

Dear Sir

I am writing on behalf of The Lee Parish Council to protest in the strongest possible terms about your intention to re-route departures from Luton airport to the South-West directly over the Chilterns, as part of the proposed changes to airspace in the South and East of England. It appears that The Lee will be pretty much at the centre of the new air corridor.

As you will know the Chilterns are a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, heavily used for recreation not just by the people who live here but also by walkers and other visitors from all parts of the UK, who between them make 50 million day visits a year.

One of the reasons for designating an area an AONB is “to meet the need for quiet enjoyment of the countryside and have regard for the interests of those who live and work there”. We notice that in your consultation document you do acknowledge the potential effect of the changes on AONBs, “in which tranquillity and visual intrusion are particularly recognised concerns”. You afford protection accordingly to the Dedham Vale and Suffolk Coasts AONBs – so why should the Chilterns be treated differently?

With the best will in the world it is impossible to see how NATS’ plans would do other than ruin the “quiet enjoyment of the countryside” as far as the Chilterns are concerned. Residents already suffer noise and pollution from planes flying in and out of Heathrow and from the many helicopters and light aircraft that transit this area.

To avoid these Heathrow flightpaths we understand the Luton planes would have to go lower, down to 3000 ft above sea level – which would effectively be less than 2500 ft for residents here, since the Chilterns are already 600-700 ft above sea level.

In short, there could be planes at less than half the height of current traffic with around 10 times the noise level – and more of them no doubt, with traffic out of Luton due to double in the next five years.

It seems extraordinary that NATS have proposed these particular changes given that you are required under the terms of the Civil Aviation Authority Guidance on the Airspace Change Process to take account of government policy on “reducing, controlling and mitigating the impacts of civil aviation on the environment; and the need to reduce, control and mitigate as far as possible the environmental impacts of civil aircraft operations – in particular the annoyance and disturbance caused to the general public arising from aircraft noise and vibration, and emissions from aircraft engines”.

We see that one of your stated aims with these proposals is to minimise the population overflow, but you appear to take no account of the fact that aircraft noise is much more intrusive in rural than in urban areas, where ambient noise levels are higher and in any case often screened out by buildings. In fact you have the temerity to say: “In previous consultations the CAA has accepted that measurement of aircraft noise in relation to tranquillity is relatively undeveloped and that no universally accepted metrics or measuring methodology exists for the assessment of tranquillity. Therefore it has not been possible to undertake tranquillity measurements for this

project.”

To dismiss such a fundamental area of concern on the grounds that there is insufficient data on it is cavalier in the extreme. In the four years that you have been working on these proposals could you not have sponsored the necessary research, even if it were simply to measure the relative impact of aircraft noise in rural and urban areas?

We do recognise that with the huge expansion in air travel some change is necessary to free up the congested airspace over the South-East, but we believe this could be done at much smaller environmental cost. For example, the Bovingdon holding stack could be moved further west, allowing Luton and Northolt traffic to climb much more quickly, reducing noise, carbon emissions and increasing safety. There would then be no need to drive flight levels down to avoid Heathrow northbound traffic, which could also climb sooner. The same effect could be achieved by expanding the existing controlled airspace to the northwest of Luton, enabling departures to be routed further north into the lower Vale of Aylesbury.

In making these representations the Parish Council is reflecting the concerns of the inhabitants of The Lee, more than 200 of whom (out of a population of not much more than 600) have now signed a petition against the proposals. We can but hope that even at this late stage common sense and environmental responsibility will prevail.