

NATS PROCEDURAL CHANGE to DEPARTURES ON COMPTON ROUTE - Q & A

What were these changes and when were they introduced?

This was a procedural change introduced by NATS on 27th June 2014. The change affects the way aircraft are directed on one of the departure routes, known as Compton, when the airport is on easterly operations (i.e. when there are easterly winds). The airport is on easterly operations approx. 30% of the time (link to website on wind direction).

The Compton route is one of six departure routes used when the airport is on easterly operations. The route concerned is used only for departures which turn to the West. In total it was used by 6% of all Heathrow departures in 2014. During periods of easterly operations, it is used by approx. 16% of departing aircraft.

What has been the effect of these changes for people on the ground?

Aircraft are being directed by controllers through a more defined area within the existing airspace. Prior to the change, aircraft using the Compton departure route were directed across a wide swathe of airspace (approx. 13 miles) before moving into the next sector of 'higher level' airspace (at approximately 8,000ft) via a "gateway" near Compton (hence its name). Since NATS made the procedural change, this gateway for departures has been narrowed to around 7 miles which means that aircraft are now climbing through a narrower area of the existing airspace in order to be in the right place to go through the gateway. This has resulted in more concentration of departure aircraft activity over some areas and a reduction in others. It has also altered the position of some flights before they reach 7,000 feet, but not below 4,000 feet.

Because aircraft are now being directed through a more defined area and with less interaction with arriving traffic, aircraft are able to climb higher more quickly.

Why was this change made?

NATS has informed us that this change has enhanced safety and efficiency; the position of traffic in this airspace is more predictable for controllers, and by directing departures through a more defined area there is less interaction with arriving traffic. Departing aircraft had previously been kept longer at 6000ft while they were below arriving aircraft, but are now able to climb higher more quickly.

What height are aircraft affected by this change?

The change itself is at approximately 8,000ft (it may be higher, depending on barometric pressure). In order to be in the right place by that height, the position of some aircraft will be affected at lower altitudes on the Compton route.

What areas are affected by the change?

The main areas affected by this change include Virginia Water, Ascot, Binfield and parts of Bracknell.

The procedural change did not affect areas to the east of the airport such as Teddington, East Molesey and Twickenham.

For some areas the number of departures have reduced. This includes Windlesham, Lightwater and Bagshot.

Why didn't NATS tell you about these changes?

This particular change applies above 7,000ft and airports are not involved in these changes. Nevertheless where procedural changes occur that alter the traffic patterns over communities close to the airport, we would expect NATS to make us aware of the changes so that we can answer questions from local residents.

On this occasion, NATS did not highlight to us the change for aircraft using the Compton route and did not inform us of it when Heathrow asked them to confirm whether anything else had changed following the cessation of the airspace trials on 12th November. This resulted in Heathrow giving inaccurate information to local residents and stakeholders. NATS has apologised for this and steps are being taken to ensure it does not happen again.

How did Heathrow discover these changes had been made?

Following the ending of the trials, Heathrow was approached by a number of residents and their elected representatives with concerns that flights were being routed differently. As a result of further investigations by CAA and NATS, the procedural change that dates back to 27th June 2014 was identified which affects air traffic in areas to the southwest of the airport.

Are these changes related to the recent airspace trials?

No, this procedural change is unrelated to the airspace trials that operated last summer and finished on 12th November. The procedural change was introduced to enhance the safe and efficient management of traffic departing from Heathrow on the Compton departure route.

Has this change had any impact to the position of aircraft arriving in the vicinity, either height or position?

This is a procedure change for departures, not arrivals and so there should be no change to the pattern of arriving aircraft. The analysis of flight patterns doesn't show a change to patterns of arriving aircraft since the procedural change was made to departures.

Are there are other changes to procedures that NATS has introduced that you're not aware of or that may have had an impact for residents living around Heathrow?

NATS has confirmed there are not.

How will you and NATS be communicating to residents about this change?

We have written to the affected local councils and MPs about it. We have also put information on our website.

Have you called for NATS to revert to the original procedures?

We asked NATS to consider this. They have advised us that this change was made to improve the safe and efficient management of traffic departing from Heathrow and are not planning to revert back.