

# LOW FLYING OVER WEST MELTON

Pilots approaching Christchurch or taking their time to gain height on leaving should not be relying on the takeoff and departure exception to rule 91.311.

A recent aviation-related concern submitted to the CAA referred to low flying over West Melton – once a rural area and now a populated township.

It complained that aircraft often fly over West Melton township (the West Junction VRP) at what appears to be below 1000 ft, or even 500 ft.

The submitter had two concerns. Firstly, in an engine or control failure event, low-flying pilots might have very little time to react, above what is now a built-up area. Secondly, there's the possibility of a collision between a low-flying aircraft and a UA (drone) which, the submitter said, commonly fly up to 400 AGL above West Melton.

Arrival procedures into Christchurch state aircraft must fly at “1500 ft AMSL or below”. This doesn't cancel, however, the requirements of rule 91.311 *Minimum heights for VFR flights* which says,

*A pilot-in-command of an aircraft must not operate the aircraft under VFR over any congested area of a city, town, or settlement, or over any open-air assembly of persons at a height of less than 1000 feet above the surface.*

However, this minimum height rule clearly doesn't apply to aircraft arriving or taking off.

“It's possible that pilots are flying too low over West Melton, on the basis they're departing from, or approaching, Christchurch,” says CAA South Island Aviation Safety Advisor Carlton Campbell.

He advises pilots not to be “bullish” about the rules for taking off and landing.

“You can't keep pushing it for extended distances. West Melton cannot be considered part of the NZCH

take-off or landing phase, so legal height must be conformed with.”

Legally, pilots must be 1000 ft AGL above such a community, and at West Melton the airspace ceiling for the airspace is 1500 ft AMSL.

“Given that West Melton aerodrome is 305 ft AMSL, West Junction is likely similar. Therefore, pilots have a gap between both legal heights of about 200 ft to fly above the township and below the upper limit of the airspace.

“Pilots need to actively manage this 200 ft gap, so as to not infringe height over the town, while not breaching airspace above.”

Carlton says similar situations apply to many aerodromes around the country.

“At one point, aerodromes such as North Shore, Paraparaumu, Taieri and Motueka, were sited in quite rural areas, but development has now surrounded those sites (and many others) and pilots must comply with height restrictions.

“Apart from the safety aspect, ‘flying neighbourly’ and minimising noise will avoid raising the ire of the residents below, and avoid future restrictions or curfews that communities may try to include in district plans.

“Don't be selfish with your flying privileges, and potentially contribute to the detriment of our children and grandchildren's flying in the future.” 

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Comments or queries?

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