

A HACAN Briefing

No Longer Just a West London Problem

Aircraft noise from Heathrow and City Airport has spread to new areas of London

- why has it been happening?
- what are the solutions?

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Photo: Phil Weedon

The picture opposite is of Vauxhall

Up to 40 planes an hour

Vauxhall is typical of the way aircraft noise has spread across London in recent years

➤ **This briefing assesses the problem and proposes solutions to ease the burden**

A feature of the last few years is the way aircraft noise has become a problem outside the traditional areas of West London. MPs, GLA members, councillors and many residents have remarked on the change that has taken place. There are two basic reasons for it. One, the steady increase in the number of planes using Heathrow has meant that many of them need to be held over London before starting their approach to the airport. Two, the increase in the number of jet aircraft, (replacing the smaller and quieter turbo-props), using London City Airport has required new and extended flight paths to allow the jets to land and take off safely. Certain areas of London have been particularly hard hit: those places which get both City and Heathrow aircraft; and the places where there has been an excessive concentration of aircraft.

The New Situation

In 2007 HACAN commissioned the respected consultants, Bureau Veritas, to undertake a study into the state of play in areas of the capital outside West London. Their findings confirmed what elected politicians and residents have been saying: in recent years the problems with aircraft noise have grown.

Key findings of the study

- Aircraft noise has become a **London-wide problem**.
- In places **20 kilometres from Heathrow** “aircraft noise dominated the local environment.” For example, there was “an almost constant background of aircraft noise” in Kennington Park, close to the Oval Cricket Ground, well over 15 kilometres from the airport.
- In some areas of **East London** flown over by both Heathrow planes *and* City Airport noise levels were comparable to those in parts of West London.
- “The **increase in the number of movements** between 1996 and 2005 can clearly be seen”
- “In terms of geographical spread, the greatest increases have occurred in the **early morning and in the evening** – arguably the relatively more sensitive times of day”
- “The relatively high levels of aircraft noise that do occur at some distance from the airport are certainly enough to be noticed by those living in those areas and in certain circumstances to **cause some disturbance and intrusion**.”

In places 20 kilometres from Heathrow “aircraft noise dominated the local environment”

- In **Ruskin Park** in Camberwell, 20 kilometres from the airport, aircraft noise dominates the local environment. During busy hours a plane flies over almost every 90 seconds, usually louder than 60 decibels.
- In **Kennington Park**, just slightly closer to the airport, planes are coming over every 97 seconds, almost all over 60 decibels and the vast majority heading for Heathrow.
- At **Clapham Common**, well outside the area where noise is officially recognised as a problem, aircraft fly over at the rate of one a minute, the vast majority of them registering over 60 decibels.
- In **Poplar**, it recorded 84 planes flying over in a two hour period, 45 Heathrow and 26 City Airport. The noise level of the Heathrow aircraft ranged from 60 – 69 decibels and the City aircraft from 64 – 82 decibels.
- “The results of this study do explain why aircraft noise from operations at London Heathrow is a **cause for concern beyond the boundary of the officially recognised contour**.” The official contour (where the Government and aviation industry acknowledge there may be a noise problem) contains the area enclosed by the 57 dB(A) LAeq contour. That is, the area where aircraft noise averages out at 57 decibels over the course of the summer - roughly between Barnes and Heathrow.

Since 2007 HACAN has undertaken further measurements. We found:

Up to 40 planes an hour at **Vauxhall** and **Clapham** at heights of around 3,500 feet

As many as 30 an hour in faraway **Blackheath**

Up to 16 an hour in **Finsbury Park** in North London

What Changed?

The first big change took place around 1995. Until then planes landing at Heathrow used to join their final approach path around Barnes. But in the mid-1990s the joining point was pushed much further east, to the Southwark/Lewisham borders. It didn't mean that every plane joined that far out but a lot did. It resulted in areas between the joining point and Barnes getting a stream of planes they never had before. No consultation was required with residents and none took place. And there was no compensation. Life changed for tens of thousands of people. This is what a couple of residents wrote in 1998.

We have inadvertently become the new neighbours of Heathrow

*"We moved into **Stockwell** 14 years ago after checking out aircraft noise (we had previously been in Fulham). There was no perceivable aircraft noise day or night. There has been a change. We have inadvertently become the new neighbours of Heathrow."*

It was as if someone flicked a switch

*"I have lived in **Clapham North** for 20 years. Until 3 years ago one hardly noticed planes, apart from Concorde. Then in summer '95, as if someone had flicked a switch, the occasional drone became a remorseless whine. It was like living under an aerial motorway."*

Aircraft began to detour over ever wider areas of London. When there were less planes many more of them could take the direct route from one of the four 'holding stacks' (over Epping, Biggin Hill, Epsom and Buckinghamshire) to join their final approach path around Barnes. But this was not possible when numbers grew. They had to be taken on detours across London. So, for example, many aircraft leaving the North West stack in Buckinghamshire are guided across North London often as far east as Leytonstone before turning round and back over Stratford and Docklands and hence on to South London and Heathrow. The more planes trying to land, the wider the arcs they need to use – so, for example, this summer when Heathrow had its busiest days on record, planes from the southern stacks that would normally have skirted Norwood Junction were being asked to fly in a wider arc over Bromley.

Concentration of flights became a problem. Aircraft are still guided on to the final approach path in different ways by different air traffic controllers but a look at the flight paths shows that, on many days, flights can be heavily concentrated on particular areas. It explains why we found up to 40 planes an hour flying over Vauxhall. The Department for Transport still favours a policy concentrating flight paths but we would question whether it is the right approach for as densely populated a place as London. It can lead to tens of thousands of people being trapped in noise ghettos.

To see the impact of concentration click on: [Under The Flight Path Crossroad](#)



The City Airport flight paths changed. Until the recession the number of aircraft using City Airport was on an upward curve. But, more importantly, many of the quieter turbo-props were being replaced with jet aircraft. The Civil Aviation Authority argues that the jets need wider flight paths to operate safely. So new flight paths have been introduced to serve City Airport. They bring a serious number of planes to new areas, often at heights of less than 2,000 feet. Some of these places, such as Leytonstone, also get a considerable number of Heathrow aircraft. It has resulted in Waltham Forest becoming the third most overflown borough in London. It is hardly surprising that the Bureau Veritas report found the combined aircraft noise levels in some areas of East London, such as parts of Docklands, can exceed that of West London.

Useful information

BAA publishes maps on its website showing the impact of the flight paths: [Easterly arrivals map](#); [Westerly arrivals map](#); [Easterly departures map](#); [Westerly departures map](#). You can also track flights using the Webtrak facility on the BAA website.

For the changes which have taken place to the City Airport flight paths: [Part I: East London & South East Essex area Size: 18.31 Mb \(pdf\)](#)

To contact Fight the Flights, the City Airport campaign group,: fighttheflights@yahoo.co.uk; 07984300558; www.fighttheflights.com

Possible Solutions

A window of opportunity may be opening up to for some viable solutions to be put in place. A number of factors are coming together:

- There is a recognition from BAA and the Department for Transport in a way there wasn't before that Heathrow aircraft present a real problem in many areas outside West London. There also seems to be a willingness to look for viable remedies. Many more people are also appreciating the impact City Airport is having on communities beyond its immediate vicinity.
- The question of expansion at Heathrow has been settled. The new Government has ruled out a third runway and mixed-mode (where both runways would have been used at the same time for landings and take-offs, thus depriving West London of runway alternation, where planes landing at the airport switch runways at 3pm to allow residents a half day's break from the noise).
- The annual cap of 480,000 on the number of flights at Heathrow is unlikely to be exceeded as the airport is currently operating at 99% capacity and still around 10,000 flights a year below the cap.
- Technology is coming on-stream which can allow for much more precision in guiding an aircraft into land.

What is required?

The ideal would be a return to the situation as it was pre-the mid 1990s: fewer planes; less aircraft being held over London; a shorter approach path; fewer jets using City Airport.

In the meantime, people in the worst affected areas are looking for some relief from the aircraft, similar to the relief that West London enjoys when the planes switch runways at 3pm.

What can be done?

- 1. Guarantee residents under the busiest flight paths periods of peace and quiet.** For example, at certain times Vauxhall could get blessed relief if the planes approached West London over Clapham North or Streatham Hill. At other times, those areas would be relieved. The technology, in the form of PRNAV, exists to allow planes to be guided with sufficient precision for this to happen. This same method could be used to give relief to people currently living under the new flight paths introduced at City Airport.
- 2. Introduce a steeper 'glideslope', (the angle at which planes descend).** It would mean the planes stay higher longer. At present the glideslope at Heathrow is 3 degrees. At City it is 7 degrees. The aviation industry is coming to the view that a 4 degree glideslope might be possible even for the very large aircraft which operate at Heathrow.
- 3. Bring back a shorter approach path at Heathrow.** This would mean most planes not lining up until they are in West London. It may not be possible given the number of planes using Heathrow but, particularly given the ability to guide planes more precisely, the current extended joining point should not be taken as a given.
- 4. Abandon plans to expand City Airport.** The current plans increase flight numbers by 50% are not compatible with cutting noise levels.

The starting point would be to gather information from both Heathrow and City flight paths so that the worst affected areas can be identified. Armed with that information Government, the London Mayor, GLA members, local authorities, local residents and relevant sections of the aviation industry, such as BAA, the Civil Aviation Authority and air traffic control, should get together to devise a practical plan to bring relief to these areas which in recent years have become, much against their will, the new neighbours of Heathrow or City Airport...or both.