

EUROPE URGENTLY NEEDS AN AVIATION CAPACITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN

Looking at the EU policy landscape for 2007 and beyond, it is clear that airports have now moved into the focus of the EU regulator. After more than 15 years of initiatives mainly targeting airlines, airports are now the object of much attention in Brussels. The airport package, adopted on 24 January 2007 by the European Commission, is of course emblematic. Yet beyond airport charges – the most significant element of the package – we are confronted by a fast developing EU aviation regulatory framework covering a wide range of issues: climate change, infrastructure capacity, security, safety, slots, traffic rights with non-EU countries, ground handling and passenger rights. All will be dealt with at EU level in the coming months and the outcomes will directly impact our business.

These are undoubtedly very challenging times. The EU institutional framework naturally tends to favour piecemeal approaches, reflecting the multiple and often conflicting interests of an increasing number of Member States – now 27 – matched only by those of hundreds of industry and other lobbying groups. But the EU and its citizens cannot afford a piecemeal approach for airports. The wide-ranging economic and social benefits generated by airports at local, national and EU level speak volumes. Suffice it to say that these days, airports create jobs much faster than most other industries. Without a thriving airport business, Europe would lose one of its most effective engines of competitiveness and growth.

However, these benefits are increasingly considered a given. In this respect, the lack of adequate initiative to address the looming capacity crunch is disconcerting – to say the least. The Communication on airport capacity adopted by the Commission as part of the airport package is not enough. By focusing almost exclusively on the better use of existing capacity, it definitely lacks ambition. It does not deliver the kind of policy platform that is badly needed to allow for new runways and terminals to be constructed in time to match demand.

For more than five years, the Single European Sky has been one of the key EU priorities for aviation. Aimed at reforming fragmented and inefficient air traffic management systems, it has been complemented by a technological revolution under way through the SESAR project. The EU objectives are definitely ambitious and well worth the occasional political pain and tensions. We are



talking about creating additional ATM capacity so as to ensure a threefold increase in aircraft movements, improving safety by a factor of 10 and achieving a 50% cost reduction for users.

ACI EUROPE has always been supportive of the Single European Sky. Together with technological progress and an Emissions Trading Scheme, it provides the basis for the sustainable and dynamic growth of aviation. However, there is a fundamental question that urgently needs to be answered. What is the use of creating all that capacity in the sky if nothing is done to address capacity shortages on the ground? Already, about 50% of ATM delays are generated at airports.

Airport capacity can no longer be exclusively dealt with at national level. We need a change of perspective based on a system approach – an EU Aviation Capacity Enhancement Plan, integrating both air traffic management and airport capacity. The Single European Sky and SESAR owe much to the determination and stamina of the late, former Transport Commissioner, Loyola de Palacio. Her successor, Commission Vice President Jacques Barrot, is firmly committed to reforming still further the aviation regulatory and institutional framework.

This is a unique opportunity to launch the policy platform indispensable to address the airport capacity crunch effectively.