

Media background briefing on airspace change by Aviation Environment Federation

18/2/16

1. What's happening?

Changes to airspace across the UK are taking place as part of the 2011 Future Airspace Strategy to modernise UK airspace by 2020¹. The Future Airspace Strategy is being driven by the EU's Single European Skies project and particularly SESAR which is aiming for more efficient use of airspace in Europe.

The UK's strategy has the aim to encourage use of Precision Based Navigation (PBN) technology, which enables aircraft to fly more accurate routes. This is leading to an increased concentration of flight paths. Airports have also trialled new flight paths in order to, according to the CAA, improve efficiency of airspace and capacity at airports.

However, the use of new flight paths has led to community disruption at several of the UK's major airports due to the redistribution and concentration of aircraft noise, with people being newly overflown. Community opposition has led to many of the trials being cancelled early.

Gatwick

Flight path trials introduced around Gatwick between 2013 and 2014 affected parts of East and West Sussex, Kent and Surrey, leading to new protest groups being set up. See here for more information². Gatwick Airport then delayed³ further changes while a review was carried out. A review of arrivals at Gatwick was published in January 2016.

Heathrow

A summary of the Heathrow flight path trials which affected communities in Ascot and Surrey can be found here⁴.

Edinburgh

In June 2015, Edinburgh Airport introduced the 'TUTOR' flight path trial, leading to increase in flights in the West Lothian area. The concerns of affected communities were taken up by members of the Scottish Parliament, securing a debate on the issue, leading to the flight path trial to be cancelled early. A summary of the 'TUTOR' flight path trial which affected people living in West Lothian is available here⁵.

Birmingham

Birmingham Airport conducted flight path trials in May 2014, which caused disruption in Balsall Common, Hampton in Arden and Catherine de Barnes⁶, leading Caroline Spelman MP to call on the

¹ <https://www.caa.co.uk/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=4294978317>

² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-28722477>

³ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-29440367>

⁴ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-29597561>

⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-edinburgh-east-fife-35562570>

⁶ <http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/villages-war-over-change-birmingham-3866700>

Secretary of State to end the trials. A summary is available here⁷. The airport and aviation regulators are thought to now be working with affected communities in a review of the trial.

London City Airport

London City Airport has recently introduced new flight paths under the LAMP change to airspace, which concentrated flight paths over Wanstead, Leytonstone and Leyton⁸. The airspace change follows a change which caused disruption in 2008.

2. What is being done about it? And why we've written the letter

Community groups affected by trials around Heathrow and Gatwick Airports (as well as around London City Airport) wrote to the Transport Secretary last June⁹ and Aviation Minister Robert Goodwill in November 2015 to highlight concerns about ongoing airspace change. The group met with the aviation minister during the same month but little progress has been seen since then on many of their demands, which included calling on Government to stop any further trials or flight path changes that concentrate flight paths or otherwise increase aircraft noise for any community.

The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is reviewing its process for airspace change with a consultation expected February or March. A consultant's report for the CAA, published in December 2015, found problems with the process for making changes to airspace but also a lack of clarity in Government policy¹⁰.

The Government was expected to consult early this year on changes to its policy to inform the process but the consultation has been delayed until after the runway decision this summer, according to civil servants, and this was confirmed when Secretary of State for Transport, Patrick McLoughlin gave evidence to the Transport Committee on 8th February 2016¹¹.

This means there is a lack of clarity about the policy supporting airspace change, which in the views of the signatories of the letter should be addressed as soon as possible, and separate from the runway decision.

Aviation Environment Federation and AirportWatch brought together campaign groups and individuals from around airports across the UK (ranging from Heathrow, to Manchester, to small general aviation airfields in Kent) and the decision was made to write a joint letter to David Cameron to ask for the review to be brought forward.

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⁷ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-28541377>

⁸ http://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/14108699.Campaigners_in_utter_despair_after_flight_path_plan_approved/?ref=rss

⁹ <http://www.airportwatch.org.uk/2015/06/gatwick-heathrow-and-london-city-airport-campaigns-come-together-to-oppose-airspace-change/>

¹⁰ <http://publicapps.caa.co.uk/docs/33/AirspaceChangeProcessIndependentReviewFinal.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/commons-select/transport-committee/news-parliament-2015/airport-expansion-ev-session-15-16/>