

Airport Operators Association response to the Civil Aviation Authority's Airspace Classification Review 2019-2020

Introduction

1. Founded in 1934, the Airport Operators Association (AOA) is the national voice of UK airports. We are a trade association representing the interests of UK airports, and the principal such body engaging with the UK Government and regulatory authorities on airport matters. The AOA's members include over 50 airports and 160 Associate Members, made up of companies representing a wide range of suppliers in the aviation industry.
2. The AOA is also an active member of Sustainable Aviation, the UK coalition of airports, airlines, aerospace manufacturers and air navigation service providers that sets out a collective and long-term strategy to ensure a sustainable future for UK aviation; additionally, the AOA are also partners of the 'Our Future Skies', an industry campaign group making strategic case for airspace modernisation.
3. The AOA is supportive of government and industry efforts to modernise the UK's upper and lower airspace. It is keen to maintain a national conversation on the benefits of modernisation and helps to share best-practice amongst its member airports.
4. The AOA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) consultation on the draft procedure for reviewing the classification of airspace.

Overarching Concerns

5. The UK aviation sector has been at forefront of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. UK airports are set to record at least £4 billion in lost revenue by the end of 2020 and the AOA has estimated that up to 110,000 jobs are at risk around UK airports. With this huge challenge facing the aviation sector, the industry's priorities have had to change to account for the crisis. The AOA would expect the Government and the CAA to also adjust their priorities.
 - a. Over the last six months, industry and Government have worked constructively to identify regulatory alleviations, in a whole host of areas, from aviation security to air traffic services, which have helped to limit and mitigate some of the financial difficulties faced by airports, ANSPs and airlines. The AOA welcomes the effort of the CAA and Department for Transport (DfT) in this regard. However, continuing with the particular endeavour of airspace classification, at this time, runs directly in opposition to the collaborative approach taken to reducing, not increasing, burden on private sector operators in the aviation industry. Given the range of urgent business-critical issues faced by operators at the present time, devoting any resource at all to this project is a gross misuse of time and energy. It is unfortunate that the CAA and DfT have not been able to recognise this.
 - b. While the AOA accepts the Airspace Classification Review as one of the 15 elements of the Airspace Modernisation Strategy (AMS), it has some concern as to the priority currently given to this element of the AMS. The AOA would, once again, request that the CAA or the Department for Transport (DfT) conduct an analysis as to the broad economic or societal benefits of reducing the volume of controlled airspace in the UK.

- c. With the CAA itself facing the funding implications of the COVID-19 crisis, the AOA would question the need to continue with the reclassification project in 2020.
6. Broadly, the AOA supports the three-stage approach outlined in the draft procedure.

Interaction with other airspace endeavours

7. The priority seemingly given to this one initiative of the AMS appears to be disjointed with the rest of the strategy. Many AOA member airports have reported that many classification issues will likely be addressed through the CAP1616 processes required by the national programme of airspace modernisation.
 - a. In light of the financial implications of the COVID-19 crisis, and the sparse resource now available to the CAA it is understandable why a dedicated airspace classification webpage would be set up in the interim. However, AOA would hope that this function would, at best possible speed, be integrated into the wider Airspace Change portal. The portal provides a trusted “one-stop shop” for airspace changes of every nature and by hosting reclassification on a separate site, the CAA is diluting the trust and oversight provided by the portal.
 - b. The AOA would hope that matters of airspace classification are integrated into the Airspace Change portal ahead of any future review cycle.
8. As drafted, the current procedure would exempt airspace that is already subject to change as a part of the early stages of the CAP1616 process. Given the current circumstances regarding COVID-19 and the industry’s financial struggles, with most individual Airspace Change Proposals (ACP), sponsored by AOA member airports, on pause, the AOA would suggest that this is accounted for by the CAA. This could be done through a medium-term “ring-fence” of areas previously identified for review under CAP1616 processes within the FASI-N and FASI-S programmes. This would ensure that the overarching benefits of the AMS are realised without any erosion from hastily executed airspace classification projects.
9. Paragraph 5.17 highlights that the review process may consider volumes of airspace included in existing CAP1616 process that are in stages 5 to 7, or where the outcome of a post-implementation review (stage 7) was decided less than three years ago, on a case-by-case basis. Airports will expect a reasonable return on investment for the resources and effort expended in completing an ACP through the CAP1616 process. A guaranteed, certain benefit of only three years would disincentivise airports from continuing their own ACPs, once the COVID-19 crisis has abated, and may even affect their decision to participate in the FASI-N and FASI-S programmes more broadly. Airports would expect newly implemented airspace to have an asset life of at least ten years.

Consider Stage

10. The AOA agrees that two years is an appropriate time frame for the cycle of the review to run. The AOA also supports the understanding that it may not be possible to run the review procedure in the same open format as was conducted for the first review, with any respondents able to highlight areas of airspace for review and potential amendment.

Review Stage

11. It will be critical for the CAA to engage at the earliest stages of particular reviews with the airspace controlling authority. Transparency in this process will build trust amongst all stakeholders, particularly when critical volumes of airspace are called for review.
12. In Table 1 of Chapter 5 (pg. 37) the CAA advise that they may consider classification applications that could affect flight paths as a result of unknown VFR flights or vectoring practices but would use a safety assessment to determine if this would be appropriate. Environmental considerations, in particular noise, should be taken into account and considered as a priority in these assessments.
13. Further clarity is needed as to the CAA's approach to the use and collection of data in this process. Within a review into particular volumes of airspace, who will be the ultimate custodian of data related to that airspace? Further clarity will be required as to the obligations to provide data to stakeholders external to an airspace controlling authority. How this data will be used, who will be granted access and who will be responsible for analysis, are all questions which require further clarity and detailed thought, before this procedure goes live.

Amend Stage

14. The AOA understands and is supportive of the views set out by the CAA in paragraphs 6.20 and 6.21, with regard to environmental impacts and the assessment of these at the amend stage. The environmental objectives set out in the Air Navigation Guidance would be appropriate for the CAA to consult when reviewing airspace classification cases.
 - a. In the AOA's view, the airspace classification process should take into account, and have the same weighting toward, environmental impacts as other airspace processes such as CAP1616.
15. The AOA appreciates the recognition that airspace controlling authorities will need to devote resource and expertise to develop new operational procedures and a safety case for reclassified volumes of airspace. This is particularly relevant when a reclassification proposal will not be of direct or demonstrable benefit to the airspace controlling authority. The AOA does not agree with the CAA's view that "We do not expect the [cost] impact to be that great". The costs to a controlling authority could be significant, especially given the current financial circumstances of the aviation sector.
16. On the broader issue of recovering the costs of the new reclassification procedure, the AOA is firmly of the view that this should come from central Government funding. The reclassification project is continuing, without delay, despite the COVID-19 pandemic, at the insistence of the Secretary of State; to expect any other stakeholder or body to contribute funding to this project, at a time when the industry and wider aviation sector need more support, not less, from the public sector, would not be fair or equitable. Government priorities should utilise Government funding.

- a. The use of the NERL en-route unit rate, capturing all commercial airspace users, would not accurately reflect the stakeholders which stand to benefit the most from this new procedure.

For further information, please contact AOA Policy and Public Affairs Manager Jeff Bevan.