



# QUEEN'S AIRFIELD IS NOT SAFE FOR PLANES, SECRET MOD FILES SHOW

News / Airports / Routes



RAF Northolt, London, which is used by the Queen is unsafe aviation report reveals

The VIP **airfield** used by the **Queen** and Prime Minister **is unsafe**, according to a classified Ministry of -Defence report obtained by the Telegraph.

Dangers to “existing operations” at RAF Northolt, London, are so serious it “could not be licensed in its current form” by the aviation authorities, the report says.

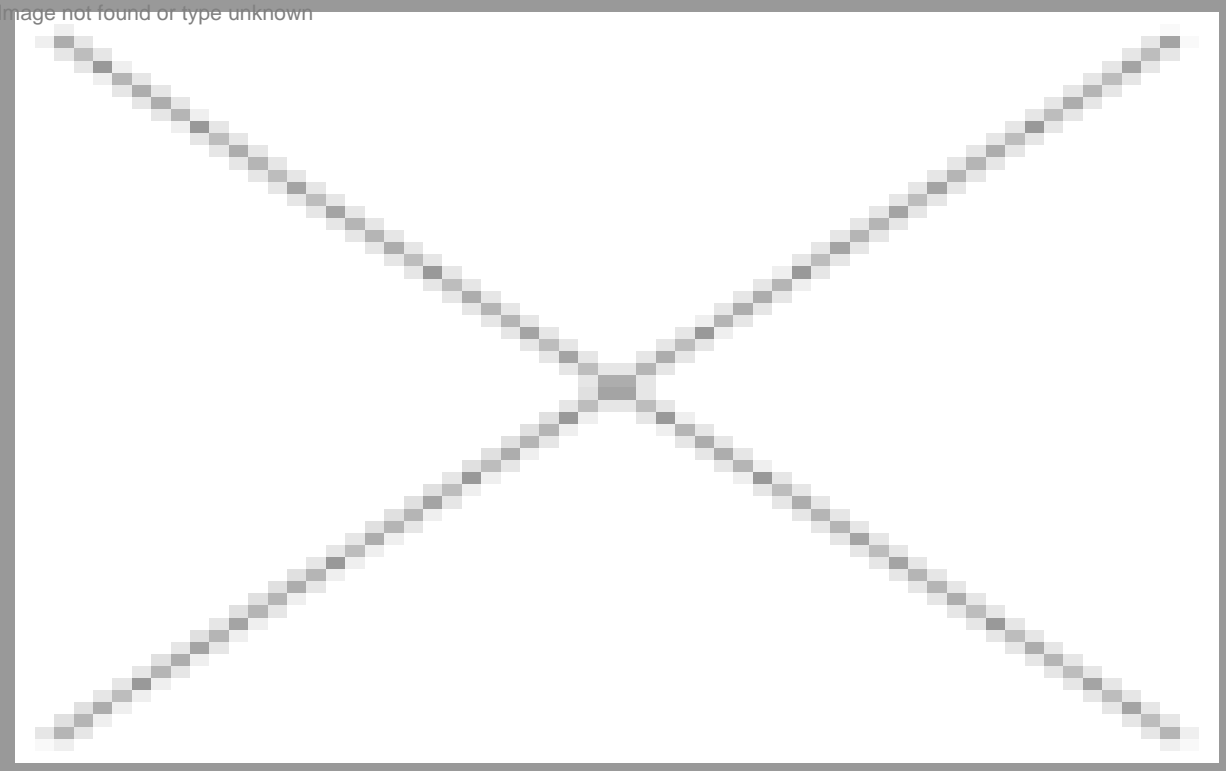
It is able to operate only under dispensation as a “Government aerodrome”.

The situation is “inexcusable”, it is claimed, and could “end in an accident”.

Northolt is the base for the RAF’s 32 (The Royal) Squadron, which operates a fleet of BAE 146 executive jets for military commanders, ministers and the Royal Family. It was used 340 times by ministers last year.

But the report says the site in west London suburbia is surrounded by “substantial numbers” of buildings which “significantly” intrude into the recommended safe zones for taking off and landing.

The obstacles include a block of flats, an industrial estate and a petrol station.



Prince Charles, Prince William and Prince Harry arrive at RAF Northolt after the death of the Queen Mother back in 2002

In some cases they come within a few feet of the aircraft undercarriage, leaving little margin for pilot error.

The normal flight path also leads to aircraft “crossing the public roads just outside the boundary at very low heights,” the report says.

On West End Road, planes fly just 9 metres (29ft) above traffic, the report says.

Hazard lights are meant to stop vehicles when aircraft take off and land. But many drivers ignore them.

“The safety of the travelling public, flight crews and local residents is at very serious risk,” said Will Curtis, managing director of rival Biggin Hill airport.

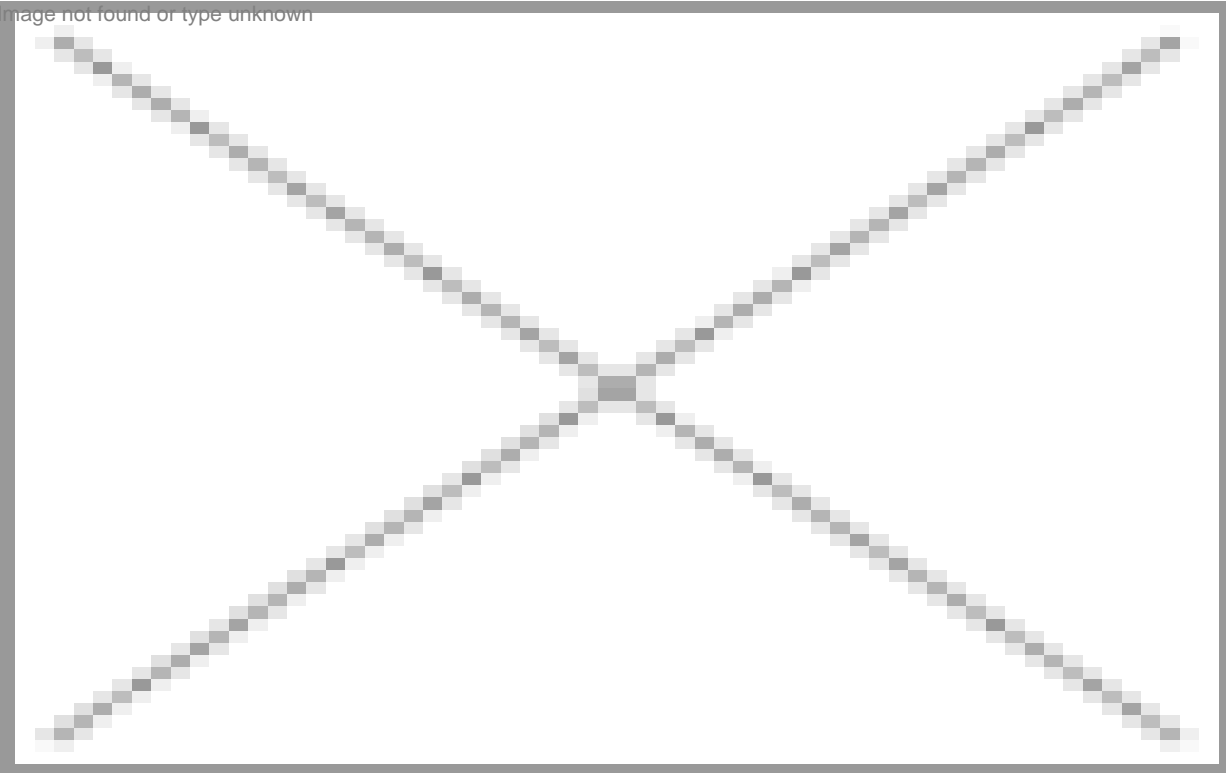
He added: “Such a situation couldn’t possibly exist at any civilian aerodrome. The margins of safety that are normally assured for civilian aircraft are absent here, but aircrew are not aware that they are absent.

“By saying it is safe, you are misleading aircrew, and that will end in an accident. It is inexcusable behaviour.”

At the eastern end of the runway, there are 267 buildings or obstacles intruding into the safety zone for aircraft landing, the report says. At the western end there are 198 which intrude into the

take-off safety zone.

Northolt's constrained site also gives it inadequate "runway end safety areas," which are designed to allow aircraft space to overshoot the runway in an emergency.



Temporary hangars which housed Typhoons at RAF Northolt as part of the security for the 2012 London Olympics

"The existing runway end safety areas do not comply with the recommended length and width," the report says.

"The probability of [an accident] is highest near to the runway ends."

After a 1996 accident in which a plane overshot the runway, ploughed through the boundary fence and hit a van on the A40 main road, seriously injuring its driver, beds of gravel aggregate were installed at both ends of the runway to stop aircraft breaching the perimeter. However, the report says that "there are concerns about... the performance of this system and its safety in use. An aggregate bed can cause significant damage to an overrunning aircraft, difficult access for emergency vehicles and provides an open textured bed that would accommodate spilt fuel, which adds to the fire risk."

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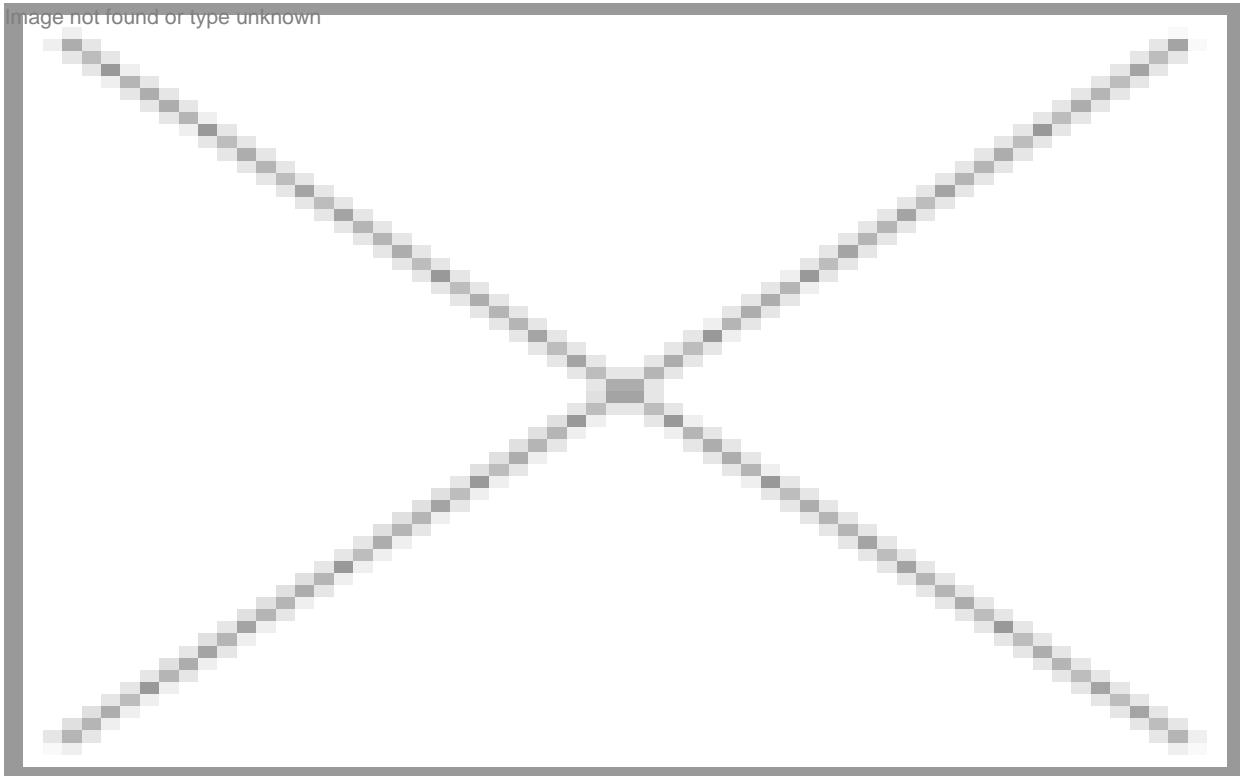
Will Curtis, managing director of Biggin Hill airport

The report, entitled "Project Ark" and classified "confidential," was compiled in 2012 by a consultancy, Mott McDonald, for the MoD, to assess how far Northolt met minimum Civil Aviation Authority safety standards. All civilian airfields must comply with the standards to receive a CAA licence, or since 2014 a certificate from the European Air Safety Agency.

The consultants concluded that the “extent of [Northolt’s] non-compliance issues” was “sufficient to state that the aerodrome could not be licenced in its current form. That conclusion would apply with the existing operations and is not related to whether or not the aerodrome was to be developed as an airport [for civilian traffic].”

They said that “the CAA would not licence the existing runway configuration... primarily due to the substantial number and degree of obstacle infringements at the east end of the runway... A fully compliant runway would require the runway to be shortened to such an extent that it would not be... of much use in the military or civil sectors.”

Minor improvements have been made since the report was written in 2012. At the time, Northolt’s runway had a “landing distance available” (LDA) of between 1592 and 1684 metres, depending on which direction you approached it from. The runway has now been slightly shortened. It currently has an LDA of 1502- 1555 metres, giving aircraft a little more room to overrun at the runway ends.



A Royal Air Force Typhoon FGR4 aircraft at RAF Northolt

But the report says the Northolt runway needs a far bigger reduction in its LDA, to 1250 metres, to be safe. This would mean, however, that many aircraft types, which need a longer runway, could no longer use the base. It has been ruled out by the MoD.

The MoD has also rejected plans to replace the “problematic” gravel beds designed to stop aircraft overrunning the ends of the runway. Plans were drawn up to install a safer “engineered materials arrester system,” made of a special type of concrete “honeycomb” which crumples under an aircraft’s weight and brings it safely to a stop. But this was abandoned on cost grounds.

The report adds that it would be “impractical and certainly very costly” to remove all the obstacles around the base that endanger aircraft on the flightpath. “If necessary, it might be possible to remove a small number of buildings that are significant obstacles,” it says. “However, even in combination, these do not resolve the infringement issue.”

Northolt celebrated its centenary this year, making it three years older than the RAF itself. It is the oldest Air Force base in Britain still home to RAF aircraft and has witnessed dozens of historic events, including the return of the coffin of Diana, Princess of Wales, from Paris after her death in 1997.

Military airfields are regulated by the Military Aviation Authority (MAA), which aims to follow the same standards as the CAA but has granted exemptions to Northolt. However, most users of Northolt are in fact civilian. As well as the Royal Squadron aircraft, which themselves carry many civilians, up to 12,000 civil flights a year, mainly private jets, now use the base, which markets itself as “London’s premier business aviation airport.”

Many ministerial and Royal flights from Northolt are now made on civil aircraft.

The document obtained by the Telegraph was released following court action by Biggin Hill and another rival to Northolt in the business jet market, Oxford airport. In January this year, the two airports sued the Defence Secretary, claiming Northolt should be regulated by the CAA.

They lost, but had not at that stage seen the full Mott McDonald report, raising the possibility of further legal action.

The MoD insisted that the airfield was safe and that where it did not meet CAA standards acceptable “mitigation” was in place. A spokesman said: “RAF Northolt’s aerodrome safety standards are fully regulated by the MAA. A recent judicial review confirmed that no changes are required in relation to current aerodrome standards which are fully published and promulgated to civil users who operate at the aerodrome.”

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**SOURCE: THE TELEGRAPH**

**ARTICLE LINK:**

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