

Rt Hon John Redwood MP
House of Commons
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17 March 2015

Dear ,

You will by now have received a letter from John Holland-Kaye, CEO of Heathrow Airport Ltd, explaining how NATS failed to inform them of a procedural change which may account for changes to air traffic patterns being noticed by residents affected by the airport's Future Airspace Strategy (FAS) trials last autumn.

I want to add my apologies to John's and make clear that the procedural change is unrelated to the trials which ran from 28 July to 12 November 2014. I can assure you that John was correct when he confirmed in November that those trials had ended and that traffic on those trial routes had reverted to previous flight paths.

In June 2014, NATS introduced a procedural change, which changes the way air traffic controllers direct aircraft within existing airspace. This change only applies when the airport is on easterly operations, and affects only the Compton route which accounts for around 16% of departures, or 6% of total departures. It involves directing aircraft through a 'gate' approximately seven miles wide in the Compton area at approximately 8000ft; this 'gate', previously 13 miles wide, allows NATS to improve air traffic management in the area, enhancing safety and efficiency.

This new procedure involves NATS (NERL) in terminal control in Swanwick climbing aircraft more quickly out of Heathrow on the Compton route and more clearly separating them from Heathrow inbound streams that in the past they would have had to transit underneath at low level. There is a net safety benefit of doing this through greater systemisation of the airspace and a clearer separation of inbound and outbound flows of traffic. There is also a net benefit to the public as a whole, as these departures now climb more efficiently, reducing overall ground noise.

I should stress that the area involved is designated as a Radar Manoeuvring Area. NATS is therefore authorised to "vector" (direct) aircraft tactically in line with our obligations under our CAA licence to achieve safe, efficient and expeditious air traffic control. NATS is not required to consult on operational changes of this type as we are not moving, creating or changing routes or redesigning airways.

The change is in line with the Government's Aviation Policy Framework, which states *'limit and, where possible, reduce the number of people in the UK significantly affected by aircraft noise'*. Therefore, we have explained to Heathrow that we are not intending to revert to previous procedures.

There is no suggestion that NATS did not follow the current agreed process. I regret that in this case we did not highlight the procedural change to the management of Heathrow when they asked us in November whether anything else had changed. Heathrow has acted in good faith in their communications with local residents.

NATS has already taken steps to ensure more robust processes are in place to share relevant information with Heathrow so that they are aware of any changes that may be noticed by local residents.

We have issued a statement and more information today about this which can be found on our website. I would be pleased to welcome you to our centre at Swanwick in Hampshire where we could show you on radar how this works, and how we safely manage air traffic in this extremely busy and complex airspace.

Yours sincerely

a kind regard



Jane Johnston
Head of Corporate Affairs