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PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF DUBLIN AIRPORT'S FURTHER DEVELOPMENT DUE TO PASSENGER CAP

Dublin Airport is of international and national importance in the Dublin region and for all of Ireland. As Ireland is an island country, providing the appropriate infrastructure to enable efficient air flights is very important to the further development of the Irish economy. Dublin Airport is the primary gateway to the Country – over 84% of Ireland's international passenger air traffic passed through Dublin Airport in the first half of 2024.

Dublin Airport is one of the fastest-growing airports in both a European and world aviation market. The strategic importance of Dublin Airport for Irish transport infrastructure is best demonstrated by the growth in passenger traffic. The number of passengers using Dublin Airport has increased from 2 million passengers per annum in 1982 to over 31,9 million in 2023. Also, in comparing nine months of 2023 (25,578 million passengers) with the same period of 2024 (26,872 million passengers) the growth of passengers' turnover was 105%. To support this growth, the number of commercial flights for a period of six months (January – June) increased from 2023 levels of some 109,8 thousand movements to some 113,6 thousand movements in the same period with growth of 103% [1].

Leading Irish air company Ryanair continues to expand its network from the airport having pioneered the low-cost concept in Europe whilst Aer Lingus, the Irish flag airline, continues to develop new routes. With airline network growth, Dublin Airport develops a combination of fast turnaround by short-haul operators as well as long-haul ones.

Dublin Airport has US Customs Border and Protection process passengers in the airport which is a significant advantage for transatlantic flights. Also under the "Open Skies" policy, the growth of transatlantic destinations at the Airport has huge potential.

Also, the Airport has a great opportunity as a gateway to the Middle and the Far East. Whilst other European hubs are having difficulty developing additional capacity to handle the projected increased demand for both physical and technical reasons, Dublin Airport has the potential with its additional runway, terminals' capacity, and location between Europe and North America [2].

Additionally, the new Northern Runway, which was completed in 2021, has the potential to provide extra capacity in the medium and longer term. Both the National Development Plan and the National Aviation Plan, have emphasised the importance of this great infrastructure project for the future prosperity of Ireland.

Thanks to these factors, average traffic growth projections in passenger numbers indicate that by 2030 Dublin Airport will handle some 40 million passengers.

On the other side, the consistent growth in passengers and air companies in the Airport over the last decade has brought other issues. Dublin Airport is now getting close to 32 million passengers per annum the maximum volume as permitted which was granted by local authorities' Terminal 2 planning permission in 2007 [3].

Unfortunately, Dublin Airport's passenger numbers are set to reduce from late autumn due to the Irish Aviation Authority's (IAA) winter slot decision. This reduction will cut the number of seats airlines flying from the Airport can offer to passengers between November 2024 and March 2025. Due to this, airlines, operating in the Airport, were forced to reduce the scale of their operations.

By the legal procedures, in 2006 before the start of construction, there were a lot of local people's submissions concerning key issues and concerns as impacts on residential amenities and health because of airport development, such as increased volumes of traffic, the potential increase in noise levels resulting from the airport and regarding air and noise pollution from airport operations.

Also nowadays, together with green politicians and activists, a group of residents strongly object to increasing airport capacity. The result of these concerns was the set of restrictions and caps.

The big problem was the decision of An Bord Pleanála the planning local authority in 2007 to impose a restriction for night flights at the Airport as well as a cap of 32 million passengers per year, fearing that the growing number of flights would lead to big congestion on the M50 highway connecting Dublin airport to the city centre. This planning condition

remains in existence now and is limiting the available slot capacity below the capacity of the physical infrastructure [4].

At that time, there were just 23 million passengers a year in the Airport, and these restrictions seemed reasonable. However, in 2023, the number of Airport passengers reached 31,908 million, and Dublin Airport operator DAA plc informed that the 32 million passenger cap will be exceeded this year.

In October 2024, the Irish Aviation Authority which is responsible for the implementation of the EU Airport Slot Regulation in Ireland determining the maximum available capacity at the Airport and setting the parameters for slots, published the coordination parameters that set Dublin Airport's Summer 2025 Capacity (March to October). These parameters define how many aircraft may be scheduled to use Dublin airport at a particular time and will be used in the airport slot process.

Due to the capacity restriction, which was set by the local authorities' planning condition in 2007, the IAA has set a passenger limit of 25,2 million seats at Dublin Airport for the Summer of 2025.

So, the Summer of 2025 becomes the second season to take into account passengers' annual restrictions. For Winter 2024 (October 2024 to March 2025) the seat cap is settled at 14,4 million passengers.

However, even the Irish Aviation Authority itself recognises that the demand for slots for the Summer 2025 scheduling season will significantly exceed the 25,2 million seat cap.

In addition, the IAA anticipates that, like Winter 2024, this decision will cut the available possibility for new slot requests during the Summer 2025 season.

The IAA itself understands, that if the passenger cap wasn't a relevant constraint for Summer 2025, it would be providing a significantly higher airport capacity [5].

So a decrease in passengers in Dublin Airport is expected already from this November as a result of the Irish Aviation Authority's winter slot decision. Some airlines, operating at the Airport, have also decided to reduce their flights due to the misunderstanding with the 32 million passenger cap.

The losers are all the airlines currently operating at Dublin Airport (because they can't get additional slots and open new routes), and potential newcomers airlines blocked by the cap. This restriction hurts new air companies at the Airport such as Delta, American Airlines, United, and Jet Blue. Also, new air companies can't start operating at Dublin Airport

because they can't get slots. So this cap breaks down the creation of new jobs, opening new routes and destinations.

Also, DAA Plc was forced to make efforts to reduce passenger numbers to comply with planning restrictions including the cancelation of airline benefits at Dublin Airport, as well as the launch by Cork Airport of a new scheme to encourage airlines to move aircraft from Dublin to Cork. However, based on the current forecast, the passenger numbers at the Dublin Airport by the end of 2024 will exceed the 32 million cap [6].

To fix this issue, in December 2023, DAA Plc applied to Fingal County Council to solve it and increase the current airport passenger cap of 32 million to 40 million passengers per year. The application had steps to improve facilities and services for passengers.

This application was part of a broader Infrastructure plan that seeks permission for a range of significant investments to facilitate the projected growth of passengers through Dublin Airport. This will improve Ireland's ability to create jobs and its economic development.

DAA Plc is doing everything it can to comply with the planning cap pending the outcome of its Application. The Airport has taken away significant growth benefits for airlines, brought proposals to reduce unscheduled flights, and asked some charter carriers to fly to other airports instead [7].

Besides that, traffic jams, which were one of the cap's reasons, are no longer a problem for Dublin Airport. The roads have been developed and reconstructed and the Airport has got very good bus connectivity to the airport. Even Fingal County Council reported in 2019 that significant road network improvements were made which provide easy access to Dublin Airport. In addition, the airport is providing about 35 million bus seats by 2025 to decrease car traffic from the airport to the city.

So, we have a huge contradiction. On one side according to the EU legislation, air companies have free access to the airport, Dublin airport has the physical possibility to handle airlines and the great air companies demand exists. On the other side, there exists the passenger cap which was set according to the local authorities' planning permission in 2007, and prerequisites of which have been already solved.

Besides, this winter's slot allocation has been challenged in court. The Irish High Court has granted leave to Dublin Airport, Ryanair, and Aer Lingus to challenge a draft decision by the Irish Aviation Authority to impose a passenger seat cap at Dublin International Airport for the Winter 2024/25 season. So, in December this year, Dublin Airport, Ryanair, Aer Lingus, and the Irish Aviation Authority will all be in an Irish court

arguing concerning the importance of Irish planning laws and European Union aviation regulation supremacy.

All parties have noted that European Union rules guarantee airlines their right to use the airport. So each party understands the lack of alternative to the situation and the necessity to fix it.

DAA Plc from its side, wants to cancel the limit and is challenging it in court, and is going to take the case to European Union judges [8].

I'm sure that an EU court concerning this particular case will have repercussions for aviation across Europe. So, lots of aviation professionals all over the world, European regulators in aviation, airport authorities, and air companies are interested and waiting for a solution to cancel Dublin Airport's passenger cap.

Dublin Airport is a critical part of Irish national infrastructure. Its role in connecting Ireland to the world will be even more important each year as Ireland tries to stimulate growth in its domestic economy, by diversifying its trading partners, cooperation, and supply chains. The existing destinations and new routes will be an important key to creating new opportunities for Irish businesses and tourist development. As a national infrastructure business which is important for all of Ireland, Dublin Airport must be able to continue delivering and maintaining the development of Ireland's connectivity with the world, ensuring appropriate infrastructure and operating environment promoting higher volumes of traffic that support tourism, trade, and the broader economy [9].

Dublin Airport is the main gateway of the Irish national economy to the world. It welcomes the vast majority of international passengers, facilitating 30% of Ireland's exports by value, and contributing 9.6 billion Euro in Gross Value Added to the Irish economy [10].

Because of these, I'm sure that the court decision will fix this problem, but it's necessary that it be fixed as soon as possible because the continued sustainable development of the Dublin Airport to meet this growing demand will be crucial to facilitating the growth in economic, tourism, and trade development, attraction investments, and jobs for Ireland.

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