AIRPROX Insight

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE December 2025

Photo for illustrative purposes: Shutterstock: Piotr Kostus

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

How close is too close?

I'm comfortable with the separation — but are they…?

Many reported Airprox involve late detection of the other aircraft, and we occasionally see events where both pilots were visual with each other for some time, yet they still got uncomfortably close…

I have written INSIGHTS about this before (January 2023 and November 2024), but I thought that **Airprox 2025164** – assessed by the Board this month – provided the opportunity to revisit the question of 'what is an appropriate distance to maintain from another aircraft?'

As with most questions in aviation, the first answer is invariably 'it depends'. Context is everything, so let's start by setting the scene.

The incident between an EC145 HEMS helicopter and a Socata TB20 took place about 11 miles south of Leeds Bradford Airport, in the Class G airspace beneath the Leeds Bradford CTA (Class D airspace, base 3000ft amsl).

Both pilots were in receipt of a Basic Service from Leeds Bradford ATC, but only the helicopter was equipped with any form of additional electronic conspicuity equipment (TCAS II, in this case).

The Leeds Bradford controller passed traffic information to both pilots, and both reported being visual with the other aircraft; the EC145 pilot also received information on the TB20 from their TCAS II equipment.

After their closest point of approach – measured on radar as 300ft vertically and less than 0.1 miles horizontally – both pilots remained on a similar westerly track, with the TB20 falling slightly behind and below the HEMS helicopter. However, the helicopter pilot continued to be concerned about how closely behind the TB20 had been following.

So why did we end up in a situation where an Airprox was declared? Firstly, I think it would be useful at this point to understand the definition of an Airprox.

According to ICAO Doc 4444 PANS-ATM (16th Edition), an Airprox is *'A situation in which, in the opinion of a pilot or air traffic services personnel, the distance between aircraft as well as their relative positions and speed have been such that the safety of the aircraft involved may have been compromised'.* This means that there doesn't have to have been a compromise in air safety.

This is obviously a subjective assessment and each pilot or controller will have their own perspective. In this case, the TB20 pilot was obviously happy that they had the helicopter in sight and believed they had taken adequate separation. However, the EC145 pilot saw it differently…

The HEMS aircraft had been operating under an 'A' callsign. This means that they are on their way to an incident or transporting a casualty from an incident to hospital. In this case, the EC145 was on its way to the scene of an event requiring their assistance.

Clearly, every incident that a HEMS aircraft attends is different, and it is highly unlikely that the pilot will be familiar with their chosen landing site. This means that the HEMS aircraft may change direction or altitude quite suddenly, and unpredictably, as the pilot seeks the most suitable area from which to recover the casualty.

When sighting a HEMS helicopter, other pilots won't necessarily know if the aircraft is engaged in life-saving activity, or simply returning to base or re-positioning. For this reason, it's best to err on the side of caution and always assume that an Emergency Services aircraft is on a life-saving mission.

Therefore, do your best to position yourself so that the HEMS pilot can see your aircraft while giving the HEMS aircraft a wide berth – enough that the pilot has the freedom to manoeuvre in all dimensions without worrying about the proximity of another aircraft.

Of course, the airspace sometimes lends itself to encouraging flight in narrow corridors – between areas of controlled airspace, for example – but this shouldn't deter us from trying our best to keep out of the way of a HEMS aircraft.

In this case, both pilots had been receiving a Basic Service from Leeds Bradford ATC.

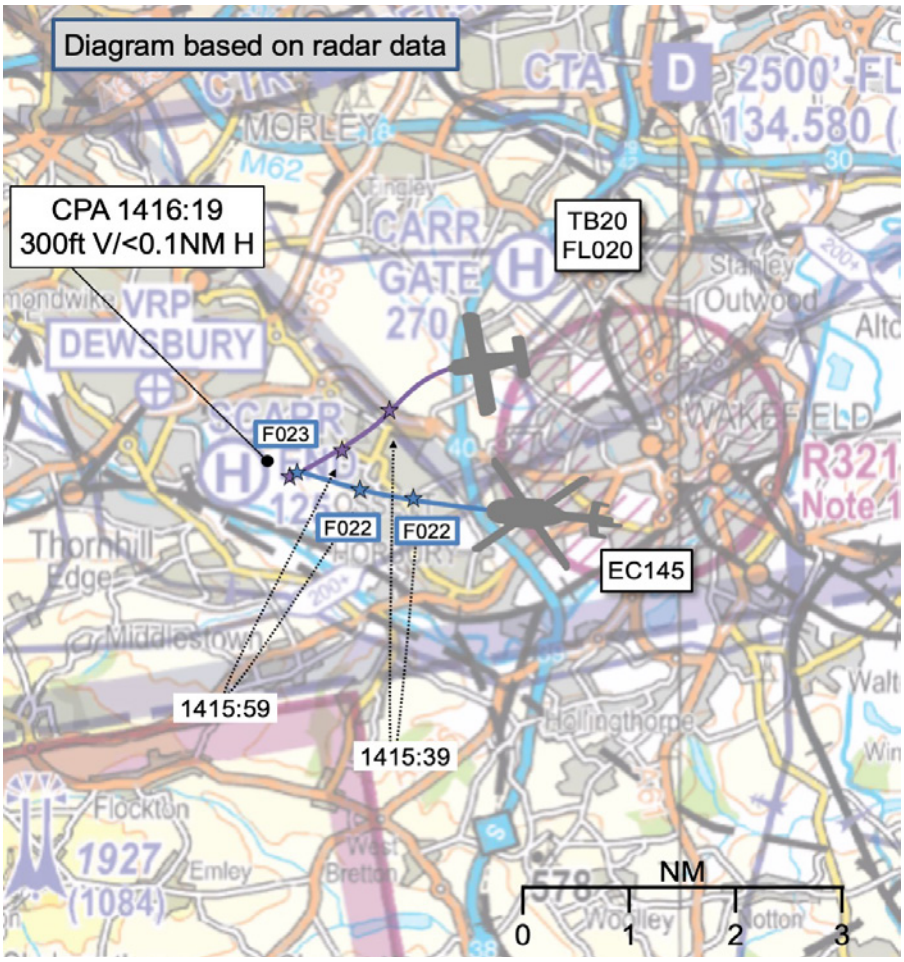
Why not make the most of the fact that you are already in contact with the controlling agency to request a transit in their Class D airspace?

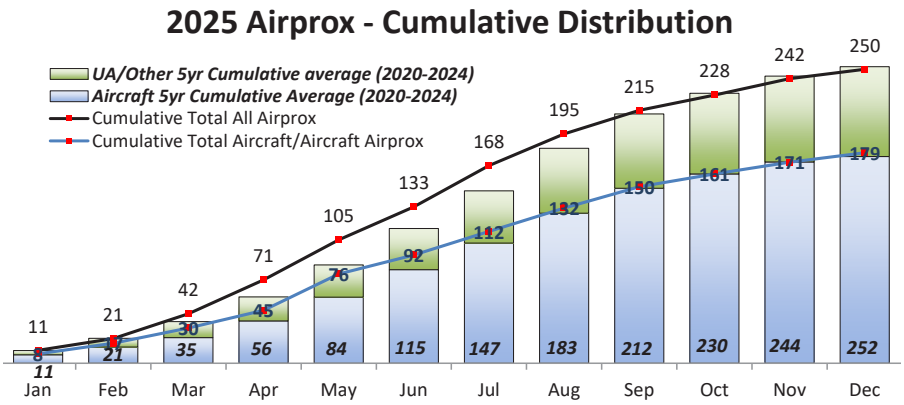
Either pilot involved in this Airprox could have requested a climb into Leeds Bradford's CTA, and the weather on the day doesn't appear to have precluded a climb for either aircraft, although a climb might not have suited the needs of the HEMS helicopter pilot if they had been looking to set down to recover a patient.

Finally, a brief word about a Basic Service and Lower Airspace Radar Service (LARS) provision. Most of us will know that LARS coverage in the UK is far from ideal – it isn't available everywhere and it isn't available all of the time.

In this Airprox, both pilots were essentially receiving a LARS from Leeds Bradford ATC, which isn't a designated LARS provider. The lesson? It's always worth a try to get a service from an ATSU even if they're not a nominated LARS provider. Additionally, a Basic Service is just that – basic!

Although traffic information was passed to both pilots in this case, CAP774 Chapter 2, paragraph 2.5 states that '*Given that the provider of a Basic Service is not required to monitor the flight, pilots should not expect any form of traffic information from a controller/FISO. A pilot who considers that they require a regular flow of specific traffic information shall request a Traffic Service.*' So, it can be a bit 'hit-and-miss' as to whether we'll get traffic information under a Basic Service. Therefore, the UKAB recommends agreeing a Traffic Service with ATC wherever possible.





BOARD SUMMARY

This month the Board evaluated 18 Airprox, including four UA/Other events, three of which were reported by the piloted aircraft and one by the RPAS operator. Of the 15 full evaluations, five were classified as risk-bearing – two as category A and three as category B.

The Board made one Safety Recommendation following an Airprox between a Eurofox glider tug and an EC145 helicopter in the vicinity of York/Rufforth airfield (**Airprox 2025153**).

The Eurofox pilot was returning to the airfield after releasing a glider from tow while the helicopter pilot was transiting northbound past the airfield. The UKAB and BGA encourage pilots of aircraft transiting close to glider sites to give the site a call.

During the Board's discussions, it was noted that CAP 413 paragraph 4.165 expressly prohibits any reply to calls to 'unattended aerodromes' (which is, essentially, what glider sites are), giving the pilots who make those calls no idea whether their call has been received or not.

Given that the CAA is currently reviewing CAP413, the Board thought that this would be the ideal opportunity for the regulator to consider 'softening' the language at paragraph 4.165 to permit replies to calls on unattended aerodrome frequencies to be made.

Although at the time of writing we are not quite at year-end, the graph above shows that Airprox reporting over the year has been pretty much in-line with the five-year averages. However, the averages include the restrictions placed on flying during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so are not truly representative of a 'normal' five-year period.

What this means in reality is that we have seen a reduction in Airprox reporting of around 10% over what we might expect. This is good news, and I hope the work of the UKAB has gone some way to contributing to this reduction in report numbers.

I'd encourage you all to take time over the winter to look back at some of these INSIGHT articles and consider whether there is anything more that you can do to reduce your exposure to a close encounter with another aircraft.