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Airport safety zones come under fire

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Concern that a lack of information has been available as to how the new zones were calculated

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A forum group for Farnborough Airport has expressed concerns over how new safety zones were decided.

New public safety zones (PSZs) at Farnborough Airport proposed by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) were agreed in January, and are expected to come into force soon.

The changes mean the PSZs will decrease in size and include 50 fewer homes. The PSZs are calculated by the 'risk contours' at the airport, which stretch out over Farnborough and Mytchett, and the Fleet and Church Crookham areas.

This is what concerned the Farnborough Airport Consultative Committee (FACC), as members have suggested there was a lack of information given about how the new PSZs were calculated.

Geoff Marks, of the FACC, said: "Rushmoor [Borough Council] accepted the Department for Transport's contention that for reasons of commercial confidentiality the changes in modelling assumptions cannot be made public – and are therefore unavailable for expert scrutiny."

Mr Marks was among those previously critical of the new PSZs, described them as 'oversimplified' and suggesting they should be wider.

Other criticism included arguments that 'narrow triangles' are the wrong shape for PSZs, as an aircraft in distress might not follow this line if coming down to crash.

In 2011, Farnborough Airport was granted approval to increase the annual number of permitted flights from 28,000 to 50,000 by the government.

"Remarkably the revised PSZ is virtually the same as the previous PSZ, despite the need to include the much higher annual flight movement figures as part of the calculation," said Hart District councillor Jenny Radley, who represents the Fleet and Church Crookham Society at the FACC meetings.

"Representatives from the CAA [Civil Aviation Authority] made a presentation to the FACC meeting in March, but they were not able to explain the changes to the model that would justify why the PSZ has not expanded.

“The lack of clarity about the revised PSZ model was of great concern to some members.”

A spokesman for the CAA said: “Clearly there was a consultation process that anyone could take part in, it was made public. The process is open, we think it is a robust process.”

Confusion appears to have arisen about where the responsibility for answering the questions put by the FACC falls.

The CAA spokesman added it was up to the council and the Department for Transport (DfT) to respond. He explained the zones were put in place by the authority on behalf of the DfT, but the initial reasons for an airport being granted a PSZ were down to the government department.

The DfT did not comment, and instead suggested it was a matter for the aviation authority. Richard Ward, environment and airport monitoring officer for Rushmoor Borough Council said the PSZs were the responsibility of the CAA, and the council’s role is limited.

A spokesman for TAG Farnborough Airport added: “This is a matter for the CAA. TAG Farnborough Airport is managed in accordance with the highest safety standards and is committed to continually identifying ways to advance these standards.”