



## What's wrong with Belfast City Airport's noise proposals

In less than three decades, George Best Belfast City Airport has grown more than 30-fold from a tiny civilian terminal carrying just 84,000 passengers in 1983 to one of the UK's busiest regional airports, boasting more than 2.6 million passengers in 2013.

Now the airport wants to raise its game even further - significantly expanding its operations, duplicating much of what Belfast International Airport already does, and relaxing its noise controls. But there's one major problem – and that's the tens of thousands of people who live under or close to City Airport's flight paths. The question is simple...

***Which matters most - the commercial interests of the airport's owners, or the health and quality of life of local residents?***

If the airport's proposals get the go-ahead, the consequences will be devastating and could mean:

- **More than twice the number of jet flights**
- **Double the noise annoyance**
- **Massively increased health risks**
- **Damage to our children's education**

# A briefing paper from Belfast City Airport Watch

## What does the airport want?

The airport wants to make two major changes to its Planning Agreement with the Department of the Environment. Noise controls stipulated in this Agreement are the only real protection which residents have against unbearable levels of noise. The two changes being sought by the airport are:

- The removal of the limit on the number of seats on flights which can be offered for sale by airlines from the airport in any given year, referred to as the 'seats for sale' limit
- A much higher permissible noise limit than is currently stipulated in the Agreement

## What's wrong with that?

Tens of thousands of people live under or close to the airport's flight paths; **the airport's own figures show that 51,910 people are already impacted by aircraft noise at an undesirably high level in Belfast and north Down.**<sup>2</sup>

Under the airport's proposals, **these tens of thousands of people could experience an increase in aircraft noise which will feel like double the noise nuisance.** That's because the airport's figures indicate that its proposed relaxation of noise controls will allow it to increase noise levels by an average of nearly 3dB and, in some instances, more than this – while this may sound small, a rise of 3dB in average noise levels is recognised as likely to double the level of noise annoyance – the perceived noise nuisance.<sup>3</sup>

And, although the airport isn't proposing to increase its overall annual limit of 48,000 flights, it says **the proposed relaxations in noise control would allow more than double the number of flights made by jets.** Jets tend to be much noisier than the turbo-prop aircraft which are widely used at the airport at the moment.

The airport's own figures show that up to **18,000 people could be affected by aircraft noise** at a level which the government says tends to cause significant community annoyance – 57 dB, averaged over 16 hours. **That's more than four times the number of local residents impacted by aircraft noise at that level in 2014 (4,107).**<sup>4</sup>

Even in 2014, **the number affected by City Airport's operations at this level was greater than Gatwick Airport (3,700) and**

**Stansted Airport (1,900).**<sup>5</sup> It's also worth noting that London City Airport insulates all houses and schools under its flight paths which are subject to that level of noise.

If the airport's proposals go ahead and noise levels rise to their permitted maximum, **City Airport would become the fourth noisiest airport in the UK in terms of population impact – only Heathrow, Manchester and Birmingham would affect more people at or above the government's 'significant annoyance' threshold.**<sup>6</sup>

## Won't people just get used to it?

There's already robust evidence that City Airport's operations are having a seriously detrimental impact on health, quality of life and education.

Belfast City Airport Watch (BCAW) commissioned an independent survey from the market research company, Perceptive Insight. It carried out face to face interviews with a representative sample of 423 people living under or close to the airport's Belfast flight path<sup>7</sup>:

- **38% described the noise from aeroplanes, when at home, as 'very high'** – only 4% described the noise from cars as 'very high'
- **More than half (51%) said planes interrupted their conversations** 'quite often' or 'very often' **when outdoors**

- **Nearly a third (31%) said planes made their own outdoor spaces** (gardens, backyards etc) **less pleasant to be in** 'quite often' or 'very often'
- **1 in 4 (25%) said that planes had woken them up and/or stopped them getting to sleep** 'quite often' or 'very often'
- **24% said planes interrupted their conversations** 'quite often or 'very often' **when indoors**
- **16% said planes had made their lives more stressful** 'quite often' or 'very often'
- **Of those who said their sleep had been affected, 40% said that they 'sometimes' or 'often' didn't get enough sleep**, as a result of having their sleep disrupted by aircraft noise
- **20% of those with kids aged 11 or under said their children's sleep was affected** 'quite often' or 'very often'

Sleep deprivation can be detrimental to efficiency at work and makes people more prone to accidents. But aircraft noise can have a serious impact on health, regardless of the effect on sleep.

As a recent report for the UK government's Airports Commission observed, there is a growing body of international evidence which indicates that **greater exposure to aircraft noise leads to poorer cardiovascular health.**<sup>8</sup>

We commissioned an eminent public health expert, Professor Eberhard Greiser, to analyse the available data and to comment on the likely health impact of the airport's proposals.

Drawing on relevant research findings, he calculates that, if the airport’s proposals are implemented:

- there will be **300 additional cases of heart disease, including 126 additional deaths**, over 10 years over and above the number which would occur if there was no aircraft noise
- there will be **137 additional cases of heart disease, including 75 additional deaths**, over 10 years over and above the number which would result from existing flight conditions

### Impact on schoolchildren

Our survey demonstrated the negative impact of aircraft noise on children at home. But the impact on children isn’t just confined to the home. In a survey of schools undertaken by Belfast City Airport Watch:

- **12 schools said pupils’ concentration was adversely affected by aircraft noise**
- **9 schools said aircraft noise disrupted teaching and/or classes**
- 11 said aircraft noise made outdoor activities in school grounds less pleasant
- 8 said aircraft noise made their school a less pleasant place to work in<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, a major international study has found that **exposure to aircraft noise is related to impaired performance in reading comprehension and recognition memory in schoolchildren**.

The RANCH Project – which involved an international team of researchers from the UK, Sweden, the Netherlands and Spain -

found that exposure to aircraft noise was correlated negatively with children’s reading ability, even when other factors were taken into account.<sup>10</sup>

So it’s especially alarming that, **under the City Airport’s proposals, its own figures show that 10 schools could experience increases in aircraft noise of approximately 3 decibels or more, averaged over 16 hours – an increase which, according to noise experts, could feel like double the noise nuisance.**

Table 1 lists the worst affected schools, using the noise increases which the airport, in its proposal, states could be experienced by each of these schools.

School	Average dB increase
Sandbrook Nursery School BT4	3.6
Victoria Park Primary School BT4	3.6
Ravenscroft Nursery School BT5	3.0
Euston Street Primary School BT6	3.0
Nettlefield Primary School and Nursery Class BT6	2.9
St Vincent’s Centre (for children with special needs) BT6	2.9
McArthur Nursery School BT5	2.9
Avoniel Primary School and Nursery Class BT5	2.8

Moreover, **there are also a further 14 other schools which the airport has previously**

listed as potentially affected – and which are likely to be. They are as follows:

*East Belfast:* Dundela Infants' School BT4, St Matthews' Primary School and Nursery Class BT5, Elmgrove Primary School BT5

*South Belfast:* Downey House Prep School BT6, Bethlehem Nursery School BT6, St Michael's Primary School, BT6, St Joseph's College BT6, Aquinas Grammar School BT6, Botanic Primary School and Nursery Class BT7, Holy Rosary Primary School BT7, Forge Integrated Primary School BT7, Wellington College BT7

*Holywood:* Priory Integrated College BT18, St Patrick's Primary School BT18

## But the airport's proposals would be good for the economy wouldn't they?

There's no good evidence to support this argument. Indeed, **the efficiency of low-cost airlines means that far fewer additional jobs are created by airport expansions than in the past.**

And those jobs may not go to the local population. In 2011, City Airport told its Airport Forum that, **of the 90 people it directly employed, just 16 employees came from east Belfast, while 6 came from south Belfast and 10 from north Down.**

Even though more people are employed indirectly, the above figures suggest that only a small proportion are likely to come from the local area.

City Airport is promising to open lots of new routes to European destinations. **But many**

**of those will be holiday routes, and encouraging more people to take their holidays abroad simply sucks potential revenue out of the local economy.**

For example, in 2003, while inbound visitors to the island of Ireland spent EUR 105 million, Irish residents spent EUR 163 abroad in the same year – a loss of EUR 58 million to the Irish economy, north and south.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, **if the City Airport succeeds in expanding further, it's likely to be at the expense of Belfast International Airport – which would simply mean a transfer of jobs from one local airport to the other.**

And **the ultimate winner** of any such unregulated duplication of services **would probably be Dublin Airport**, which is already very popular with many people from Northern Ireland.

In 2014, **864,000 people from Northern Ireland used Dublin Airport, up 52% on 2013.**<sup>12</sup> Any strengthening of Dublin Airport at the expense of our own airports will only lead to greater numbers of Northern Ireland passengers shunning local airports and using Dublin instead, and will also lead to greater numbers of inbound tourists entering the island of Ireland through that particular point of entry, and then being much less likely to come north of the border as a result.

**If expansion of aviation capacity in Northern Ireland is thought to be desirable, the logical terminal for that expansion is Belfast International Airport** which has many advantages over Belfast City Airport. **Unlike City Airport, International Airport:**

- has plenty of spare capacity, with two runways
- can operate 24 hours a day, and handle freight and long haul flights
- is located on a greenfield site with minimal noise disturbance for residents

The enormous contrast in the noise impact of both airports is demonstrated by the comparative noise impact figures which

each airport published in their current Noise Action Plans 2013 – 18 which they were required to produce to comply with EU legislation. These showed that:

- While just 897 residents are affected by aircraft noise linked to BIA's operations, as previously noted, no less than 51,910 people are affected by noise from the City Airport's flights<sup>13</sup>

*If Belfast City Airport's noise and expansion proposals go ahead, the sky would be the limit for the airport. We would end up with an international airport right on the doorstep of local communities in east Belfast, making life intolerable for tens of thousands of people in the east and south of the city, and in north Down.*

*Duplicating the ample provision at Belfast International Airport, just 20 miles away, will benefit neither airport. The only winner is likely to be Dublin Airport at a significant cost to our local economy.*

*We want the Northern Ireland Executive to:*

- *Reject the airport's application*
- *Properly enforce the current Planning Agreement*
- *Stand firm against any further expansionary demands from the Airport*
- *Put the interests of local residents first*
- *Get the right balance between the Airport's commercial interests, and residents' health and quality of life*

## About Belfast City Airport Watch

Belfast City Airport Watch Ltd. is an umbrella group of 13 residents' and community associations, and one trade union branch, and 770 individual supporters, all of whom oppose further expansion of George Best Belfast City Airport. The group operates as a not-for-profit company, limited by guarantee.

For more information and to sign up as a BCAW supporter, visit our website:

[www.belfastcityairportwatch.co.uk](http://www.belfastcityairportwatch.co.uk)

E-mail us at: [info@belfastcityairportwatch.co.uk](mailto:info@belfastcityairportwatch.co.uk)



## Footnotes

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<sup>2</sup> The airport's *Noise Action Plan 2013 – 2018*, Table 8, shows that a total of 51,910 people are affected by aircraft noise at a level of 50 LAeq 16h or above. Current Building Standards regulations (BS8233: 2014) state that it is desirable that noise in gardens and patios is at or below 50 LAeq.

<sup>3</sup> The airport has only provided projected noise level figures for the worst affected areas, covering about 18,000 households. However, there is no reason to assume that the increase in noise would be significantly different outside this area.

<sup>4</sup> Bickerdike Allen *George Best Belfast City Airport. Airborne Aircraft Noise Contours 2014*, Table 6.

<sup>5</sup> Figures from Airports Commission Discussion Paper No 5, Aviation Noise, Table 2.1.

<sup>6</sup> This is based on the figures given in Table 2.1 above.

<sup>7</sup> The survey was carried out in August 2012 by the market research firm, Perceptive Insight. 2012 was the least noisy year within recent years, according to the airport's own noise monitoring figures which show 3,728 people affected by noise at or above the level considered to cause 'significant community annoyance' by the UK government – well below the 18,000 which could be affected at or above that level if the airport's proposals go ahead. BCAW is grateful to the charitable trust, Lush Charity Pot, for a grant which paid for the commissioning of this survey.

<sup>8</sup> Clark, C. (2015) *Aircraft noise effects on health*, p. 2. Report prepared for Airports Commission.

<sup>9</sup> 35 nursery, primary, post-primary and special schools responded to the survey. All are situated under or close to City Airport flight paths. The survey was carried out in June 2008. 45 schools were sent postal survey forms. Non-respondents were followed up by telephone.

<sup>10</sup> Further details of the RANCH project can be found at:

[http://www.wolfson.qmul.ac.uk/RANCH\\_Project/Ranch%20Project/Background%20Aims%20and%20Objectives.htm](http://www.wolfson.qmul.ac.uk/RANCH_Project/Ranch%20Project/Background%20Aims%20and%20Objectives.htm)  
and in a published journal article at: <http://aje.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/163/1/27>

<sup>11</sup> OECD Directorate for Science, Technology and Industry (2004) *National Tourism Policy Review of Ireland*, p. 12. Available at: <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/40/39/33648366.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> See: <http://www.u.tv/News/2015/05/14/More-NI-passengers-using-Dublin-Airport-37264>

<sup>13</sup> The figures are taken from Belfast International Airport *Environmental Noise Directive Belfast International Airport Noise Action Plan 2013 – 18*, Table 3.3 and George Best Belfast City Airport *George Best Belfast City Airport – Environmental Noise Directive – Round Two – Noise Action Plan 2013 – 2018*, Table 8. The figures refer to the number of people affected by noise at 50 LAeq or above. See also note 2 above.