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Landmark public dialogue and new funding give the public a real stake in the future development and regulation of emerging aviation technology in the UK

- **New public dialogue report outlines people's hopes, concerns and expectations of emerging aviation technologies and their regulation.**
- **New £1.8 million funding to research public views and the social implications of the development of drones, advanced air mobility and regional airplanes in the UK.**

Farnborough, UK, 20 July 2022: A new public dialogue report and additional funding for social research were announced today (20 July) by the Future Flight Challenge at UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) which will allow the UK to better understand how more integrated aviation systems and technologies might bring about a range of social and economic benefits to the UK.

Commissioned by UKRI and supported by UKRI's Sciencewise programme, this report provides a unique insight into people's hopes, expectations and concerns about the potential future operations of three different types of future flight technologies for civilian use: drones, advanced air mobility ('air taxis') and regional air mobility ('eco planes').

Whilst participants recognised these technologies held potential and promise, their support was conditional on further research before public investment in these technologies is accelerated.

Generally, many felt more strongly about their concerns than the potential benefits, with participants raising concerns about a range of issues including:

- Personal safety and collisions arising from busier and more crowded skies
- Cybersecurity concerns, particularly over automated vehicles being hacked
- Privacy and data protection, to restrict intrusion into and video recording of people's private and domestic lives
- Governance, regulation and licensing to intentionally constrain "uncontrolled expansion of commercial uses of future flight technologies"
- Accessibility and affordability concerns, given the potential to exacerbate inequality
- Employment, jobs to ensure training is targeted towards those from underprivileged backgrounds or where jobs have been displaced
- Environmental concerns including impacts on wildlife and biodiversity and in particular air, visual and noise pollution to ensure these technologies would be greener than current methods

However, while greater convenience was rarely seen as justifiable, there were specific exceptions where participants could see the potential for drones, 'air taxis' and new aviation technologies to make UK lives better into the future and would therefore potentially be more accepting of their deployment. Justifiable applications included:

- Improving emergency services for medical and humanitarian purposes

- Improving infrastructure or access to goods or services in rural, or remote UK locations
- Improving regional connectivity across the UK
- Improving the environmental credentials and sustainability of public transportation
- Surveying and repair of critical infrastructure, such as storm damage to railways and power lines

Given considerable uncertainty about how these technologies might evolve, there were overriding concerns about accessibility (in terms of those living with disabilities and in terms of socio-economic accessibility) and appropriate levels of governance. It was clear that public support for these technologies will be contingent on them being accessible to all communities across UK and subject to strong governance and regulation.

Building on participants' recommendation to expand research in this area to include a broader range of public and specialist perspectives, the Future Flight Challenge has also announced it is investing a further £1.8 million in social science research through the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

This research will allow further engagement with communities across the UK to better understand how these technologies can be developed in a way that respond to real social needs, concerns or expectations. Drawing on the public's views will enable better understanding of how the social benefits of these new technologies might be made accessible to all members of UK society.

For example, the Air Mobility Ecosystem Consortium project, funded by the Future Flight Challenge, is working to demonstrate how the UK can use electric air-taxis to improve regional connectivity. Meanwhile, the SATE 2 project in Scotland is working with local authorities and NHS Scotland to improve local aviation networks for patients (and medical supplies) creating the same access to services, regardless of location.

Gary Cutts, UKRI Future Flight Challenge Director said "As a challenge we realise that public perceptions, trust and social desirability are pivotal to the uptake, roll out and ultimately the success of future flight technologies.

We know these new technologies have huge potential to benefit people across the UK and change our day-to-day lives, but there are significant hurdles to overcome. This report helps us start to understand the complex public, community and stakeholder attitudes, concerns or expectations that will inform society's thinking about future flight.

The additional funding we've contributed will help us better understand how these technologies can be developed in a way that respond to real social needs, concerns or expectations."

Professor Fern Elsdon-Baker, UKRI Future Flight Challenge Social Science Research Director**,** University of Birmingham said

“These new aviation technologies are just on the horizon and have the potential to radically change aspects of our day-to-day lives, so it is vital that we build a better understanding of their social benefits, impacts, and implications before they are rolled out.

The public dialogue report released today provides us a valuable steer directly from the UK public as to how they would like to see these technologies employed or operated. The announcement from UKRI of funding to enable further social research and community engagement that draws on this report is very timely and emphasizes the growing, much needed role of public engagement in the development of future research and innovation.”

Tom Saunders, Head of Public Engagement, UKRI said:

“Science and technology can change so fast that policy and regulation often struggle to keep pace. We welcome this timely public dialogue, ensuring the public’s priorities are front and centre as new future flight technologies, applications and policy developments emerge. UKRI’s Sciencewise programme helps researchers, policy-makers and innovators understand what the public really thinks, and ensures that experts, government and the public can design a better future together.”

Jeremy Neathey, ESRC Director of Strategy and Partnerships, said:

“As the major public funder of social science research in the UK, ESRC recognises the crucial role that UK society plays in informing the roll-out of these new Future Flight technologies.

For the last year, ESRC has prioritised this collaborative research in dialogue with communities and stakeholders, through the appointment of Research Director, Prof Fern Elsdon-Baker.

I am pleased ESRC can support this additional engagement with the UK public to inform the development of future aviation.”

ENDS

Notes for Editors

The deliberative public dialogue was undertaken by Ipsos and The Liminal Space during March to April 2022 with 72 participants who were broadly representative of the UK population as a whole, distributed across cities, towns, and rural communities.

Read the full public dialogue report

For more information contact: press@ukri.org / pressoffice@contacts.bham.ac.uk

Future Flight Challenge

The Future Flight Challenge from UK Research and Innovation is a £125 million investment designed to deliver the third revolution in aviation. By establishing a vision for the future aviation system using new classes of electric/hydrogen and autonomous vehicles we are transforming how we connect people, deliver goods and provide services. We are working towards demonstrating the safe integration and operation of drones, advanced air mobility and regional aircraft, along with advancements in electrification and autonomy. We encourage businesses, regulators and public bodies to share knowledge and resources with each other to bring these innovative air vehicles into service safely and practically.

Sciencewise

Sciencewise (www.sciencewise.org.uk) is an internationally recognised public engagement programme which enables policy makers, research councils and research funders to develop socially informed policy on science and technology. Sciencewise helps to ensure policy is informed by the views and aspirations of the public. The programme is led and funded by UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) with support from BEIS.