

HAVE YOU LISTENED TO YOUR NEIGHBOURS LATELY?

The interface between ANSPs is one that requires collaboration on operational and management levels. This has always been important but becomes even more so with Functional Airspace Blocks. In this article, **João Esteves and Antonio Guerrero Compas** discuss their experience in the South-West Functional Airspace Block, drawing on the experiences of controllers to improve safety.

KEY POINTS

- 1. Collaboration between units is important to fill the gaps at the border.**
- 2. It is important to improve the system through the opinion of controllers, since they know their work better than anyone. Their involvement makes the work safer, and improves their confidence.**
- 3. Letting controllers know the opinion of controllers in interfacing units is a good way to help improve safety.**
- 4. Joint initiatives must be set up for safety monitoring at the FAB level.**

João Esteves is currently working in NAV Portugal's Safety Department as the person responsible for the safety surveys programme, including normal operation observations, and for SMS training. His operational background encompasses both ATC and AIS/AIM functions. Besides the operational side, throughout his career he has experience in training and quality management functions.

He has a degree in Social Sciences (Sociology) and a post-graduate qualification in Data Analysis in Social Sciences.

Antonio Guerrero Compás is currently working in ENAIRE's Safety Unit as head of safety promotion and safety culture department, responsible for safety surveys process, SMS training and involved in HF integration in SMS. He is member of the Safety Human Performance Sub-Group since 2011. He studied Aeronautical Engineering at Universidad Politécnica de Madrid.

Air traffic controllers talk to each other regularly. They also talk to their neighbour controllers regularly. But do they listen to their neighbours about their difficulties and working problems, some of which may be a consequence of their own working methods and routines? Maybe not so often...

The Single European Sky legislative package, Regulation (EC) No. 1070/2009, states that the Functional Airspace Block (FAB) is based on a provision of air navigation services and related functions. It is performance-driven and optimised through enhanced cooperation among air navigation service providers.

Within this framework, NAV Portugal and ENAIRE (the Portuguese and Spanish air navigation service providers) are responsible for air traffic management in the South-West FAB.

Both organisations decided to launch a joint targeted safety survey on the coordination and traffic transfer process between Lisboa and Madrid ACCs. The aim was to better understand ATCOs'

perceptions on the process itself and the adequacy of the Letter of Agreement between the two ACCs.

This was achieved through a common questionnaire developed for the controllers with en-route endorsement in both centres, based on a preliminary analysis of the Letter of Agreement and some ATM occurrence reports.

This analysis led to a selected set of topics, as follows:

- Transfer of traffic departing from Porto Airport and flying via Transfer Points ADORO and BARDI – transfer levels FL280 or FL320.
- Adherence to, and adequacy of, procedures for verbal coordination on cases of failure in the OLDI automatic coordination process.
- Coordination failures in cases of traffic flying with strong tailwinds – lack of coordination message and/or alert concerning revised ETAs for these flights.
- Sector configurations – perception by ATCOs of the adjacent configurations.
- Transfer of communications vs transfer of control – need for simultaneous actions (or not).
- Language (use of English).

The questionnaire was available in both centres during one month. The level of participation was slightly above 20%, which was considered reasonable enough to draw some interesting conclusions.



The survey revealed some very positive things about the current model of operation, such as:

- The recognition by controllers that the coordination process is, in general terms, very good. It is felt that there is an easy collaboration among Portuguese and Spanish controllers, and that there is regular observation and application of the Letter of Agreement provisions by both sides.
- OLDI performance is seen as very positive, since this is an essential tool for automatic coordination.
- Verbal coordination is generally used whenever found more suitable than automatic coordination.
- Operational limitations regarding specific waypoints (level restrictions) are perceived as useful and important for risk mitigation.
- The identification of the sector with which the controllers have to coordinate transfer of traffic at a given moment is generally perceived as easy.

Some areas of improvement were identified, on both sides. Some of the more relevant aspects identified were:

- Current separation minima established in the Letter of Agreement should be re-evaluated, in order to allow better accommodation of high volumes of traffic.
- Controllers should moderate the number of requests for tactical changes, since these significantly increase workload on the collateral side.
- Controllers should reinforce the use of English language in verbal coordination.
- Verbal coordination should be done between planners, whenever possible, to avoid overloading executive controllers with these tasks.
- Controllers should adhere strictly to agreed level restrictions on specific waypoints.
- Identification of active sectors, although generally perceived as easy, can be improved through a variety of information mechanisms (e.g., Supervisor notification, creation of a table with structure of frequencies).

- Automatic update of ETA/ETO, in situations of strong tailwinds, would be an important advantage.
- Inclusion of specific waypoints in the Letter of Agreement, where transfer of communications would imply delegation of control, is also seen as an advantage.

Besides the answers given on these aspects, controllers from both sides presented many comments and suggestions, which are important to improve working methods and to mitigate safety risks.

In light of this, both ANSPs agreed that future coordination meetings would be desirable, as a way to improve both the Letter of Agreement provisions and the global coordination process.

to present possible solutions to ease the coordination process.

This study turned out to be a very interesting experience, which has provided a lot of valuable information that can be used to improve safety.

We have been able to analyse things that are done in the day-to-day work (work-as-done), compare it with written procedures (work-as-imagined and -prescribed), and we have seen how resilient the system is.

At a safety management level, we have learned about the way the safety survey process is carried out in each organisation, enriching the process. At an operational level, a joint survey allows the improvement of the system through the opinion of those who work within it daily. 

This is one of the most important goals of this study: to create awareness of each side's difficulties and problems, and to present possible solutions to ease the coordination process

As a normal outcome of this activity, a number of recommendations were produced by both ANSPs, and these were addressed to the responsible managers. Also, the results of this survey will be presented to controllers, so that they may become aware of each other's opinions. This is one of the most important goals of this study: to create awareness of each side's difficulties and problems, and

