

Changes to pilots' flying hours could cause danger, say MPs

Committee says new European regulations mean pilots' shift times could increase the risk of them falling asleep on the job

- [Dan Milmo](#)
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MPs on the transport select committee are worried that new European air regulations could mean pilots falling asleep on the job. Photograph: Tim Ockenden/PA

Proposed changes to pilots' flying hours could put safety at risk on commercial flights, MPs have warned.

The House of Commons transport committee said draft proposals by the [European Aviation Safety Agency](#) (Easa) could undermine UK safety standards.

The British pilots' union, Balpa, has claimed that under one scenario a pilot could be required to land a plane 22 hours after having woken up in the early morning. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) – the UK's aviation safety regulator – and Department for Transport (DfT) have sought to play down those concerns, describing the 22 hour claim as an "extreme" case.

The committee's chair, Labour MP Louise Ellman, cited a Balpa poll that said 43% of pilots have reported falling asleep involuntarily while on duty.

She said: "Current EU proposals risk making the situation worse, by lowering the UK's current standards. A lowest-common-denominator approach to safety will not benefit passengers, airlines or crew."

Balpa said the proposals could lead to an increase in accidents. Jim McAuslan, Balpa general secretary, said: "This report should be a wake-up call to the government that it must stand up for UK-level aviation safety standards and not allow them to be watered down. This is not for pilots' sake, but for the travelling public."

The current limit on the length of time a pilot can fly in one stint is 13.25 hours, which can be extended by up to three hours by the aircraft commander.

The aviation industry's safety record has improved significantly over the past decade. Major airlines had their safest ever year in 2011, according to the International [Air Transport Association](#), with western jets suffering an accident every 2.7m flights. Including eastern-built jets such as the Russian Tupolev, there were 486 fatalities in 2011 compared with 786 in 2010.

A spokesman for the CAA welcomed the report but played down its concerns. "We think the current proposals, amended by our ongoing input, provide a sound basis to maintain the UK's current high safety levels and actually increase safety for UK passengers travelling on some other European airlines.

"This conclusion is based on expert knowledge, operational oversight, research projects, engagement with scientists and analysis of the evidence."

The CAA acknowledges that in some cases the proposals will see flight hours extended, but they will also require airlines to manage fatigue with greater vigilance.

A DfT spokeswoman said: "The safety of the travelling public is paramount, which is why we have been clear that we would only support Easa's final proposals if the CAA is content that they provide an appropriate level of protection against crew fatigue."

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