AIRPROX Insight

DIRECTOR UKAB'S MONTHLY UPDATE

September 2025

AIRPROX OF THE MONTH

Low level lowdown

130.490MHz

Photo for illustrative purposes: Shutterstock: steveharrisonphotos

Do you know what the VHF Low Level Common Frequency is — should you use it?

Following a suggestion some years ago by a civilian helicopter pilot who flew mostly in Scotland, I initiated a project to look at the viability of a common frequency for military and civilian pilots operating below 2000ft agl and not in contact with a LARS (Lower Airspace Radar Service) unit or using a Frequency Monitoring Code (a 'listening squawk').

The idea was trialled in Scotland with the CAA's approval and, following its success, it was extended to the whole of mainland Britain. The extended trial was equally successful and so the **VHF Low Level Common Frequency of 130.490MHz** was born.

The reason I've chosen to highlight it this month is that, anecdotally, there doesn't seem to have been much take-up of it by civilian pilots, and **Airprox 2025078** is a prime example of where the frequency might well have come in handy.

This Airprox took place over the North Pennines, about 12 miles east-northeast of Penrith, between a Hawk and a PA-28. The Hawk pilot was conducting low-flying training and had turned from a northerly track onto an easterly one about 25 seconds before the Airprox. The Hawk was equipped with TCAS I equipment which detected the PA-28's transponder signals, warning the pilot of its position and relative altitude, and the front-seat pilot then spotted the Piper and performed a 6G breakaway at around 1000ft AGL.

The PA-28 had been flying at an altitude of 3100ft over the Pennines where the terrain was about 2000ft amsl, so around 1100ft agl. Although the pilot wasn't carrying any additional electronic conspicuity equipment, they spotted the Hawk as it turned onto its easterly track, so the Piper banked and climbed to increase separation.

The closest point of approach was recorded as 0.2 miles at the same altitude. While the horizontal distance might not seem that close, the aircraft were more-or-less head-on at a closing speed of around 500kt, which led the Board to assign a Risk Category B (safety not assured) to the encounter.

So, what's this got to do with the Low Level Common Frequency? Well, the Hawk pilot had been using it while operating in the UK Low Flying System (UKLFS). This exists from the surface to 2000ft agl (so it follows the topography) and has its own particular set of rules for military aircrew, one of which is that crews must monitor the Low Level Common Frequency and announce their position and intentions periodically.

The Hawk pilot's last call on that frequency was one minute 20 seconds prior to the Airprox, just to the west of the high ground over which the PA-28 pilot had been flying. The call was in an open area where it was deemed that their call would have been most likely to reach any other aircraft in the local area, and the Hawk pilot announced that they were flying towards Cross Fell (two miles west of the Airprox location).

Had the PA-28 pilot also been using the Low Level Common Frequency then it's highly likely they would have heard the Hawk's transmission and reacted to it. However, the Piper's pilot had been using the London Information frequency and so had relied on the London FISO knowing the whereabouts of the Hawk if they were to receive any traffic information on it.

London (and Scottish, for that matter) Information FISOs are not permitted to use surveillance-based information to report aircraft positions to pilots – they have to use the information passed to them by the pilots using the service. This is a significant limiting factor to the Basic Service we receive from London/Scottish Information, and it's an important fact worth remembering.

Details regarding the Low Level Common Frequency and how to use it can be found in the UK AIP GEN 3.4 paragraph 3.2.5 and also in the CAA's Safety Notice SN-2024/006 issued on 12 September 2024. If looking up the Safety Notice, do be aware that it refers to two things, the first of which is how military pilots treat formations of aircraft when it comes to giving way; the information regarding the Low Level Common Frequency is in the second part of that same Safety Notice.

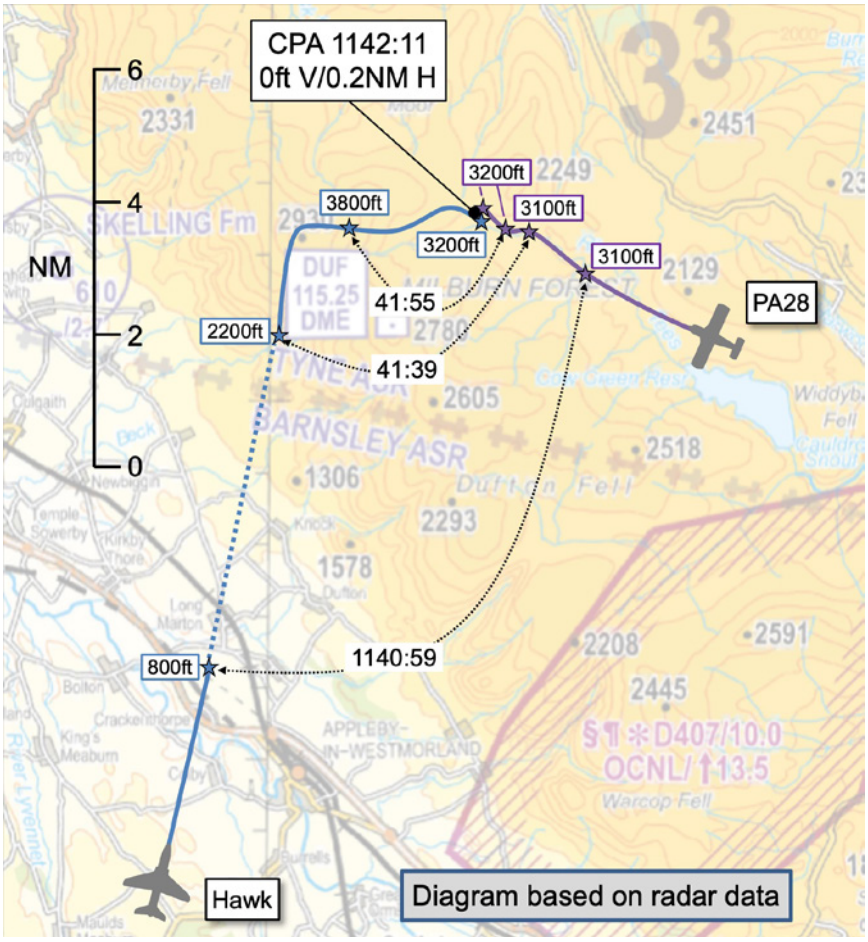
Communication is a vital element of aviation – we should all consider a comms plan as part of pre-flight preparation. Ideally, seek a surveillance-based service (usually a Traffic Service) but, if a Basic Service is all that's available, then understand its limitations. A controller or FISO is not required to monitor an aircraft under a Basic Service and traffic information shouldn't be expected.

Where no service is available (such as the area in which this Airprox took place) then consider using the Low Level Common Frequency. While it's primarily designed for pilots (military and civilian) flying below 2000ft agl, it can be used at altitudes above 2000ft agl.

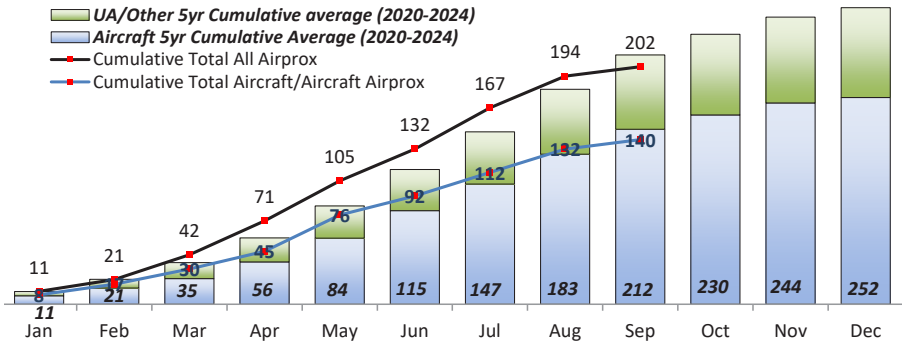
The frequency is expressly intended to aid deconfliction between aircraft operating in the same area, so if you hear a transmission from a pilot in the same vicinity as you then reply to that transmission and try to organise a deconfliction plan (such as agreeing vertical or lateral deconfliction).

Finally, and having espoused the advantages of the Low Level Common Frequency throughout this newsletter, it doesn't replace getting a service from an ATC unit – the Airspace & Safety Initiative website suggests that, if flying within ten miles of an aerodrome with a suitable ATS (FIS/ATC), or underneath their airspace, or within 15 miles or five minutes' flight time, whichever is the sooner for a MATZ, obtain a service from that Unit.

If not, and if a LARS is available, obtain a service from the LARS provider. If that's not available, use an appropriate Frequency Monitoring Code (FMC) where available (but don't expect to receive traffic information). If not, consider using the Low Level Common Frequency or obtain a service from London or Scottish Information.



2025 Airprox - Cumulative Distribution



BOARD SUMMARY

This month the Board evaluated 36 Airprox, including 16 UA/Other events, all of which were reported by the piloted aircraft. Of the 20 full evaluations, nine were classified as risk-bearing – one as category A and eight as category B. The Board did not make any Safety Recommendations this month.

By comparison to last year, Airprox reporting over the summer months has reduced by about 15% (as the graphic above shows). This reduction in reporting is encouraging, but I do also hope that it's because there are fewer reportable incidents, and not because people feel that close encounters are not worth reporting.

This year's annual Airprox Digest magazine contains an article describing the Airprox process and your part in it – so if you are wondering whether or not to report an Airprox, or simply interested about the process, I'd encourage you to read the piece — the onset of autumn and more inclement weather might provide the ideal opportunity to do so.