

PE1804/T

Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity submission of 5 November 2020

Thank you for your letter of 6 October 2020 following the Public Petitions Committee's consideration of Petition PE1804 about Highlands and Islands Airports Limited's (HIAL) Air Traffic Management 2030 Strategy (ATMS). I welcome the opportunity to comment on this important issue.

I recognise the need to modernise Air Traffic Control to ensure more sustainable and reliable air services in the Highlands and Islands. HIAL has been tasked with taking this process forward to find the safest and most sustainable solution. HIAL need to future-proof their operations in Scotland against a background of issues including increasing regulation, future operational safety and staff recruitment and retention.

The Scottish Government subsidises the operation of airports in our remote communities to ensure that these communities stay connected with the rest of Scotland and beyond. We need to ensure that air services are maintained into the future with safety at the heart of operations. As with all public bodies in Scotland, HIAL should engage with its staff, stakeholders and those that use its services in relation to how it delivers those services. I am aware that HIAL has engaged extensively with all interested parties throughout the duration of the ATMS project to date and this will continue as the project progresses. This includes undertaking a retrospective Islands Impact Assessment even though there is no legal requirement for them to do so as the decision to proceed was taken before the Islands Bill was passed.

HIAL is responsible for the operation of airport services at its 11 airports. Scottish Ministers appoint a Board to represent their interests, to oversee the management of the company and to ensure that it operates in line with Ministerial expectations. The HIAL Management Team is responsible for operational issues and the Board is responsible for overseeing this. Part of the Board appointment process is ensuring that, collectively, the Board has the requisite skills and knowledge to carry out its duties. I am satisfied that the HIAL Board has taken its decisions based on the best available information and analysis of the different options available.

I am aware that the Committee has written to HIAL separately. I have asked HIAL to address the operational issues raised by the Committee in their response and to offer to present more detailed information directly to the Committee. The Committee may also wish to consider taking evidence from others in the field. In particular, the Committee may wish to consider engaging with the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), as the industry regulator, given their role in ensuring that the new system will be as safe or safer than existing arrangements.

Best wishes
Michael Matheson