

PE1804/Y

Anonymous submission of 1 December 2020

As an Air Traffic Control Officer (ATCO) for Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd (HIAL) I am forced to submit this anonymously.

I agree with the petition as it supports the views of the majority of my ATCO colleagues and I. Our feelings towards the proposed 'Remote Towers' (RT) project have not changed since it was first mentioned in 2018, the displeasure amongst ATC staff has never been taken on board by HIAL Management and the Air Traffic Management Strategy (ATMS) project team.

In April 2019 during an ATMS project board meeting (Board consists of HIAL, ATMS Management & HIAL Board Member) those present were presented with the results of a survey carried out by Prospect Union to gauge the views of ATC staff towards the RT Project. The survey showed that a staggering 93% of ATC staff opposed the RT and Centralisation Strategy. Instead of acting upon this and improving engagement with staff the board instead question the efficacy of the survey.

My colleagues and I do not oppose the modernisation of ATC, 86% in the same survey agreed that ATC needs modernising. Prospect undertook a similar survey in November 2020, the results were similar to the previous survey with 83% opposing centralisation and 95% supporting modernisation. Alarmingly for HIAL only 5% said they would be willing to relocate to Inverness, even if a suitable relocation package is offered.

HIAL have chosen the costliest and riskiest option, which I believe, will not improve to the safety of ATC in the Highlands and Islands. The services provided are lifeline services. why are these services being gambled upon?

The Remote Tower and Centralisation concept is new technology, which has not been tried and tested in unpredictable climates such as the rural islands of Scotland, who have the windiest weather in the UK.

Why rely on technology over 300 miles away during wind speeds of over 60 mph? It's hard to explain but when you are on duty you have a feel for things. You can see, hear and feel the elements which will prompt you to carry out your duties appropriately, that will be lost in a remote centre this is just not assuring as sitting in a conventional tower at the airfield.

In December 2019 the board agreed with the recommendation by HIAL Management to downgrade ATC at Benbecula and Wick. I strongly oppose the decision to downgrade these airports from ATC to Aerodrome Flight Information Service (AFIS).

A downgrade from ATC to AFIS is a downgrade in the level of safety currently implemented. Why would you want to reduce safety with Europe's largest danger area, D701, less than 3 miles west of the airfield at Benbecula? There is no legal

requirement to downgrade the airfields. The velocity of which the downgrade is being implemented at Benbecula is simply astonishing.

HIAL have a fully staffed ATC unit at Benbecula, four of which are locally recruited and trained ATCO who do not wish to leave their home. HIAL would rather have aircraft pilots from approximately 40 miles from Benbecula separate themselves and decide who will land first rather than have ATC separate them by issuing aircrafts with restrictions and clearances. ATC Staff have still not been given answers as to why this is happening so quickly or an adequate answer as to why the airport is being downgraded.

The CAA has said they could grant temporary controlled airspace around airfields such as Benbecula and Wick. The decision must be financial, but how can you put a price on safety of the users?

Having spoken with some pilots who operate on routes to and from Benbecula, they are surprised and concerned about the downgrade in service as it will increase their workload significantly causing unneeded stress and distractions during what is already a busy period in the cockpit.

Centralisation goes against the Islands Bill. We have yet to see the results from the Islands Impact Assessment survey and interviews carried out by an independent company, to gauge the views of staff towards relocation to Inverness. Prior to these taking place staff were informed that no result would change the decisions already made.

The decisions and decision-making process by the HIAL board have to be questioned; no member of the HIAL board has any ATC experience or has lived on one of the Islands they are making decisions regarding. Why have they never sought the views from the subject matter experts, the employees who when on duty carry the most responsibility, ensure the safety of those in and around the airfield, are highly skilled, trained and continually assessed so standards remain high, the employees who are the Air Traffic Control Officers.

I would urge the committee to recommend a full review of the ATMS project.