

The Rt. Hon. Michael Gove MP
House of Commons
London
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Miss Rosalie James

26 October 2015

Dear Mr Gove

I am writing to once again state my dissatisfaction with the lack of response regarding clarification of the Government's Policy on Aircraft Concentration.

I first emailed you, along with the DfT and local councillors on 11 September and have sent subsequent requests for a response. To date nothing has been received.

Amongst the very many complex issues and questions surrounding the scandal of current levels of aircraft noise over many communities, stating what should be a clear Policy statement is surely the most simple to answer? It appears not. Why is that? Could it be that this Government does not have a policy, does not understand its policy or is reluctant to state that policy publicly in the certain knowledge that it is by far and away the biggest contributor to current noise issues?

Communities in this area feel rightly aggrieved at the lack of real engagement by those elected to represent us at local, borough and county level. Whilst we appreciate that all opinions are valid, those now blighted by aircraft noise demand at least equal representation. It is unacceptable to simply sit and wait for data verification, unless of course this Government can guarantee to those affected by noise that no decision on further expansion will be made until a full inquiry is completed.

That said, with this PM's volte face on categorical pledges such as no third runway or changes to tax credits, the credibility of any such guarantee would be highly questionable.

On Monday 19 October, Robert Goodwill, Minister for Aviation spoke at the Adjournment Debate, Mitigation of Noise around Heathrow.

Whilst many of our neighbouring boroughs, equally affected by the same noise issues which have been reported to you by your constituents for more than a year were represented by their MPs, Surrey Heath communities had no such representation.

There are various statements in Mr Goodwill's speech which I should like to raise (his comments italicised):

"One of the problems seems to be that whilst it is now possible to fly aircraft more accurately, that does limit the number of people affected, but it does mean that those who are affected can often have a much greater instance of aircraft and there is a debate to be had as to whether we should fly down these accurate navigation lanes and limit the number of people affected, or whether we should in effect go back to the situation we had in the past where because aircraft could not navigate so accurately, we had a dispersed level of flying out of the airports concerned and therefore the noise was spread around."

This statement confirms that things have indeed changed as communities have consistently stated, otherwise why would Mr Goodwill state that 'we should in effect go back to the situation we had in the past'.

Why then do the CAA, NATS, DfT and HAL consistently state that nothing has changed, when the Minister responsible clearly feels there is a changed situation which could be reverted?

“Turning now to the Government’s role, under the powers set out in the Civil Aviation Act 1982, the Government sets noise controls at Heathrow including restrictions on the number of flights allowed during the night and specifies the routes that departing aircraft need to follow. The controls also cover minimum height levels and maximum noise limits that departing aircraft must adhere to at certain points near the airport. Of course communities can be affected by noise disturbance by either arriving or departing aircraft or indeed both but as I will set out later it is more difficult to lay down limits for arrival aircraft”

We are continually provided with contradictory information about who is responsible for routes taken but the above statement clearly confirms that it is Government which decides the routes. A secondary issue is the level at which NATS can vector off of these routes. However, with Easterly arrivals causing up to 17 hours of nonstop aircraft noise for our communities, why can limits not be set for arrival aircraft? Furthermore, whilst Government consent would be needed to move the holding stacks (7,000 feet upwards), why is it acceptable that NATS is allowed to direct landing aircraft anywhere it wishes in the 7,000 feet to 4,000 feet zone between the stacks and final approach, i.e. the Surrey Heath area?

“The routes used by aircraft and the height at which they fly are two significant factors that affect noise experience by people on the ground. The departure trials last year both at Heathrow and Gatwick and the public response to them, as indicated by the number of complaints received clearly show that people do notice any changes in airspace use and are quick to make their feelings known as my inbox will attest.

The Government understands the concerns that these communities have and are looking into how the airspace change process can be improved. The CAA are also aware of concerns around the airspace change process and that is why they are carrying out an independent review into whether it can be improved. ”

The feeling from the majority of those affected and who have submitted complaints to their local Councillors is that those same Councillors prefer to believe and quote unquestioningly the propaganda fed to them by the aviation industry itself. If Mr Goodwill can acknowledge that communities are aware of changes, why cannot our own Borough and County Councils do the same? Whilst Mr Goodwill does state that the Government understands the concerns of communities, when all is said and done the Government is still failing to act.

“I wish to assure the House that these trials ended last year but the information gained from them is vital to increase our knowledge of Future Airspace Change driven by the CAAs Future Airspace Strategy. Changes to the UKs airspace structure are required. We must accept this while recognising that we need to address the impact of such change as much as is practical. The Future Airspace Strategy is critical to making sure the industry is efficient and able to minimise its overall environmental impact. “

When will information be unambiguous? Here Mr Goodwill states that the FAS is CAA driven. We are told that changes are due to Government Policy and the need to meet European requirements of SES. With hundreds of thousands of people potentially adversely affected by aircraft noise, why is Mr Cameron not challenging this EU directive given the level of outcry from the British public?

“So the plan is to modernise UK airspace and deliver our contribution to the European Commission’s Single European Sky by 2030 which is an ambitious plan designed around the use of modern technology including more Precision Based Navigation. This technology has the potential to bring significant benefits for the industry through greater efficiencies, safety and resilience or the environment through fewer emissions and for passengers through quick journeys and fewer delays but this technology also gives the Aviation Industry an opportunity to deliver improvements to communities near airports. More precise navigations means planes can be directed away from populated areas and can ascend quicker meaning less noise for people on the ground. This can only happen with modernisation however for without this none of the benefits will be possible. Of course modernisation brings challenges too this is why it is important the Government listens to the concerns of communities so that they can share in these benefits where possible and the CAA, NATS and the wider industry also need to listen to communities and ensure that they then have a say in changes that will affect them.

As set out in our Aviation Policy Framework the Government believes that in most circumstances it is desirable to concentrate aircraft along the fewest possible number of routes in the vicinity of airports and that these routes should avoid densely populated areas as far as possible. However, the Aviation Policy Framework goes on to add that in certain circumstances such as where there is intensive use of certain routes and following engagement with local communities, it may be appropriate to explore options for respite. This engagement is crucial for delivering the results that work for communities and the aviation industry. “

The question first put to you in this letter is answered here. The Government's belief that to concentrate aircraft along the fewest possible routes is desirable!

I fail to see how the widely voiced concerns of so many communities over such a sustained period of time can possibly have been taken into account if such a statement can be made.

I also feel that you are ideally placed, as Minister for Justice, to explain how the policy of the concentration of flights over less densely populated areas is compatible with Article 8 of the Human Rights Act 1998 (right to respect for private and family life and the home). People's human rights do not diminish if they happen to live in a less densely populated area. In fact, there is a good argument that such rights are all the more relevant, as people can be more vulnerable when they are less numerous. It would appear that the Government is taking advantage of this vulnerability.

These, Mr Gove, are the pressing issues of the day for many of your constituents. Communities now demand that the current issues of noise are addressed; that legislation is introduced to ensure those responsible are legally accountable for the impact of changes to noise on the ground and that a public inquiry is held into the legal framework surrounding the governance of the aviation industry. All of which is required before yet another myopic decision on further airport expansion is made.

Yours sincerely



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cc:

Robert Goodwill, MP

Cllr Mike Goodman

Cllr Moira Gibson

Cllr C Sturt

MPs of affected constituencies