) at the airfield, and whether or to what extent these established flying functions have been impacted by compliance or otherwise with the terms of the MoU.

Planning Policy Context

- 0.3. It is relevant to the consideration of what is set out in the MoU to understand the national and local planning policy context as it relates to general aviation (GA).
- 0.4. There is considerable policy support at a national level for GA in the UK. The Government published a General Aviation Strategy in March 2015 which notes the planning guidance issued to planning authorities with reference to the National Planning Policy Framework, so that the network of GA aerodrome sites is considered within Local Plans and taken into account in future planning decisions. The Government has recently consulted on a Green Paper 'Aviation 2050: The Future of UK Aviation' published in December 2018, which sets out the intention of the GA Strategic Network of airfields to ensure an appropriate balance between transport and housing priorities, protecting the GA sector's contribution to the UK economy.
- 0.5. Policy AS.9 of Stratford-on-Avon District's Core Strategy sets out the Council's intention to:

"Retain and support the enhancement of the established flying functions and aviation related facilities at Wellesbourne Airfield."

- 0.6. Policy WW14 of the Wellesbourne and Walton Neighbourhood Development Plan states:

"The retention of flying activities at the Wellesbourne Airfield is supported. The role of the airfield must take account of, and safeguard, the needs of associated business, leisure and training activities and enable them to grow."

Airfield Activity

- 0.7. Wellesbourne Mountford Airfield is a GA airfield situated a few miles to the east of Stratford-upon-Avon and is operated by Radarmoor Ltd. – a company set up and owned by the owners of the airfield with the express purpose of operating the airfield and holding the airfield licence.
- 0.8. There are two operational runways: runway 18/36 (917 metres) and runway 05/23 (587 metres), the latter being unavailable on Saturdays as a local market is held on the airfield site. The airfield's standard opening hours are daily 0900 to 1730 (or sunset plus 30 minutes, if earlier, in winter). Flying outside these times is permitted by arrangement and some pre-scheduled night flying takes place. The airfield is situated in uncontrolled (Class G) airspace but lies underneath part of Birmingham's controlled (Class D) airspace.

- 0.9. A variety of fixed wing and helicopter operations take place on the airfield, mainly by light aircraft and small helicopters used for leisure and training purposes. We also understand that some private aircraft use the airfield for business purposes and that these include a light jet aircraft used by a local company up to three times per week.
- 0.10. As far as we can ascertain, the airfield is being maintained and operated in accordance with the terms of its licence as set out in the Civil Aviation Authority's 'CAP168 Licensing of Aerodromes'. The CAA makes regular inspections of licensed airfields and will report any concerns to the Accountable Manager (the airfield manager) and require them to be addressed. We asked the airfield manager when these inspections have taken place and whether any concerns were required to be addressed. We were told the inspections take place around every 15 months and the next one is due in January 2020. We were also told that there were no major concerns raised at the last inspection¹.
- 0.11. There are no published statistics on the numbers of aircraft movements, but the airfield manager estimated that around 20,000 movements take place per annum and that around 15% of these are by helicopters, the remainder being by fixed-wing aircraft.
- 0.12. In preparing our report we consulted with all the current tenants on the airfield and also with On-Track Aviation, who have recently moved off site to a location nearby, although they still fly from Wellesbourne. We also consulted with a number of private users of the airfield.

The Memorandum of Understanding

- 0.13. We considered the specific provisions of the MoU and whether they have been breached, or might be likely to be breached, and what implications they might have for future development of the airfield. However, it is important to stress that we make no comment on the legality or otherwise of the MoU, as this is outside our area of expertise. Our concern here is to evaluate the aviation impact on the established flying operations at Wellesbourne.
- 0.14. It is also important to distinguish in this analysis between what the MoU seeks to protect on a temporary basis (i.e. the established flying functions or current operations) and what the long-term re-development proposals might be. The intention of the MoU is clearly to facilitate the continuation of established flying activity, and not to pursue a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO), while a Master Plan for a "*proposed mixed use development*" is jointly prepared and evaluated by the owners and the Council. The objective of this report is to deal primarily with the former issue. Further analysis will be required when specific proposals for the proposed mixed use redevelopment are brought forward.
- 0.15. We considered each provision as set out in Section 1.3 of the MoU and subsequently referred to in Section 2, as required to maintain the established flying functions. We identified a number of potential concerns in relation to the provisions of the MoU, which we summarise here and have subsequently raised and clarified with the owners:
- ➔ Retention of airfield licence – the airfield remains licensed at the present time and is therefore continuing to support the established flying functions in that respect, but the references to future development in the MoU (in paragraph 1.2) may have implications in the future for the licensing of the airfield; this will be reviewed at the Master Plan stage;
 - ➔ Runway 05/23 – we queried with the owners why Runway 05/23 had not been included in the MoU and they told us that there was no intention to remove this runway from use while the MoU applied (other than for the usual Saturday market); as long as this is the case, the established flying functions are still being supported while the MoU is in place;
 - ➔ Hours of operation – these are not specified in the MoU but as far as we are aware the hours of operation are being maintained and the owners assured us that there was no intention to change these while the MoU is in place;

¹ It should be noted, however, that some tenants have expressed concern about surface erosion of the taxiways and runways. These issues may not necessarily invalidate the airfield licence, however.

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- Provision of maintenance - some concern was expressed to us by users of the airfield about the continuing provision of aircraft maintenance if Take Flight were to leave; however, maintenance services to the existing regulatory standard continue to be provided at the present time;
 - Aviation fuel – some concern was expressed to us by users of the airfield that the MoU did not specify the provision of both types of aviation fuel (i.e. JetA1 and Avgas) although we have no evidence to suggest both types are not continuing to be provided currently;
 - Provision of outside aircraft parking and storage – we are aware that some users are unhappy about the terms of the parking licences that have been offered to them; concern was expressed by some users about, inter alia, a price rise, the designation of parking areas, and permitted use being confined to the licensee. The owners told us that some of these concerns had been addressed, but the provisions of the MoU are not being breached as long as outside aircraft parking is being provided;
 - Provision of commercial flight training - given that On-Track Aviation still use the airfield, commercial flight training is still being provided at Wellesbourne in compliance with the MoU; and the return of Aeros to Wellesbourne, which we understand is due to be in January 2020, will add a based commercial flight training organisation;
 - Provision of a flying club – if Take Flight leave the airfield there would be no flying club at Wellesbourne, which would be a breach of the MoU; however, the proposed return of Aeros will provide a flying club at the airfield in compliance with the MoU, although this is unlikely to provide a strictly ‘equivalent’ flying club as Aeros are primarily a flight training organisation and may not be able to accommodate Take Flight’s members to the same extent. This needs to be kept under review.

Conclusions

- 0.16. Given the above, we cannot conclude that the specific terms of the MoU have been breached at the present time in terms of maintaining the established flying functions, even if there are some concerns about the future. Even if there were a strong case for terminating the MoU, the consequences of doing so could lead to the termination of further tenancies within 28 days and create more uncertainty as to the future of the airfield.
- 0.17. We believe, therefore, that the Council should keep the MoU in place at the present time, whilst continuing to monitor it to ensure compliance. The Council should also continue dialogue with the owners to explore a Master Plan for a potential mixed-use redevelopment. However, much depends in the future on how these discussions proceed, with what speed, and how realistic they prove to be.

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