

Airspace Policy Consultation

HACAN Briefing

This is an important consultation; a once-in-a-generation opportunity to influence aviation noise policy.

It does not just cover Heathrow. It is a national consultation. It was released on 2nd February and the consultation closes on 25th May. It does not deal with specific flight paths. It is about the principles that should be used when flight paths are introduced. It also asks for views on the setting up of an Independent Noise Authority and an on revised metrics to assess noise annoyance.

Over the coming years flight paths will be changing throughout the world. They are being modernized. Most aircraft are equipped with new computer technology which enables them to be guided more precisely. In the consultation document the DfT gives this reason for wanting to modernize the airspace: “Our current airspace system is inefficient and means passengers face longer journeys and delays as airspace becomes more congested. This will only get worse - it is expected that by 2030 there will be 3,100 days’ worth of delays – 50 times the amount seen in 2015, along with 8,000 cancellations a year. Inefficient airspace arrangements also means more emissions from longer journeys and prevents improvements being made that could reduce noise for communities around airports, for example by removing the need for holding stacks for aircraft unable to land and making better use of new technologies which allows aircraft to better avoid overflying populated areas”.

The target date for modernizing the airspace at Heathrow – which will involve changing a lot of the flight paths – is 2024, a year before a 3rd runway is due to open. Heathrow will be required to modernize its airspace whether there is a 2 runway or a 3 runway airport.

Responding to the Consultation

You can respond to the consultation in one of three ways: by giving online answers to the consultation document; sending an email with your views; writing in with your views. Our suggestion is that you email or write as that gives you more freedom to air your views. To respond on line go to www.gov.uk/government/collections/uk-airspace-policy. Or email airspace.policy@dft.gsi.gov.uk Or write to: Freepost UK AIRSPACE POLICY CONSULTATION.

You can find the consultation at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/589099/uk-airspace-policy-consultation-executive-summary.pdf (summary)

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/588186/uk-airspace-policy-a-framework-for-balanced-decisions-on-the-design-and-use-of-airspace-web-version.pdf (full paper)

There are three key areas of interest covered in the consultation:

- The processes to be followed when flight path changes are proposed
- The metrics to be used when measuring noise annoyance (new metrics are proposed)
- The role of an Independent Noise Authority

Each could have a significant impact on people’s quality of life

1. The processes to be followed when flight path changes are proposed

The new flight paths which have been introduced in recent years at airports such as Gatwick and London City have caused a lot of distress and controversy. HACAN also gets lots of complaints from people when air traffic controllers make smaller changes to flight paths. The Airspace Policy document is proposing much more engagement of communities before new flight paths are introduced and when smaller changes are made to existing flight paths.

The consultation document identifies three separate types of changes to flight paths which could be made.

Tier 1 is the introduction of brand new flight paths. This process is overseen by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). The CAA has been criticized for the way it has done this but is putting in place new procedures which will involve communities at a much earlier stage. The Airspace Policy consultation document is proposing that the CAA does not have the final decision: “we propose that the Secretary of State should have a call-in function. This would mean that when airspace changes meet one or more specified criteria, the Secretary of State could make the final decision.” This will be welcomed by many communities.

Tier 2 is where changes are planned that fall short of being brand-new flight paths. The consultation is proposing that the CAA oversees this process with a ‘suitable and proportionate’ level of community involvement. Until now communities have not been involved.

Tier 3 is where smaller changes are made by air traffic control to the way flight paths are used. These changes can cause many more planes to be routed over a particular area. It is a major source of complaint from communities. Until now, communities have had no right to be informed about them and no redress. The consultation proposes that the CAA “puts in place a suitable process for industry to follow” which sets out “expectations on transparency and engagement with communities.” This is an important step forward and will be welcomed by most communities.

The consultation also asks for views on two important issues connected to airspace: respite; and where noise should be prioritized over other issues. There is a welcome recognition that multiple routes can be preferable to concentrating all the flights over particular areas. The DfT continues to argue that noise should be the main consideration when planes are below 4,000 feet with it only being one of the factors – along with things like emissions – between 4,000 and 7,000 ft. On the basis of where complaints come to us from HACAN argues that noise should be the main consideration up until at least 6,000ft.

2. The metrics to be used when measuring noise annoyance

For over 20 years there has been fierce criticism of the way the DfT has measured noise annoyance. It has argued that ‘the onset of community annoyance’ occurs when the noise over a 16 hour day averages out at 57 decibels (known as the 57dB LAeq contour). Many have argued this does not reflect reality. It excludes, for example, places like Putney and Fulham in West London. The DfT proposes to replace it with a 54dB LAeq contour (which takes it to about Clapham and Vauxhall) but will not ignore areas further afield as the Noise Attitude Study* it commissioned and has published alongside the consultation document found “some adverse effects of annoyance can be seen to occur down to 51dB LAeq.” (which we estimate would cover areas perhaps 25 miles from the airport; maybe further). The DfT is also proposing a supplementary N60 metric – this measures the number of planes going over a property at over 60 decibels. Residents often say this is more meaningful to them than average noise. For night noise the DfT is proposing 45dB LAeq and N70 as the onset of community annoyance.

* The study can be found at <http://publicapps.caa.co.uk/docs/33/CAP%201506%20FEB17.pdf>.

An argument can be made that the metrics recommended by the World Health Organisation (which argues that annoyance begins at a slightly lower level than the DfT has recognized) should have been used but the DfT has gone much further than had been expected in proposing these new metrics. It represents an historic break from the past and reflects much more accurately the noise as people experience it on the ground*.

* There is one important area which may not be covered by the proposed new metrics. Because the metrics are averaged out over the year they don't reflect the noise annoyance in places like Teddington and Ealing which just get easterly take-offs (about a third of the year). A metric is needed covering just the days the planes are flying in these areas.

3. The role of an Independent Noise Authority

The idea of an Independent Noise Authority was first promoted by the Airports Commission. The DfT is backing it. It is calling it Independent Commission on Civil Aviation Noise (ICCAN)

The key functions the DfT proposes for ICCAN are:

- Advise on the best noise management techniques;
- Advise on the accessibility of noise information, making communities better placed to engage and comment on proposals;
- Verify noise forecasts and noise data;
- Influence proposals through best practice guidance;
- Respond to all formal airspace consultations to advise that the most appropriate and best available noise mitigations have been considered;
- Be involved in any proposals to change airspace;
- Advise airports and relevant competent authorities on the processes to agree operating restrictions;
- Publish and promote best practice guidance including on noise management, engagement on noise issues, use of enforcement tools, and the role of conciliation in disputes;
- Review recent research and where gaps in evidence exist, undertake or commission independent research;
- monitor and quality assure airports' noise measurements and reporting. This is to help to re-gain lost trust between communities and airports and improve the credibility and transparent nature.

How the noise authority would function

The DfT proposes a fully independent body; advisory rather than regulatory. Funding would come from Government to pay for a Board and a Secretariat. It would be housed within the CAA but the DfT says its "governance would include total functional separation between it and the CAA: they would work on separate work streams with no crossover". One of the reasons for the DfT suggest housing it within the CAA is to enable it to be set up quickly.

Responses on the Noise Authority

Most communities are expected to welcome it. Too often communities have felt there was no independent body to turn to if they felt they had not been properly treated by the DfT or the aviation industry. There will be different views on its roles; whether or not it should be a regulatory or advisory body; and whether it should be housed within the CAA.

Feel free to use anything in this briefing but always remember you don't need to be an expert to respond. Simply explaining how you feel in you own words will be sufficient.

HACAN gives a voice to residents under the Heathrow flight paths. We can be contacted at info@hacan.org.uk; tel 020 8876 0455, website: www.hacan.org.uk

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