



# It's good to talk



**Keeping a good lookout and listening-in tells you much about what's going on around you, but talking to ATC gets you the bigger picture**

It's a curious thing, some pilots will stand at the bar and bend your ear for hours about flying, but pop a headset on them and they come over all shy or, in some cases, simply prefer not to talk to whoever is out there.

Which is a shame, because think about these words: "Communicate unto the other person that which you would want him to communicate unto you if your positions were reversed."

It's a great quote and underscores why, in the words of a certain phone company, "it's good to talk". The thing is, you can only learn so much about other people near you, or heading your way, by keeping a good lookout and listening – talking gets you the bigger picture and also potentially gives them valuable situational awareness, too.

There are a stack of services that can help improve situational awareness if pilots use them, so let's start with LARS, the Lower Airspace Radar Services which is probably one of the most useful.

Established in the 1970s its aim was to improve the efficiency of ATC services for aircraft in the vicinity of airfields not protected by controlled airspace. Its primary objective is to aid the flow of traffic to and from these airfields by encouraging aircraft transiting the area to receive an Air Traffic Service (ATS).

The service is provided within approximately 30nm of each participating ATS Unit, and unless it's 24-hour will normally be available between 0700 & 1600 in the summer and 0800 & 1700 in the winter, Mondays to Fridays. Some units might serve evening, night or weekend flying, so it's worth giving them a call irrespective of the published hours. If no reply is received after three calls, you can assume it's not available.

So here's a quick refresher on how to use it: first, tell your departure airfield you wish to switch to the new frequency offering LARS. Having selected the frequency, call the unit and state your intentions.

Controllers like information in a common



'All you can realistically expect under a Basic Service is weather, airspace activity and conditions at airports. What you shouldn't expect is specific traffic information...'

format because it makes life easier for all, so give your call sign, aircraft type, where from and to, position, altitude, whether you're VFR/IFR/SVFR, your heading, and your request, ie, what sort of service you'd like; Basic, Traffic, Deconfliction or Procedural

Service (the latter two are now no longer available if you're flying VFR). It's worth bearing in mind that the provision of LARS is discretionary, especially if the controllers are engaged in other tasks and the level of cover will also depend on



the equipment available. The controller should make it clear what service is being offered, and if they can't provide a full service, whether there are restrictions involved.

Our advice is to ask for a Traffic Service wherever possible, but you might only get a Basic Service, especially if they're busy, and the clue really is in the name here. All you can realistically expect under a Basic Service is weather, airspace activity and conditions at airports. What you shouldn't expect with a Basic Service is specific traffic information, it's up to you to avoid other traffic by looking out for it.

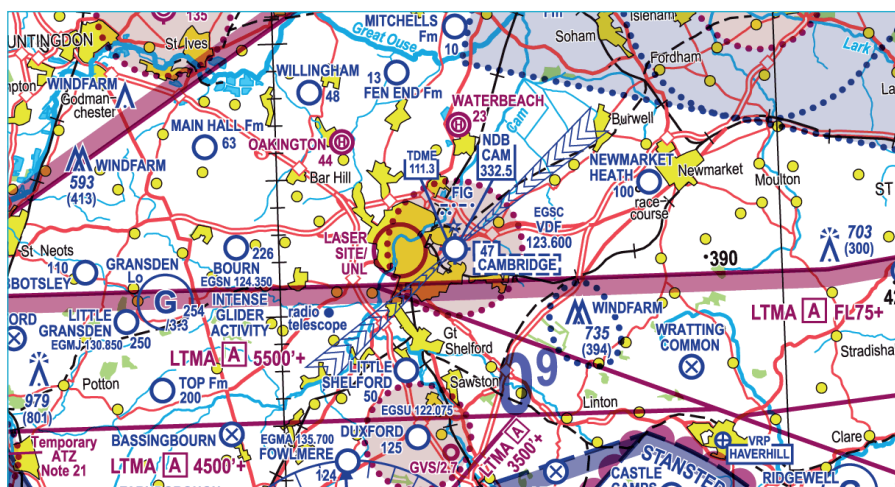
At best, you might be told if another pilot is estimating the same position at the same or a similar time. There is a 'but' though; if an ATS unit is providing you with a Basic Service and the controller sees a definite risk of collision then they should pass you specific traffic information because they have a legally defined 'Duty of Care' to you as their customer. However, there is no requirement for a controller to follow your flight under a Basic Service, so any traffic information will only be forthcoming if the controller happens to be looking at that part of the radar screen at the time and notices the potential conflict.

The reason we say that a Traffic Service is preferable is because, unlike a Basic Service, the controller will actively be tracking your flight and will provide radar derived traffic information to assist you in avoiding others, although responsibility for collision avoidance still remains with the pilot. The controller will pass information on traffic that will pass within 3nm and 3000ft, and should give that information before the traffic is within 5nm.

In theory, you'll be passed information that's pertinent to you in time for you to think about changing your course or height, but you won't get avoidance advice (and ATC might not even know the height of the other traffic if it's not squawking); if such action is needed it's your responsibility.

If you're not sure what ATC has (or hasn't) said, then simply ask them to repeat or clarify the message. And that's true for any communication with a controller. But remember, if they are calling traffic to you closing on a constant bearing, you have to do something about it yourself (although they may prompt you depending on how busy they are).

Even if you're not being helped by LARS, making radio calls can still avoid tricky situations, particularly if you're transiting



near an airfield. It's worth giving them a call because they can pass local information you might otherwise have missed, such as that parachute drop at the village fête that slipped by when you were checking the NOTAMS. It happens.

And how about the feathers on the chart showing an instrument approach at some airfields in Class G (pictured above)? Many pilots blithely fly across them without thinking someone might be on the way down concentrating on their instruments. If you want to cross them call the airfield and check; you can also find out if anyone is carving ovals in the sky in the associated hold – they could be as low as 2,500ft which is, of course, a popular en route height...

Calling airfields without full-blown radar, (such as Cranfield, Shoreham, Carlisle, Redhill and sometimes others such as Gloucester, Cambridge and Coventry) might not get you a full service, but they will be inclined to tell you about aircraft that they know about at the same level and perhaps warn you of other potential hazards such as local paragliders, microlights, balloons or "multiple gliders to the north", particularly in the busy spring and summer months.

Even if you don't want to talk to

someone, you might want to think about using a listening squawk where available. All you have to do is dial in the correct squawk code for the area with Mode C if you have it, and simply listen in. If there's something you need to know, such as a risk of encroaching airspace, the controller will let you know and possibly tell you about looming traffic, too.

Talking, and listening, to airfields early on becomes even more important near the destination because it can all get rather busy, so it helps to have a picture of who's doing what (and who might not necessarily be following the procedures you expect) early on. And think of this – it's not only other aircraft approaching the overhead that come into play, but also traffic climbing out that could be heading straight towards you.

The golden rule in any communication is 'if in doubt, ask', which probably applies more in a busy circuit than anywhere else; and if the picture doesn't match what you hear, tell the controller you're going to leave, rejoin and have another go.

Finally, don't try to tell others what they should do (they may not be able to do it!), just say what you'll be doing, and then do what you said you'd do! ■