
March 2014 Meeting Notes

PUBLIC MEETING held at Acol Village Hall, Saturday 29th March 2014

NR = Nicholas Reed, Chairman Why Not Manston?
RG = Sir Roger Gale, MP Thanet North
LS = Laura Sandys, MP Thanet South
DL = Dan Light, Save Manston Petition Organiser
MA = Manston Airport
CH = Clive Hart, Leader of Thanet District Council
TDC = Thanet District Council
KCC = Kent County Council
AG = Ann Gloag
EZ = Enterprise Zone
LHR = Heathrow Airport
LGW = Gatwick Airport
STD = Stansted Airport

The following is a summary of the comments and discussion that took place at the meeting on Saturday. I do not do shorthand, so I had to try and keep up with the speakers which was not always possible. I did not manage to get all names. I apologise if there are any inaccuracies or if I have misunderstood anything that was said by anyone.

NR opened the meeting, welcomed everyone and then introduced RG.

RG said that he and LS had been working closely together in their efforts to save Manston. They both believe MA should remain open and operational and at this time there is no Plan B as they do not want to even consider the alternative. All time and efforts are focused on Plan A. RG first heard of the closure on Wed 19th March during the Budget Speech when he received a page from BBC asking him for a comment. **Nobody** knew in advance of the shock announcement to MA staff on that Wednesday morning.

RG liaised with Secretary of State for Transport and Minister of State for Aviation.

RG says that despite some criticism that he has heard, the Unite union are doing their job in helping MA staff and doing it well. Any business is only as good as its employees – they are the wealth of a firm.

Friday morning there was a meeting of the Thanet Regeneration Group and this group supports Manston (including CH). In fact everyone at a national, county and district level all have a burning desire to maintain MA in an operating condition.

A potential buyer made themselves known to RG and they met with a financier who would provide the necessary backing. RG emphasised on more than one occasion during the meeting that he and LS are purely intermediaries – as MPs they cannot and will not be directly involved in any business deal. At this time there is purely an offer on the table – no deal has been confirmed.

At 12:15 on Thursday (27th March) an offer to purchase was submitted to Ann Gloag (her personal email address) and to her lawyers. Doubtless there will now be some negotiating as it is unusual for a first bid to be accepted – and a bid includes a price as well as terms and sometimes a bid can collapse as terms are rejected. It could well be that other bids have been submitted to the current owner of which we are not aware.

It is not possible for the Government to buy MA. Apart from anything else, there is not the time.

Next Wednesday (2nd April) there will be a meeting with the Business Minister to see what assistance can be given to keep MA operational.

CH is looking to extend the EZ to include MA (*this will give it certain advantages regards taxes, rates etc*).

Everyone is working together:
To secure a deal and in tandem

Take the business forward. So they are trying to secure additional business for a continuing MA. Such business would include freight, small businesses etc. MA employs 150 people but there are also those other companies and employees who rely on Manston being operational – such as TG Aviation, the catering company etc. It is estimated that for every one person employed by the airport, there are 9 other jobs reliant on the airport.

RG then handed over to LS.

LS said she had little to add, that RG has been the driving force. There is a task force in place working to save MA. Any department with any input is behind MA and they are also looking at it in context with the question of airport capacity in the south east.

All voices are important – we as the public are part of the marketing of the airport. MA airport needs an owner who believes the airport has a sustainable future and so a more diversified business plan is needed.

DL thanked everyone for signing the petition. He hopes that something positive will come from all of this.

Anyone who has not signed the petition is asked to do so – and all family and friends should be asked as well. Go to: <https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/save-manston-airport?bucket=&source=twitter-share-button>

The meeting was then opened up to questions from the floor.

Q = question, although some were comments rather than questions. Many of these cover the various points that have been raised by many people and rumours that have been going around!

Q – Has the MOD got any interest or influence in MA? What is the strategic / defence value?

RG – the MOD stopped using the airport in the 1990s and offered a lease for it to become a civilian airport. At the time there was a covenant in the lease for it to operate as an airfield for the next 25 years. However, when the government then sold the airport freehold, that covenant was cancelled. So no, there is no MOD interest. Nor is there a legal interest of any sort. The MOD does have a fire training school and part of the licence for any airport is that there must be fire services.

Air Traffic Control and Radar are also other essential requirements to keep an airport open and they are both owned by the airport owner.

Q – The airport was sold for £1 but what other conditions were attached?

RG – Doesn't know full conditions but does know that the previous debts were settled by Infratil at the time they sold. That there was an ongoing liability of around £350,000 which was taken on by AG. And that to date she has probably injected about £1.5 million to keep airport operating.

Q – David Foley of East Kent Chamber of Commerce then advised that when Pfizer closed with the loss of 3,700 jobs, RG & LS worked quickly and effectively and the EZ and Discovery Park were created which have resulted in many companies coming to the area. An operational airport helps current companies in the area; helps new start-ups and attracts new inward investment. The 700 companies in the East Kent Chamber of Commerce all support MA.

LS – MA is a key asset in East Kent. The EZ at Discovery Park is attracting new companies – one from Australia has just started there and one from the Far East is due to move in soon. Ostend Airport has recently closed so there is even the opportunity for MA to pick up some business from there. The Regional Growth Fund helps local business. There was a meeting this week which announced that 7 to 9 minutes will be shaved off the journey time of HS1 from London in September and another reduction is expected later which will bring the journey time from London to less than an hour. Part of the future marketing must be "Seat on Train to Seat on Plane".

Q – From Chairman of Deal & Walmer Chamber of Trade.

He says the airport currently pays £600,000 in business rates. Can TDC not extend a hardship relief which gives a 75% reduction in business rates to allow the airport to extend its operating time.

LS – TDC is doing what it can. They are talking about extending the EZ and part of that package assists with business rates.

RG – At the time he found out about the closure, the Chancellor was speaking about a package of benefits for airlines to encourage them to use regional airports. So in the future KLM (or any other airline which flies from Manston) could get assistance on new routes, so maybe KLM / Air France could start a Paris service.

NR asked if CH or anyone from TDC was present to respond to the question. CH was not at the meeting but Bob Bayford stepped forward. He said that as he is part of the opposition in TDC he has not been privy to any of the current negotiations. He said that Thanet Conservatives support night flights at MA.

Q – From Russ Timpson, LibDem candidate for the Thanet South seat in next year's elections. He has spent many years working in the aviation industry.

He said we should not believe that any big airline (eg BA) will fly from Manston. *(It will only ever be a regional airport with a limited number of passenger services)*. What the airport must do is think laterally and expand into other areas where there is a demand.

There is currently a worldwide shortage for breaking down aircraft – over 11,000 747s are nearing the end of their flying time and there is nowhere for them to go to be dismantled and recycled. The airplane graveyard in Arizona is full. Currently many planes go to Ghana where some parts are taken for recycling but they are then just burnt and kids play on the wreckage! Why not create such a recycling base at Manston? It could be done in large hangars out of sight and would not then be an eyesore. *(Subsequently found out – this type of service needs special permission due to some toxic substances in the engines etc. MA currently only has permission from TDC to dismantle 2 aircraft a year)*.

There is currently a huge shortage of aircraft technicians and engineers. Why not start courses at East Kent College and run in conjunction with MA. Similar courses operate very successfully at Norwich.

Certain high end engineering is currently carried out at Farnborough but they are now running at capacity. Some of those companies could look at MA.

All above show that it is necessary to build a diversified business plan for MA in the future.

Q – What is CAA's (Civil Aviation Authority) view of possible closure?

RG – He has not been in contact with CAA but will do so.

Q – As MA is a major divert airfield in the south east, how will the closure affect this?

RG – STD is in fact the main divert airfield for the south east. However the Home Office is reviewing major diversion tactics and it is hoped MA will be included in the future.

RG added that in the past two reviews of airport capacity in London and the south east, Manston has not been mentioned or included in any plans. When RG questioned at ministerial level, this he was told that it is too far from London. But it is in fact a similar distance from London as STD, especially with the soon to be reduced travelling times with HS1.

Q – What will happen to MOD plans to re-start air sea rescue service at MA?

RG – Bristows will be operating this service. However they want a long time commitment that airport will be operational. They will invest £1 p.a. over 12 years and so need a 12 year commitment.

RG added that Cargolux the major freight company currently operating from Manston wants to continue operating from here. KLM wants to stay – all signs were looking good for their twice daily Amsterdam service. They have announced a suspension of their flights from 8th April, not that they will be permanently stopping services.

Q – Why has there been no major advertising campaign in London to try and attract people to use MA?

LS – Whoever runs MA in the future needs to have a clear strategy including how to attract those from further afield to MA.

Q – What about the future of the museums at MA?

RG – The museums are on airport land but as RG is not considering anything other than Plan A and the airport continuing at this time, he cannot respond to the question.

Q – One third of flights, about 1.5 m tons, from LHR are freight. The amount from LGW is not known but also high. Moving these cargo flights to MA would not only increase business for MA but would free up slots at LHR and LGW for more passenger flights and thus reduce urgent need for another runway.

RG – There is a big problem in that the UK is currently losing a lot of business to Schiphol, Charles de Gaulle and Dubai due to the lack of airport capacity and as a result, as a country we are losing money and jobs. Whatever solution is finally decided for London and an extra runway / airport it will take years to build. MA is ready now and could be used. RG has persuaded the Aviation Minister to look into options.

Q – comment presented by a farmer whose land adjoins Manston. He says that since 1916 agricultural land around Manston has been compulsory purchased to become part of the airport. Some of this land could legally be repurchased by the original farms – “if Manston no longer operates as an airport”.

Q – the new A380s are wider aircraft. At LGW there is one stand for these planes. LHR and STD also have limited facilities. MA has

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