

Submission on public consultation for Donegal Airport and the retention of the Public Service Obligation.

Firstly, by way of background, I have a long association with Donegal Airport, from the very beginning I was actively involved in progressing this project in west Donegal, I acknowledge the part played by others in making this project possible. It is self-evident to all, the massive work which has gone into the airport from the early days, it is through this commitment by various Governments that the Airport has become the success that it is today.

The importance of the airport to Donegal, is immeasurable and it plays a vital role in the socio-economic life of Donegal.

County Donegal has a six-mile boundary with the rest of the Republic of Ireland, bordering Co Leitrim only. The rest of the border is with Derry, Tyrone and Fermanagh and measures about 70 miles, the fact that 12 times our border length is effectively with a State that shortly will be Non-EU member state is significant.

Donegal County is therefore effectively an island, isolated from the rest of the Republic by Northern Ireland which is part of the UK.

Donegal does not benefit from any rail links, nor do we have a motor way connecting us with our major cities, it is through this lack of rail and motorway infrastructure that Donegal Airport is of critical importance. It is also because of this lack of connectivity that Donegal Airport is a premier candidate for PSO and subvention of passenger flights under EU rules.

In many ways our isolation and lack of direct connectivity with the rest of the Republic of Ireland, that has in some ways effected our development and growth over the years, added to that was of course the thirty years of the troubles in Northern Ireland.

In terms of tourism, Donegal has always had to play the poor relation to the needs of the likes of Kerry and Galway, where there has been massive investment in tourism product. Again, the perception that Donegal is distant from Dublin or Shannon Airports and lack proper motorway connection and rail access has had a negative impact on our sustainable growth.

It is only now with the advent of the Wild Atlantic Way that Donegal has a chance to attempt to move forward.

Donegal Airport is an important cog in delivering tourists to Donegal, to enjoy a tourism product that can be available throughout the year.

Donegal Airport is an important part of keeping existing jobs in Donegal and of securing further investment to create more jobs. The airport provides access to Donegal within hours from Europe or the USA, a vital service for companies. The number of passengers that use the airport to connect to Donegal for Business reasons is ever growing, similarly for Tourism, numerous Hoteliers are providing packages through the airport based on a fly and stay vacation in Co Donegal. It is through these new innovations that further growth will foster right through out Donegal, and the airport is the natural catalyst for this.

Our health infrastructure depends greatly on our patients getting to Dublin city hospitals, and it is the airport that over 50% of them fly to their clinics or treatments. For sick patients, these journeys are pure torture, whether by ambulance or bus. Donegal Airport provides some relief, especially for cancer patients – this is a critical link and service for hundreds of patients each year.

Without the Public Service Obligation (PSO) Donegal Airport would struggle to survive, the extra subvention to make flights more cost-effective assist to make the airport the success that it is. It provides accessible transport, that provides further links through Dublin Airport.

Without the subvention, air travel would be too expensive and would be beyond the range of many of the current users of the airport. The PSO for Donegal Airport is in keeping with the guidelines and directives from the EU for regional and local airports, based on lack of connectivity to the overall Northwest Region.

To tamper with the PSO for Donegal Airport without doubt will put the very future of the airport in jeopardy and may well lead to its overall closure, this would be a massive blow to the overall future of west Donegal and the entire County.

Far from reducing services, there are strong arguments that services should be augmented and improved.

In all areas of subventions, Donegal fares out worst when compares to Kerry, Waterford and Knock, despite these areas' proximity to large cities and superior infrastructure in terms of road, rail, health services, tourism provision and foreign direct and national investment.

Far from reducing services, there is a strong argument to be made that Donegal requires preferred status treatment to the other regional airports in view of the State's continuing neglect of the county in its policies on rail, roads, tourism, health and industrial policy.

In view of the impending Brexit, it is essential that connectivity for Donegal is protected and expanded, it was never so important as it is now that Donegal gets extra resources, since Brexit will make Donegal isolated from the rest of the country, due to the fact our greater land border will be with a Non-EU State. This new dimension of isolation, one which we have not experienced since pre-1973, is a case and point for expanding the PSO for Donegal Airport as opposed to reducing it or reviewing the benefits of it.

Donegal will become a frontier county within a frontier state of the EU due to our border with Northern Ireland and the UK, which we envisage by then will be outside of the European Union.