

Transition Altitude (TA) – Apr 2015

Introduction

Across the UK, a harmonised Transition Altitude (TA) of 18,000ft is proposed with the intention of enhancing efficiency, both inside and outside controlled airspace, through standardisation of airspace and altimeter setting procedures. This will provide the foundation for future safety, environmental and economic benefits that will be realised through improvements to the vertical profiles of aircraft arrivals and departures in the London and Scottish FIRs. It also serves as a platform for future airspace and operating concepts through programmes such as Single European Sky (SES), SES Air Traffic Management Research (SESAR), Future Airspace Strategy (FAS), UK/Ireland Functional Airspace Block (FAB), the London Airspace Management Programme (LAMP) and the Northern Terminal Control Area (NTCA) Development Plan.

The First UK TA Consultation

The first TA Consultation for UK airspace took place in early 2012 based on a proposal of 18,000ft. Feedback from the consultation was generally supportive of a higher TA, however further safety work and a more detailed Concept of Operations (CONOPS), was needed so that the technical issues could be addressed in more detail before the final level of the TA could be confirmed.

The European Position

Since the launch of the first UK consultation, the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has conducted an initial consultation on a harmonised TA in line with the European Commission Rulemaking Procedure. The following regulatory options were identified:

- Option 1 – Do nothing (i.e. no regulatory intervention)
- Option 2 – An Implementing Rule (IR) to implement a harmonised European TA at 18,000ft
- Option 3 – An IR prescribing common criteria for the determination of the TA at or above 10,000ft

On EASA's behalf, Eurocontrol conducted a Regulatory Impact Assessment and a cost-benefit analysis to assess the practical and financial implications of a higher harmonised TA for all stakeholders including NSAs, ANSPs, large and small airports as well as civil and military operators.

EASA also established a HETA Rulemaking Group which met in Cologne over the period of a year and included approximately twelve members from various European States. The UK had both CAA and NATS representation with the CAA representative also acting as the Chair of the group. The group's aim was to determine which of the three options under consideration was most appropriate from a European perspective, and if it was decided that change was required, to prepare a Notice of Proposed Amendment (NPA) to be considered by the relevant EASA Director.

The HETA Group determined there should be no regulatory intervention, although it felt that EASA should issue guidance to States wishing to change their TAs in the future. These findings will first be presented to the European Commission and they will then proceed to the SES Committee for ratification, although this is not anticipated until summer 2015.

The UK Position

A decision was made by the FAS Deployment Steering Group in December 2013 to proceed to a second State Consultation on the TA with a CONOPS developed to support a level of 18,000ft. In February 2014 the NSAs of the UK, Ireland, Norway and the Isle of Man signed a Letter of Intent to demonstrate their intention to implement a TA of 18,000ft at the same time and based on the same high level CONOPS. The UK has since received further assurance from the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA), as part of the UK/Ireland FAB that Ireland will raise its TA to 18,000ft within the same timescale as the UK. The Norwegian CAA and Avinor as the main ANSP within Norway are also working towards the same timescale.

All sides acknowledged that there would have to be a lead-in time from when the TA was agreed until the implementation date and therefore implementation is not anticipated until March 2018. The UK in particular had to make a decision on the final TA by March 2014, as a higher TA is an enabler for the main elements of the LAMP and NTCA projects. As the European project timescales did not suit the aspirations of the UK, Ireland and Norway, the three States had to proceed with their plans before the European position was clear.

European Engagement

The UK has undertaken a TA Influencing Strategy programme with the view of convincing our near continental neighbours to join the UK, Ireland and Norway in implementing an 18,000ft TA. The CAA hosted an 'Adjacent States' meeting in London on the 26th November 2013 to inform our near neighbours of the UK's progress to date; this included the proposed procedures in the high level CONOPS which NATS and the CAA jointly developed. Another such meeting is planned for 1st July 2015.

Despite the European engagement it eventually became clear that no other countries were likely to implement a higher TA in the same timescales as the UK and its partners, and so plans are being drawn up to address any boundary issues which may arise.

As a related issue, in May 2014 Russia let it be known that it was planning to change from utilising metres to feet in Russian airspace and also that it is seriously considering the option of an 18,000ft TA.

The Second UK TA Consultation

The CAA has always planned for a second, more detailed consultation to follow once the actual level was confirmed and a Concept of Operations was developed. Following an extensive series of simulations, workshops and engagement meetings with a variety of stakeholders, the CONOPS has reached a good level of maturity and therefore the second consultation has been scheduled to take place between November 2015 and February 2016.

Deployment options for Transition Altitude in the UK will be taken forward under the FAS Deployment Plan, with NATS delivering change within controlled airspace through its airspace change programmes, including the TA Project itself and the London Airspace Management Programme (LAMP).