WHO WANTS MORE NIGHT FLIGHTS?

At the end of February, The Department for Transport (DfT), on behalf of the Government, published its long-awaited consultation on the *"Night Flight Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted Airports from October 2025"*.

This consultation will influence the Government's decision on the number and type of night flights to be permitted at Stansted after the present restrictions end in October next year. It is an important opportunity for local residents, as well as local councils, to make their views known to the DfT.

As a result of Freedom of Information requests submitted by Stansted Airport Watch (SAW) it is clear that Manchester Airports Group (MAG) has been lobbying the DfT to "de-designate" Stansted, i.e. so that Government restrictions on night flights would only apply to Heathrow and Gatwick but not Stansted. Alternatively, as a minimum, MAG wants the DfT to remove the current limit on the number of night flights at Stansted (13,700 per annum).

This lobbying activity by MAG is in clear breach of its agreement with Uttlesford District Council *"not to seek any relaxation of the night flight restrictions currently in force"*. It shows a complete disregard for an agreement lawfully entered into, as well as a disregard for the adverse impact of night flights upon the health and wellbeing of local residents.

Aircraft are intrinsically noisy machines and particularly so where there are low ambient background noise levels at night, as is the case of the largely rural area around Stansted Airport. An aircraft engine on take-off at 50 metres emits 140 decibels of noise which is at the threshold of pain.

Further background

The current position at Stansted is that there is a limit on the <u>number of night flights</u>, which is easy to understand and monitor, and also a <u>quota count </u>(QC) limit, which is far more difficult to monitor and not easily understood.

The QC system allocates points to each aircraft type, ranging from 2 QC points for the noisiest aircraft using Stansted at night, such as the Fedex MD11, to 0.25 points or even 0.125 points for less noisy aircraft such as those used by Ryanair and easyJet. For example, a weekly noise quota limit of (say) 150 QC points would allow 75 night flights by the noisiest aircraft or up to 1,200 night flights by less noisy aircraft. As a simple rule of thumb more aircraft means more noise disturbance.

It's simple arithmetic. As the very noisiest aircraft are phased out over the years, each one could be progressively replaced by more than ten times as many night flights. That explains why MAG wants (at the very least) the numerical limit removed and why local councils, as well as local residents, should oppose this.

Responding to the consultation

The consultation proposes extending the current restrictions – i.e. maintaining the status quo – at Heathow and Gatwick until (at least) October 2028. However, for Stansted, the DfT is seeking views on three different options:

Option 1 – Removal of all Government night controls in October 2026, thereafter relying solely only local planning conditions.

Option 2 – Same as Option 1, but removing Government night controls in October 2025, whilst maintaining a QC limit, but not a numerical limit.

Option 3 – Government night controls to remain (i.e. as per Heathrow and Gatwick).

Options 1 and 2 reflect lobbying activity by MAG. Both these options would mean fewer restrictions and, inevitably, more Stansted night flights. Option 3 is clearly preferable and it is important that local residents make their views known to the DfT.

The link to the DfT consultation document is Night flight restrictions: Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted airports from October 2025 - GOV.UK (www.gov.uk). You can respond online but an email response allows more flexibility to make your own points, rather than just responding to the pre-set questions. The email address is night.flights@dft.gov.uk.

Other points you could make

- Phase out night flights altogether – 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 from 11.00pm to 7.00am, as defined by the World Health Organisation, 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 – Airport management can grant 'dispensations' where flights are delayed by weather or Air Traffic Control problems. Dispensations do not count against the night flights limit. Stansted granted 1,200 dispensations last summer whereas Heathrow granted only 462. The DfT should remove the right of airports to grant dispensations, i.e. marking their own homework. For more information, see https://stanstedairportwatch.com/press-releases/night-flights-smoke-and-mirrors/

- 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 quite unnecessary, other than in exceptional circumstances.

- Health Impacts – The Government recognises that aircraft noise at night has negative impacts upon local communities around airports and can impact on physical and mental well-being. These negative impacts are far greater than any economic benefits.

Night flights are the biggest single cause of noise complaints by local residents. This consultation is an opportunity to make your voice heard. **The closing date is 22 May 2024.**