

**Almondsbury Emergency Air Operations Base Structured Forum Notes
9am to 10.30am, Tuesday 2nd September 2025**

1. Welcome, introductions and apologies

Chair

All introduced themselves.

In person attendance:

- Representatives of the operators/developer of the development
 - a. GWAAC – CEO Anna Perry (Chair and notes), Operations Manager Sean Coles
 - b. NPAS – Base Senior Pilot Rick London
- Almondsbury Parish Council
 - a. Cllr Keith Burchell
 - b. Cllr Ian Christie
- Bradley Stoke Town Council
 - a. Cllr Jon Williams
- Guest speaker
 - a. Will Houghton, Senior Project Developer, Bristol Energy Cooperative

Virtual attendees: None.

Apologies noted from:

- Neil Higgs, South Gloucestershire Council
- Lauren Harsley, NPAS Base Manager
- Local resident representatives appointed by Almondsbury Parish Council
 - a. Mark Neves
 - b. Paul Timmins

2. Agree minutes of 19.04.2022

Chair

Agreed.

3. Purpose of the meeting as laid down by planning conditions

Chair

Attendees were reminded of the purpose and operation of the forum, as set by planning conditions.

4. Report on activities at the base from operators, incl flight data and any complaints GWAAC/NPAS

Presentation from Rick London:

- Overview of NPAS service.
- 700hrs flown in last 12 months. Slightly down on last two years - had a 5 week service period this summer.
- April – Jul 2025 flew 147hrs 46 mins to 241 incidents across SW but also West Mids and Wales. 87.9% had positive outcomes.
- National service controlled by West Yorkshire Police, so get deployed where needed. Whatever force uses the service pays for it.
- Work included 62 missing people, vulnerable people, vehicles or suspects located.
- Gave examples of some incidents have been involved in.
- One third of incidents are vulnerable or missing people.
- Had one complaint since December. Small overfly of edge of avoid area at 1000ft.

Presentation from Sean Coles:

- Overview of GWAAC service.
- 2024 was a record breaking year with 2,272 call outs - 77% by road, 23% by heli (529 missions).
- % that are helicopter flights has gone down as more car capability has been developed.
- In 2024, GWAAC were called to 501 cardiac arrests and 338 road traffic accidents.

- First 6 months of 2025, 1,181 missions, of which 26% were by helicopter (309) so another busy year is anticipated.
- Showed total helicopter noise complaints across both GWAAC and NPAS from 2018 – 2025, where GWAAC are aware of the NPAS ones. Shows that average has dropped over period except for an increase in 2024. NPAS do get complaints from night flying, but generally complaints come when there is a visiting helicopter or pilot who are not so aware of the local landscape, constraints and sensitivities. There have been four complaints so far in 2025.
- GWAAC is building a Mission Support Centre base extension. Ground works should finish at the end of September. Aiming to co-locate offices to Almondsbury, and make site open to more people. However, funding is still needed for the main building contract, so there is no timescale for this yet.

Q: Most social media complaints are about flights at night, so does that come through in complaints?

A: Night complaints tend to be about people are hovering above rather than short flights in and out. NPAS now flying less at night, as no longer 24hrs usually. Generally fly 20hrs a day and are offline for 4 hours overnight.

Q: Do complaints come from a particular area that is most affected by noise?

A: Complaints don't come from particular geographical areas, come from a small number of individuals spread out across the area who make regular complaints. No pattern to the locations. We do look into complaints and try to find the underlying causes and address them. Sometimes the flights were completely routine but people perceived them as exceptional in terms of noise or proximity.

5. Report on activities at the base from local community, Councillors
including any report of complaints to South Gloucestershire Council

Noted that Councils very supportive of NPAS and GWAAC and the services they provide to the community. No other matters to raise.

6. Community issues requested by any member of the group NPAS
a. NPAS drones update

Rick London gave overview of current NPAS drone trial which is Home Office funded. On month two of six month trial. Trial is happening from Avonmouth overnight, mainly over water in restricted air space. It is not linked to the Almondsbury site. This is with a large drone instead of crewed craft. The trial is to see if it is viable option for policing. Drone is about 200kg and can fly for around eight hours. Size of a van and has a single rotary engine in, not electric. Even is successful and funded, predicted to be at least 2030 before possible deployment. Full details on npas.police.uk

Q: Seems a long time to develop this?

A: If put uncrewed aircraft straight over cities there are risks. They haven't got the same 'see and avoid' capabilities which crewed aircraft have, and this is important in uncontrolled airspace. Want to retain ability to have good awareness of surrounds. Working with National Air Traffic Service and Civil Aviation Authority about how to work in that airspace safely.

Q: Are they autonomous?

A: Controlled by ground station who manually controls it, and a camera operator operates it too. There are auto-pilot modes but is under human control. Trial is testing technical capabilities to see if options are there for the future. Unknown how they will or won't be deployed in the future.

7. Information for the public Will Houghton
a. Proposed solar farm on land overlooking FATO from Bristol Energy Cooperative

Anna Perry introduced the item by explaining how GWAAC experienced around seven years of significant uncertainty after Filton airport was put up for sale, before the purchase and build of the airbase at Almondsbury was agreed with BAE. However, as soon as the new airbase started to be built, BAE announced that the Almondsbury site would be put up for sale too, and GWAAC and NPAS were given a short time frame to purchase it before it would be put on the open market. NPAS were not in a position to

make the purchase, and GWAAC considered that another period of uncertainty about our future was untenable, so purchased the airbase in 2018 at a cost of £2m – using some grants, public donations and their reserves. The option was for them to buy all 72 acres; there was no option to buy part of the land.

Since then, GWAAC has been paying contractors to maintain the 72 acres whilst looking for ways to reduce the costs of maintenance and generate income to support the charity, which are also sympathetic to the local area and meet environmental sustainability objectives. The proposed option is the best they have been able to develop.

Will Houghton gave an introduction to Bristol Energy Cooperative as focused on local community energy, keeping benefits in local area and empowering communities. It is a not for profit organisation with 2,000 members who are investors. Over the last few years, BEC has raised over £15m and installed more than 12MW of solar, including Lawrence Weston solar farm. Income from these projects is used to support local communities through grants and other funding.

BEC considers that this solar farm project will result in around £560k of community benefit funding over 40 years, to be shared between GWAAC and others.

There is a drop-in public consultation event on 16th Sept and people can look at plans via the website, www.gwaacsolar.co.uk, which will be updated as the project develops.

Will displayed a map of proposal. He explained that the solar panels would be just less than 3m tall and south facing. They are designed to be placed below the brow of hill, screened from houses in Almondsbury by the contours of the land and by enhancing existing hedgerows and planting new hedge and trees just below the ridgeline, shielding views. Other Biodiversity Net Gain improvements will also be made.

Ecology studies including BNG, Preliminary Ecological Assessments and bat surveys have been completed and none have identified significant issues. BEC is getting these updated based on the most recent design.

An access track runs through site, mainly stone but some tarmac where there is a risk of helicopter downwash. It is planned to have a 5.7MW peak output from around 10 acres, generating enough to power 15,000 homes.

Regarding aviation, BEC are currently engaging with NPAS and doing glint and glare study to reduce risks.

BEC are currently seeking community engagement, feedback and questions. BEC are likely to seek planning permission by end of 2025, with construction 2026 or 2027.

During the construction phase we are not expecting any significant noise. Traffic management plan will be drawn up to manage construction traffic. Noise and traffic will be less than has been for other GWAAC projects, where no complaints have been received.

BEC completed the existing solar rooftop array at the airbase in 2024, which is 240KW.

Q: Will be panels be seen from Florence Park and Crantock Drive?

A: We are doing specialist visual impact studies. Currently BEC don't believe the panels will be visible from houses, as will be screened by hedges and trees.

Q: Is the new hedgerow slow or fast growing?

A: Don't know, will speak to ecologist.

Q: Is it just grassland on the slope currently?

A: Yes. Local residents have previously requested trees being planted up there to help with visual and acoustic screening, so this will answer that request.

Q: What stops birds nesting around and on panels?

A: It is not really possible to net off panels in same way as rooftop. They have secure cable trays to stop birds interfering with them. Cannot really enclose them all.

Q: Will there be battery storage?

A: No, just feed into grid is proposed.

Q: Will fences allow animals to pass through and over?

A: Large animals will be able to go down sides on either side of solar to get through to land they currently spend time on. A perimeter fence will run all around outside but this won't be solid. Will be CCTV for security and a swale to reduce flood risk.

Q: Will the construction traffic use the GWAAC drive?

Yes, should not be noticeable by neighbours.

Q: Will there be any noise from the operation?

A: Solar farms are very quiet when operating. We have engaged a specialist noise consultant firm but their advice was that it will be quiet, and therefore SGC are unlikely to require a detailed noise study. Inverters will only make a small noise during the day when it is sunny, no noise at night.

Q: Will the energy go straight to the grid or be used locally?

A: BEC is trying to explore ways to connect to local residents so they can buy the energy from the project but it is not currently possible under regulations, although that might change over time. Currently a special tariff called Energy Local is only available at low voltage installations and this one isn't low voltage. Proposal to change in future. There will be the opportunity for local people to buy shares and have a stake in the project later on.

Q: Who does it get sold to?

A: You can sign up with an electricity supplier to buy it. Can also sell to SGC or large private companies.

Q: Where will it connect to the grid? Will there be new pylons?

A: On the northern edge of the site there is large power line that we have secured a very favourable grid connection for. There will not be any new pylons.

All attendees went outside to view the proposed site.

Q: When will ecology reports be available?

A: Some are done already, others in progress. When we have key findings we will put onto the project website - www.gwaacsolar.co.uk. BEC are about to populate this with more information and will keep it updated as new information comes through. Full ecology assessments are being done. We have noted some comments from local residents about particular species already.

AOB:

Q: Last year GWAAC submitted an application to amend some planning conditions. Are there any plans to resubmit this?

A: No, not currently. Each application incurs a cost and GWAAC does not have a budget for this at the moment due to a lack of income and increased costs and demands on the service. There is no urgent need to amend the conditions; it was an attempt to make the conditions more workable and future proof, rather than because of a current operational need.

Discussed A38 developments and the need for a right hand turn in and out of site to help emergency vehicles and reduce other traffic needing to find turning points.

Keith and Ian advised that the Almondsbury Neighbourhood Plan is in development and it would be a good idea for GWAAC to be consulted on this. Keith to signpost person to Anna.