



Department  
for Transport

The Rt Hon Angela Rayner MP

**By email**

From the Parliamentary  
Under Secretary of State  
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Dear Angela,

### **General Aviation – Department for Transport’s priorities and governance**

On Monday 15th November, you published a letter criticising the Secretary of State for Transport for promoting various policies on General Aviation, and accusations about how some could be seen as lobbying. As the Minister responsible for Aviation I am writing to clarify points made incorrectly about the Department’s work and priorities on General Aviation.

#### **General Aviation priorities**

The Department for Transport works to promote all aspects of its important brief, including the General Aviation sector which contributes around £4bn to the economy and supports nearly 40,000 jobs. Suggestions that General Aviation is a hobby sector shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the sector. General Aviation is the seedbed of all aviation, developing the talent of the future, the safety processes that underpin the entire industry, and is the test bed for emerging zero emission technology.

General Aviation airfields form part of the critical national infrastructure and the Department wants to ensure that airfields can grow and thrive as key economic contributors.

This is not new. General Aviation has been a key component of the Department’s remit for many years. As Secretary of State between 2012 and 2016 Patrick McLoughlin provided a Letter of Direction to the Civil Aviation Authority<sup>1</sup> asking it to prioritise work on aviation grass roots. The Government published the General Aviation Strategy six years ago under the Coalition

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<sup>1</sup> The Civil Aviation Authority is an Arm’s Length Body and the Department is able to provide grant funding under sections 12 and 16 of the Civil Aviation Act 1982 to deliver specific activities.

Government, setting out the Government's vision of the UK being the best place in the world for General Aviation as a flourishing, wealth-generating and job-producing sector of the economy. This is therefore collectively agreed government policy.

Many of the Government's subsequent policies relating to General Aviation result from implementing this strategy – including supporting General Aviation airfields, promoting skills and diversity and delivering more proportionate regulation for General Aviation, working closely with the Civil Aviation Authority. I have observed with interest the work my colleague the Rail Minister is doing, reversing the cuts made by Dr Beeching in the 1960s. The work on General Aviation being done now by this and previous administrations will ensure that future Aviation Ministers are not tasked with rebuilding our critical national aviation infrastructure. Once lost, airfields are difficult to replace, given the pressure on development land.

Three years ago in 2018, the Government updated the National Planning Policy Framework to include section 106.f to ensure that planning decisions have regard to the importance of the national network of General Aviation airfields.

As part of our continuing work, and following on from the 2015 General Aviation Strategy, I recently issued a Written Ministerial Statement in the House ([link here](#)) and my Department published the General Aviation Roadmap ([link here](#)).

The aviation sector remains incredibly unrepresentative of the wider population. Over 95% of commercial pilots are men. The Government and Transport Secretary are passionate about the UK being able to train pilots from more diverse backgrounds. Diversifying General Aviation, which produces the commercial pilots of the future, plays a critical part in this.

### **Civil Aviation Authority - Airfields Advisory Team**

The Airfield Advisory Team is an independent non-regulatory advisory team within the Civil Aviation Authority.

The Civil Aviation Authority is an independent Non-Departmental Public Body, established in statute and subject to the rules on lobbying which apply to all such bodies. The Chief Executive Officer, as the designated CAA accounting officer, is responsible for ensuring that all public resources are utilised in line with the requirements in the UK Corporate Governance Code and in the spirit of Managing Public Money.

The Airfields Advisory Team was established to provide advice and support to General Aviation airfields on a range of aviation-related matters affecting their

operations and its remit is set out publicly<sup>2</sup>. As part of this work, the Airfields Advisory Team also liaises with organisations to ensure that the economic, educational and community benefits of General Aviation are understood so that informed decisions can be made by local planning authorities.

It was established in the context of a severe decline in airfields. It is in line with government policy that the impacts on General Aviation are considered in decisions that affect airfields.

The work of the AAT is also consistent with the “growth duty” for regulators (established in the Deregulation Act 2015) which requires the Civil Aviation Authority to take account of the growth of the sector whilst carrying out its regulatory functions. This duty is also set out in the Secretary of State’s published [letter of priorities](#) to the regulator.

The Department provides grant funding to the Civil Aviation Authority for a range of activities, including the work of the Airfields Advisory Team. This itself is subject to Managing Public Money and the DfT Permanent Secretary’s Accounting Officer responsibilities. All such grants are provided under strict governance arrangements and are subject to specific KPIs and monitoring arrangements.

In summary your characterisation of the Airfields Advisory Team as a separate lobbying body is wholly incorrect. It is an independent advisory team operating within the CAA with a published remit and subject to clear rules in relation to lobbying and managing public money.

### **Airfield Development Advisory Fund**

The Airfield Development Advisory Fund was set up in October 2020 to provide General Aviation airfields and associated businesses with bespoke support to help them grow and upskill. Applicants benefitted from a range of operational, safety and business management advice, similar to many business development funds available in other sectors.

The Airfield Development Advisory Fund was set up in line with Cabinet Office public procurement policy rules and involved close working with the Department’s commercial team and the Crown Commercial Services to procure and manage the contract. This fund has been delivered and is no longer open.

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<sup>2</sup> The CAA have published the AAT’s full remit here. Annex C covers the specific role of the AAT: [https://consultations.caa.co.uk/ga/uk-general-aviation-opportunities-after-easa/supporting\\_documents/UK%20General%20Aviation%20opportunities%20after%20leaving%20EASA%20Consultation%20CAP1985%20%20v2.0.pdf](https://consultations.caa.co.uk/ga/uk-general-aviation-opportunities-after-easa/supporting_documents/UK%20General%20Aviation%20opportunities%20after%20leaving%20EASA%20Consultation%20CAP1985%20%20v2.0.pdf)

## **Tetrathyllead**

The Department wants to see lead cut out of fuel. Our current actions are entirely in line with the European Union, but the Transport Secretary last year indicated his determination to move faster on finding alternative fuels than the previous EASA regime. This is in fact the exact opposite to the assertion in your letter.

I hope this letter clarifies the Government's priorities for General Aviation and the role the Airfield Development Advisory Fund and the Civil Aviation Authority's Airfield Advisory Team play in supporting these. As I have set out above, the Airport Advisory Team sits within the Civil Aviation Authority, an independent regulator that is subject to, and complies with, rules on managing public money and lobbying. Therefore it is difficult to see how the issues that you allege are supported by the facts. I can assure you there is nothing wrong with the Department for Transport standing up for roads, railways, ports, cycle lanes and, indeed, airfields.



**ROBERT COURTS MP**

**MINISTER FOR AVIATION, MARITIME AND SECURITY**

Enclosed: Official role and remit of the AAT

cc. Lord Geidt, Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests

**APPENDIX C****Airfield Advisory Team (AAT) – role and remit**

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1. In order to meet the Department for Transport's objective of sustaining the UK network of airfields, the CAA has set up an Airfields Advisory function with funding support from Government. The new team will provide advice to Government, licensed and unlicensed airfields and local planning authorities on matters that are relevant to CAA's functions, and will formally commence engagement with airfields from November 2020.
2. The AAT's advice will cover:
  - best practice on regulation, safety or other operational issues relating to CAA competency, existing regulations and how they might be resolved. This would build on and support airfields' own responsibility for safety and would be separated from our role as their safety regulator. This could include reviewing safeguarding assessments to ensure that a sound methodology has been used and the conclusions reasonable; and
  - how proposed changes might impact the wider aviation industry (for example, considering the potential wider impact of the closure of an airfield which housed a flight training school).
3. The AAT will engage with licensed and unlicensed airfields by improving the airfield's understanding of key issues such as changing regulatory policy and communicate their understanding of an airfield's viability, operational and business issues to the DfT.
4. The AAT will be the key point of contact for engagement with airfields or other relevant stakeholders seeking advice from the CAA to ensure consistent and timely advice, bringing in other CAA teams as required.
5. Provide a regular overview of the airfield and its position based on the CAA's areas of competence and other significant factors where appropriate, both at a sector level where critical sustainability issues arise for specific airfields, on a case by case basis;
6. Lead on other bespoke projects and airfield related research subject to availability of funding that would be agreed on a case by case basis;
7. In achieving the above, being proportionate in its approach by focussing on licensed and larger unlicensed airfields and when undertaking those functions taking account of the impact on growth in accordance with the CAA's growth duty.