

PE1804/AA

Anonymous submission of December 2020

I am an air traffic controller employed by HIAL therefore I wish to make my submission anonymously.

Firstly I would like to address the issue of “engagement”. HIAL state “HIAL absolutely refutes the petitioners’ allegations of poor engagement with staff and stakeholders, and would caution against conflating objection to the project with a lack of engagement. HIAL has undertaken over 150 meetings since announcing the project, with staff and politicians, local and national, and will continue to do so.”

The Cabinet Secretary for Transport states “I am aware that HIAL has engaged extensively with all interested parties.” A reference to engagement appears in virtually every response from HIAL or the Cabinet Secretary.

This however, is a red herring, and should not be used as a reason to support the project. Firstly, any engagement with staff or stakeholders has not been meaningful. It has simply involved a briefing, telling anyone present what is going to happen. All concerns have been batted back at every turn. “This is happening, get used to it” appears to be the mantra used by HIAL. Imagine if you will, an innocent man on death row. He is to be executed in the morning. The warden has ensured that the innocent man has been engaged with through the whole process to ensure he knows what’s happening and when he is to be executed. Does this make the innocent man’s pending death any more justifiable? I'm afraid any reference to engagement by HIAL is an irrelevance and should be taken with a pinch of salt. It cannot be used to defend this project or the process.

If this project continues it will involve remote tower technology at five airports and the downgrade of two airports. HIAL and the Cabinet Secretary have stated “issues including increasing regulation, future operational safety and staff recruitment and retention.” as reasons for this course of action.

Let me start with the most important issue:

“Future operational safety” - HIAL have insisted time and again that safety will not be affected. However, they cannot explain how the total removal of air traffic controllers from Benbecula and Wick will not have a detrimental impact on safety. It should be asked where did this massive shift in direction come from? There is no regulatory requirement to do so. Instead of enhancing the service they are willingly downgrading it. This goes completely against the concept of modernisation and future safety. This is a retrograde step and the removal of the control that air traffic controllers provide in the airspace around their airports will of course reduce safety. You simply cannot argue otherwise. HIAL states that traffic levels and complexity are the reasons behind this decision. To establish the levels and complexity of traffic at Benbecula and Wick the air traffic

controllers should have been consulted. They were not. For remote tower technology it has been stated that certain aircraft are difficult to see. How does this not impact on safety? A lot is being made of the fact that this technology is being used elsewhere. This is yet another irrelevance. You must look into the reasons other airports have used this technology and how busy these airports are. These air traffic providers put this technology into areas that do not have ATC. They do not replace ATC. The head of one such provider stated that remote towers will never replace controllers in the tower. You would think a company that represents the Highlands and Islands would be more aware, wary even, of the climate and connectivity issues these areas experience. To suggest that removing fully staffed ATC towers from these exposed airports and replacing them with cameras in a field that requires reliable and robust connectivity is the right thing to do is astonishing.

“Increasing Legislation” - As has been stated in other submissions, everyone is in favour of modernisation. However, increasing legislation does not require HIAL to pursue this drastic and extreme course of action. So to suggest legislation is forcing HIAL down this path is again misleading. The CAA have stated that the downgrading of Benbecula and Wick is not the necessary step that HIAL are making out. Remote towers are certainly not the solution to any of the issues HIAL may be facing. Our communities deserve more.

“Staff recruitment and retention.” - I believe the petitioners have debunked this reason already. Yet another misleading statement and should be ignored by the committee. When HIAL recruits locally it is successful.

I write this not only as a qualified air traffic controller but also as a concerned member of the community. This is a very concerning time for air travel in the areas of Scotland that rely on it most. I hope this project can be stopped before it's too late.