31st October 2012

AN UPDATE ON RAF BRIZE NORTON ENVIRONMENTAL NOISE AND ITS MITIGATION

In my open letter dated 1 October 2012, I set out the background to the current environmental issue relating to C130 Hercules engine ground running noise, and what we are planning to do next. Subsequent engagement with the local community has been most welcome, but there has been an appetite for more clarity on the RAF’s action plan.

Action completed by 31st October 2012

Despite having already implemented some significant operating constraints regarding the location and timing of ground engine running for C130 Hercules, it is clear that the success that we experienced in reducing environmental noise in June, July and August has been short lived. This transient reduction may have been due to improved aircraft serviceability, summer holidays or the fact that we had exported training to other parts of the country. Nevertheless, the improvement that we thought we had achieved has not been sustained, and I apologise for that.

I have taken urgent action and with immediate effect, ceased any C130 engine ground running on Bays 70 to 82 (those adjacent to the boundary fence close to Black Bourton), and directed that all engine running now occur on the southern taxiway ‘Golf’ and on or close to Bay 69. While these locations were identified as minimising the noise impact, the result will place an additional demand on Station personnel to tow aircraft, which will affect our ability to deliver against training and operational tasking. However, I have funded additional manpower and equipment to facilitate the associated towing task, which will reduce this impact to an acceptable level from January 2013; until then those that work for me will endeavour to overcome this new challenge.

All engine running will now take place only in these two locations unless there is a clear operational reason to use Bays 70 to 82. Any such occurrences will be documented alongside those records of ‘out of normal working hours’ engine ground running that you are aware we are already keeping; these records will be made available for scrutiny by the Local Consultation Working Group as is currently the practice. Although these two locations are those that minimise the noise impact to the maximum number of people affected, I would like to clarify that engine ground running will continue to happen as a matter of routine during normal working hours (0700 to 1900, Monday to Saturday and 0830 to 1900 on Sunday). Between 1900 and 2300, runs can be authorised by the Duty Operations Controller, and in the remaining period, only by the Station Commander or the Officer Commanding Operations Wing, and then only in the case of operational necessity.

I have reinforced direction to my aircrew that Auxiliary Power Units are only to be used from the last safe moment before engine start and throughout the taxi phase. This equipment is non-discretionary for the engine start and taxi sequence – it is an integral part of the aircraft’s safety-essential operating equipment.

Work to deliver in near future.

While having directed that C130 aircraft now need to be towed for ground engine runs, meteorological conditions influence where noise propagates. I have reprioritised work to generate a model to help select a minimum noise ground running location and I hope that
this tool can be delivered early in 2013. In order to do this, and in light of the fact that I have ceased engine ground running on Bays 70 to 82 unless operationally justified, I have suspended work on reorientating C130 parking on those Bays.

The RAF Centre for Aviation Medicine (RAFCAM) will conclude work on noise contours around the Station in December, which will allow a judgement to be made on entitlement for acoustic insulation. A case will then need to be made by the RAF to fund this programme of work, but I expect this to be ready for public consultation between April and June 2013.

Positive progress has also been made on better understanding the need for ground engine running. While the philosophy of ‘on wing’ maintenance means that the engines are often used to power other aircraft systems, analysis has already shown that we should be able to reduce the occasions when this might happen. The engineering authority are working closely with industry and the regulatory authorities in order to secure the necessary clearances to modify these maintenance procedures, and you will understand that safety is an overriding consideration. I am hopeful that we will start to see a benefit from this new approach perhaps as soon as January 2013.

Work in progress for the longer term

I have already written about our intention to reduce the environmental noise from C130 and A400M ground engine runs using infrastructure solutions where these are deemed practical, and that we must not rush in to delivering something which is not fit for purpose for the future or is not value for money. Some feedback has taken indicative figures for noise reduction using an engine running pen on Bay 40 or ‘D30’ in the AMEC report as definitive; the AMEC projected noise map is a theoretical model, and is not representative of a facility which has been proven against C130 or A400M. Further work is underway to help us decide on what measures are sensible to take, and we will provide more information when it is available, but a new build is unlikely within 2 years

Summary

I and my team are working hard to reduce the environmental impact from C130 Hercules ground running. We remain committed to being a good neighbour and to working with the local community on environmental issues. While I personally apologise for having been on leave when the last Local Consultation Working Group met on 14 October, I will attend the next meeting in January 2013.

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