

TCN Consultation
NATS
Freepost NAT22750
Reading
RG1 4BR

4 June 2008

Dear Sir or Madam,

RE: Submission in respect of the consultation on proposed changes to airspace

This is produced in response to the review of the airspace known as Terminal Control North (TCN) by NATS contained within its consultation document on proposed changes to airspace, published in February 2008.

At the outset, while my signature of Early Day Motion 1540 indicates my belief that the four week extension to the consultation is insufficient to enable all concerned stakeholders and members of the public to respond to these complex matters, I do welcome the opportunity this extension (to 19 June) presents to take further account of the views of my constituents. I have received considerable, ongoing correspondence from many parties within Hemel Hempstead regarding these proposals, and the additional time has allowed me to reflect a greater number of their views in this response.

I have previously raised several of the points that follow in a meeting with representatives of NATS held in the House of Commons on 19 March 2008.

My submission focuses on the implications of the proposed changes to flight paths contained within the consultation document for residents of the Parliamentary constituency of Hemel Hempstead. In particular, it highlights a number of adverse consequences for residents of the villages in the north-west of my constituency, most of which are in a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The most significant change is for proposed new departure routes from Luton airport, which will result in more over-flying of the National Trust Ashridge area and many villages including Little Gaddesden, Ringshall, Nettleden, as well as many other villages and hamlets that form part of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), in many cases at lower altitudes than currently. There are also changes proposed for departures from Heathrow heading North and North East,

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departures from Northolt, and arrivals to Luton, which will lead to some shifts in the areas over-flown. The Chilterns is one of 40 Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty designated by Government as worthy of special protection, and of equal status to National Parks. They cover 15% of England and are described by the Government as the jewels of the English landscape. Government statistics have shown that over 50 million day visits to the Chilterns take place each year; these are predominantly by people from London and nearby towns seeking the peace and quiet of the countryside.

The Luton proposals are a particular concern as they would mean large aircraft flying at 3,000 to 4,000 feet above sea level over rural villages in my constituency – one should bear in mind that the Chilterns are already some 600 feet above sea level. Furthermore, the changes would require light aircraft to fly lower to avoid jet flight paths.

It is understood that NATS have said,¹ with specific reference to one of the Luton departure routes:

'No practical alternatives exist to avoid both centres of population and the AONB. Government guidance suggests that in general the impact to people should take precedence in the design of routes at 7000ft or below, and therefore NATS is proposing the route positioned further towards the middle of the AONB.'

The relevant Defra Guidance² Note states:

'National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) have been confirmed by the Government as having the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. Each of these designated areas has specific statutory purposes which help ensure their continued protection. National Park purposes are to conserve and enhance their natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage and to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of their special qualities by the public. The Broads' purposes are to conserve and enhance their natural beauty, promote their enjoyment by the public and protect the interests of navigation. And the statutory purpose of AONBs is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of their area.'

¹ <http://www.chilternsociety.org.uk/content/dloads/NatsTCNorth-ConsultationInfo.pdf>

² 'Duties on relevant authorities to have regard to the purposes of National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads' <http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/issues/landscap/pdf/authorityduties-guidancenote.pdf>

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The statutory duties are provided for in Section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (National Parks), Section 17A of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act 1988 (The Broads) and Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 (AONBs). Specifically, they state that, "in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land" in these areas, relevant authorities "shall have regard" to their purposes.'

I believe that the Chiltern AONB and the Ashridge Estate is a precious natural resource and that the proposed route changes will increase the noise levels over this area by an unacceptable amount to the detriment of millions of visitors, the wildlife and the residents. From a situation at present with almost no flights over these areas below 4,000 ft the proposals include numerous flights below this height. I further believe that NATS have inappropriately interpreted Government guidance and failed to give sufficient weight to these considerations.

Finally, the movement of the Bovingdon stack, which serves Heathrow airport, should be considered as a matter of urgency. The stack itself necessarily has an important effect upon the use of airspace locally, and any movement according to the continuing discussions could reduce noise disturbances in the area by permitting aircraft to fly higher. Ambiguity surrounding the Bovingdon stack therefore highlights aspects of the consultation as being premature; I would like to see the situation clarified before a final decision on airspace use is made.

Accordingly, and given that the cumulative effect of the changes will be considerably to the detriment of the AONB, Ashridge, Little Gaddesden, Ringshall, Nettleden and the surrounding towns and villages, I cannot agree with the proposals. I therefore urge NATS to amend the routes below to avoid flights below 5,000 ft over the affected areas.

- Luton easterly departures to the southwest
- Luton westerly departures to the east
- Luton westerly departures to the north
- Luton westerly departures to the southeast
- Northolt westerly departures to the east.

I trust you will be able to consider the points raised.

Yours sincerely,

Mike Penning
Member of Parliament for Hemel Hempstead

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