

Brussels, 15 June 2023

Submission to the Dutch government's consultation on the Balanced Approach procedure for Schiphol

1. Introduction

The European aviation sector is strongly committed to decarbonising air transport. Airlines for Europe's (A4E) members¹ are accelerating their efforts to contribute to achieving the EU's climate goals, which aim to make Europe the world's first carbon-neutral continent by 2050. Acknowledging its responsibilities, even while dealing with the COVID-19 crisis, the wider European aviation sector published its *Destination 2050 Roadmap* in February 2021 to show a pathway to reaching net zero CO₂ emissions by 2050.² A key step towards 2050 is finalising the EU Green Deal Fit for 55 package focused on 2030, where we are supporting proposals that help the aviation sector to further decarbonise and achieve the long-term EU climate goal.

Sustainable aviation means a reduction of emissions, but also a reduction of noise through continuous deployment of new and smarter technologies, new aircraft and modern engines, as well as operational improvements (e.g. more efficient flight paths). The challenge of making aviation more sustainable and less impactful on its surroundings is to find the appropriate balance between reducing emissions, noise and local impact whilst at the same time preserving competitiveness and offering connectivity within Europe for people, families and businesses, as well as to the rest of the world.

A4E was surprised and dismayed by the Dutch government's sudden announcement on 24 June 2022 that it aims to substantially cut back and limit operations at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport (AMS) for noise reasons, and at that time without a clear noise reduction target. The cut from the current 500.000 to 440.000 flight movements in the coming years was announced without prior deliberation with the stakeholders - including A4E members - directly concerned, who have meanwhile invested heavily over the past years and planned for the future. This was done in the context of the *Luchtvaartnota 2030-2050*, where more than 20 stakeholders and the government worked together on a vision for the future of aviation in the Netherlands, which foresaw 540.000 movements in the next years.

2. Serious concerns about the approach of the Dutch government

A4E believes that noise reduction and limiting noise hindrance should be the central goal and not the number of flight movements at a certain airport. From the outset, it seems that the Dutch

¹ [Airlines for Europe \(a4e.eu\)](https://a4e.eu)

² A4E, ACI Europe, ASD Europe, CANSO and ERAA commissioned the *Destination 2050* report from the Royal Netherlands Aerospace Centre (NLR) and SEO Amsterdam Economics. For further details see: <https://www.destination2050.eu/>

government has had reduction of activity at Schiphol in mind, rather than looking at what can best be done to achieve a set noise reduction target. Europe's aviation sector is fully committed to doing what it can to reduce noise, hindrance and make aviation more sustainable. Below are a number of concerns and shortcomings we see regarding the approach taken by the Dutch government.

- **The proposed Balanced Approach process is misconceived and focused on the reduction of the number of flight movements to 440.000 rather than efficient ways to achieve noise reduction**

The Balanced Approach ([Regulation \(EU\) 598/2014](#)) prescribes the following steps:

- (i) setting a noise reduction target and identifying a noise problem
- (ii) a projection of the development of the noise situation at the airport without additional measures (baseline)
- (iii) if the baseline shows that current measures/developments (such as fleet renewal) are insufficient to meet the noise objective, the consideration of additional measures.

According to the Balanced Approach, four categories of measures must be weighed: reduction of noise at its source, land-use planning and management, noise operational procedures and finally operating restrictions, with operating restrictions being the last category only to be turned to as a last resort to achieve the noise reduction goal.

The Balanced Approach procedure does not allow for any predetermined outcome but prescribes a thorough process to ensure that noise-related decisions are sufficiently informed and built on robust analysis and transparent consultation of stakeholders, with the aim that such measures are fit for their purpose.

Yet, it is clear from the *Hoofdlijnenbrief* of 24 June 2022 from Minister Harbers - and other policy documents that followed - that the capacity reduction to 440.000 flight movements was seen as an objective from the outset, not as a necessary and proportionate measure that follows from a carefully executed EU Balanced Approach procedure. For instance, the noise target was not set until long after the shrinkage was formulated as an objective, nor were relevant stakeholders properly consulted. In fact, they were not consulted at all until now. As a result, the entire process appears geared towards a particular outcome, whereby the analysis of the actual noise situation, the formulation of the noise target, the reference year and the short duration for achieving the target, and the consideration of possible measures, are all shaped with the aim of arriving at the shrinkage to 440.000 flight movements.

- **The alleged noise problem is not supported by an objective determination of the actual noise situation**

The context for the Balanced Approach is the Dutch government's assertion that "the urgency is high for substantial noise reduction in the short-term". This should be based on objective measurements of actual noise development. Instead, the Dutch government seems to be relying

mainly on a GGD survey of subjective noise perception, which may also be heavily influenced by the pandemic.

The GGD study³ itself notes (page 4-5, translated from Dutch):

“The report found that despite a decrease in the number of flights, people on average experienced more annoyance from air traffic in 2020 than in 2016. One possible explanation is that people were asked about perceived annoyance at home and were more at home at the time of the corona pandemic. [...] It may also be that, after months of relative silence, they actually experienced additional annoyance from the resumption of air traffic. In addition, it is known that perceived noise annoyance and sleep disturbance depend not only on actual exposure, but also on non-acoustic factors, such as sensitivity to noise and satisfaction with the living environment.”

Additionally, an objective determination of the current noise situation in accordance with the ECAC Doc 29 method should precede any Balanced Approach steps, but such measurement has not taken place yet. The Ministry has used old NRM (Nederlands Rekenmodel) figures instead. This fundamental flaw puts this entire Balanced Approach process into question.

- **The noise objective is disproportionate and far-reaching**

The far-reaching target (20% reductions during the day, 15% reductions during the night) to be achieved in such a short timeframe from now (November 2024) deviates significantly from previous targets used for Schiphol and examples of the application of the Balanced Approach abroad. In no way is it substantiated why the high reduction percentages of 20% and 15% were chosen.

Indeed, the determination of the reduction percentages for the noise abatement objective remains unclear. During the information session organised by the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management on 20 April 2023, despite questions from various stakeholders, no further information or substantiation of the selection of the targets was provided, and this is worrying. At the session, the Ministry did acknowledge that it did not provide any opportunity to consult on the noise objective itself prior to issuance of the Balanced Approach consultation document, which calls the entire process into question, as also noted by various stakeholders present during that session.

- **The reference year and baseline principles are misapplied**

The reference year serves as the starting point for setting the target and the baseline for how the noise situation will develop autonomously. For example, in a Balanced Approach conducted in 2023, one could look at the noise situation in 2019, set a target of a 15% annoyance reduction in 2030 compared to the measured noise in 2019, and project in the baseline the extent to which autonomous developments between 2019 and 2030 already meet that target. The baseline year

³ GGD study, June 2022, [Rapport_belevingsonderzoek_geluidhinder_en_slaapverstoring_2020-1.pdf\(ggdghor.nl\)](#)

should be in the past so that reliable data is available for the benchmark. However, under the Dutch government's Balanced Approach, the baseline year is set to November 2024, i.e. in the future. This also projects what autonomous developments and existing measures already achieve in terms of noise reduction between now and November 2024, but it does not attribute the achievements until November 2024 towards meeting the noise target. Instead, it actually pushes the target further away. It appears the November 2024 baseline was approved prior to the noise assessment, and without public consultation, again calling the process into question.

- **The deadline for meeting the noise reduction target is unreasonably short**

According to the Dutch government, the (very far-reaching) targets should be achieved as early as November 2024. Given the lead time of the Balanced Approach process, this amounts to a requirement to achieve the noise target as soon as the process is completed. No time is allowed for this to be achieved gradually. The Dutch government then uses this to reject the vast majority of potential noise abatement measures because it would take too long to achieve results. The Minister concludes on this basis that only a significant capacity reduction can achieve the target in the specified timeframe. The ICAO guidance on the Balanced Approach, international examples of how it has been applied, long-term planning of investments in the aviation sector, and the need for a predictable and stable aviation policy, mean that noise targets should be set precisely in the medium-term. The Dutch government has had ample time to plan a gradual and balanced framework for reducing noise and environmental impacts at Schiphol. Instead, it is now rushing to meet a self-imposed deadline which ignores the reality of the long-term planning horizons in the aviation sector.

- **The external dimension is not sufficiently taken into account**

Again, we would like to stress that the Dutch authorities are not only bound by the Balanced Approach through Regulation (EU) 598/2014, but also under international law. The Balanced Approach is enshrined through international standards in Part V of Annex 16, Volume I to the Chicago Convention. Moreover, in Article 15(4) of the 2010 Protocol to amend the Air Transport Agreement between the US and the EU and its Member States (EU/US ATA), the Parties reaffirm their commitment to apply the Balanced Approach principle. Additionally, where new mandatory noise-based operating restrictions at airports are imposed, Article 15(5) of the EU/US ATA requires that authorities “provide an opportunity for the views of interested parties to be considered in the decision-making process” and that such “operating restrictions shall be (i) non-discriminatory; (ii) not more restrictive than necessary in order to achieve the environmental objective established for a specific airport; and (iii) non-arbitrary”.

In this context, A4E members remain highly concerned about possible retaliation from other (non-EU) countries.

3. Calling on the Dutch government to reconsider its approach

A4E would like to reiterate that noise and hindrance reduction should be the central goal, not the number of flight movements. It should follow from a thorough Balanced Approach which type of measures - proportional, cost-effective and least far-reaching - are needed to achieve a legitimate objective. In particular, the cost-effectiveness, and the most efficient way to achieve a goal looking at all possible measures to achieve it, should be central.

In this context, we call upon the Dutch government and Minister for Infrastructure and Water Management Mark Harbers to embrace any other less damaging approach that achieves the same noise reduction target and/or has a better noise reduction impact in the future.

Concretely, if industry stakeholders come with a better plan to achieve the same noise reduction target, or even do better in a slightly longer timeframe, without reducing capacity, this is what should be implemented. Of all the available noise reducing measures, operating restrictions that reduce flight movements **should be the last resort**. Such a measure may even be counterproductive where it could lead to deployment of larger aircraft when capacity is restricted in terms of aircraft movements and flight paths, potentially affecting more people by noise, not less.

A4E remains deeply concerned that an unnecessary, disproportionate cut in the number of flight movements at Schiphol would not only severely damage Europe's connectivity but may also pose a risk to the EU's existing air service agreements.

A drastic cutback in existing aircraft movements at Schiphol will mean thousands of job losses in the aviation sector, loss of economic growth, investment and competitiveness, while not helping the sector to further decarbonise and reduce its overall climate, noise and local impact. Future revenues will be lost and cannot be spent on sustainability and avoiding noise nuisance. Loss of connectivity has many knock-on effects, where we see for example that accessibility is a decisive factor for international corporations that establish offices in Europe.

To achieve Europe's climate ambitions, we believe united and joint action is much more effective than a patchwork of different national policies and measures. We need robust climate action but also a level playing field in the EU's Internal Market.

There is no question that air travel has to become more sustainable, less noisy and efficient. Well-designed global, European and coherent national policies are essential for this and can stimulate the required innovation and investment. Scaling back capacity by 15 years would undermine our ability to achieve these goals.

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