

Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport Legislation Committee Inquiry into the Air Services Amendment Bill, 2018

I would like to submit to the Committee firstly on those aspects of the Bill that relate to proposed amendments to paragraph 8(1)(d) and subsection 9(2) of the Air Services Act 1995 to require Airservices Australia to carry out activities to protect the human and natural environment, community amenity and residential areas from the effects of the operation and use of aircraft, and associated effects; and, secondly on the proposed Section 10A regarding consultation and the appointment of an Aviation Community Advocate.

Background

I am a longstanding member of the Sydney Airport Community Forum (SACF) and have sat on the Forum in different representative roles since its inception in 1996. This submission however, is made by me as an individual with significant community experience of aircraft noise rather than specifically as a SACF representative.

Amendments to Paragraph 8(1)(d) and Subsection 9(2)

I think it is fair to say that Airservices Australia has come ahead in leaps and bounds over the last 20 odd years in its recognition of the impact of aircraft operations, and in particular the effects of aircraft noise on the community. None-the-less there is a case to formalise greater protections for communities affected by aircraft noise and to make it very specifically one of Airservices Australia's responsibilities. This would give recognition to the progress that has been made and encourage further opportunities in this direction.

Aircraft noise is extremely disruptive and detrimental to the welfare and amenity of residential communities. There is no such thing as a quiet aeroplane and increasing numbers of aircraft flying over the suburbs of our cities has had a large impact on effected residents. This is particularly true as increasing demand put strains on the system and new technologies have minimised the sharing of aircraft noise.

A significant issue is that most often the effects on residential communities of the operation and use of aircraft are given less weight in any decision making than operational efficiencies and air traffic management in general. Put simply, faced with a choice between worsening the aircraft noise impact on the community or improving the capacity of operations, it is operations that wins most of the time. Formal, legislative recognition of Airservices Australia's responsibilities to protect the community from the effects of the operation and use of aircraft may help to redress this situation.

Similarly, I would suggest that the community are not seen as the equal of the aviation industry in their relationship with Airservices. The airlines pay Airservices and are referred to by them as their customers. They are consulted at the earliest opportunity when determining alternatives, provide technical input and have a degree of access that the general community does not. Again formalisation of Airservices' responsibilities to the community may assist in redressing this, as indeed would the appointment of an Aviation Community Advocate.

Amendments to Section 10A Regarding Consultation and the Appointment of an Aviation Community Advocate.

The creation of an independent Aviation Community Advocate (ACA) was originally an initiative of the Sydney Airport Community Forum (SACF). After a public tender, the role commenced in September 2007 and was seen as very valuable by most members of SACF. Unfortunately, the contract for the ACA was not renewed when it expired in 2009 despite the strong desire from SACF members for the role to continue. The Minister at the time cited budgetary constraints as the reason for this decision. There have been on-going calls for the reinstatement of the ACA ever since.

While the scope of the ACA was part time and Sydney specific, it had been originally intended that it should be a full-time role with national responsibilities. The role of the ACA was to independently advocate the interests and views of the community on aviation matters and aircraft noise in particular, provide independent research and advice, and to develop proposals for policy and procedural changes that would benefit the community.

The Air Services Amendment Bill propose that an Aviation Community Advocate be appointed when there are proposed changes to flight paths and airspace management. This indeed is a critical time for an ACA. However, I would suggest that there is even greater value to be had if it is a full-time engagement with national responsibilities as had originally been envisaged. With each major airport having its own community consultative arrangements, and with current aircraft noise issues prominent at many of them, there is ample work for an ACA in supporting these groups and addressing current issues. Further, noting that the airspace is about to be designed for the new airport at Badgery's Creek, and that this will have follow-on effects for the rest of Sydney, there is even more of a compelling reason for the urgent reinstatement of an ACA to advocate for the community in this airspace design.