

Resident Working Group

C/o [REDACTED]
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Deputy Assistant Commissioner
Laurence Taylor
Frontline Policing
New Scotland Yard
Victoria Embankment
SW1A 2JL

(by email)

29 August 2021

Dear [REDACTED]

Petition Against Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit reinstating their base at Lippitts Hill

PETITION

As a resident of High Beech/Sewardstonebury, each of the signatories to this letter “strongly oppose the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit part of NPAS (National Police Air Services) reinstating their base at Lippitts Hill, after 2 years of being established at North Weald aerodrome.

- The impact of noise and air pollution will be caused by day and night helicopter flights and servicing will again cause considerable stress and disturbance to local people to the site, and to livestock, birds and wildlife. The air will again have a fuel vapour smell.
- The site is adjacent to Epping Forest, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Epping Forest is also a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) that aims to improve air quality.
- Over the past 2 years the number of residential dwellings has increased, some of which border the police site. Wildlife diversity appears to have improved such as Buzzards.
- Road use would be significantly increased by personnel commuting to the site and service vehicles support the unit.
- The money spent relocating the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit to North Weald Aerodrome would have been a substantial waste of public money.

Residents believe that the helicopters should continue to be based in a designated airfield, such as North Weald and we would ask that NPAS and the Metropolitan Police rethink their position.”

SIGNATURES

Over the last month over 80 signatures have been collated from people who live or work immediately adjacent to the Police site at Lippitts Hill.

Local residents have not been advised by the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit that they intended to return to Lippitts Hill, which has limited the time available to residents and interested parties to deliver their representations.

HISTORY and INFORMATION

The Lippitts Hill Metropolitan Air Support Unit was formed in 1980 and employed 48 personnel. The senior management were based at Wapping police station. All pilots were ex-military Royal Navy but also Army Air Corps. Each aircraft was crewed by a pilot with two officers acting as observers, and averaged over 260 flying hours per month. In February 2015, it was announced that the control of the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit was to be transferred to the National Police Air Service (NPAS) on 31 March, and that the base at Lippitts Hill would close in the following year. A projected new base at Elstree was intended to serve Hertfordshire, Bedfordshire, and Essex as well as London. However, by February 2017, a replacement for the Lippitts Hill base had not been procured, and the possibility of using RAF Northolt instead was being investigated.

In December 2015 the Metropolitan Police Air Unit transferred to NPAS and on September 7th 2017 EFDC approved the NPAS North Weald Airbase on a 25 year lease. It is understood that bringing all Police aviation services together would save £ 11 million per year. In addition, it is understood that £4 million was spent on building the facilities for NPAS at North Weald. NPAS have 15 bases across England and Wales, providing borderless air support 24/7 on every day of the year. NPAS not only manage operational response, they also manage helicopter maintenance, upgrades, fuel purchase etc.

On 7 September 2017 it was provisionally agreed by Epping Forest District Council to allow the unit to operate from North Weald Airfield in Essex, with a 25-year lease.

In NPAS annual report 2017/18 it states that South East had 42% of the total national tasks undertaken annually. This figure, in itself, shows how busy the site at Lippitts Hill was, and would continue to be, if the Metropolitan Police Air Service return to fly from there.

Helicopter flight paths were agreed upon. Local residents agreed the routes with the Metropolitan Police Service. Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) supported these negotiations. Despite all this, incursions to the agreement took place on a daily basis with helicopters flying low over housing immediately adjacent the Air Unit as well as beyond. It is worth noting that during these discussions, pilots advised that Lippitts Hill was one of the most difficult sites to fly in and out of.

The level of noise pollution was intensified when 24 hour flying was introduced, and local residents have campaigned for many years for the Metropolitan Police Air Support Unit to adhere to the agreed flightpaths and ultimately to find a suitable alternative airbase. EFDC officers and councillors have always been very supportive of residents and have facilitated dialogue between residents and the Metropolitan Police.

Aviation News August 2020 reported:

'There have been comments in the UK Parliament focussing on the noise pollution created by NPAS helicopters over London. Lord Lexden, Deputy Chairman of Committees, Deputy Speaker in the House of Lords, asked the Government whether they have plans to reduce the noise made by police and ambulance helicopters circling over London during the weekends and to replace them with quieter drones. The question was answered by Baroness Williams of Trafford, The Minister of State, Home Office. The decision of when to deploy helicopters over London is an operational matter for the police and the London Air Ambulance. The London Air Ambulance only operates during daylight hours due to operational reasons and this reduces noise during the hours of darkness. NPAS provides aircraft, including helicopters, and in London, responds to requests for support predominately from the Metropolitan Police Service, British Transport Police and the City of London Police. NPAS deploys helicopters after completing a threat, harm and risk assessment; and only deploy them when necessary. In 2019 a total of 3727 calls for service were delivered to the Metropolitan Police Service or City of London Police, an average of 10 per day. The existing fleet of aircraft are compliant with regulation [International Civil Aviation Authority, Chapter 8 and Annex 16] and are amongst the quietest within their category. This appears to be a multi-faceted campaign against helicopter noise over the Capital as on June 18, Tony Devenish a Conservative Party member of the London Assembly complained of specific noise on May 31st and June 1st. His angle was that on those dates two helicopters remained in stationary flight over Pimlico for several hours and caused a lot of loud and unwelcome noise for residents. A month later, on July 21, the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan replied apologising and referring to representations made to Government and the CAA that the regime governing helicopter flights over London is not fit for purpose and offers little if any protection from helicopter noise. He is to continue to make the case to both Government and the CAA that the issue must be addressed. [Hansard] 'Retention continues to be a never-ending problem that the organisation has not resolved, and it continues to severely blight the availability of NPAS to provide a satisfactory service. For now, the new fixed wing aircraft are seemingly being used as the sticking plaster for the problem. The excess noise created by training up some recently employed pilots in the NPAS way led the North Weald base to issue a grovelling apology in late June. Some residents may have noticed an increase in police helicopter activity around the North Weald base. Sergeant Steve Rowlett, Base Manager explained to the local media "We appreciate that there have been a lot of training flights taking place recently and I can assure you that amount of activity in and out of North Weald has been above what we would normally expect to experience through our normal police operations. This increase is due to the fact that we have recently recruited a number of highly experienced and qualified pilots who all need to be trained in the specifics of the type of helicopters we fly and this involves both day and night mandatory elements. "The usual expectation is for our existing pilots to only undertake mandatory training that assess their proficiency and allows for practice of safety drills to comply with legal requirements every 6 months. We appreciate that whilst doing this training we may have caused noise and inconvenience....' "Where possible we have made efforts to displace the training to other airfields that are available to us, however with only a limited number of sites being suitable and even less currently open and operational we have had to operate locally...'

Questions and comments from residents and interested parties:

- Has the Metropolitan Police Air Service investigated all options to enable them to continue to work within NPAS and fly out of North Weald and have the discussions with NPAS concluded?
- It is deeply concerning that Metropolitan Police Air Service and NPAS appear unable to resolve the operational issues that would allow them to continue aviation support from the purpose built new base at North Weald Note - Lippitts Hill has not been a working base for Police helicopters for the last three years.
- What would be the cost, in public money, of the helicopters returning to Lippitts Hill?
- The problem appears to be about operational communications and budget management between NPAS and the Metropolitan Police Air Services. Relocation should not have to be part of resolving the issues. The pandemic has demonstrated that infrastructures are in place for excellent communications between public services, wherever they are located.
- Is there a reason why the Metropolitan Police Air Services cannot operate independently of NPAS at North Weald? On this subject, where are Met. Police flying their fixed wing plane from?
- Technology has progressed massively and continues to do so. We understand that NPAS is planning to operate drones as well as their aircraft.
- Police Aviation News March 2020. Retention of pilots is an issue, requiring recruitment and pilot training for NPAS and presumably the Metropolitan Police Air Services. NPAS Annual Report 2017/18 stated that contracts were in progress for flight simulators for Pilot Training and Checking. These would not be available to the Metropolitan Police Air Services if they were not able to use the NPAS facilities or have the collective buying power that NPAS allows.
- In May 2020 further improvements were being made for Police aviation at the North Weald site. Again, these are improved facilities that the Metropolitan Police Air Services will not be using.
- Local people were not made aware that Police helicopters were due to return to Lippitts Hill. It was a local resident who became aware by chance.
- Since the helicopters were moved to North Weald, a significant number of new dwellings have been built very near the Lippitts Hill site. Some of these houses are directly adjacent to the old helicopter runway. The new owners were not made aware of the proposed return of the helicopters, at the time of purchase, and therefore were not aware of the potential distress and disruption that they cause.
- When servicing the helicopters, the machines are kept running at full throttle for long periods at a time. The noise makes any conversation or hearing within the vicinity impossible and the smell of aviation fuel can be intense.
- Past experience is that the Metropolitan Police Air Service, when operating out of Lippitts Hill, has substantially disregarded the needs and rights of the local community. Operational agreements with the community were ignored and disregarded. The Unit has not been open to communication with the local civilian

population, who have asked for the Metropolitan Police Air Unit's help to try to mitigate the considerable impact that they have on local people's lives.

If the Metropolitan Police Air Service and NPAS are not able to work together at North Weald, we would ask that the Metropolitan Police Air Service use NPAS as landlords, enabling them to continue to fly from North Weald, which is an established purpose built aerodrome suitable for helicopters and fixed wing craft.

Residents look forward to hearing your response.

Yours sincerely

 (on behalf of Residents Working Group)

Cc: Dame Eleanor Laing - MP for Epping Forest

Paul Thompson – Superintendent of Epping Forest, Corporation of London

Roger Hurst – Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner for Essex

BJ Harrington – Chief Constable of Essex

(Appendix – Petition of 81 names was attached)