

Airport Hopes for a Brighter Future



Waterford Airport, where works on the 150-metre runway extension have yet to commence.

While passenger numbers at Waterford Airport are growing, the highly sought resumption of a link to London remains elusive.

Of course, the 150-metre runway extension, announced this time last year, remains an even greater prize, and works have yet to commence on that Government-pledged project.

Those improvements will permit larger and more diverse turbo prop aircraft to land at Waterford, along with larger corporate jets, envisaged in 2006 by then Minister Martin Cullen.

Obviously, things have changed during the post-Celtic Tiger era, but with increasing talk of a recovery of sorts and improved economic funding, utilising the Airport as a key regional economic driver is being spoken of once more.

And with monies for the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) earmarked for Ireland, and with the new Ireland South Regional Assembly to be housed in Waterford, hopes are high that the Airport can benefit from such funding.

Between now and 2020, Ireland is to be allocated a total of €1 billion from both the ERDF and the European Social Fund.

While discussions are already in hand for several other regional projects, we can only hope that Waterford Airport remains high on the pecking order.

Evidently, management at Waterford Airport will have to make its case in how it can contribute to the south east's long-term recovery, while financial support streams from other regional sources may have to be tapped into.

As is the case when it comes to the pursuit of Technological University status for the south east, the drum shall have to be beaten loudly and consistently when it comes to making the case for further investment at Killowen.

Speaking to The Munster Express, Airport Chief Executive Desmond O'Flynn justly pointed towards the upward curve in passenger numbers, stating his assertion that Waterford Airport can assist in the south east's recovery.

FlyBe is currently offering good connectivity, he noted, with flights departing from Waterford to both Birmingham and Manchester daily at lunchtime (with fares to both in the €120 to €150 return range).

Via Birmingham, one can make connecting flights to Paris, Dusseldorf and Milan, as well as Exeter and Southampton, while Manchester offers an even greater range of connections, be it to Glasgow and Edinburgh or to a host of European sunspots in Spain, Italy, Greece, Cyprus and Turkey to name but a few.

As for short term goals at Waterford Airport, re-establishing the London link via Stobart Air (previously Aer Arann) to London Southend may be considered, given that the company is obviously very familiar with Waterford. Perhaps some incentives and co-funding may be required to get them back on the Killowen runway, and what a boost that would provide to the local tourism sector.

CityJet, which flies and into London City Airport at off-peak times (it's an expensive landing space within proximity of Canary Wharf and the City of London) is also an outside possibility.

Industry trends, said Mr O'Flynn, indicate that airline passengers are happier with the easyjet approach of landing directly into popular city destinations such as Barcelona, also reflected in Ryanair's reduction in services into Girona (59 less weekly flights to that airport as of this summer). Incidentally, Ryanair has increased its connections to Barcelona Airport by 53 flights a week.

"Rebuilding confidence in Waterford is the key," said Mr O'Flynn, and regaining customers from both Dublin and Cork will be a major component of such a strategy.