



24.6.2010

NOTICE TO MEMBERS

Subject: Petition 0550/2008 by Mr Stewart Dalton (British) on protest against the plans to close down Sheffield City Airport

1. Summary of petition

The petitioner strongly objects to plans to close down the Sheffield City Airport, arguing that such a measure would halt the development of Sheffield which would become the largest EU city without airport. The petitioner maintains that the airport, built with EU financial aid, is currently the property of Peel Holdings. The petitioner explains that Peel Holdings also owns the RAF airfield at Finningley which it would intend to re-open as commercial airport. According to the petitioner, commercial services at Sheffield airport started in 1998 and closed in 2002 despite the fact that financial returns were not expected in less than ten years. The petitioner challenges the claims of Peel Holdings related to financial losses and considers that the closure of Sheffield airport would only benefit property developers. The petitioner asks the European Parliament to look into this matter.

2. Admissibility

Declared admissible on 2 October 2008. Information requested from Commission under Rule 192(4).

3. Commission reply, received on 20 March 2009.

The petitioner argues that the closing down of the Sheffield City Airport would halt the development of Sheffield which would then become the largest EU city without an airport. The petitioner maintains that the airport is currently the property of Peel Holdings who also own the Robin Hood Airport Doncaster Sheffield located on the site of the former RAF airfield at Finningley (located between the cities of Sheffield and Doncaster in South

Yorkshire) which opened in 2005 as an international airport¹. According to the petitioner, commercial services at Sheffield City Airport started in 1998 and closed in 2002 despite the fact that financial returns were not expected in less than ten years. The petitioner challenges the claims of Peel Holdings related to financial losses and considers that the closure of Sheffield City Airport would only benefit property developers.

Sheffield City Airport was a very small airport. Eurostat does not have any recorded passenger statistics for the airport, even though Member States are obliged to report traffic to Eurostat for every airport with more than 15,000 passengers per year in accordance with Regulation (EC) No 437/2003 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 February 2003 on statistical returns in respect of the carriage of passengers, freight and mail by air.²

In this regard, the Commission has noted that the 2005 Community guidelines on financing of airports referred to studies which concluded that an airport needs between 500,000 and 1,500,000 passengers per year to break even.³ Sheffield City Airport with a runway of approximately 1,200m and less than 15,000 passengers per year would therefore be expected to be loss-making and the claims by the owner that the airport is unprofitable are therefore most likely correct. However, it is in the end the local authority that decides whether it needs more transport infrastructure or not.

The European Commission fully understands the petitioner's view point, the importance of airports for citizens and the local economy's competitiveness. It would also like to highlight the importance of developing airport capacities in Europe. However, it is for Member States to choose how to organise their transport systems and in doing so they need to take into account competition between airports and the financial viability of airport undertakings. The Community, which indeed contributes to the development of an integrated transport policy in accordance with the principles of proportionality and subsidiarity, cannot intervene in this area.

No breach of Community law can be identified in the situation described in the petition.

4. Commission reply, received on 24 June 2010.

Having analysed the latest additions to the evidence provided by the petitioners the Commission considers that:

The petition concerns a very small airport (Sheffield City) which, as stated by the petitioners themselves, is effectively closed to all commercial traffic since 2002. It is therefore not a matter of maintaining open an existing airport, but re-opening a closed one. In both cases this would anyway be outside the competences of the European Commission.

The runway at Sheffield City airport is so short that even small turbo-prop (propeller) regional airliners could not use it. The petitioners indicate that one specific type of turboprop regional airliner, the Dash 8 Q-400 could use it (and again, only accepting some charging limitations,

¹ Current passenger traffic at this airport is in the order of 1.1 million for 2007

² OJ L 66, 11.3.2003, p. 1.

³ OJ C 312, 9.12.2005, p. 11, para 72.

like flying with less fuel or fewer passengers onboard). In order to give an idea, the single runway at Sheffield City Airport is 1211 metres long and 30 metres wide while a typical "low-cost" airport has a runway of 2500 m length and 45 metres width.

The city of Sheffield is well served by two efficient airports: Doncaster Sheffield Robin Hood, at 46 km (44 minutes driving time), and the hub airport of Manchester, at 90km (1h15'). [*Distances and driving times as indicated in www.viamichelin.com*]. Doncaster has over one million passengers a year and serves 40 destinations, while Manchester, one of the largest airports in the UK, has over 22 million passengers a year and serves over two hundred destinations worldwide.

Within the TEN-T rules, building a new airport is usually justified only if no airports are available in a radius of 100km.

The study carried out by York Aviation (provided by the petitioners as a supporting document) which was commissioned by Sheffield City Council, states clearly on many occasions that the Sheffield City airport would not be viable. It is also to be noted that all airlines contacted in the framework of the study declared that they would not be interested (nor able) to fly to Sheffield City Airport.

Considering that the owner of Sheffield City Airport is also the owner of Robin Hood airport, from a commercial and transport point of view it appears to make sense that operations be concentrated on the latter. This airport, being a former military base, has a huge runway of 2893 x 60 metres. Moreover, Robin Hood airport is equipped with a category III Instrument Landing System (ILS) allowing operations also in very low visibility conditions.

Taking into consideration the above observations, the Commission does not intend to take further action.