

Safety Bulletin

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The importance of giving ATC early advice of airborne systems malfunctions

Several occurrence reports have highlighted the importance of providing timely advice of airborne system failures, degraded navigation or altitude-keeping capability to ATC.

In a recent incident an air traffic controller noticed an aircraft unexpectedly transition from an ADS-B track to a flight plan track (no surveillance information). The controller advised the crew, who acknowledged.

A short time later, the aircraft's track did not transition as expected to a radar track on estimated entry into radar coverage. Once again the controller advised the crew, who replied that they had a 'minor technical issue'. The crew later advised the controller that the aircraft had degraded navigation capability and had lost RVSM status.

ATC separation standards, and traffic information OCTA, are predicated on the navigation and altitude keeping capabilities of an aircraft. In this case, a loss of separation with an opposite direction aircraft occurred. This may have been avoided if earlier advice had been provided.

Another incident where an aircraft system malfunction occurred had a similar beginning. Initial communication with ATC was limited. Some time later, the pilot declared a PAN and commenced an emergency descent due to loss of pressurisation control.

In addition to the pressurisation failure, the aircraft was no longer painting on radar due to a loss of power to the aircraft's transponder. Earlier advice of the potential for an emergency descent may have allowed ATC to safeguard the necessary airspace.

If you are troubleshooting a problem, or dealing with a system failure, consider giving ATC an early heads up. Based on the circumstances, ATC may be able to instigate changes to yours or another aircraft's clearance to minimise the possibility of a conflict. It is much easier and safer for ATC to deal with problems when there is time to manage the situation, rather than having to react when an issue has developed into a major problem.

ATC does not need to know the nature of your problem, but should be able to assess its operational consequences.

In appropriate circumstances, timely declaration of a PAN can also assist ATC in providing the appropriate level of response including any necessary priority.

Early advice to ATC of any change, or potential change to navigation capability or ability to maintain your level will enable ATC to begin to take steps to safeguard both your aircraft and other aircraft in the vicinity.

For more information

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