

Conference on Airport Expansion: 28th September 2002

Background Paper on Noise

➔ **Noise is *the* major problem for most communities living around airports and under flight paths.**

➔ **Noise affects different people in different ways.** For some people aircraft noise does not present a problem. For others, it comes to dominate every aspect of their lives; it penetrates the very core of their being.

➔ **The Government claims that "the onset of community annoyance" starts when the noise from aircraft averages out at 57 decibels, known as 57dB(A) LAeq.** The World Health Organisation (WHO) puts the figure between 50 and 55 decibels (and about 10 decibels lower at night). WHO says few people are highly annoyed at levels below 55 dB (A), and few are moderately annoyed below 50dB(A). European research, published late last year by the European Commission, tends to confirm the WHO estimate. The research was carried out in Berlin for the European Commission. It assessed all the studies that had been done in Europe into people's attitudes towards aircraft and traffic noise. It averaged out the findings to come up with the number of people that are 'highly annoyed' by aircraft and traffic noise in different parts of Europe.

The research found that in Central European countries (which included the UK):

- 15% of people were 'highly annoyed' by noise levels averaging 53 decibels
- 25% of people were 'highly annoyed' by noise levels averaging 60 decibels
- 40% of people were 'highly annoyed' by noise levels averaging 68 decibels

The Government in the Regional Air Studies has drawn up 'noise contours' for the number of people affected at each airport when noise levels average out at 57 decibels. It also estimates the numbers that would be affected by an average of 54 decibels. But most of the charts and maps it uses only highlight the 57 figure. The difference in the number of people affected at the larger airports is huge. At Heathrow at present 307,000 are affected by the 57 figure, but 603,000 when the 54 figure is used.

➔ **There is a lot of criticism of the way the Government averages out the noise throughout the day.** It measures the noise of each aircraft (ie the number of decibels it produces) and averages out over a 16 hour day to get what is known as a dB(A) LAeq level. It then draws up a noise contour. This has been criticised on two counts. Firstly, the average includes the periods in the day when there are no planes overhead. And, secondly, many people argue that, in assessing the noise, too much weight is given to the noise of individual planes and not sufficient to the number of planes. Because individual planes have got quieter over the last 20 years, the Government can claim that noise contours have shrunk.

➔ **There is no prospect of significantly quieter planes being introduced over the next 20 years.** The progress of the last couple of decades has come to an end. It means that the sort of expansion envisaged in the Regional Air Studies will inevitably mean that more people across the country will be exposed to higher levels of noise. This is confirmed by Arthur D Little, the firm of consultants, that produced the technical study that accompanied The Future of Aviation, the Government's policy consultation document published in December 2000.

Living under the flight path....

"I am on the flight path to Heathrow and must endure a cacophony of groaning aircraft over the street. The confusion for me is that I live in Camberwell and that is a long way from Heathrow. And yet I have to endure landing aircraft at night and more irritatingly for the entire day at 90 second intervals." **Darren Finkel:** architect, single, aged 34, bought his Camberwell flat 8 years ago before aircraft were a problem in the area. Sold up this year and moved to Croydon...reluctantly: he had grown up in nearby Dulwich and works at London Bridge.

"I spend most of my time at home these days. I have become disabled and have difficulty walking long distances. I have a nice little flat, especially adapted for me, on a nice estate. But I am driven crazy by the planes. All I can do is sit and shout at them. I don't think they hear me!" **Betty Underhill:** ex-nurse (now on disability benefit), aged 47, has lived in same council flat in Brixton for 15 years. Brought up in Vauxhall.

John Stewart