Department for Transport

From the Secretary of State
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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
House of Commons
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Dear Michael

Thank you for your letter of 10 December 2015 enclosing one from your constituent, Rosalie James of , Lightwater, Surrey, about the Government's policy on aircraft noise.

I would first like to make clear that the Government's overall policy with regard to aviation noise, as stated in the 2013 Aviation Policy Framework (APF), is 'to limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise'. To achieve this, the Government believes in most cases it will be preferable to concentrate aircraft over as few routes as possible and this has indeed been the overriding policy for many years. The APF does, however, go on to say that there should be the opportunity for multiple routes to be considered, where appropriate, 'such as where there is intensive use of certain routes, and following engagement with local communities'. Clearly, individual local circumstances do need to be taken into account since what might be appropriate at one airport, or even on an individual departure route, may not be suitable elsewhere.

In your constituent's letter, she also queried who is responsible for the routes planes fly. When routes were first designed over 40 years ago, they were selected to avoid population overflight as far as possible. Preventing new areas from being exposed to significant levels of noise was therefore achieved by establishing noise-preferential routes (NPRs) at the airports the Government owned at the time – including Heathrow. These created the overall route framework within which the precise standard instrument departure routes were then set. NPRs are routes aircraft aim to follow on departure up to around 4000 feet, above which height they can then be vectored on to a more direct route to their destination. NPRs cannot be changed without the Government's agreement, although changes can be made via the Civil Aviation Authority's (CAA) Airspace Change Process to the associated standard instruments departure routes as well as any changes to routes further away from the airport.

The structure of the departure routes around Heathrow has not changed in many years, and while there were trials that took place in 2014, the routes have now reverted to their previous form. There can, however, be random variations in the frequency and type of aircraft using particular routes that may affect how noise is

distributed. It should also be noted that some aircraft are able to fly routes more accurately resulting in less dispersal than previously existed. At Heathrow, this will not be due to the introduction of performance-based navigation (PBN), but can partially be explained by the increased navigational capabilities of aircraft and improvements in airspace systemisation.

For safety reasons, and to ensure safe separation between incoming flights, there are no set routes or heights for arrival aircraft before they join the final approach path. Aircraft leave the stacks before they go below 7000 feet, and in order to ensure the safe and efficient utilisation of some of the busiest airspace in the world, air traffic control (ATC) has long had the discretion over the exact location that an aircraft will intercept, at least at 3000 feet, the instrument landing system (ILS) prior to landing. Without the ability to vector aircraft in the airspace between the stack and joining the ILS, NATS would be unable to offer an efficient and safe air traffic service provision. One by-product of this procedure is that it does offer some dispersion of arrival air traffic which can be a benefit to some communities. This also means it is not possible to set arrival noise limits at specific locations as there will be a wide variation in the location and height of arriving aircraft. With the increasing systemisation of ATC over the coming years, the amount of controller intervention should reduce sharply for both arrival and departing air traffic.

By 2024, there is a Europe requirement for all major airports in the EU to have PBN procedures in place for their flightpaths, as part of the European Union's Single European Sky programme to modernise airspace. In the UK this modernisation is being delivered through the CAA's Future Airspace Strategy. The implementation of PBN will deliver significant improvements to the precision with which ATC can manage the trajectories of aircraft. The greater navigational accuracy means more efficient operations, shorter journeys and reduced fuel use and emissions. PBN can also generate significant improvements to the noise climate by keeping planes higher for longer, removing routine holding stacks, letting aircraft fly steeper trajectories and ensuring planes are directed away from populated areas.

Our airspace was designed over 40 years ago when there were considerably fewer planes in the sky, and modernisation is essential to delivering all of the benefits I have mentioned. Prior to any implementation of these procedures, there will need to be consultation with communities who may be affected. The Government believes that to fully deliver the benefits airspace modernisation can offer, communities have to be involved in the process and have a say in the changes that need to take place – including on whether it is better to concentrate flight paths or pursue multiple routes in a given situation.

I hope you have found this response useful.

Yours

Patrick

THE RT. HON. PATRICK McLOUGHLIN