

Support demanded for Waterford Airport

Uncertain future for Killowen while Knock Airport flourishes



The future of Waterford Airport is of concern to the general public, along with business and political representatives.

Waterford Airport must receive an immediate commitment to a similar level of support to that provided to Cork International Airport: that's the view of Waterford City & County Councillor Eddie Mulligan (Fianna Fáil).

Cllr Mulligan was speaking following comments from Cork Chamber of Commerce President, Gillian Keating, backed by Junior Foreign Affairs Minister Sean Sherlock, calling for a review of the National Aviation Policy to prioritise the restoration of Cork Airport's competitive position.

They are requesting that the repayments on Cork Airport's €120 million debts be 'parked' for a decade to allow Cork Airport to "find its feet again" and have the flexibility to compete with both Dublin and Shannon Airports.

Said Cllr Mulligan: "If Waterford is to develop the Airport in the short to medium term, as per the EU Guidelines, Government funding by the Exchequer cannot permit Cork Airport to get the proposed leverage on such a large scale at the detriment of our Airport.

"Cork no doubt has its eyes on our increasing passenger numbers and we can already see aggressive marketing being put in place to attract passengers west towards Cork Airport. With the imminent departure of Flybe on the horizon immediate action is needed and required to stop Cork Airport's unfair and unjust demands," he added.

While Waterford Regional Airport faces an uncertain future at present, the fortunes of another regional airport in Ireland are going from strength to strength.

A record number of passengers used Ireland West Airport (as Knock has been re-branded) last year, according to recently released figures. More than 700,000 passengers used the airport in 2014 - a record in its 29-year history.

Ireland West Airport Knock, which is located in An Taoiseach Enda Kenny's Mayo constituency, saw passenger numbers reach 703,000 in 2014. The increase has been attributed to the number of UK services on offer.

The best performing routes included Ryanair's services to Stansted and Luton, while the airline's Gatwick service grew by six per cent.

Meanwhile, Flybe services were also said to have performed very well, however the airline's Birmingham route is to cease later this year, as is the case in Waterford.

Flybe recently announced that it was suspending both its Manchester and Birmingham services from Waterford Airport.

The airline's Manchester service finished in October, while its Birmingham service will cease in springtime. The announcement came despite Waterford Airport experiencing a 15 per cent increase in passenger numbers.

Aer Lingus Regional, which operated services from Waterford to Luton and Southend, pulled out of the airport in 2013.

Commenting on Knock's performance, the airport's managing director Joe Gilmore said the figures highlighted the importance of the airport as a gateway to the west and north-west. It's also worth noting that seven local authorities have also agreed in principle to invest in Knock.

Meanwhile, on Wednesday last a Sinn Féin delegation led by Senator David Cullinane met with Waterford Airport management at Killowen to discuss the facility's short term difficulties and its long-term outlook.

Joined by MEP Liadh Ní Riada, her PA Conor McGuinness and local Councillors Pat Fitzgerald and Jim Griffin, Senator Cullinane said the increase in passenger numbers last year remained "a remarkable achievement - credit must go to the airport management, staff and the board".

He added: "However, serious challenges have emerged with Flybe pulling out of the airport...and of course, every effort is being made by the management and board to find an alternative carrier and reopen routes with the UK."

Drawing Knock Airport into the discussion, Senator Cullinane said that recent comments by Taoiseach Enda Kenny "open up possibilities" for Waterford.

"The Taoiseach has agreed to grant aid up to 90 per cent of the infrastructural works needed at the airport. This must also apply to Waterford as we must have a fair and level playing field. I have tabled a Seanad motion for (this) week on this important issue and I will take the opportunity to challenge the Minister."

David Cullinane said Waterford Airport retained a “vital regional relevance” and “has the potential to boost tourist numbers and to continue to act as a gateway for the region to London, the UK and Europe.

“It also provides a range of other services including acting as a base for the Coast Guard search and rescue operations for the southeast.

“The Airport has plans to expand the runway to accommodate larger aircraft thus expanding potential at the Airport.

“This is vital and needs to be supported by Government. Previous commitments made under Transport 21 need to be re-examined and delivered upon where appropriate. This must involve greater capital investment as a recognition of the strategic and economic importance of the airport.”