

Will Bristol become the flashpoint for anti-airport protests?

At COP26 Steve Melia spoke with the activists who led the campaign against Bristol Airport's expansion plans. Besides the climate impact of more flights, campaigners have voiced concerns about increased traffic and conflicting figures over public transport's modal share

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Tarisha and Steve Clark of the Bristol Airport Action Network (BAAN)

The big marches at COP26 in Glasgow attracted a wide range of people protesting about local and national issues, as well as the global ones. Among those who travelled from elsewhere in Britain I met a small group from Bristol who have led a long-running campaign against the expansion of Bristol Airport.

My book, *Roads Runways and Resistance*, describes this from the planning application submitted in 2018 to the unexpected decision of North Somerset Council to refuse it. Since then the airport has appealed and the outcome of the planning

inquiry is now awaited. Much of the debate concerned the climate impacts of more flights, but surface access has also been contentious.

The campaign mobilised thousands of people, who joined marches, organised petitions and objected to the planning application. For a smaller group of unpaid activists it took over a large part of their lives.

Steve Clark was a Green councillor in South Bristol when the application was submitted to neighbouring North Somerset. His wife Tarisha set up Bristol Airport Action Network (BAAN) and Steve became increasingly involved, leading their formal objection as a “Rule 6 party” represented at the inquiry.

He says: “The last six months during the inquiry has been a pretty full-time job. I retired from being a councillor so that I could spend more time on it. There’s been a core team of about six people who have spent an awful lot of time on it. We’ve had a barrister and three expert witnesses who gave evidence for us – for free – but it’s been quite exhausting really.”

Mary and James Collett are a retired couple who already knew Steve and Tarisha when the campaign began. Mary is a mild-mannered softly spoken woman, totally unlike the stereotype of a militant activist, but she and James were both arrested for spraying slogans in chalk paint on the DfT offices in London in 2019.

Why did she decide to join the campaign? “We took a pledge not to fly and we haven’t flown for some time because of the environmental damage it does... we should not be expanding the most polluting form of transport during a climate emergency.”

Before the campaign began, Bristol Airport had declared an intention to double in size by 2040. The current application would increase the cap on flights from 10 million to 12 million a year, raising some serious concerns about surface access. Bristol is the only UK airport of its size or larger to have no rail or light rail access.

Clark says: “The airport’s got one dual carriageway road leading to it. In fact, it’s not a dual carriageway all the way... That means that a lot of people get to the airport via rat-runs through the local villages... the road access is totally unsuitable for 10 million passengers, let alone 12 million.”

The original application proposed some minor road “improvements” and a “stretching” target to increase the modal share of public transport from 12.5% to 15%, through incremental improvements to bus services.

The picture on modal share was muddied by the Civil Aviation Authority’s 2019 passenger survey, which showed Bristol with a 22% modal share for public transport. Why were the two measures so far apart?

Steve Clark gives one explanation: “If you drive to an illegal parking space near the airport and then you go in a minivan from there to the airport, that’s counted as public transport.”

All parties at the inquiry agreed on the need to reduce informal parking around the airport. Some of it uses the 28-day rule for temporary use without planning permission, although that rule is difficult to enforce and open to abuse.

Bristol Airport is seeking to build more parking on-site to capture that demand, although it is likely to remain more expensive than the alternatives.

At different points in the inquiry barristers for one of the parties stated that the actions of another party were “unfair”, which is legal code for “we reserve the right to apply for a judicial review if this decision goes the wrong way”. And if the efforts of the council and the Rule 6 parties fail? No one wants to say this publicly yet, but privately, others are ready to take direct action.

Steve Melia is a senior lecturer in transport and planning at the University of the West of England. *Roads, Runways and Resistance from the Newbury Bypass to Extinction Rebellion* is published by Pluto Press