Briefing Sheet

How Noisy Are the Planes? How Many People Are Affected?

The Noise Climate is Getting Worse
More people than ever before are affected by aircraft noise. For many years the problem of aircraft noise was largely confined to South West London. Now, over a million people in London and the Thames Valley live under the Heathrow flight path. It extends from Greenwich and Eltham in the east to Windsor and Henley in the west and as far north as Brent, Finsbury Park and Mile End, with places as far away as Chalfont St Peters experiencing aircraft noise at certain times of the day.

The Reason it is Getting Worse
In recent years the flight paths for landing aircraft during the day (for night noise, see Aircraft at Night Briefing) have been extended to accommodate the increased volume of planes. This means that, whereas in the past, aircraft used to descend rapidly over Barnes, they now come down a lot earlier. Thus, huge swathes of London, previously untroubled by aircraft noise, have got real problems. Some areas are subjected to a plane, one every 90 seconds, coming over from 6 in the morning until after 10 at night.

But Aren't Planes Getting Quieter?
Individual aircraft have got quieter over recent decades. It has been particularly true in the case of departing aircraft. But, aircraft are still very noisy and the increased number of planes has largely off-set the fact that individual planes have become quieter.

But Doesn't the Government Claim Fewer People Are Affected?
It does. But its claims are based on very shaky evidence. The last time it did on-the-ground measurements of the people affected by aircraft noise from Heathrow was in 1982, since when the number of flights has gone up by nearly 70%.

So How Does the Government Measure Noise Levels?
Noise is measured in decibels (db). The Government then averages out the aircraft noise over the whole day - so that it includes the quiet spells when there are no aircraft - a method known as Leq. The average decibel count over the day is thus described in terms of dbLeq. The Government decided that the "onset of community annoyance" began at 57dbLeq. So, in 1982, using on-the-ground measurements, it came up with a 57dbLeq contour - ie, the area where noise levels reached 57dbLeq. It updates this contour each year, not by on-the-ground measurements, but by calculations

made by computer factoring in the number of planes and the noise of each plane. The computer measurements give undue weight to the noise each plane makes. Thus, because Concorde - the noisiest of all the planes - has been grounded the noise contour has shrunk by a third. Yet there are only 3/4 Concorde flights a day. The dbLeq measurement, therefore, does not reflect the way aircraft noise actually affects people. So, even before Concorde was grounded, the Government was claiming that the 57dbLeq contour was shrinking....at the very time more people than ever before were complaining about aircraft noise.

What Needs to be Done to Get More Accurate Measurements?

The Leq method of measuring noise needs to be abandoned and replaced with something more meaningful. The Government needs to recognise that "the onset of community annoyance" starts below 57 decibels. It should adopt the standards suggested by the World Health Organisation. And the Government needs to ask people just how bothered they are by different levels of aircraft noise. Belatedly, the Government announced in Spring 2001 that it was to embark on such a study. It is a three year study, but interim results will be available before the end of 2002.

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