Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

7th Meeting, 2021 (Session 6), Wednesday 17 November 2021

PE1804: Halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy

Note by the Clerk

PE1804: Lodged 26 March 2020

Petitioners	Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula Community Council.
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands & Islands Airports Ltd's Air Traffic Management Strategy Project to conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the ATMS project.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1804

Introduction

1. This is a continued petition that was last considered by the Committee at its meeting on 8 September 2021.

2. At that meeting the Committee agreed to write to the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport. The Committee also agreed to write to the Civil Aviation Authority, the Scottish Government's Digital Assurance Office and the Prospect trade union.

3. All responses have been received.

Submission from the Minister for Transport – 5 October 2021

4. The Committee wrote to the Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero and Transport in September 2021 requesting an update on:

   - The status of the project and whether it was still on budget; and
   - When a decision by the CAA on Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast (ADS-B) was likely.

5. A response was provided by the Minister for Transport on 5 October 2021.

6. This stated that HIAL had recently held informal discussions with Prospect to 'find a mutually agreeable solution for the delivery of the ATMS programme'.

7. The Minister suggests that talks are in their very early stages and that governance, cost and regulatory issues would need to be addressed before any proposal could be consulted upon and that 'in the meantime work on the ATMS programme will continue.'

8. The Minister states that a budget of £48.4 million for the programme was agreed in December 2019, comprising anticipated capital expenditure of £34.7 million and revenue expenditure of £13.7 million. He notes that, as with any large infrastructure project, 'this budget will be kept under review as the programme progresses'.

9. In relation to the second question around when a decision by the CAA on Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast (ADS-B) was likely, the Minister notes that whilst 'HIAL have had many discussions with the CAA…towards a more cooperative surveillance approach (which ADS-B is one element of such a system)', that the CAA 'has not given HIAL a firm timeline for implementation'.

Submission from Prospect – 2 November 2021

10. In a submission received by the Committee on 2 November 2021, Prospect provides a further update on their talks with HIAL, stating that these have focused on 'taking a different approach to the remote towers project with an agreement on a possible way forward announced on 25 October'.

11. Prospect notes that future discussions will be focused on:

    - The introduction of a surveillance programme across the HIAL network with surveillance services provided for Stornoway, Sumburgh, Kirkwall, Inverness and Dundee airports from a combined surveillance centre in Inverness.

    - The phasing out of procedural air traffic control services and the adoption of more modern and widely used techniques, practised globally.

- Air traffic services being provided locally at Stornoway, Sumburgh, Kirkwall and Dundee for the duration of the surveillance programme, with air traffic control for Inverness being provided remotely from the combined surveillance centre.

- A review of air traffic provision against a scope, agreed by HIAL and Prospect, to inform the next steps of the programme. The review to be undertaken at the end of the surveillance programme, or five years, whichever is soonest.

- It has been agreed that further separate talks will take place on air traffic services for Benbecula, Wick and John O'Groats airports.

12. Prospect has agreed to suspend all industrial action whilst talks continue, noting that if agreement can be reached 'this proposal would protect local employment and local air traffic services for at least the next five years.'

Submission form Civil Aviation Authority – 6 October 2021

13. The Committee wrote to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to request further information about where remote tower technology had been successfully deployed.

14. The Civil Aviation Authority responded on 6 October 2021, noting that 'within the UK remote provision of air traffic control has been commonplace in the Area Control and Approach Control environments.'

15. Since the 1950s, Area Control services, which manage aircraft flying at higher altitudes in the UK's three Flight Information Regions, have been provided 'remotely' from en-route Air Traffic Control (ATC) centres. These centres are currently at Swanwick and Prestwick.

16. Whilst HIAL does not provide Area Control services, the CAA notes that 'radio communications, navigational aids and surveillance sources such as radar are all remote from the location at which the control service is provided.' The CAA highlights that HIAL do provide Approach Control services, which control aircraft arriving and departing from airports.

17. Approach Control services for aircraft flying to and from the airports around London have been provided remotely and are currently located at Swanwick. Again communications, navigational aids and surveillance sources are remote from the site at which the air traffic controllers provide the service.

18. Whilst aircraft in the immediate vicinity of an airport are usually controlled from the control tower at the airport, in 2009, the first approval for remote provision of tower ATC services was granted at Heathrow. All tower equipment and services are delivered to a location off airfield for service provision in the event of evacuation of Heathrow's tower. However, this facility does not include delivery of video to replicate the controllers' views from the Visual Control Room (VCR).

19. In 2019, a full video Visual Control Room was approved at Cranfield which takes video from remote camera systems fed into a control room.

20. In 2021 a full VCR for London City airport was approved at Swanwick Centre. This takes video from an array of cameras situated at the airport and delivers this information, along with the communications, navigational aid and surveillance information, to Swanwick, making London City airport the first major international airport in the world to be fully controlled from a remote digital air traffic control tower.

21. The CAA notes that it is also aware of (but has had no involvement in) the successful deployment of remote systems in Norway, Sweden, and Hungary, as well as multiple trials of systems across the globe. It goes on to note that 'the entire ethos of the remote tower concept is that nothing changes, only the controller views their location on screens instead of through windows'.

22. In relation to what would constitute 'successful deployment' of such systems, the CAA suggests that this can only occur 'when a satisfactory safety case has been produced, containing robust safety assurance for the planned change in service (i.e. the establishment of a remote service)' and notes that 'only when the facilities and supporting equipment have been audited, and any CAA findings addressed satisfactorily, will we grant approval for the systems and facilities that comprise the remote facility'.

Scottish Government submission – 12 October 2021

23. The Committee also wrote to the Scottish Government seeking confirmation that HIAL:

- had taken action in response to the recommendations of the assurance health check carried out in January 2021; and
- was complying with Scottish Government requirements for a project of this nature.

24. The Scottish Government explains that the Digital Assurance Office (DAO) oversees the assurance of digital projects and Portfolio, Programme and Project Assurance (PPPA) colleagues oversee Programme level assurance and also the assurance of non-digital projects.

25. Review teams are independent and led by a review team leader who has been accredited by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority. The Scottish Government notes that in relation to HIAL, the 'digital element of the Air Traffic Management Strategy Programme represents only part of the overall Programme.'

26. Following the health check carried out in January 2021, the Scottish Government states that HIAL submitted an action plan and supporting evidence to set out how it intended to respond to the review team's recommendations.

27. An Assurance of Action Plan review was due to take place in the week commencing 25 October 2021 and the Scottish Government undertook to write to the Committee to provide a further update once the latest review had been completed.

Action

28. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe

The following submissions are circulated in connection with consideration of the petition at this meeting -

- **PE1804/NN: Minister for Transport submission of 5 October 2021**
- **PE1804/OO: Civil Aviation Authority submission of 6 October 2021**
- **PE1804/PP: Scottish Government submission of 12 October 2021**
- **PE1804/QQ: Prospect submission of 2 November 2021**

The Scottish Parliament launched a new website at the end of Session 5.

All written submissions received on the petition before May 2021 can be viewed on the petition on the archive webpage. Written submissions received on the petition after May 2021 can be viewed on its new webpage.