



## Response to Department for Transport Consultation on Night Flight Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted from October 2025

Stansted Airport Watch (SAW), formerly Stop Stansted Expansion (SSE), was established in 2002 in response to Government proposals for major expansion at Stansted Airport. Our objective is to contain the development of Stansted Airport within tight limits that are truly sustainable and, in this way, to protect the quality of life of residents over wide areas of Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire and Suffolk, to preserve our heritage and to protect the natural environment.



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## 1. Introduction

1.1 Stansted Airport Watch (SAW) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to this consultation but we start by expressing disappointment that, at best, the current framework of restrictions, dating back to 2017, will be extended to October 2028, meaning that the original October 2022 end-date will have been pushed back six years. Thus, there would be no progress in the longstanding Government commitment progressively to reduce aircraft noise at night.

1.2 The Future of Air Transport White Paper (ATWP), 2003, stated as follows:

*“The Government recognises that noise from aircraft operations at night is widely regarded as the least acceptable aspect of aircraft operations. We will bear down on night noise accordingly ...”*<sup>1</sup>

1.3 The Consultation Document (CD) endorses the ATWP assessment that “*aircraft noise at night is the least acceptable aspect of aircraft operations*” (para 1.3), acknowledges that “*noise from aircraft taking off and landing at night is often regarded by communities as the most disturbing form of airport operations*” (para 2.1) and recognises that “*exposure to aviation noise at night can impact on physical and mental well-being*” (para 2.12).

1.4 It is therefore disappointing that the CD contains no new measures to tackle night noise. At best, the numerical limits and aggregate noise (QC) limits would be unchanged for all three designated airports until October 2028 and, incredulously, the CD also includes the option of removing both the QC and numerical limits for night flights at Stansted from 2026.

1.5 Furthermore, the CD completely disregards the following commitment given in the Aviation Policy Framework:

*“We want to strike a fair balance between the negative impacts of noise (on health, amenity (quality of life) and productivity) and the positive economic impacts of flights. As a general principle, the Government therefore expects that future growth in aviation **should ensure that benefits are shared between the aviation industry and local communities**. This means that the industry must continue to reduce and mitigate noise as airport capacity grows. As noise levels fall with technology improvements the aviation industry should be expected to share the benefits from these improvements.”*<sup>2</sup> [emphasis added]

1.6 Maintaining both the QC limit and the numerical limit at present levels would mean that all the benefit of technology improvements would accrue to the aviation industry, and none to local communities. At Stansted, in the absence of any of the current Government restrictions on night flights, the imbalance would be far worse.

1.7 All aircraft are intrinsically noisy machines and aircraft noise at night is particularly intrusive in rural areas surrounding Stansted Airport where, apart from aircraft noise, ambient noise

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<sup>1</sup> ‘The Future of Air Transport’ White Paper, DfT, Dec 2003, para 3.12.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Aviation Policy Framework’, DfT, March 2013, para 3.3.

levels are very low. This point has been acknowledged by the Secretary of State<sup>3</sup> but the CD makes no reference to the particularly intrusive impact of aircraft noise in rural areas. Moreover, the proposals set out in the CD indicate that this point will continue to be disregarded for at least another four years. Worse still, the CD singles out Stansted for the potential removal of all the current Government night flight restrictions.

- 1.8 The claimed shift in focus of the night-time noise abatement objective from the “*number of people significantly affected by aircraft noise*” to the “*adverse effects of aviation noise at night on health and quality of life*” is meaningless since there is no action to support this and the adverse effects of aviation noise at night on health and quality of life are disregarded.
- 1.9 The World Health Organisation (WHO) “*strongly recommends*” reducing noise levels produced by aircraft at night below 40dB Lnight “... *as night-time aircraft noise above this level is associated with adverse effects on sleep*”. However, the DfT continues to contend that a noise problem only exists within the 45dB Lnight contour. All that the DfT has to say about this disparity in the CD is “*We will continue to review evidence underpinning WHO guidelines together with more recent evidence.*” This review has been going on for almost six years and we have not even seen an interim report.
- 1.10 In summary, we regard this consultation as far too heavily skewed towards the interests of the aviation industry, even to the extent of disregarding longstanding Government policy commitments and the best available scientific evidence of the adverse impacts of night flights on the health and wellbeing of local communities.
- 1.11 This response should be read in addition to our letter to the Secretary of State for Transport dated 29 March 2024 concerning night flight restrictions.

## **2. Airport in the Countryside**

- 2.1 The DfT has singled out Stansted for special consideration in the consultation on the grounds that a 2021 planning condition. If Stansted is to be singled out for any reason, it should be in recognition of its largely rural setting, in sharp contrast to Heathrow and Gatwick. From the outset, the vision for Stansted has been “The Airport in the Countryside” and this has been a guiding principle for planning policy over the past 40 years.
- 2.2 The population around Stansted lives mostly in a large number of small villages and a few market towns. Ambient noise levels in such a rural area are low, particularly at night, and consist largely of pleasant, natural sounds. People who live in an urban location are less likely to be disturbed by aircraft than those who live in the countryside, particularly at night. Each discrete noise event, such as an aircraft movement, will be clearly heard against the ambient or background noise levels of the particular location at the time.
- 2.3 Thus, the LAeq noise averaging system understates the true adverse impact of aircraft noise intrusion on local communities around an airport in a largely rural location, like Stansted,

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<sup>3</sup> Letter from Secretary of State to Sir Alan Haselhurst, at that time the local constituency MP, 10 Dec 2013.

because it fails to take account of background noise levels. The Secretary of State accepted the shortcomings of the LAeq system, writing to our constituency MP in 2013, as follows:

*“... the APF also recognises that people do not experience noise in an averaged manner and that the value of the LAeq indicator does not necessarily reflect all aspects of the perception of aircraft noise. This may be especially true for rural airports such as Stansted where the ambient or background noise levels are relatively low.”<sup>4</sup>*

2.4 The Government’s July 2017 aviation policy document recognised the importance of the number of flights and not simply LAeq average noise levels for local communities near airports, as follows:

*“... recent evidence suggests people are becoming more sensitive to noise at lower levels and that the number of flights overhead can be a more significant factor than the average noise level”<sup>5</sup>*

2.5 Having regard to the evidence referred to above, it would clearly be illogical for the Government to remove controls on the number of night flights at Stansted and place reliance upon an LAeq noise contour and/or the QC system to control their impact.

### 3. World Health Organisation (WHO) Noise Guidelines

3.1 The WHO Environmental Noise Guidelines provide robust public health advice, underpinned by evidence, to drive policy actions to protect communities from the adverse effects of aircraft noise. The WHO recommendations are based on the confidence that the public health benefits of adherence to the guidelines outweigh the undesirable adverse consequences. Specifically for aircraft noise, the WHO

*“... **strongly recommends** reducing noise levels produced by aircraft during night time below 40 dB Lnight, as night-time aircraft noise above this level is associated with adverse effects on sleep.”<sup>6</sup> [emphasis added]*

3.2 As pointed out in para 1.9 above, the DfT continues to contend that a noise problem only exists within the 45dB Lnight contour. There is a very significant difference between 45dB and the WHO recommended limit of 40dB because the dB scale is logarithmic. An increase of 3dB is a doubling of noise energy. Indeed, this is the basis for the QC system whereby the number of QC points doubles for each 3dB increase in an aircraft’s certified noise level.

3.3 It can also be noted that the planning condition relating to night noise at Stansted is based on a 48dB noise contour, which is far in excess of the 40dB maximum recommended by the WHO, based on its evidence that night-time aircraft noise above this level is associated with adverse effects on sleep. The geographical area covered by the 48dB Lnight contour should therefore be zero Km<sup>2</sup>, not 74 Km<sup>2</sup>.

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4 Ibid.

5 ‘Beyond the Horizon: The Future of UK Aviation’, DfT, July 2017, para 7.32.

6 ‘Environmental Noise Guidelines for the European Region’, WHO, October 2018.

3.4 The DfT has a long term commitment to adopt the WHO noise guidelines, as follows:

*“The [WHO] guideline values are very low. It would be very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve them in the short to medium term without draconian measures – but that is not what the WHO proposed. The recommendation was that the Guidelines for Community Noise should be adopted as long term targets for improving human health. This is also consistent with the advice above. The UK Government is committed to take account of this. In respect of aircraft noise at night, the 30 year time horizon of the White Paper, [2000-2030] provides a suitable time parameter for ‘longer term.’”<sup>7</sup>*

3.5 This commitment, made as far back as 2004, was to adopt the WHO Guidelines by 2030. In 2004, 2030 seemed a long way into the future but is now only six years away. It is fair to point out that the WHO Guidelines at that time set a 45dB threshold for night noise whereas the most recent WHO Guidelines recommend a maximum of 40dB. Either way, it is disappointing that the CD, contains no targets for adopting the WHO Guidelines.

#### 4. Why is Stansted singled out?

4.1 The consultation document singles out Stansted for potential de-designation. The DfT’s position is that the current night flights regime should be extended until October 2028 for Heathrow and Gatwick but not necessarily for Stansted. The explanation provided for maintaining the status quo at Heathrow and Gatwick until 2028 is given as follows:

*“We propose a bridging night flight regime of 3 years that will cover October 2025 to October 2028. This is because we are awaiting evidence from the ANNE study and also from the Aviation Noise Attitudes Survey. This survey is being conducted by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and it is anticipated to be published in 2025 to 2026.”<sup>8</sup>*

4.2 This reasoning applies equally to Stansted, and we reject the DfT’s assertion that there has been a material change at Stansted as a result of a planning condition attached to the 2021 permission for 43mppa. The condition referred to is Condition 7 in the Panel of Inspectors’ Decision Letter which, in its relevant parts, states as follows:

*“By the end of the first calendar year that annual passenger throughput exceeds 35million, the area enclosed by the following contours shall not exceed the limits in Table 1:*

|                |                 |          |
|----------------|-----------------|----------|
| <u>Table 1</u> | 48 dB LAeq, 8hr | 74.0 km2 |
|----------------|-----------------|----------|

*By the end of 2032 or by the end of the first calendar year that annual passenger throughput reaches 43million (whichever is sooner), Stansted Airport Limited,*

<sup>7</sup> ‘Night Flying Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted’. Stage 1 of Consultation on Restrictions apply from 30 October 2005’ DfT, July 2004.

<sup>8</sup> CD, para 3.7.

or any successor or airport operator, shall reduce the areas enclosed by the noise contours as set out in Table 2.

|                |                 |                      |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| <u>Table 1</u> | 48 dB LAeq, 8hr | 73.6 km <sup>2</sup> |
|----------------|-----------------|----------------------|

Thereafter the areas enclosed by the contours as set out in Table 2, shall not be exceeded.”

- 4.3 Leaving aside questions about the triggering of these noise contour limits, it is important to note that, in imposing Condition 7, the Panel of Inspectors made clear that it should sit alongside the Government’s night flight restrictions, as evidenced by their Decision Letter:

*“However, the night flight restrictions do not cover the full 8 hour period used in the LAeq assessment. Consequently, if only the night flight restrictions were to be relied upon, there would be no control of aircraft noise between 23:00 and 23:30 hours and between 06:00 and 07:00 hours. The ESA3 has demonstrated that the reductions in night noise would be beneficial to health. For these reasons, inclusion of the LAeq 8hour restriction in condition 7 would be necessary. **In coming to this view, the Panel has taken into account the dual restrictions that would apply.** However, the night noise contour requirement in condition 7 would be necessary to secure the benefit and it has not been demonstrated that the night noise restrictions would be sufficient in this respect.”*<sup>9</sup> [emphasis added]

- 4.4 We note that the minutes of the DfT/MAG quarterly meeting in July 2023 state as follows:

*“DfT noted that the Department’s take on the Stansted planning condition, is that it was designed to work **in conjunction with Government controls rather than in lieu of Government controls.**”* [emphasis added]

- 4.5 The same minutes show that DfT officials noted as follows:

*“...one of the key things in removing the current 6.5hr night controls, is that this would open the potential for increased flights within the Night Quota Period”.*

- 4.6 It is therefore clear that the DfT itself recognises that the night-time noise contour established as a local planning condition in 2021 is expected to work in conjunction with the current Government restrictions and that removing the numerical control on night flights would open the door for more night flights. Indeed, the 74 km<sup>2</sup> noise contour limit is beyond generous and could easily accommodate far more night flights than at present.

- 4.7 Removal of the current Government restrictions on the number of night flights at Stansted would be entirely beneficial to the aviation industry and entirely disadvantageous to local communities. This would be directly contrary to Government policy, as set down in the Aviation Policy Framework:

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<sup>9</sup> Appeal Ref: APP/C1570/W/20/3256619 (43mppa Inquiry), Panel of Inspectors appointed by the Secretary of State, Decision Letter dated 21 June 2021, para 44.

*“... to strike a fair balance between the negative impacts of noise (on health, amenity (quality of life) and productivity) and the positive economic impacts of flights” and the Government expectation “that future growth in aviation should ensure that benefits are shared between the aviation industry and local communities.”<sup>10</sup>*

## 5. Shortcomings of the QC System

- 5.1 The QC system alone would not be effective in controlling night noise because of the way it works, whereby an aircraft’s QC rating is halved for each 3dBA reduction in the noise level. Newer aircraft can be rated as low as QC.125, having a certified noise level of 81.0 – 83.9 dBA, whereas some older aircraft operating from Stansted have a QC2 rating, having a certified noise level of 93.0 – 95.9dBA. In the absence of a movements limit, one night flight by a QC2 aircraft could be replaced by up to 16 night flights by a QC.125 aircraft. This would be wholly unjust for local residents. All aircraft are inherently noisy and, for those who live close to an airport, **it is the frequency of noise events that can ruin a night’s sleep.**
- 5.2 A further shortcoming of the QC system, and of any planning condition based on a noise contour, is that the noise contours calculated and published by the ERCD are modelled on aircraft noise only from the moment the aircraft takes to the air until the moment it touches down. Two of the noisiest impacts of night flights for those living close to the airport are disregarded, namely, the revving of engines as aircraft prepares to depart and accelerate along the runway, and the reverse thrust applied to the engines when aircraft touch down.

## 6. The Stansted Noise Action Plan (NAP)

- 6.1 It has been suggested that the Stansted NAP could be relied upon to control the impact of night flights at Stansted. However, whilst NAPs contain targets, objectives and aspirations, they are not legally enforceable. Furthermore, it is clear that MAG has been lobbying the DfT for a relaxation of the night flight restrictions at Stansted, contrary to its planning agreement with the LPA (Uttlesford District Council) which contains the following obligation:

*"From the date of this agreement not to seek any relaxation of the night flight restrictions currently in force for the night period of 23.00 – 06.59 or for the night quota period of 23.30 – 05.59"<sup>11</sup>*

- 6.2 If MAG will not honour its existing agreement with the LPA regarding night flights, how can MAG be trusted to honour any new agreement?

## 7. Further Comments

- 7.1 The current consultation provides an opportunity for the DfT to give consideration to new measures to reduce the impact of night flights on local communities and thereby work towards achieving a reasonable balance between the interests of the aviation industry and

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Aviation Policy Framework’, DfT, 2013, March 2013, para 3.3.

<sup>11</sup> Section 106 Agreement between Stansted Airport Ltd and Uttlesford District Council, March 2003.

the health and wellbeing of local communities, including:

- **Progressively phase out night flights** – Stansted is currently allowed 13,700 night flights a year between the hours of 11.30pm and 6.00am. By comparison, Heathrow, which is three times bigger than Stansted, is allowed just 5,800 night flights a year. Night flights are particularly intrusive in a largely rural area, with low background night noise levels. The aim should be to phase out all Stansted night flights, except emergencies, by 2030.
- **Night should mean night** – The limit on the number of night flights should apply for the full 8-hour night period (11.00pm to 7.00am) and not just for the 6½ hours (11.30pm to 6.00am) – when the limit on the number of night flights currently applies.
- **Dispense with dispensations** – The discretion granted to airports to disregard late arrivals or (less frequently) early departures when reporting night flight numbers, has clearly been abused by Stansted. For the Summer 2022 period, Stansted granted 1,201 dispensations compared to 576 at Gatwick and just 415 at Heathrow. The 2023 numbers are similar to 2022 at Stansted and Heathrow and, although there was a significant increase in dispensations granted by Gatwick in 2023 compared to 2022, Stansted was still - by far - the main offender, particularly having regard to its comparative size. The discretion given to airports to grant dispensations should be removed. Airport management should not be allowed to mark their own homework.
- **Ban reverse thrust** – The use of reverse thrust at night should be banned except in the case of an emergency. The Stansted runway is one of the longest in the UK and so the additional braking effect provided by using reverse thrust upon landing is unnecessary other than in exceptional circumstances.
- **Health impacts need to be fully assessed** – The Government recognises that aircraft noise at night has negative impacts upon local communities and can impact on physical and mental well-being. These negative impacts can be far greater than the economic benefits. Sleep disturbance caused by night flights can result in impaired work performance and there can be a significant cost for this, for example, in the case of the many local residents around Stansted who work in the UK financial services sector and other professional occupations including the NHS/healthcare sector, education and emergency services. In contrast, the economic justification for a night flight, as opposed to that same flight operating during the day, is seldom demonstrated, despite the following, longstanding Government assurance:

*“The Government recognises that noise from aircraft operations at night is widely regarded as the least acceptable aspect of aircraft operations. We will bear down on night noise accordingly, but we must strike a fair balance between local disturbance,*



*the limits of social acceptability and the economic benefits of night flights. This should be done on a case-by-case basis.”<sup>12</sup> [emphasis added]*

## **8. Response to Consultation Questions for Stansted**

### Question 3

To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with option 1 for the next night flight regime at Stansted Airport?

### Answer 3

Totally disagree. This would allow an increase in night flights. Reasons explained above

### Question 4

To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with option 2 for the next night flight regime at Stansted Airport?

### Answer 4

Totally disagree. This would allow an increase in night flights. Reasons explained above.

### Question 5

To what extent do you agree, or disagree, with option 3 (our preferred option) for the next night flight regime at Stansted Airport?

### Answer 5

Option 3 is preferable to options 1 and 2 but, as explained above, there needs to be far more progress by Government in reducing the impact of night flights upon the health and wellbeing of local communities. Government controls for the night quota period should remain pending a phased reduction of night flights leading to a total ban.

Finally, please note that, as a member of the Aviation Environment Federation's Airspace and Noise Community Forum, we fully support the detailed response they have submitted to you.

*Stansted Airport Watch  
22 May 2024*

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<sup>12</sup> Air Transport White Paper, DfT, December 2003, para 3.12.