

# Mental health and aircraft noise: frankly, who gives a damn?

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Two years ago a ground breaking summit was held at London's City Hall to "discuss practical solutions to the contentious issue of aircraft noise".

It delivered a resounding recommendation for an Independent Noise Ombudsman to protect the welfare of the overflown.

But two years later, precisely zilch has happened. Alarmingly, this suggests that the public health and welfare of the overflown is still not taken seriously. I firmly believe this is the case despite herculean efforts by organisations such as HACAN (Heathrow Association for the Control of Aircraft Noise).

Who then can people rely on, and trust, in all of this, if it is commonly perceived that the relationship between airlines, airports, regulators and civil servants are too cosy, and there is no independent champion for the overflown? Who?

Yet never at any time in aviation history are people more vulnerable, and at risk of serious blight and ill health, from the imposition of newly prescribed concentrated low altitude flight paths, than now.

## *So what are the risks of low altitude concentrated flight paths on health?*

Research generally confirms that aircraft noise can increase blood pressure, and cause heart disease, strokes and dementia. That's, of course, if your lungs don't seize up first from inhaling toxic air. One also often dies significantly sooner than counterparts outside these flight paths. What's not to like?

But it doesn't take a great deal of imagination to realise that concentrated, low level, flight paths, in particular, may increase known health risks significantly, as effects are not diluted ,as with traditional dispersed (diluted) flight paths – hence the term 'concentrated'.

Instead aircraft after aircraft are navigated precisely down, not so much flight paths or corridors, as tramlines! Whilst this is an impressive technological feat it is far less impressive if you find that they are interminably skimming your roof top, without variation. In such cases the unfortunate involuntary consumers will inevitably receive a double, super concentrated dose of noise and toxins – precursors, as noted, to very probable ill health and premature death. This is why much greater dispersal and variation with low altitude flight paths is essential. This point appears not yet to have been grasped by the aviation industry, or Government policy makers. It urgently needs to.

The effect of the relatively new phenomenon of low altitude concentrated flight paths appears to be worryingly under-researched. What dosage is safe? What controls are in place? Are they sufficient, and if so, who says so?

## *But what about mental health?*

Research suggests that existing sufferers of mental illness are generally more sensitive to noise.

For the involuntary consumers of noise and air pollution, everything will be more intense as noise and particulates saturate narrow 'tramlines'. This fact appears to be lost on Public Health officials and politicians. So what dose is safe? Where's the evidence? Where are the controls? Does anyone really care?

A review of literature on the relationship between aviation noise and mental health clearly indicates that more needs to be done. But despite there being clearer indications from several sources linking the two, there has been a reluctance to commission further research.

Moreover there has been a regrettable lack of empathy in some quarters implying, for example, that depression and Mental Health is still beset with misunderstanding, prejudice and inequality in Britain 2016. It's as though depression is a 'non-event' for the aviation industry, and that those who dare say they are profoundly affected, are somehow irrelevant or exaggerating. This, incidentally, merely compounds the sense of isolation and alienation suffered, and I can testify to that.

### *Recent research implications*

Recent published research points to a large study at Hamburg Airport which highlights that a 10db increase in aircraft noise may result in a 10% increased risk of depression. The suggestion is that further research is required, but there are other studies also positively correlating a relationship between aviation noise and likely mental ill health.

A study in Japan, for example, has found that people exposed to aircraft noise levels above 70dBs (A) Ldn have higher rates of mental instability and depressiveness.

And another study, found that those living closer to airports showed a higher frequency of 'generalised anxiety disorder', a precursor I would suggest to other forms of mental illness, particularly depression, especially when there is little or no equality or access to justice, as with the UK's draconian regime. Put yourself in their shoes for a few moments, if you can....Not nice is it?

Another European study, published in European Commissions Science for Environment Policy (Noise Impacts on Health) journal, January 2015, issue 47, advised that the health of vulnerable people exposed to noise is under-researched, and suggested that vulnerable groups of people, such as those with mental illness, may be more at risk from exposure to environmental noise than healthy adults. I believe that this is a very sound hypothesis.

A growing number of overflown have been saying for some time, and a growing body of literature supports this, that aircraft noise can trigger or exacerbate mental illness as well as the generally more accepted (and acceptable?) physical illnesses. One needs to consider not just those without any current form of ill health, but also those with pre-existing conditions including high blood pressure or mental health including depression, when undertaking the research.

### *But depression is not such a 'big deal', surely?*

Depression is a very real illness and it sticks in the throat to have to say this in 2016, but one has to. It can affect every aspect of one's life, including work and social life, appetite, motivation,

relationships, ability to get out of bed, and ultimately the desire to live. It can have truly devastating effects.

I never really talk about my 'black dog', but feel I have to, as the stakes are now so high, not just personally, but also for the invisible underclass caught by similar circumstances.

About 12 years ago I was a patient in a locked hospital ward having tried to end my life. I was a whisker away from a body bag, but was interrupted .....My life at that point was literally hanging by a thread. I was given a second chance and I grasped it with both hands. Consequently I work relentlessly hard, one day at a time, at staying well.

Hanging, is the most common suicide method for males, less so for females. But depression can affect people in many ways, and severe depression can be life threatening, no ifs or buts about that. It can devastate not only the lives of those affected but also their families, friends and loved ones, for years and even lifetimes.

I fought my way back from hell. Not only had I lost the will to live, I had other complications: psychotic depression is the most severe form of depression and renders you more prone to suicide. It can come with a range of other nasty complications such as severe restlessness and delusional thinking, and is thought to be caused by major life/environmental change.

I was on the edge of the abyss and hanging onto reality by my fingernails at the time. Scared, anxious, and bewildered by the experience, I was an absolute train wreck. However I edged back to the 'real world' one step at a time. I was extremely lucky to have family who coaxed me back to life, although they were distraught and despairing at times, and an employer who patiently waited for me, coaxed me, coached me, and believed in me, when I had lost all belief and self-confidence

It took me years to begin to trust myself, and for my family to trust me, and to feel substantially healed, and to get our lives back on track. So I habitually do the things that are 'good' for me, while trying to avoid any toxic influences. Deep down, however, I have an anxiety and a strong drive to stay well since the experience was so hellish, and the chances of a further successful outcome are very slim, as episodes of illness have become progressively, and dramatically worse.

### *And then the aircraft noise came*

Approximately two years ago, following dispersal from elsewhere, larger, lower flying, long haul aircraft began overflying our home all day long, when Heathrow was on easterly operations (on average, c. 30 % of year). Flights had become more concentrated although this was denied.

We had just finished our sanctuary – a loft extension – but with aircraft noise now flooding in, had to gut it and fit high density acoustic insulation and boarding, using the last of our savings. But noise still leaked through air vents, trickle vents, soffits, and velux ventilation flaps, and no-one – I'll spare blushes, and mention no names here – cared a jot (I really wanted to use the 'f' word here).

Efforts to resolve were blocked or discredited suggesting that perhaps I was imagining things. This was particularly nasty as I had been so ill a decade earlier that, yes, this was a feature of the illness.

The fact was aircraft were disproportionately impacting our home when there was a 3 km prescribed zone to disperse the impact. I had to borrow to pay for an independent report to confirm what I had already said. Again this was stonewalled, and my genuine sense of alienation grew (for someone who had struggled to stay well this was particularly cruel).

Talk of airport expansion and the possible prospect of more noise seriously raised my anxiety levels, and I knew from past experience that anxiety and worrying over intractable problems only sent me round in an endless loop, causing me to worry more. I tried CBT, and a range of other interventions, nothing made a difference. The large air craft in close proximity to our roof spoke volumes, and the lack of control over the situation only made matters worse.

In addition, plans to ‘simplify’ the way airspace is used by 2020 has seen the move towards concentrated flight paths, and the compression of noise. Noise is corralled, affecting a minority among communities particularly badly, where aircraft are flying at low altitudes. Blight, ill health and injustice are bequeathed so the rest of society can flourish and benefit from their misery. Is this really the right thing to do?

## ISSUES

The overflow are more vulnerable now than at any other time in aviation history. The widespread deployment, particularly of low altitude, concentrated flight paths, will create unprecedented health risks and create noise ghettos. This is the new Apartheid, creating an underclass, with no rights, and no protection. Democracy will have turned its back on them, and will have turned back the clock.

It sticks in the throat, therefore, that in a week a convicted sex offender is invoking his Human Rights to avoid deportation, the overflow have absolutely no Human Rights. Yes, that’s correct. Zilch! And to make matters worse aviation noise is exempted from the suite of environmental noise protection laws which apply in any other area of public life. Such provision is offensive, abusive and simply wrong.

The obsession with aviation growth, and its seeming inevitability, is seeing the compression of existing noise footprints to make them smaller. Coupled with the PR of quieter aircraft one might think one followed the other. Not so. In fact, as many aircraft are lower within the compressed contour zones, and there are more of them, then the experience for the overflow in many cases is much worse. The proximity of aircraft to rooftops also leaves a ‘psychological footprint’, long after the noise has gone – a palpable sense of personal space violation. Remember if one is within 60metres of HS2 then one automatically receives full statutory blight compensation, whereas the same doesn’t apply to blight from flight paths. Words genuinely fail me here. Is anybody listening? Does anyone care?

One also needs to recognise that noise monitoring, ineffective and non-independent as it is, averages noise. People don’t hear or experience averages, they hear and observe events – one after another, which invariably trigger a physiological response as the heart beat and blood

pressure increases, and mind races. So not just noise, including loudness and pitch, but vibration, number, frequency and proximity to private space and one's home, affect one's overall experience.

The pin point precision and direction of aircraft at low altitude over the same property time and time again, at perhaps 60-90 second intervals, is impressive from an operational efficiency perspective, but dangerous to health and well-being. Hot spots in the flight paths network need to be reviewed at a micro level, and measures taken to ensure that occupiers, especially those vulnerable to aviation noise, and those with known pre-existing health conditions, are treated fairly and decently. At the moment they are treated no better than the weekly garbage. They're disposable.

The delay in establishing an Independent Noise Ombudsman to provide some much needed protection and redress for the noise afflicted is unacceptable, and any material changes to existing flight paths in the past two years – and some arguably have been 'snuck in' – and, those going forward, should be captured within the enabling provisions. This might then protect those from air space modernisation, or airports implementing changes that are detrimental to sections of communities, but which otherwise might not be covered by any mitigation or redress arrangements (in other words the perpetrators could weasel out of their responsibilities, again).

The Government, proponents of airport expansion, and airports should live up to their Corporate Social Responsibilities, and seriously invest in mitigation and compensation for schemes for those affected. The amounts presently offered, as a whole, are derisory.

People expect, and are entitled to 'quiet enjoyment' of their home, whether they own or rent it. It should be a place of retreat from the hurly burly and somewhere they should feel safe. If there is a problem they have legal redress to resolve it. With the overflown this doesn't apply. Yet we know aviation noise affects physical and almost certainly mental health, and we do little or nothing about it. We collude with the grim reaper by doing nothing. How do you think this makes those screwed by this discriminatory system feel? How do you think this affects their physical and mental health?

Why then does the World Health Organisation recommend that external sound levels should be kept below an average level of 30dB(A) in the bedroom, or a maximum of 45dB(A) for a single event? It's because health and wellbeing can be affected by external disturbance, and sleep can be disturbed. This is why airports should be mandated to provide 'world class' schemes to ensure that bedrooms and living rooms especially are protected to achieve this benchmark, and that each installation is independently audited to ensure compliance.

Mental Health is still misunderstood and ignorance has created a society where too many fail to appreciate how devastating depression or other forms of mental illness can be, or the blatant inequality that people endure on a daily basis. Those stuck under imposed concentrated low altitude flight paths, for example, have the double whammy of the inequality of aviation noise, as well as the inequality of mental illness to try and survive (an unenviable burden). It is about time this dualism was acknowledged, so that we can move on and find appropriate solutions.

Concentrated low altitude flight paths, coupled with weak governance and control systems, place some of the most vulnerable in our communities at risk of being pushed over the edge- to become just another statistic. There are no Human Rights, there is no equality, nor justice for

them, just pain, loss, ill health and most likely an earlier death than the spectators outside the ghetto walls, looking in mostly indifferently.

If once in a life time airspace changes have, and will be made, as the aviation industry have announced, they will inevitably have ‘once’ in a lifetime’ consequences. Lives will be turned upside down so others benefit. As a society it is, therefore, only right that we understand and redress this.

Presently some areas receive a break from aircraft noise and respite is seen as a significant benefit, and indeed it is. If, as it may, displace and disperse more noise on others in due course, then this too should be managed sensitively and fairly. It should also be borne in mind that some people newly affected by noise, or affected by more noise, may not be able to tolerate the new dose. In such cases the benefit of a respite break will be of no use to them. Again such cases need to be considered and appropriate solutions found.

I’m reminded that a sign of a civilised society is not only how well it looks after its people, but how well it looks after the vulnerable and weak. Mental Health and aircraft have come a long way in the past 50 years, but they are uneasy bedfellows. More work needs to be done to appreciate that good mental health should be a universal entitlement, as should access to justice and equality for the concentrated overflow.

I have struggled writing this blog because it has been painful to admit the truth, and revisit old memories. I also worry that nothing will change, leading to an inevitable ‘car crash’, hence this blog. However, I do hope that many who read this text will discuss and raise the issue from a Human Rights, Mental Health, or Justice perspective. After all how many people will have to die from bad Government policy and bystanders’ indifference, before good people do something?

Please help, if you can.

Thank you.

Chocksaway, on behalf of a wider family of noise and health affected overflow

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