



# Quarterly Report

## September – November 2010

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# 1 Introduction

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## 1.1 Context

1.1.1 On 16 December 2009 the Australian government released the [Aviation White Paper 'Flight Path to the Future'](#), which included the establishment of an Aircraft Noise Ombudsman (ANO) to:

- oversee the handling of aircraft noise enquiries and complaints
- conduct independent reviews of noise complaints handling
- make recommendations for improvements where necessary.

1.1.2 Mr Ron Brent commenced as the first Aircraft Noise Ombudsman in early September 2010. The ANO's powers and duties are formally defined in a Charter, including enshrining the ANO's independence from Airservices Australia's (Airservices) executive management structures, and reporting directly to its board on performance in regard to aircraft noise management matters. A quarterly report to the Board is provided to assist Airservices in reporting to the Minister.

## 1.2 Purpose

1.2.1 This report presents complaint statistics and a commentary during the first quarter of operations of the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman. The report is structured around the three key functions of the ANO, these being review and monitoring of Airservices' complaint-handling, consultation, and information provision in regard to aircraft noise issues.

# 2 Complaint handling

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2.1.1 This area of the charter has received the most focus and resources during the first quarter of the ANO's operations. Individual complaints from members of the public dissatisfied with how their concerns about aircraft noise had been managed provided a valuable source of information about key areas of concern and opportunities for improvement.

2.1.2 By the end of November 2010, 37 individual complaints were received by the ANO. Attachment 1 provides a more detailed summary of the ANO's complaint statistics.

2.1.3 Of the 17 complaints (almost half of the total received) that were closed, five were closed because complainants did not respond to requests for further information (although complaints will be re-opened if and when complainants do respond). Nine were closed following referral to Airservices, the Department of Infrastructure and Transport (the Department), or the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA).

- 2.1.4 Following a process of investigation and evaluation by the ANO, a number of complaints were referred back to Airservices as the response had not fully considered the specific concerns of the complainant. In each instance the ANO sent Airservices a formal letter of referral and also discussed the matter with senior staff of Airservices, indicating the ANO's views on how the complaint could be better addressed. In each case Airservices has been requested to provide a copy of its response to the complainant so the ANO can monitor the outcome and address any further approaches from the complainant.
- 2.1.5 The complaints reviewed by the ANO have highlighted opportunities for improved complaint handling in Airservices and prompted the ***Review into Airservices Australia's handling of aircraft noise complaints***. The terms of reference for this review are at Attachment 1.
- 2.1.6 Similarly, a number of complaints were referred to the Department or CASA and discussed with senior staff within those agencies, where the ANO's views on managing the complaint(s) were put forward. This was followed by a formal referral letter in which a copy of the agencies response was requested. The need to refer complaints for resolution to agencies and organisations other than Airservices has highlighted a key aspect of aircraft noise complaint handling that warrants significant further investigation and effort.
- 2.1.7 There is evidence that 'cross-agency referrals' of noise complaints are not being well managed. One complainant stated that she was referred by Airservices to CASA and the Airport operator. The Airport operator then referred her to Airservices Australia and CASA, while CASA referred her to Airservices and the Airport operator. Obviously this is unsatisfactory for the complainant and results in poor engagement by industry with the broader community. It also results in missed opportunities to respond to issues raised and the ability to learn from complainant feedback. The reasons this circular referral occurs and how it could be better managed will be addressed in some detail in the Review referred to in 2.1.5.
- 2.1.8 Other issues that have emerged from the complaints received to date that will be addressed in the Airservices' review include:
- how complaints are recorded and reported
  - how issues are identified through the complaint process
  - how the substance of the complaint is addressed within Airservices.

### 3 Consultation

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- 3.1.1 The function of consultation within complaint management is the least examined to date. While a number of complaints suggested a lack of consultation in relation to changes to air traffic operations, these seem to have received individual attention rather than a more holistic assessment.
- 3.1.2 The work to date on consultation processes has been focussed on research and information gathering, including:
- ANO attendance at the Airservices / Australian Airports Association Noise Forum in October
  - a visit to the Brisbane Airport Experience Centre in early November
  - participation at the Australian Mayoral Aviation Council meeting and Perth Airport Noise Consultative Committee in mid November.
- 3.1.3 The recent Senate Enquiry took a particular interest in consultation, and the White Paper initiative that required all federally-leased Airports establish community consultation forums. This suggests the issue is a key concern of the community. It is an area to be addressed in more detail by the ANO in the first half of 2011. The ANO will be aiming to accept more invitations received from community consultation groups to attend their consultation forums. Attendance at such forums will provide the opportunity to learn about the concerns of particular communities in relation to aircraft noise issues and to understand the effectiveness of Airservices' engagement with these forums and their communities.

### 4 Information Provision

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- 4.1.1 The presentation and distribution of information related to aircraft noise is the third aspect of the ANO charter and one that is intrinsically related to the effectiveness of both complaint handling and consultation processes. For this reason, an examination of information provision will likely be the key focus of the ANO's next significant review. Nevertheless, some aspects of information provision relevant to individual complaint handling will be addressed in the first Review.
- 4.1.2 Based on complaints received by the ANO, the main sources of information for the public have been discussions with stakeholders, the Webtrak tool, the Airservices' NFPMS reports and Airport websites. Some complainants appreciate the detail available in track-plots provided by Airservices' NEU staff and the level of pictorial detail and accompanying explanations, which can go a long way in providing a comprehensive response. Unfortunately, relying on the complainants to interpret and draw conclusions from this information without adequate explanations in non-technical language has sometimes created more confusion and concern resulting in additional cost to Airservices in resolution effort compared to what may have been required had there been more careful drafting of the initial response.

- 4.1.3 Some 'low-hanging fruit' in this area would be the development of fact sheets about some of the key recurring issues that arise from complaints. This opportunity has been discussed with senior Airservices staff in relation to a number of individual complaints.

## 5 Conclusions

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- 5.1.1 The first quarter of ANO operations has been a busy mix of receiving and responding to complaints, establishing effective processes for communications with stakeholders, particularly Airservices, and coordinating the challenges of setting up a new office.
- 5.1.2 The ANO has recently re-issued the ANO complaint form following feedback from complainants. The ANO is also improving accessibility by expanding the contact information on the ANO web-site. The ANO will soon have the infrastructure in place to take live calls to the 1800 number during office hours. Further development of the complaint form, the website and office procedures will follow.
- 5.1.3 While responsiveness to complainants is reasonable, processes will be streamlined to improve timeliness as the office builds knowledge and experience.
- 5.1.4 No formal recommendations to the Board have been raised as a result of investigations into individual complaints. This reflects the high level of cooperation and support from Airservices, both in regard to individual complaints and more generally in assisting the establishment of ANO operations. The willingness of Airservices to adopt change and improve responses to complainants has obviated the need for any formal recommendations.



Ron Brent  
Aircraft Noise Ombudsman  
1 December 2010

## Attachment 1 Summary of quarterly complaints statistics

	Sep-10	Oct-10	Nov-10	Qtrly Total
Number of complaints:	13	14	10	37
<b>State/Territory of complainants:</b>				
ACT	0	0	0	0
NSW	4	7	3	14
NT	0	0	0	0
QLD	1	1	0	2
SA	1	5	3	9
TAS	0	0	0	0
VIC	3	1	1	5
WA	4	0	3	7
	13	14	10	37
<b>Status</b>				
Closed	11	5	1	17
Awaiting further information from complainant	0	1	3	4
Referred to Airservices for further information	0	1	0	1
Referred to another organisation for further information	1	2	0	3
Under consideration within ANO Unit	0	1	6	7
Under active review by ANO	1	4	0	5
	13	14	10	37
<b>Complaint handling:</b>				
Complaints not reviewed:				
Complainant did not provide further information	4	1	0	5
Addressed in separate review	3	0	0	3
Outcome of reviewed complaints:				
Referred to Airservices to respond directly and copy reply to ANO	2	3	1	6
Referred to DoIT to respond directly and copy reply to ANO	1	1	0	2
Referred to CASA to respond directly and copy reply to ANO	1	0	0	1
Time taken to close complaints: average days, including weekends and public holidays, from lodgement to close:	37			

## Attachment 2 Terms of Reference – Review of Airservices Australia’s handling of aircraft noise complaints

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<b>Review Objectives</b>	<p>To review the effectiveness of Airservices Australia’s handling of complaints and enquiries relating to aircraft noise, and to recommend improvements where appropriate.</p> <p>This will include benchmarking against the five elements of effective complaint handling outlined in the Commonwealth Ombudsman’s publication <i>A Better Practice Guide to Complaint Handling</i> (April 2009):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culture: Agencies must value complaints as a means of strengthening their administration and improving their relations with the public.</li> <li>• Principles: An effective complaint handling system must be modelled on the principles of fairness, accessibility, responsiveness, efficiency and integration.</li> <li>• People: Complaint handling staff must be skilled and professional.</li> <li>• Process: The seven stages of complaint handling—acknowledgment, assessment, planning, investigation, response, review, and consideration of systemic issues—should be clearly outlined.</li> <li>• Analysis: Information about complaints should be examined as part of a continuous process of organisational review and improvement.</li> </ul>
<b>Review Scope</b>	<p>The review will examine:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the policies, procedures, processes and systems in place relating to complaint handling.</li> <li>• Airservices’ complaint, enquiry, records of responses and performance statistics for a 12 month period (1 July 2009 to 30 Jun 2010)</li> <li>• A number of case studies of individual complaints identified by both Airservices Australia and the Aircraft Noise Ombudsman</li> <li>• Interviews with relevant staff.</li> <li>• Examination of responses provided to stakeholders</li> </ul>

	<p>with particular emphasis on complainants.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The level of resourcing applied to the complaint handling process.</li> <li>• International benchmarks for aircraft noise complaint management.</li> </ul>	
<b>Expected date of report issue</b>	Draft: December 2010	Final: February 2011