



Aviation industry warns of future delays without airspace change

An unprecedented coalition representing airports, airlines and air traffic control has warned of major flight delays unless widespread changes can be made to UK airspace.

Research by NATS has shown that delays are set to rise from around 90,000 minutes a year today to 4 million by 2030 unless the UK's ageing network of airspace structures and flight paths is redesigned to make use of modern aircraft technology.

The Sky's the Limit group is also highlighting that significant environmental benefits are being missed as aircraft are forced to fly longer and further than necessary because of the failure of successive governments to commit to airspace modernisation.

The *Sky's the Limit* group is calling on the government and politicians to support the changes that it describes as urgent and necessary.

Without redesigning the UK's network of flight paths and airways, it is feared that it simply won't cope with the growth in traffic forecast over the coming years, with 3.1 million flights a year expected in the UK by 2030, up from 2 million flights in 2015.

Martin Rolfe, NATS Chief Executive Officer, said: "A thriving aviation industry that connects us to the rest of the world has never been more important, but this problem is an existential threat to both the industry's health and the wider health of UK plc."

Much of the UK's controlled airspace – the invisible motorways in the sky where commercial aircraft fly – was designed in the 1960 and 1970s for a different era of aircraft and when traffic was less than half of what it is today. Redrawing flight paths and moving away from traditional ground-based beacons to modern satellite navigation will increase capacity in the air, while reducing the number of people who experience aircraft noise and cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

The environmental benefits of airspace modernisation are considerable, with aircraft able to fly more directly with routes that can be designed to avoid noise sensitive areas or provide a more equitable spread of noise. These more direct routes will reduce fuel consumption and lower CO2 emissions, lessening aviation's impact on the climate and local air quality.

Modernisation would allow for the greater use of smooth continuous descent and climb operations, meaning aircraft spend less time at low levels where they are not as efficient and create more noise. It would also reduce the need for conventional orbital holding, which again would keep aircraft higher for longer.

Through these and other improved operating procedures - that can be utilised with a modern airspace structure – there is a potential carbon saving to UK aviation by of between 9% and 14% by 2050, according to Sustainable Aviation. Modernising UK airspace will therefore help the industry to deliver its commitment of a 50% cut in CO2 emissions by 2050 compared to 2005.



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Craig Kreeger, Chief Executive Officer of Virgin Atlantic said: "On-time performance is vitally important for Virgin Atlantic and our customers. Our investment in the very latest generation aircraft will allow us to fly ever more efficiently so that we can keep our fares low and minimise our environmental impact.

"But we need modern airspace infrastructure to maximise the benefits of these highly efficient aircraft. We're calling on the government to recognise the overwhelming positive case for change in terms of the wider economic value and the benefits for noise and emissions."

Carolyn McCall, Chief Executive Officer of easyJet added: "The airspace through which our aircraft operate every day is a critical part of our national infrastructure, but some of it dates from the 1960s and needs to be modernised. We should take advantage of recent advances in technology so that aircraft can operate quieter and more efficient routes, as well as delivering significant, double digit reductions in carbon emissions and fewer delays for passengers. We want the Government to start the process to deliver this much needed modernisation of the UK's airspace."

The *Sky's the Limit* group, which involves airlines, airports and air traffic control providers, is committed to working collectively as an industry with government, communities and other key stakeholders to deliver airspace modernisation and its associated environmental and economic benefits.

The group is now calling on the government to commit to delivering a stable, long-term noise and airspace policy that enables airspace modernisation and to assign it under the remit of the National Infrastructure Commission in order to detach it from the short term political cycle.

Mr Rolfe concludes: "We welcome the government's decision to agree the location of a new runway in the south east of England, but airspace is the invisible part of our transport infrastructure and this is a nationwide issue that needs to be addressed. Imagine the road network of the 1960s trying to cope with today's road traffic levels. The amount of delays that motorists would experience would be totally unsustainable. Modernising how our skies are structured is vital, but we are already behind schedule and it is critical that the industry and government now work together to deliver change."

The Sky's the Limit campaign is made up of the Airport Operators Association, BAR UK, Airlines UK, IATA and NATS.

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Note to editors:

Find out more about the campaign at theskysthelimit.aero

For more information contact the NATS Press Office on 01489 615945, email info@theskysthelimit.aero

About the Sky's the Limit campaign

The Sky's the Limit is a campaign group of leading aviation organisations calling on the Government to prioritise its work on airspace and noise, and support industry initiatives to modernise our airspace.

The Sky's the Limit campaign members include the Airport Operators Association, the Board of Airline Representatives in the UK, Airlines UK and the International Air Transport Association

What is airspace modernisation?



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Controlled airspace is the invisible structure of airways and flight paths commercial aircraft follow when flying through the UK. Designed over 50 years ago for an industry vastly different in scale to the one we have today, it was never envisaged that UK airspace would eventually handle more than two million aircraft and carry 250 million passengers, as it did in 2015.

And air traffic is set to continue to grow, reaching 3.1 million aircraft carrying 350 million passengers by 2030. The boosts to trade and tourism from this growth are substantial, but to secure it the UK needs to ensure that it can manage that demand without delaying passengers or cancelling flights. We need to modernise our invisible infrastructure without further delay.

Through better operating procedures that can be utilised with a modern airspace structure, aircraft can fly more directly and routes can be designed to avoid noise sensitive areas or provide a more equitable spread of noise. It will also mean greater use of continuous descent and climb operations which reduce noise and CO2 emissions. In essence, aircraft would be able to fly quieter and more efficient routes.

It will also benefit the UK economy. Airspace modernisation across Europe will deliver over £29bn to UK GDP and 116,000 jobs by 2035 (IATA, 2016).