

Two steps forward, one back for quiet sky advocates

This week has seen community advocates hoping to curb the noise and proliferation of helipads on Waiheke take two steps forward and one back.

The Auckland Council has voted to tighten how noise is measured at helipads, and look into potentially banning them from residential areas. But advocates hope the government overhaul of the Civil Aviation Act would set new rules around helicopters failed to pan out.

The Civil Aviation Bill, introduced in 2021, passed its third reading on March 29, and is now waiting for the Governor-General to formally sign it into law. Only the Green Party voted against progressing the bill, after their proposed changes to better address climate change and community concerns about helipads were rejected by parliament. These included Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick's proposal to amend clause 52 of the bill from "the Transport Minister may make rules 'regulating the effect or potential effect of civil aviation on people, activities, and things,'" to read the minister 'must' make such rules.

Addressing parliament at the third reading, Chlöe said while the bill did well in updating the existing civil aviation legal framework, the Greens could not support it since it failed to address community concerns, and close gaps in the rules - as reflected in the submissions to the select committee from Quiet Sky, Waiheke Local Board and others such as the Federated Mountain Clubs. "[The bill] really misses a trick when there is no runway left, when it comes to having consideration and protection of our climate, conservation, and our communities," she said. "Especially when we're looking down the barrel of further proliferation of



Quiet Sky's Kim Whittaker is frustrated council staff recommend against more comprehensive action on helipads due to low numbers of formal complaints, when the process is so unclear most give up and just complain to Quiet Sky. Photos Merrie Hewetson

private aircraft and vehicles in the next 10 to 20 years."

Chlöe added she and the Greens will now seek to convince Transport Minister Michael Woods and Associate Transport Minister Kiritapu Allan to use their discretion under clause 52 to address helipad proliferation instead - and that another clause allowing for noise abatement rules, that 'includes' the vicinity of aerodromes, could and should be more widely applied. "So, they can expect those cases to be made as soon as the bill is passed, and we'll have them on her desk."

Meanwhile, at the Auckland Council Planning, Environment and Parks Committee meeting on 30 March, councillors voted to urgently implement National

Planning Standard 15 - meaning helicopter noise would no longer be averaged over three days. The committee also directed council staff to make how to complain about helicopter noise clearer on the council's website and passed a motion from Councillor Mike Lee asking staff to look at the feasibility of prohibiting helipads in residential areas.

Mike said the raft of "patchwork" measures currently recommended by staff were not enough. "It will not end public concerns; it will not give relief to neighbours whose quiet enjoyment of their property is going to be disturbed inevitably by a private helicopter."

Quiet Sky Waiheke spokesman Kim Whittaker expressed frustration with the council's lack of action. A staff report recommended against more comprehensive measures, partially due to a low number of formal complaints making them hard to justify. Only 26 complaints of helicopter noise were made to the council in three years, with eight coming from Waiheke.

"Planners are using the fact we are fielding all the complaints as a reason not to do anything," he said.

Cr Chris Darby supported Kim's comments, noting he lived with helicopters regularly flying over his home but never formally complained to the council - because even as a councillor, he didn't know how. Instead, he ended up complaining to the Mechanics Bay commercial helipad,

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and the Civil Aviation Authority.

“I [also] struggle to find a reason why the council is so permissive towards helipads in residential and other sensitive areas,” Darby said. “There is no shortage of commercial helipads.”

Darby recommended the “champagne hampers and polo sticks” crowd could just use them, with only minor inconvenience. He noted there are three commercial helipads in the inner city alone, with another three in nearby suburbs. On Waiheke, Carson’s Field is less than 20 minutes’ drive from anywhere on the island - and has hire vehicles available on site.

Waiheke Local Board chair Cath Handly said helicopters were interfering with the tranquility which was at the heart of expectations held by Hauraki Gulf Islands’ residents and visitors.

“It says ‘oh by the way, it’s only seven percent of transport emissions. So hey, that’s chicken feed,’” Cath said. “Each helicopter produces 950 pounds of CO2 per hour and burns over 40 times the fuel of a car per hour. That qualifies them as one of the most polluting, carbon-intensive modes of transport.”

Mike Lee says while recent developments haven’t been everything community advocates hoped for, it felt like the end was in sight after last week’s meeting. “We have shoved ajar a steel door which until recently seemed permanently locked,” he says. “I am sure we can get there if we show resolve and unity of purpose.”

This issue goes back over a decade. The District Plan used to only allow a maximum of three helicopter take-offs or landings a day at a consented helipad. But a new rule in 2009 allowed far more helicopter movements, only limited by noise levels based on a three-day average. Critics say this made it far easier to get consent for a private helipad.

A few years later, in 2014-2015, Waiheke residents’ frustrations with the growing number of helicopters passing overhead boiled over with controversy around a new helipad at Cable Bay Vineyard. Neighbours made numerous complaints about the level of noise from helicopters already flying to and from the property and formed the Church Bay Residents’ Group to lobby for more control - and a return to peace and quiet. A noise abatement notice was issued to Cable Bay in 2014, but council hearings commissioner Janine Bell still granted Cable Bay’s application. She also ruled helipads had already become a recognised component of Waiheke vineyards and the numerous resource consents already granted for helipads meant they could not be considered exceptional or unusual. Therefore, public notification of them could only happen in “special circumstances”. Her ruling left



Councillor Mike Lee says the council tossing three-day averages for helicopter noise and investigating feasibility of prohibiting helipads in residential areas knocks ajar a door advocates thought locked tightly.

the public no formal avenue to object to new helipads.

At the time there were 12 other Oneroa properties consented for helicopter flights, with some allowed as many as 44 helicopter movements a day.

Mike Lee, in a previous term as Waitemata and Gulf Ward councillor, and Waiheke Local Board member Paul Walden, who was the board chair at the time, strongly criticised the ruling for taking away residents’ civil rights. Despite numerous similar public outcries, petitions and complaints, helipad opponents struggled to gain traction for several more years.

Community group Quiet Sky Waiheke



As Civil Aviation Bill passes without proposed amendments on helipads, Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick promises to have cases for using existing discretionary powers to address the issue on Minister of Transport’s desk SOON. Photo Sarah Gloyer

formed in 2021 to advocate for change and better coordinate public opposition to the proliferation of helipads. Quiet Sky’s goals have seen strong support from the Waiheke Local Board, and Auckland Central MP Chlöe Swarbrick in particular. Together they gained some policy changes from council, with increasing pressure for more, and brought the issue to the national stage and parliamentary debates.

However, the number of helipads continues to balloon. In 2019 there was roughly 20 consented helipads on Waiheke - by 2023 there were 58.

• Paul Mitchell, with additional reporting by Laura Kvigstad, funded by NZ on Air

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