

Guidance for Airport Engagement and Complaints Handling around Environmental Sustainability

CAP3041



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Introduction

Airports engagement guidelines

These guidelines set out a principle-based approach to airport engagement and complaints handling practices that focuses on promoting the importance of

- Transparency;
- Effective process;
- Community reach;
- Environmental sustainability; and
- Environmental sustainability literacy.

The objective of these guidelines is to ensure relationships between airports and communities are based on trust, by identifying and sharing best practice in engagement and complaint resolution around environmental impacts. While these guidelines primarily relate to engagement and complaints handling around aircraft noise, other environmental impacts, such as the effects of aviation on air quality and climate through emissions, have also been considered, recognising that awareness of environmental sustainability more broadly is becoming increasingly widespread.

Change in operations is a key factor in determining aviation's noise impacts. Noting that long-term, strategic change is generally addressed by the engagement processes set out under www.caa.co.uk/cap1616, these guidelines focus instead on the engagement and complaints handling processes around short-term, short-notice change. This sort of change is unexpected, and includes changes in routes, increased traffic, noisier aircraft and other changes to airport's operations or air traffic services (caused by a change in wind direction) and sometimes non-compliance by airlines to noise abatement guidelines. These guidelines are also applicable to airport engagement and complaints handling practices for day to day airport operations where no changes have occurred.

These guidelines were developed in three stages:

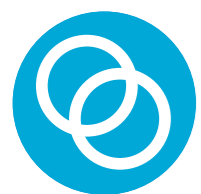
Stage 1: data and evidence gathering, including a detailed survey circulated to a range of English airports of different sizes and characteristics and their associated communities (both Airport Consultative Committees and other local community groups), to seek insights on how the complaints handling and engagement processes at each airport were carried out and their perceived effectiveness. The survey was supplemented by several stakeholder interviews to gain a deeper understanding of their survey responses.

Stage 2: developing a set of draft principles, using the evidence and insights from the survey and interviews.

Stage 3: testing the draft principles with two airports and their communities, to understand how they can be applied in practice.

These guidelines are intended to be used both as a reference guide for airports and an information and education piece for communities, on best practice for engagement and complaints handling on the environmental impacts of an airport's operations.

If you have any feedback on these guidelines and the topics covered within, please email environment@caa.co.uk.



Principle 1 Transparency

Airport and community group engagement should be transparent and meaningful, both about past impacts and upcoming short-term/short-notice changes.



There are a number of reasons why some communities or groups may feel they do not trust an airport.

Examples include when:

- > information is not shared openly and fully;
- > information is highly technical and complex and not well understood by communities; or

- > outcomes are not delivered, or expectations are not managed on the feasibility of delivery of certain outcomes.

Increased transparency fosters a culture of collaboration and open communication and leads to accountability, responsibility and traceability that creates deeper trust between airport and communities.

Examples of good practice

- > A larger-sized airport refers to its Noise Action Plan as an example of effective engagement and communication with communities, working with them and also with industry stakeholders to drive collaboration and transparency. The Noise Action Plan lists the various engagement forums that exist, and the industry and community groups who participate, as well as the dedicated measures the airport has put in place to keep residents informed on short-notice and short-term changes to operations that affect the published runway alternation schedule.
- > A smaller-sized airport sets out how it provides information on unexpected aircraft movements in a proactive way. The airport prides itself on the open and transparent engagement it conducts with local communities (including visiting frequent complainants at home to discuss the issues) to help residents understand the reasons for and impacts of the types of activity expected at the aerodrome.
- > A larger-sized airport focuses its engagement strategy on internal and external stakeholders. Regular meetings are held with multiple internal stakeholders (including the Flight Evaluation Unit, Community Engagement Team, airfield operations, air traffic control representatives and airlines when required) to review complaints and incidents, identify any common themes and trends, plan interventions if required, and proactively plan mitigation activity. These meetings assist in planning ahead for any known issues. Complaint data and reports are provided to external stakeholders and reviewed at Airport Consultative Committees and technical subgroups. These long-standing meetings have proved successful and, through transparent reporting of positive and negative results, open debate has led to a trusted relationship and understanding from stakeholder representatives. The airport also hosts publicised community drop-in sessions, produces a community newsletter about the work being undertaken, has an online flight tracking system and a suite of factsheets on how the airport is addressing its environmental impacts. Care is taken to ensure publications and communicated information is in plain English.

Reflections

- > Transparency is an overarching principle that supports engagement, communications, environmental sustainability literacy and complaints handling.
- > Transparency relates closely to ensuring a literacy baseline is achieved, which can improve the extent to which airports communicate technical language and the complexities of aviation transparently. However, despite airports' efforts, communities are not so positive about their interactions with airports nor about the quality and detail of information.

Guidelines

In order to effectively engage with and gain the trust of communities, airports should:

- > share metrics and information transparently;
- > develop metrics and measures (where possible) in collaboration with communities, to reinforce transparency;
- > communicate using a range of media targeted at different audiences who might have varying levels of technical understanding and environmental literacy;
- > manage expectations of feasible outcomes.



Principle 2 Effective process

Airports should aim to have proportionate processes in relation to complaints handling and engagement, and continually improve them using evidence-based metrics where possible.



> Generally, all airports have an engagement and complaints handling process, but processes need to remain future proof.

> Analysis of data and trends help to ensure engagement is effective, beneficial to stakeholders and empathetic to their position.

> This analysis can also identify areas where more work is required and support the allocation of appropriate, proportionate resource and expertise, based on the environmental effect of the airport's operations on its local communities.

Examples of good practice

- > A larger-sized airport engages strongly with first time complainers as it recognises it as an opportunity to create good first impressions and build relationships. It does not use automated responses to complaints. When dealing with repeat complainants it acknowledges the limitations in the information it can provide (which becomes very repetitive and nugatory) and the actions it can take.
- > A smaller-sized airport's complaints procedure was developed in collaboration with its Airport Consultative Committee and takes into account that the airport has only one member of staff handling noise complaints. It has a limited capacity to handle complaints and answer queries given its small size. The airport has seen a clear spike in the number of complaints during and after Covid-19 as people have found themselves spending more time at home. The airport believes this increase in complaints to be due to non-acoustic factors (of how noise is perceived) rather than changes to audible noise.
- > A larger-sized airport has many avenues for handling complaints, including a complaints telephone call centre which allows for a discussion of the issue. It also offers live information for the public to view online, which can resolve questions with data. The complaints team receives queries on all matters related to the airport, not just environmental ones. The vast majority of complaints tend to be made by a small number of complainants. The airport finds it helpful to explain this in the complaints statistics to provide context on the complaints picture to the public.

Reflections

- > Better use of data and metrics can help to evaluate the effectiveness of the complaints handling process. However, it is difficult to decouple the process from the outcome to verify whether the former is effective if the latter did not align with the complainant's desired result.
- > The majority of airports surveyed indicated that they review their processes annually, demonstrating that they recognise the need to continually update their policies in line with industry advancements. It is evident from the airport and Airport Consultative Committee responses to the survey that processes are already scaled by airports, to ensure appropriate and proportionate resource, which are empathetic to communities' needs.

Guidelines

- > Airports should focus on understanding the different audiences they engage with and tailor responses accordingly.
- > Airports should listen and act upon communities' feedback to strengthen their processes.
- > Airports should invest in proportionate processes to gather data, using appropriate metrics. They should consider the long-term benefit of using the data to measure the effectiveness of their engagement and complaints handling.
- > The formats in which airports accept complaints and how they engage with the public should be accessible through a multitude of channels, which should also be regularly reviewed, as the ways in which community members engage are varied and constantly changing.



Principle 3 Community reach

Airports should attempt to engage with the public more broadly across their communities.



- > Airport engagement with local communities is currently mostly directed through established community groups and forums. While these allow for clear channels, there is potential that they only represent certain views, especially as some forums are by invitation only.
- > Through seeking wider reach and more inclusive representation from across communities, and using a range of targeted engagement channels and opportunities, airports can reach a broader cross-section of their local communities.
- > This will lead to wider representation of viewpoints, increased awareness of the environmental impacts of aviation across communities and a more collaborative and representative discussion between airports and their communities.
- > Any increased reach must be proportionate, recognising that there will always be those in the community who are not interested.

Examples of good practice

- > A smaller-sized airport carries out a 'get to know the airport' programme with its local community. This aims to facilitate opportunities for the local community to experience the airport more closely to better understand how it operates. It includes tours of the airports, as well as events like fun runs on the runway and other events at the airport in support of local charities. This encourages a wide range of community members to engage with and understand the airport and its role.

Reflections

- > The ability of other airports to carry out any such programme will be proportionate to the amount of available resource and operational complexity of a particular airport.
- > Airports may employ a wide range of communication channels to engage with communities, including both digital and in-person mechanisms.
- > These channels are generally focused on engaging through community groups and forums. While these established platforms allow for structured and continuous dialogue, there is potential for a limited group of the same people to be involved in the conversations.
- > Broader engagement by an airport with its local community may lead to more diverse feedback and more representative engagement outcomes.

Guidelines

In seeking to engage with a broad representation of its local communities, airports should:

- > Use a wide range of communication channels and engagement methods, taking into consideration the challenges of digital literacy and accessibility. Airports should also evaluate the effectiveness of the methods.
- > Seek to engage with the 'silent majority' on their priorities and interests in aviation's environmental matters, but balance this with ensuring there are clear engagement objectives as some members of the community are just not interested.
- > Engage on a range of aviation's environmental impacts, not just noise, taking into account that different demographics may have different environmental priorities.



Principle 4 Environmental sustainability

Airport engagement should cover all aspects of environmental sustainability.



- > Airport operations have various types of environmental impacts on communities, both adverse and positive.
- > There is a distinction between local environmental impacts, which take place in the vicinity of where they are generated (for example, noise, biodiversity, water and air quality), and global environmental impacts (for example, greenhouse gas emissions) that have an effect regardless of where they are created.

- > Considering the broader environmental impacts beyond noise could help the airport broaden the reach of their engagement.
- > Taking this broader perspective can also help the airport future-proof its areas of environmental focus by being cognisant of and prepared for engagement on a variety of environmental impacts, rather than just the ones that may be in focus today.

Examples of good practice

- > A larger-sized airport has a process for engaging on a range of environmental factors and publishes performance and forward-looking information to set out the projected impact of these expected changes. The airport engages with a wide range of stakeholders on other environmental factors including communities, airlines and the regulator. This is done via the Airport Consultative Committee, airport website, airport newsletter and social media.
- > A medium-sized airport engages on a range of environmental factors with consultants, local authorities and the community, to explore opportunities to decarbonise and to achieve the stated environmental goals. Information and data are provided for current and forward-looking updates and the programme is fully documented on the airport's website in an open and transparent manner.
- > A smaller-sized airport produces a Sustainability Report focused on biodiversity and nature at the airport. This is accessible by communities on the airport's website and through the Airport Consultative Committee.

Reflections

- > Research¹ indicates most aviation passengers are concerned about the environment and climate change.
- > This research also indicates that younger generations care about the climate at least as much as noise. Actively engaging on the wider environmental impacts of aviation beyond noise could help the airport broaden the reach of its engagement.
- > Airports have been found to attempt to engage on environmental issues other than noise, although these efforts may be less well resourced.
- > It is expected that engagement on other environmental factors to increase in tandem with developments in the industry, such as electric aircraft and Sustainable Aviation Fuels.
- > In survey responses it was noted that airports accept complaints and engage on other environmental factors through fewer channels than with noise. This indicated there is scope for airports to broaden their engagement to address all aspects of their environmental impacts.
- > Proactively engaging on all aspects of the environment could also help airports reach beyond the regular community representatives and achieve the 'community reach' principle.

Guidelines

- > Airports should explore a broader communication and engagement approach, to help prepare for a future where environmental impacts beyond noise are likely to be a part of the debate on environmental sustainability.
- > This approach could include offering a wide range of channels for interested parties to engage on all environmental sustainability factors, and to accept complaints as is available with noise.

¹Flying in 2023: Research findings from Wave 12 of the CAA's UK Aviation Consumer Survey, CAP2622 <https://www.caa.co.uk/our-work/publications/documents/content/cap2622/>



Principle 5

Environmental sustainability literacy baseline

Airports should work with their local communities to ensure a common baseline of environmental sustainability literacy.



- > In the context of airport engagement and complaints handling, environmental sustainability literacy can be defined as the awareness and understanding of the various ways that aviation impacts on the environment, and how this in turn impacts on planet health.
- > Aviation and its environmental impacts are complex and technical. This can be a barrier to effective engagement and communication between airports and communities.
- > When airports and their local communities have a common level of sustainability literacy, there is better quality engagement, clearer

understanding of the issues at hand and more inclusive dialogue.

- > Airports have a leading role in working with their local communities to ensure a common baseline level of environmental sustainability literacy. Community representatives also have a role in supporting their communities to build their environmental sustainability literacy to be able to effectively engage. By working together to ensure there is a shared level of environmental sustainability literacy that is being used in their communications, airports and communities can have better conversations about the environmental impacts of aviation.

Examples of good practice

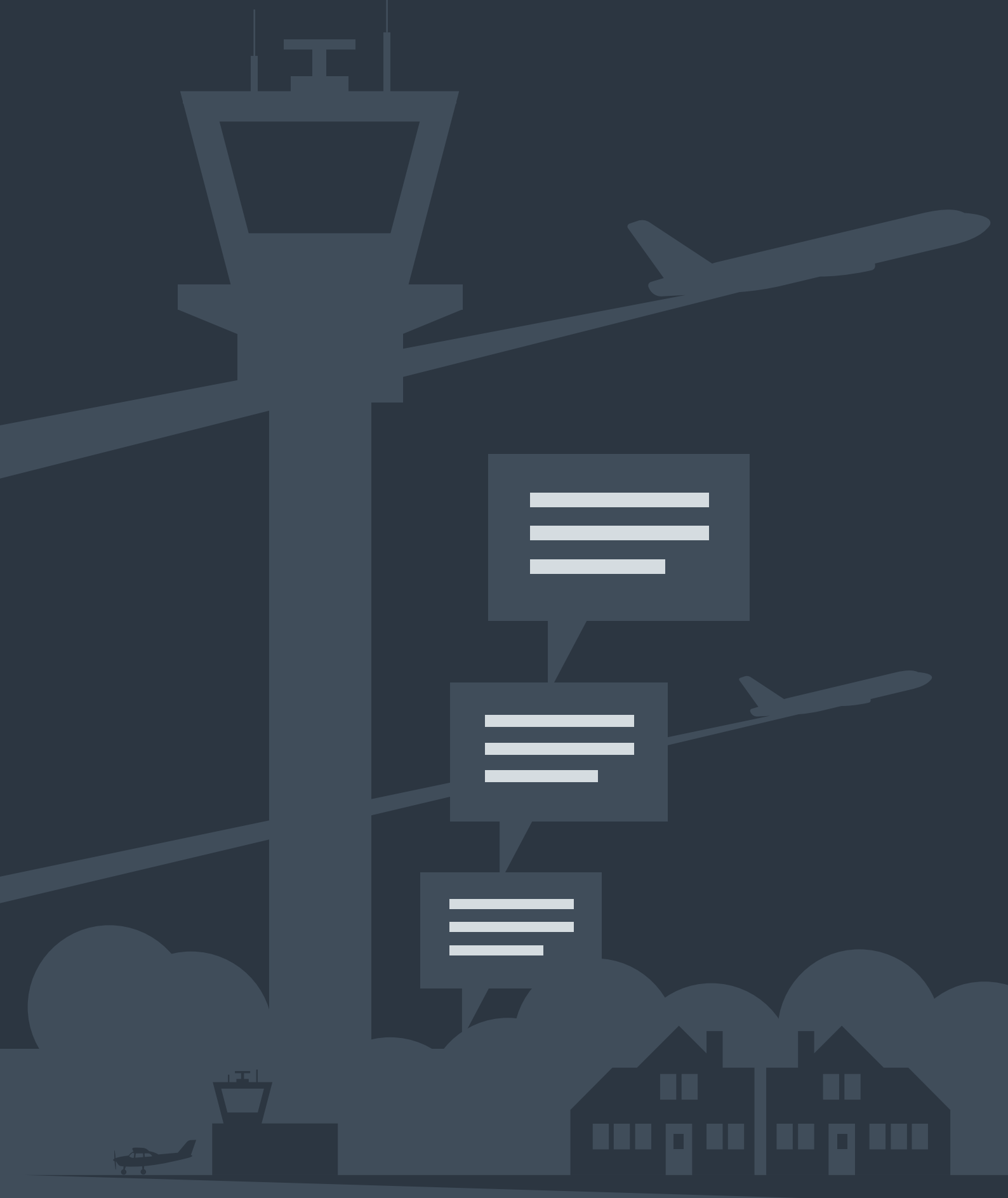
- > One medium-sized airport employs dedicated marketing and communications professionals to facilitate providing technical information in plain English.
- > A smaller-sized airport is developing a community information booklet, specifically aimed at residents living near to the airport, to improve its shared understanding and engagement with local communities.

Reflections

- > Aviation can be complex and technical, as can understanding its impacts on the environment. This can be a barrier to effective engagement and communications between airports and communities impacted by airport operations.
- > Different stakeholders may have different levels of environmental sustainability literacy when airports and community groups engage on environmental matters that impact them.
- > Communities report that they perceive airports do not provide information about environmental factors in a way that is accessible and easily understood, while airports report that they perceive non-industry stakeholders have a poor understanding of environmental metrics, regulation and policy.
- > Positive engagement is fostered by all stakeholders having a similar level of joint understanding to be able to have meaningful conversations.

Guidelines

- > There is scope to create better joint understanding by airports and their communities working together to ensure there is a shared baseline level of environmental sustainability literacy.
- > Airports can support the development of this by limited technical jargon in communications with communities, and by proactively checking in on levels of understanding rather than assuming content has been understood in a certain way.



environment@caa.co.uk
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