

Prospect submission of 7 March 2022

PE1804/XX - Halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy

In October I wrote to the committee setting out an agreement between Prospect and HIAL to work together on a possible new direction for the modernisation of air traffic services in HIAL. I am pleased that following a period of intense negotiation with the union and engagement with the workforce through joint working group a new way forward has been agreed. Prospect members voted to accept the offer in a recent ballot and the dispute is now resolved with one notable exception.

The solution now being developed mirrors the arrangement which has been operating at Sumburgh for decades. Local air traffic towers will remain at Dundee, Inverness, Kirkwall, Sumburgh and Stornoway with radar surveillance being delivered from Inverness at a facility on the airfield. While this remains a challenging project from a regulatory perspective, the technology and process required are not novel, and the whole concept is several orders of magnitude easier to deliver than the previously proposed remote towers option.

The proposal protects highly skilled jobs in island communities. Any staff who wish to relocate to Inverness to work in the surveillance centre may of course do so, but those who wish to remain (which we believe is the vast majority) will be able to remain. The new approach is not without difficulty: there remain a number of people challenges which we will work with the company to resolve, including agreeing a staff complement for each station which will ensure a long-term resilient service. There also remain recruitment and retention challenges at Inverness, but not at other locations. Working groups have been established to consider these issues.

We have agreed a review at the five-year point. I have been clear with the company that members expect that the review will be conducted in a fair manner without a predetermined outcome. If in five years' time the implementation of remote surveillance has been successful, there would be no business case to make further changes. We therefore do not view this as simply a delaying tactic to introduce remote towers by stealth.

The one remaining area of dispute is the downgrade of Benbecula and Wick aerodromes. Our members are still of the view that this is neither required or desirable. They remain of the view that moving to a FISO service provides a less safe, less flexible service and would not be fit for the low carbon/electric flight vision proposed by the Scottish Government in its most recent consultation on the future of aviation.

A working group to consider the level of service at Benbecula and Wick has been proposed, but at time of writing we are yet to see the terms of reference. Benbecula was one of the only areas of the island impact assessment to show any positives for the remote towers project, however this was comparing the proposals for a FISO service with the total relocation of services to a remote tower centre. Now that the company have accepted that local tower and centralised radar is a valid option, the impact of this assessment is no longer valid and the impact on Benbecula should be reconsidered as negative compared to both the status quo and the proposed future model of operation for the other ATC airports.

This has been a long running dispute that I am glad to see drawn to a close. I hope HIAL and indeed other organisations will learn lessons about the perils of not involving the workforce and the communities it serves in the strategic direction of the organisation. The solution now being adopted was viable when HELIOS prepared their original report, but it has taken five years and millions of pounds of expenditure for that to finally be accepted.