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Welsh government wins Cardiff Airport legal row against Bristol over £200m subsidy



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Mark Palmer, Wales politics assistant editor and **Dan Moffat**, BBC Wales

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Bristol Airport has lost a legal battle against its rival aviation hub near Cardiff, over £205m worth of tax payers subsidy from the Welsh government.

The Competition Appeal Tribunal rejected a claim that the money for Cardiff Airport in Rhoose was "unlawful".

Bristol Airport had wanted the subsidy quashed, arguing it risked distorting the market and was equivalent to the taxpayer contributing £71.50 per passenger.

The Welsh government welcomed the ruling saying "we very much hope to see both Cardiff Airport and Bristol Airport continue to thrive and grow".

Bristol said it was "disappointed" and would take some time to study the decision in detail "before deciding on our next steps".

In April 2025 the Welsh government officially awarded a subsidy worth £205.2m to Cardiff Airport, with £20m already allocated to be spent during the current financial year.

The full amount would be phased over 10 years.

Ministers said the subsidy would support new maintenance facilities, hangars and cargo capacity. New routes would also be developed, concentrating on global aviation hubs and destinations that could also support Wales' economic growth.

After seeing the size and details of the proposed subsidy, Bristol Airport filed an appeal with the Competition Appeal Tribunal in July 2025.

In February, lawyers for Bristol Airport told the Competition Appeal Tribunal that the £205.2m Welsh government **"should be declared unlawful"**.

They said that the size of the Welsh government subsidy was unprecedented in UK aviation and a breach of competition rules.

Around half of the £205.2m subsidy is allocated for route development, which Bristol Airport argued could be used to unfairly entice airlines to Cardiff and distort the competition between the two airports.

But the Welsh government argued that it was common practice for airports to provide up-front payments to airlines.

In its ruling, published on Tuesday, the Competition Appeal Tribunal said: "Bristol's application for a declaration, a quashing order and a recovery order is dismissed."

"This judgment is unanimous."

In welcoming the decision, a Welsh government spokesperson said: "We welcome the Competition Appeal Tribunal ruling that our investment in Cardiff Airport is lawful and can continue on its current terms."

"The airport, which recently celebrated a 9% growth in passenger numbers for last year, is looking forward to its busiest summer flying programme in many years, and we very much hope to see both Cardiff Airport and Bristol Airport continue to thrive and grow."

A Bristol Airport spokesperson said: "The competition tribunal heard significant concerns about the unprecedented £205m subsidy, which comes on the back of £181m of taxpayers' money that Cardiff Airport has already received. The subsidy will see Welsh taxpayers forking out around £71 for every single additional passenger flying out of Cardiff Airport.

"We're disappointed that the tribunal feels, that despite the burden being put on the taxpayer, the flexibility given by the Subsidy Control Act introduced after Brexit means that the subsidy can proceed.

"We'll now take some time to study the decision in detail before deciding on our next steps."

The tribunal's panel of three, chaired by Ben Tidswell, said that Bristol Airport had taken a "kitchen sink" approach to the challenge, making a number of points it said ranged from "considerable detail, to big picture".

"It has at times been difficult to identify precisely what the nature of the challenge is and on what basis."

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