



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

**TO:**

The Rt Hon Mark Harper  
Secretary of State for Transport  
Great Minster Houses of Parliament  
33 Horseferry Road  
London  
SW1P 4DR

**CC:**

Thomas Woldbye  
Chief Executive Officer  
Heathrow Airport Ltd  
The Compass Centre  
Nelson Road  
Hounslow  
TW6 2GW

21 May 2024

Dear Mr. Harper,

**Re: Response to the Government's consultation on night flights**

We are writing to express our concerns, on behalf of local residents, about the Government's consultation on night flight restrictions, which closes on 22 May. Whilst the consultation covers night flights at Gatwick, Stansted and Heathrow, we are primarily concerned with the impact on Heathrow, given the arrivals and departures that fly over our constituencies.

Whilst noise misery and pollution from Heathrow blights the lives of millions of residents across South West London every day, it is at night that the worst effects are felt - leading to greater health risks, lost productivity and disrupted sleep.

Currently 5,800 scheduled night flights are permitted between 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. every year at Heathrow (a number that doesn't include any unscheduled flights that arrive or depart at night, which happens regularly and without sufficient evidence as to why they are needed).

The consultation proposes that the current night flights regime, which was due to expire in 2025, be extended until October 2028. We, alongside local residents and campaign groups, believe that the original timetable of October 2025 should be adhered to, so that changes can be made as soon as possible given the level of disturbance that night flights have on people's sleep and quality of life.

We are also concerned that decisions about night flights are being made without a proper evidence basis regarding the economic, social, health and environmental impacts. We therefore call on the Department for Transport (DfT) to heed our request for greater transparency and a proven evidence basis for how decisions about night flights are being made.

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## **Calling for a ban on night flights**

Ultimately, we would like to see a complete ban on night flights so that every resident has the right to a **full eight hours' sleep**. In the interim, we would like to highlight two improvements that would reduce some of the worst impacts of night flights:

1. Bring forward the evening scheduling so that all flights depart by 11:00 p.m. (rather than the current 11.30 p.m.).
2. Shift the time of early morning arrivals so that no plane arrives before 6:00 a.m. (whereas currently they are allowed between 4.30 a.m. and 6:00 a.m.).

Heathrow could encourage these changes by charging significantly higher fees for planes taking off or landing in these periods. Services that persistently run late should be rescheduled to reduce the risk of encroachment into the night and, ultimately, landing slots should be removed from operators that fail to improve.

At Heathrow, aircraft regularly run late with insufficient evidence provided as to why this was necessary. Greater transparency on this point is urgently needed.

## **Noise levels**

In addition, we believe that the decibel limit at which noise breaches occur are set too high. Therefore, we ask the DfT to lower the decibel limit at which noise breaches occur, so that airlines are incentivised to operate their least noisy aircraft at night and early in the morning.

## **Understanding the health impacts**

Crucially, we believe that decisions around night flights are being made without sufficient consideration of evidence and research into the health impacts of night flights.

We understand that the DfT plans to maintain the current night flights regime until the conclusion of the Aviation Night Noise Effects (ANNE) survey. We contend, however, that there is no need to wait. Whilst the ANNE study will be the UK's first in 30 years to assess aviation noise effects on sleep disturbance, we believe that there is already a substantial international body of evidence which points to the negative health impacts of night flights on communities living close to airports and under flight paths.

Studies published by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and the British Medical Journal, as well as evidence presented by academics and researchers since the early 1990s, suggest that late night and early morning flights can be linked with an increased risk of strokes, extreme mental health issues, substance abuse, heightened stress and chronic insomnia.

However, this research does not seem to have been given the weight it deserves when balancing the need for restrictions against the alleged economic benefits of these flights.

## **Unsubstantiated economic benefits**

Whilst striking a balance between the needs of industry and residents is important, the economic benefit brought by night flights has been significantly overstated in the past.

In 2022, the former Minister for Roads and Local Transport, Richard Holden MP, speaking on behalf of the Minister for Aviation, made reference to often-cited data presented by York Aviation that night flights contribute around £8.4 billion to the UK economy.

However, an independent review of this data found serious methodological vulnerabilities in the study, concluding that it significantly overstated the benefit of night flights on business productivity in the UK.

The New Economics Foundation's report on York Aviation's analysis also found that with the boom in virtual meetings since the COVID-19 pandemic, York Aviation's analysis, which heavily emphasises the value created by business air travel, is out of date. The number of

people travelling by air to meet directly has shrunk dramatically since the expanded adoption of video conferencing and, as such, York Aviation's findings cannot be relied upon.

We urge the DfT to consider an updated, independent analysis of the economic impact of night flights.

### **Fulfilling the consultation's stated objectives**

In its consultation documents, the DfT says its stated objective is:

*"To limit, **and where possible reduce**, the adverse effects of aviation noise at night on health and quality of life while supporting sustainable growth and recognising the importance to the UK of commercial passenger and freight services."*

In the same document, the Department states that *"We believe the existing restrictions on night flights are sufficient to meet the new night-time noise abatement objective."*

Given that the proposals amount to no significant changes for night flights in and out of Heathrow, we do not believe they can fulfil the Government's stated aim to *"where possible reduce"* disruption from night flights, and improve residents' lives.

We ask the Government to consider the actions outlined above, and to commit to a comprehensive assessment of the economic, social, environmental and health impacts of night flights – because **everyone deserves a good night's sleep**.

We look forward to hearing your response to these crucial questions.

Sincerely,

**MUNIRA WILSON MP**

Member of Parliament for Twickenham

**SARAH OLNEY MP**

Member of Parliament for Richmond Park

**Cllr HINA BOKHARI AM**

London Assembly Member

**Cllr GARETH ROBERTS AM**

Leader of Richmond Council

London Assembly South West Constituency Member