

Safety up, delays down in the UK's complex airspace – why air traffic management unions oppose SES2+

The UK's complex airspace requires a high degree of expertise and technical equipment. The UK is part of a functional airspace block with Ireland covered by NATS, the Air Navigation Service Provider (ANSP) for the UK, and the Irish Aviation Authority.

Safety is at an historic high and delays at an historic low. In 2012, EU-wide en-route air traffic flow management delays per flight were at a historic low of 0.63 minutes per flight.

Real cost reductions have been achieved in over 20 member states.

However, this record could be jeopardised by new, Europe-wide targets that:

- fail to take into account the complexity of the air traffic management (ATM) system in each member state
- could be overly punitive
- affect the UK service and ultimately the travelling public's experience
- take no account of the improvements already achieved in safety, cost efficiency and service quality.

European air traffic management

The European ATM system is one of the busiest in the world and has to accommodate increasing air traffic flows while being under pressure from airspace users to cut costs and improve performance.

What is Single European Sky?

In 1999, the European Commission launched the Single European Sky (SES) initiative – a legislative framework that seeks to meet future aviation safety, capacity and efficiency needs at European rather than national level.

SES created functional airspace blocks that organise airspace according to traffic flow rather than national borders.

Legislation was introduced, across the EU, under the auspices of SES to harmonise safety, economic regulation and inter-operability of safety systems.

The second package of SES legislation (SES2) set out safety, network capacity, cost

efficiency and environmental impact targets for service providers.

But airlines do not believe that progress on SES has been swift enough.

SES2+

The European Commission has now tabled a third package known as SES2+, which proposes:

- removing member states' influence and strengthening infringement processes
- giving airlines more influence and control over service providers
- unbundling safety-critical ancillary services (surveillance, communications, meteorology and engineering)
- separating infrastructure management from service provision
- creating a new European Aviation Agency and seeking to grant it regulatory powers that are more appropriately exercised at a national level.

Why do air traffic and aviation workers oppose SES2+?

Unions representing 4,000 workers in air traffic control and systems engineering in the aviation industry are asking the UK government, the Civil Aviation Authority and NATS to oppose the proposed legislation and seek amendments that:

- retain proper consultation at member state level
- retain control over its civil and military airspace
- continue to have sufficient ATM jobs to meet current and future capacity.

What are the airlines' view?

Some stakeholders, mostly airlines, feel the current European airspace is fragmented and leads to inefficiency and high costs.

The European Commission has started a process, known as Reference Period 2 or RP2, for deciding how much airlines will pay to use European airspace for the period 2015-19.

Airlines are putting considerable pressure on the European Commission to significantly reduce prices. These views are driving the commission to set more stringent performance plans for 2015-19, and continue to be the subject of heated debate.

What are these goals?

The commission's goals* for 2020 include:

- increasing capacity threefold to reduce delays on the ground and in the air
- improving safety by a factor of 10
- reducing the effects flights have on the environment by 10 per cent
- halving the present cost of providing ATM services to airspace users.

*(set against 2005 baseline)

The trade unions believe these goals are:

- arbitrary
- not validated
- politically-driven.

The goals have not been modelled or tested and there is no evidence that they will deliver a safe, efficient and fit-for-purpose level of service.

The commission has not assessed why previous SES targets were not met. The economic downturn and impact on traffic has not been adequately taken into account. Despite this, the European ATM system has seen significant improvements in performance.

The commission has not fully recognised the costs reductions and vast improvement in service that NATS has already achieved.

Risks

Unions fear that SES2+ carries too many risks including profit over safety, fragmentation, loss of capability, over regulation and competing priorities. They believe that:

- Unbundling key, safety-critical and related services is likely to increase fragmentation. One of SES' key objectives is to reduce fragmentation in the aviation industry.
- There is a risk of over-regulation and competing priorities between different organisations.
- The proposed creation of an 'infrastructure manager' is an attempt to remove the provision of key services from providers, leaving them without the capability to ensure a common safety system and method of operation.
- Separating so-called 'support' services could leave safety-critical systems in the hands of 'for-profit' companies with the attendant risk of profit over safety.
- Unreasonably large price reductions will increase delays in air

travel, reduce investment in technology and require big cuts in air traffic control staff numbers.

The European Commission needs to talk to stakeholders

Prospect and PCS are concerned that the commission continues to ignore significant stakeholders, including member states and their service providers, choosing not to engage with representative associations before adopting the proposals despite the requirement for social dialogue.

Who are you speaking for?

Prospect represents people working as controllers, systems engineers, scientists and specialists in NATS. PCS represents 1,000 operational and support staff. Both unions also represent staff in the Civil Aviation Authority, UK airports and aircraft engineers.