

**Public**  
**Key Decision - No**

## **HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**Title/Subject Matter:** Consultation by National Air Traffic Service – London Luton Airport Flightpaths

**Meeting/Date:** Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Customers and Partnerships) – 7th January 2021

**Executive Portfolio:** Executive Councillor for Leisure and Regulatory Services, Councillor Keith Prentice

**Report by:** Operational Manager (People)

**Wards affected:** All

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### **Executive Summary:**

This paper outlines the content of an ongoing consultation exercise being undertaken by the National Air Traffic Service (NATS) regarding changes to Luton Airport's approach flight paths and associated holding zone and offers the opportunity for members to consider and comment on it.

### **Recommendation:**

The Overview and Scrutiny Panel is invited to consider the report and, if considered appropriate, to make comments to Cabinet in order to assist in preparing a formal response to the consultation on behalf of the Council.

## **1. PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

- 1.1 This paper outlines the current consultation exercise which the National Air Traffic Service (NATS) are carrying out in respect of proposed changes to the incoming flightpaths to Luton Airport and the associated holding zone. The Overview and Scrutiny Panel is invited to consider the proposals and, if appropriate, forward comments to Cabinet in order to inform any response which the Council makes to the consultation process.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 In October 2020, NATS launched a consultation exercise which is scheduled to run until early February 2021. This exercise consults on proposals to alter inbound flight paths and to create a new dedicated holding zone for Luton air traffic.
- 2.2 These changes are planned in order to provide clear separation of the air traffic for Luton and Stansted airports, which currently overlap. The changes also create a dedicated holding zone for Luton's air traffic, replacing the current holding zones, which Luton traffic shares with Stansted traffic.
- 2.3 NATS have published a detailed consultation paper on these proposals, which can be found at [https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6\\_luton\\_arrivals/user\\_uploads/lla-arrivals-consultation-document-screenview-1-3.0.pdf](https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6_luton_arrivals/user_uploads/lla-arrivals-consultation-document-screenview-1-3.0.pdf). In addition, an abridged version of the consultation document has been prepared which includes all the key elements but abridges the technical detail, which can be found at [https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6\\_luton\\_arrivals/supporting\\_documents/LLA%20Arrivals%20ABRIDGED%20Consultaton%20Document%20Issue%201.0.pdf](https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6_luton_arrivals/supporting_documents/LLA%20Arrivals%20ABRIDGED%20Consultaton%20Document%20Issue%201.0.pdf). NATS have also created an exhibition-style web site which gives detail on the proposals and also offers the opportunity to register for webinars where the public can hear more about the proposals and ask questions of NATS staff. The exhibition website is located at [https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6\\_luton\\_arrivals/](https://consultations.airspacechange.co.uk/london-luton-airport/ad6_luton_arrivals/).
- 2.4 The main proposals relate to a re-routing of inbound flights as a result of the separation of the Luton and Stansted traffic and the associated creation of new dedicated airspace. The new airspace is to the south of Huntingdonshire, with aircraft starting their final descent to the south of St Neots. As such, this element of the proposals does not have a significant local impact. However, the proposals envisage the creation of a new holding pattern, to be used in the event of unscheduled congestion resulting in a "back-up" of approaching air traffic. This proposed holding zone would be in a loop pattern around the line of the A1 road, broadly from St Neots to Alconbury. A map showing a summary of these proposals, extracted from the NATS documents, is attached as Appendix 1 to this report.

- 2.5 Details of the proposals and the associated consultation have been provided to all the Town and Parish Councils in the District, so individual representations can be made. A number have indicated that they plan to do so and some have provided comments or copied their consultation responses to HDC. The comments fall into three main areas, namely whether the proposed changes are justified by predicted air traffic levels, the potential for noise nuisance from the proposed holding zone and the potential for increased pollution from aircraft using the new holding zone.
- 2.6 NATS have stated that the primary objective of the proposals is to separate the traffic for Luton and Stansted. This has necessitated the creation of new holding zones, as the current holding zones overlap traffic from the two airports and are also overflowed by the inbound flight paths. The consultation document states that, although the current arrangement is safe, it provides no scope for any additional flight capacity and the combination of this factor plus the desire to increase safety by separating air traffic and preventing flight overlapping means that change is necessary and the “do nothing” option is not considered sustainable.
- 2.7 The rationale for selecting the proposed location of the holding zone is not included in the current information, being a consistent feature of all inbound traffic options. However, this issue was covered by the NATS team at a consultation webinar attended by HDC Officers and Members. It was stated that this location was the only available air space which did not conflict with air space allocated to existing north-south flight paths, east-west flight paths, the descent routes to the airport and the airspace to the north which is used by the RAF bases in the region.
- 2.8 The noise issue is determined by a combination of the number of flights and the noise generated by individual aircraft. Data on these issues is included in the NATS consultation document. This indicated that peak hourly traffic averages at 12-13 arrivals per hour, with peak hours being 0700-0800, 12.00-14.00 and 17.00-19.00. The busiest single hour of 2019 saw 24 arrivals. This would appear to support the assertion that, with traffic flowing normally, use of the holding zone would not be expected to be high. The minimum flying height in the holding zone will be 8,000 feet and aircraft would be held at different heights at 1,000 foot increments above this, to a maximum of 14,000 feet, if additional holding were to be required. Data from the Civil Aviation Authority indicates that the most commonly used aircraft at Luton would generate approx. 55dB noise at 7,000-8,000 feet and noise from aircraft at altitudes any higher than this would not be discernible from background noise. To contextualise this, 50dB is noted as the equivalent of a “quiet office” and 60dB a “busy general office”.
- 2.9 The NATS consultation document quotes guidance which states “Where practicable, it is desirable that airspace routes below 7,000ft should seek to avoid flying over Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB); All changes below 7,000ft should take into account local circumstances in the development of the airspace design; Consultation with environmental stakeholders will usually only be necessary where the proposed changes concern controlled airspace below an altitude of 7,000 feet. Changes at or above 7,000 feet will usually not have a noticeable impact”.

- 2.10 NATS accept that the actual impact of the proposed holding zone will only be measurable once it is in operation. However, they have also stated that, in simulations, the improved traffic flow generated by the new flight paths and the separation of the traffic from Stansted led to minimal use of the holding area.
- 2.11 Potential pollution is discussed in the consultation but the combination of altitude, more modern aircraft and the fact that no additional capacity is discussed at this point leads to an indication that this is not considered to be a significant concern with these plans.
- 2.12 Comments have been forwarded to the Council by several Town and Parish Councils, as well as by several private individuals. It is understood that most of these comments have been made directly to NATS. The majority have raised objections
- 2.13 The NATS consultation exercise for views via a survey with 10 specific questions. Questions 1-7 are specifically about the decent/approach flightpaths. Questions 8 and 9 are technical questions regarding airspace classification. Question 10 allows comments on any other issues to be put forward.
- 2.14 As most of the questions relate to the descending flightpaths to the Luton runway, issues which potentially impact on Huntingdonshire residents are not directly covered. However, there is the opportunity to provide “free text” input in Question 10, should it be considered appropriate for the Council to comment. As noted, the main potential areas for comment would be the overall need for change, the positioning of the holding zone and the potential impact of aircraft noise and pollution from the use of the holding zone.
- 2.15 The Overview and Scrutiny Panel are invited to consider the content of the consultation document. Any comments which the Panel would like to include in a formal Council response will be forwarded for consideration by Cabinet, where any formal response will be agreed for submission.
- 2.16 To assist the discussion, NATS have indicated that, subject to availability, they will endeavour to join the O&S Panel meeting so it is expected that some specialist input should be available.

### **3. LINK TO THE CORPORATE PLAN, STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND/OR CORPORATE OBJECTIVES**

- 3.1 The Council has a corporate objective to “make Huntingdonshire a better place to live, to improve health and well-being and support people to be the best they can be”. The issues raised in this consultation have the potential to impact on this.

### **4. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 This report is for information and comment, so has no immediate legal implications.

## **5. RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 This report has no immediate resource implications.

## **6. LIST OF APPENDICES INCLUDED**

Appendix 1 – Map of Affected Areas

Appendix 2 – Specific Consultation Questions

## **7. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Consultation responses copied to the Council by Town and Parish Councils.

## **CONTACT OFFICER**

Name/Job Title: Finlay Flett, Operational Manager (People)

Tel No: 01480 388377

Email: [finlay.flett@huntingdonshire.gov.uk](mailto:finlay.flett@huntingdonshire.gov.uk)