

Airspace Change Policy Consultation: breakthrough, or breakdown?

Blog by Chris Keady.

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The sky above our heads is up for grabs as the Government consults on ‘**once in a lifetime**’ airspace policy change.

Many people, including campaigners as influential as John Stewart, chair of **Hacan (Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise (UK))**, believe that this potentially represents a ‘breakthrough’ moment, that needs to be seized. However, in doing so John acknowledges that the detail on consultation, compensation, independent noise authority, and the balance between community and aviation, in particular, still needs to be properly resolved. Most would probably agree.

I believe most would also agree that, exceptionally, the identification and treatment of ‘**hotspots**’, and the need for ‘**Respite Plus**’ should also be resolved as part of the consultation process. These concepts to protect the most vulnerable – more about them later – were first introduced at the House of Commons, ‘**Aviation Noise and Mental Health**’ seminar last year, and are a crucial missing piece in the **Airspace Change Policy** jigsaw.

One needs to remember, though, that the problem with such unprecedented change is that it is often fraught with missed opportunities, occasional own goals, and the overlooked, in the dash for the winning line.

The deliberate juxtaposition of the phrases, ‘breakdown’ against ‘breakthrough’, is therefore solely to remind people to think about the downside as well as the upside of

this transition, and to get the balance right. This is in the hope that everyone may be treated fairly, especially those who may be faced with significant new noise.

Before going further, I need to clarify two things:

- **Mental Health can be seriously affected by aviation noise**, and may cause or exacerbate existing depression. It should be remembered that severe depression may not always be successfully treated, and that such cases contribute to around 6,000 suicides in the UK each year. This should not be dismissed out of turn, there is a very real, elephant in the room, issue here.

No one really wants to talk about it, and I have regrettably found some of the debate being shut down in recent months, when this is the very time, more than ever before, that we most need an honest, balanced debate, informing balanced policy decisions and outcomes for all the overflow.

My ‘coming out’ blog,” **Mental health & aircraft noise, who gives a damn?**” kindly published by Hacan: <http://hacan.org.uk/blog/?p=467> in February 2016, spoke up for those crushed by a system that, up until then at least, frankly didn’t care. If you haven’t read it, or shared it, please do, as this is a glimpse into a rarely discussed world (**please also see footnote later**).

- I have campaigned with **John Stewart** since early 2014, and have shared significant event platforms with him on many issues including, notably, an **Independent Noise Ombudsman**, and **Mental Health and Aviation Noise**. I have greatly appreciated this. I have also blogged extensively on the unhealthy relationship between **aviation noise and Mental Health**, especially severe depression; but if this is all I have to show for my efforts, my epitaph will record that I failed abysmally.

While I readily agree with John that **consultation, compensation, an independent noise regulator, and respite**, are, potential breakthrough policy areas, which may provide significant benefit to many, I have also sought to constructively highlight crucial **‘policy blind spots’**. I make no apology for this, as there will be no second chance at ‘once in a lifetime’ change - people's' lives, literally, hang in the balance.

Challenging John, is most certainly not a case of being ‘off message’, or trying to ‘rain on [anyone’s] parade’, as sadly, some pro respite supporters, appear to recently mistakenly believe. On the contrary. **Respite plus, which would provide critical relief for some of the potentially significantly overflowed vulnerable - which respite alone cannot do - is not a threat, but an extension of the thinking, and values which underpin respite itself!**

Nearly a year ago, at the seminal **‘Aviation Noise and Mental Health’** seminar at the House of Commons, I warned of the risks of airspace change, especially for those with a pathology of severe depressive illness. Depression, and severe depression, doesn’t mix with low-level concentrated flight paths, and significant aviation noise, which I noted were potentially ‘incubators for mental illness’. This isn’t helped as

there are no safe noise doses, noise overdoses are likely, and the impotence of being unable to do anything about it, is amplified when one can't move on (exit barriers are high). One is then like a fly trapped in a spider's web desperately struggling to free oneself but only succeeding in sticking ever faster, while knowing all the time that you're for dinner.

Towards 'Respite Plus', and fairer outcomes for all the overflown

Unless carefully conceived and managed, airspace change may recreate the very noise ghettos that communities have rightly fought for so long to eliminate.

The preference to compress and then concentrate noise on the fewest people inevitably compounds the impact for some, especially under low-level concentrated flight paths. This is potentially where the problems will arise, especially where they coincide with 'hot spots'.

In setting out what a 'hot spot' might look like, John Stewart, in his latest blog, confirms that "**Respite alone may not be enough for aircraft noise hotspots. 'Respite Plus' may be needed**" <http://hacan.org.uk/blog?p=528>

I emphatically agree with him, and would go so far as to say that in some cases we already know it will.

He very usefully suggests possible '**hotspot characteristics**', and that the defining criteria might be that someone living in a hot spot could be endangering their physical or mental health if '**Respite Plus**' was not offered (Health Impact Assessments should help to flag this up?).

This determination could be supported by the **Independent Commission on Aircraft Noise (ICAN)**, and the Local Authority and affected householders would work alongside any airport to try to define what '**Respite Plus**' may entail. This work really should happen though as part of a pre-implementation programme phase, and, at the very least, emergency funds should be provided to deal with urgent cases ahead of any airspace policy change. In my experience, and humble opinion, we need to be trying to prevent mental illness in the first place, and particularly relapses of serious mental illness where we can do so, rather than leaving families and society to pick up the pieces up, afterwards. By then the damage will have been done.

Respite Plus: as a 'starter for ten', I have already suggested appeal, comprehensive noise insulation, and in very exceptional cases, where this fails to address the health issues, a '**move on**' scheme should be considered. I have covered this in earlier blogs and considered funded and partially funded options in innovative scenarios. The **ICAN** should also actively ensure that blight conditions do not creep along the flight paths from the immediate proximity of the airport(s), or should otherwise address it.

I don't see the airport (any airport) funding all of this, not at all. After all this is a national 'once in a lifetime' transition, and should be seen, and funded as such.

Additional funding may come from hypothecated existing taxes or introducing new taxes, or a mixture of sources. This should be underpinned by a long-term planning perspective, and a short, medium and long-term funding strategy to deliver what is needed. Zero rated VAT, on acoustic and related products and services supplied to address a 'hot spot' could also potentially be a step in the right direction, where they are bought in at a significantly discounted rate by qualifying residents.

And please remember if you're within 60 metres of HS2 you qualify for full move-on compensation, but if you're within 60 metres of a concentrated flight path, nothing! How fair is that? Answer: it isn't. It isn't!

But this is where the longer-term view is essential to ensure that sufficient money is in place, rather than making do, with 'divvying-up' loose change, and short-changing decent people.

A plea before it is too late

One can't consult noise away. It will eventually end up on someone's roof somewhere, and often such involuntary consumers may have little or no power to do anything about this negative, often life changing, experience; while complaining about noise can have little or no effect, once the flight paths are fixed. And because of the toxic nature of this noise and potential impact on physical and mental health, I have consistently argued for a 3 stage '**Respite Plus**' process in the case of **hotspots** and serious, noise-affected mental and physical health conditions. Many are now beginning to see the sense and the equity in this.

Surely it is only right that the current, and soon to be newly, or more significantly overflowed, deserve **a consultation process that results in equitable policy and outcomes for everyone?**

Will good people, therefore, please intervene **now** to ensure that the right thing is done for the losers in this transition process, not just the winners?

Above all, please ensure that the necessary assistance is provided to cope with hotspots, ahead of any airspace change, so that the unfortunate few do not have to pay the ultimate price.

East, West, North or South, and irrespective whether your politics are left, right or straight down the middle, please ensure that 'right is done'. Thank you.

Footnote

I have always believed in fairness, and equality and helping others where I could. I have put myself 'out there' to be shot down and ridiculed, but this has been in the hope that I may be able to express the importance of providing **help** for people, especially those who have struggled with mental illness and have 'recovered', only to be potentially destabilised by significant new aviation noise, and placed in jeopardy. I live c. 8+ miles from the airport, but in c.2014 began to be overflowed all day for c.30% year, without notification (a real shock). In the past year, this % has reduced noticeably, but it is set to increase post

airspace policy change. It is clear other communities receive substantially more disruption, and are desperate for change. This has never been an issue for me, and I have understood that noise dispersal was inevitable. It is the concentration of noise which is more the issue, especially for those who, in my experience, have been on the very edge of the abyss with severe mental illness.

I was disturbed by the noise but couldn't keep the noise from leaking into the house – the bedroom in particular - which set up a spiral of annoyance, anxiety, frustration, and helplessness. I couldn't 'turn the noise off' and this lack of control can become very destabilising. Not all depression is treatable and episodes have become more severe in my case. I therefore went into pre-emptive survival mode when discovering, by chance, that my home was likely to be further overflowed by very significant close /rooftop arrivals, again post airspace policy change. Therefore, I'm out trying to persuade good people to think that this can't be right, and that specialist niche support in terms of products and services are provided to 'at risk' cases before, and not after the fact, (prevention rather than cure is I would argue imperative in such cases (my earlier blog explains a little more)).

I support respite for the already badly overflowed, but have campaigned for 'Respite Plus' for a small minority whose physical or mental health may otherwise be severely affected if caught in a 'hotspot'. All concentrated flight paths will not be the same, nor will have the same impacts. Everyone deserves to be treated fairly, and to have a right to life. **Please help** if you can.