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Pilots Waved Before Fireball Crash: Families Recall Horror as Southend Airport Remains Shut

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A routine Sunday afternoon turned to tragedy as families at Southend Airport watched a small aircraft crash in flames just seconds after take-off.

Families watched in disbelief as a small aircraft crashed and burst into flames just seconds after take-off at London Southend Airport on Sunday afternoon. Witnesses say the pilots waved cheerfully before the aircraft banked sharply, flipped, and slammed nose-first into the ground, triggering a massive fireball.

John Johnson, who had taken his wife and children for a quiet afternoon of plane spotting, shared with *EssexLive* that the joy quickly turned to horror. “We all waved at the pilots, and they waved back. But a few seconds into the flight, the plane twisted violently and then crashed. The explosion was enormous. Everyone was in shock, especially the kids.” He immediately phoned 999 to report the incident.

The 12-metre aircraft, operated by Dutch firm Zeus Aviation, had been flying from Pula, Croatia, to Southend, with a return to Lelystad Airport in the Netherlands scheduled later that evening. The Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) is now leading a full inquiry.

Shocked Community

Nearby, the crash caused chaos. Working at Rochford Hundred Golf Club, James Philpott described the moment the blast hit: “I was in a hut when the heatwave came through. I looked up and just saw this massive fireball.” Part of the golf course was evacuated, and Westcliff Rugby Club, hosting around 250 people at an event, was briefly told to prepare to leave.

Pete Jones, the club chairman, confirmed that evacuation was later deemed unnecessary. “We could see the smoke, but luckily we didn’t have to move everyone,” he said.

Travellers at the airport were also thrown into confusion. Blair and Aideen Cowling, with their young children, had been due to fly to Palma de Mallorca. “I saw a fireball out of the corner of my eye, and when I told Blair to look, it was already gone,” Aideen said. The family was forced to rebook flights from Heathrow the next morning. Others, like John and Caroline Dansy from Southend, were redirected to Luton for alternative departures.

Zeus Aviation has said it is cooperating with authorities and expressed its condolences to those affected. Meanwhile, Essex Police has asked the public to share any information that might assist the investigation via its major incident portal.

London Southend Airport has confirmed it will remain closed until further notice. Passengers with upcoming flights have been urged to contact their airlines directly.