

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

7th Meeting, 2022 (Session 6), Wednesday 4
May 2022

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

Note by the Clerk

Lodged on	6 May 2020
Petitioner	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. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [2 February 2022](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) and hear evidence from the petitioners, Prospect and HIAL at a future meeting.
2. Members may wish to note that the Committee is due to hear evidence from the petitioners and Prospect at this week's meeting (4th May) and HIAL at our meeting on 18th May.
3. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
4. The Committee has received new responses from the Civil Aviation Authority, HIAL and Prospect which are set out in **Annexe C**.

5. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on [the petition's webpage](#). All written submissions received on the petition before May 2021 can be viewed on the petition on the [archive webpage](#). Members may wish to note that this includes correspondence with airlines operating routes in the areas covered by this petition.
6. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
7. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on [the petition's webpage](#).
8. A private SPICe questions paper has also been supplied to Members for this week's evidence sessions.

Action

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

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

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

Petitioner

Created by Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula Community Council

Date lodged

Considered from 6 May 2020

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.

Previous action

This issue has been raised with Liam McArthur MSP, Alasdair Allan MSP and Rhoda Grant MSP. It has also been raised with Alistair Carmichael MP and Angus Brendon MacNeil MP.

Background information

We call on the Scottish Government to:

1. Halt HIAL's ATMS project and conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the whole ATMS project and its potential safety, economic & quality of service impacts, and make recommendations on the options for ATS provision at HIAL airports accordingly. ATCOs at all HIAL airports should be called on for evidence, as the only experts in air traffic control at HIAL airports.
2. Instruct HIAL to suspend their policy on changing the Air Traffic Services provision at Benbecula and Wick until the UK Civil Aviation

Authority (CAA) have published their own official guidance to UK Air Navigation Service Provider's (such as HIAL) on the effects of European Union Authority for Aviation Safety (EASA) policy on Air Traffic Control provision.

3. Conduct an independent islands impact assessment as under the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 for all affected island communities. Highlands & Islands Airports Limited (HIAL) announced its remote tower air traffic management strategy (ATMS) involving seven of its airports in January 2018. A Business Case was approved by the Board in December 2019, which listed four main challenges to ensure the resilience of Air Traffic Control (ATC) operations and the continuation of safe, efficient air travel though the Highlands and Islands:
 - Low staff numbers and difficulties with resilience, recruitment and retention have, in some instances, led to airport closures
 - The changing regulatory environment and compliance with new policies on safe service provision requires change
 - The urgent need to modernise an ageing infrastructure and outdated methods of controlling air traffic
 - The need to create a competitive edge in the operation and ultimately deliver a more sustainable and cost-effective service

We believe that difficulties with recruitment and retention have existed only at a minority of HIAL airports. This can be overcome by local recruitment as suggested in Highlands & Islands Enterprise's EKOS report where it states that "grow your own"... [has] been successful for HIAL in recruiting – this should continue in some form to address future staffing requirements". HIAL ATCO salaries have in the recent past been considerably less than the industry standard and may have been a factor in the retention of staff at some of HIALs locations.

We agree that the changing regulatory environment and compliance with new policies on safe service provision requires change, however, we do not believe HIAL's ATMS provides the best answer for HIAL airports. The option chosen by HIAL is the costliest and riskiest as stated in their own Helios report.

We agree there is a need to modernise ageing equipment and infrastructure, but this could be done at each airport without the need to move the ATC service to a centralised facility or downgrading the Air Traffic service provision.

We do not agree that HIAL's plans for ATMS will deliver a more sustainable and cost-effective service. In fact, in the long term the reverse may occur due to the expensive new infrastructure itself needing to be replaced after a number of years of service in a hostile environment (climate) and the extra Air Traffic Engineering support required to maintain the day to day integrity of these new systems.

We believe that quality of service of scheduled flights to the communities served at the seven airports may be compromised due to the potential for an increase in flight delays, cancellations and airport closures at Stornoway, Inverness, Sumburgh, Kirkwall & Dundee due to:

- Communications failures / malfunctions between the remote airport & Inverness centre.
- Equipment failures / malfunctions at the Inverness Centre may lead to airport closures.
- Operational limits of cameras – the maximum wind speed they can operate in before camera shake makes visuals unusable
- Maintenance of cameras due to salt corrosion and scouring on the lens by wind-blown sand / particles. There will be delays in repairing outages of cameras and associated equipment as Air Traffic Engineering (ATE) support staff need to be detached in.
- Loss of runway availability – existing digital remote towers do not support cross runway operations. Some runways will be closed resulting in more flight cancellations due to cross winds.

At Benbecula and Wick airports the use of an Aerodrome Flight Information Service (AFIS) in non-visual conditions in particular, would cause a significant increase in the number of flight delays compared to the present ATC service. No positive deconfliction advice to aircraft pilots in the air is possible with AFIS. (An AFIS current Licencing and legal issue).

We believe that the proposals will have a significant long-term adverse economic impact on the communities of Caithness, Orkney, Shetland, and the Western Isles through:

1. The relocation or loss of well-paid and high skilled ATC jobs at HIAL airports, particularly within the more rural and 'fragile' communities, and the loss of spouse and partner's jobs from the communities.

2. Loss of ATC associated jobs, e.g. air traffic and admin support staff.
3. A reduction in customer confidence caused by extensive new delays, technical failures, safety concerns and airfield limitations.
4. In communities reliant on airport accessibility for economic activity, a 'downgrade' of the airports at Benbecula and Wick will result in a reduction or end of the use of the airport by the following (because the norm is an ATC service): -
 - Ad-hoc civil charter flights at Benbecula in support of the Hebrides Ranges.
 - Aeroplane manufacturers for test flights in non-visual conditions.
 - The potential for new scheduled operators to be attracted to these airports or a change in status with the present scheduled service operator.
 - Ad-hoc tourism flights

We believe the ATMS plans will reduce the safety of services provided at all airports operated by HIAL due to the following reasons: -

1. Currently Meteorological (MET) observations are carried out by Air Traffic Controllers or MET qualified support staff who use local knowledge of geography and topography to assess the MET conditions. Instruments can be used as an aid to observations if necessary. Due to limitations of MET instruments they can be incorrect and the MET observer can disregard readings when appropriate. MET observations under ATMS will completely rely on instruments which will create high risks in these very exposed airports where weather conditions can be a considerable hazard to aircraft.
2. The potential for reduced safety in the air at Benbecula and Wick:
 - A downgrade to Aerodrome Flight Information Service will result in pilots receiving only generic information on any conflicting aircraft, with the pilots themselves having to resolve any conflicts based on the information received. Positive deconfliction advice to aircraft in the air would not be possible due to current legislation and AFIS licencing. Air

Traffic Controllers provide a layer of safety which will be removed from scheduled passenger flights, ambulance flights, transiting military aircraft, private visiting aircraft and helicopters used by local businesses such as fish-farms.

- Benbecula has military Ranges in the vicinity, and both airports have nearby aeronautical Danger Areas which can, if active, affect aircraft flight paths and profiles in/out of these airports
3. By relying on new, largely untested technologies, we are exposing Air Traffic Services to a suite of new, never seen before safety risks and points of failure which do not exist within current operations. Historically HIAL have never done this because of the risk – we ask what is their rationale for changing policy now?
 4. Multi-mode operations have been suggested by HIAL. This involves Air Traffic Controllers operating several airports and/or approaches simultaneously. This suggested concept is unproven and may come with additional safety risks.
 5. Safety critical local knowledge of geography, weather, facilities and much more will be lost, replaced with a “remote Air Traffic Controller” who will lack such awareness.
 6. Air Traffic Controllers currently look out a window to ensure the safety of aircraft in their vicinity. Seeing aircraft, obstructions, obstacles and everything else is more challenging when looking at a TV screen.
 7. Situational awareness is essential to aircraft safety. A digital remote tower will compress a 360 degrees’ view across 270 degrees on the TV screens, making situation awareness far more difficult.
 8. Being absolutely reliant on technology means technology failures will be another new risk factor which does not exist at present.
 9. Cyber security – air traffic services across the entire Highlands and Islands region will be IT based. A cyber-attack against any part of it would have the potential to shut down the entire operation, exposing every aircraft to yet more new risks that do not currently exist.
 10. The majority of ATC Staff are opposed to the proposed ATMS and if they refuse to move to the new centre it could be

necessary to staff it with ATCOs who have no previous experience at HIAL airports. HIAL have stated that they would consider training ATCOs from scratch with training provided by instructors who haven't worked at the airports concerned. This essentially removes decades of invaluable experience, training and safety management.

We believe the technical feasibility of this project has not been proven as the implementation and delivery of the remote tower and surveillance centre is the largest and most complex project HIAL have ever undertaken and yet the HIAL's Management team delivering the project, and HIAL's board who approved the project, do not have any civil aviation qualifications. The Scoping Study (Helios Report), the basis of the ATMS project, had many errors identified in it and these have not been corrected by HIAL or given sufficient answers as to mitigation.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1804 on 2nd February 2022

The Convener: Our first continued petition is PE1804, which was lodged by Alasdair MacEachen, John Doig and Peter Henderson on behalf of Benbecula Community Council.

The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd's air traffic management strategy project and to conduct an independent assessment of the decisions and decision-making process of the project.

I am delighted to welcome Liam McArthur, who joins us online this morning, and Rhoda Grant, who is back with us in the committee room. Both are with us to speak to the petition.

Before I come to them, I will offer a little more background. The Scottish Government's latest submission provides an update following the assurance of action plan that was conducted in the week commencing 25 October.

The plan was set in the context of HIAL's announcement that a framework for discussion had been agreed with Prospect, the trade union, to establish a new way forward for the implementation of the ATMS programme.

It noted that programme delivery activities were largely paused to enable further delivery options to be appraised.

The submission confirms that the digital assurance office, the portfolio, programme and project assurance team and HIAL would continue to liaise to ensure that appropriate assurance arrangements are planned in as decisions are taken on the programme's direction.

In its most recent submission, HIAL explains that, as a result of those developments, all industrial action was suspended while talks continued. In addition, new ATMS working groups were established with 27 air traffic colleagues from across several airports to help detail the benefits and risks of a potential way forward. The first of those groups met on 6 December.

At the end of January, HIAL announced that the HIAL board had agreed "the future strategic direction for the ATMS programme. This will comprise a centralised surveillance operation for Sumburgh, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Inverness and Dundee airports, based at HIAL's existing approach radar facility on the Inverness Airport Site. Air traffic tower services will continue to be provided locally at each of these airports."

A late submission from one of the petitioners, commenting on the detail of that announcement, has been circulated to members. In summary, the petitioner raises

concerns about the timescales for the new developments; the £9 million that has been spent so far; the implementation of surveillance radar; the timeline for Inverness to be granted controlled airspace; whether HIAL intends to introduce controlled airspace at Dundee, Stornoway, Kirkwall and Wick and, if so, when; and moving Benbecula and Wick from air traffic control to aerodrome flight information service.

He is also concerned about what will happen to New Century house, the building that was bought to house the combined surveillance centre and remote tower centre. The petitioner asks the committee to correspond directly with the Civil Aviation Authority regarding the issues raised and would welcome the opportunity to discuss his concerns with the committee in person.

I understand that we heard from the petitioner two years ago. Like others, I got quite excited when I saw "Reporting Scotland" feature announcements in relation to the petition and thought that maybe we were seeing progress of some kind. However, the petitioners are underwhelmed, to say the least.

Before the committee considers the petition, ask Liam McArthur and Rhoda Grant whether there is anything that they would like to update us on, although we do not want to hear the original submissions all over again.

Mr McArthur, I will come to you first. Is there anything that you would like to update us on?

Liam McArthur (Orkney Islands) (LD): I will try to be as brief as possible, convener. The petitioner has set out very well some of the remaining issues.

For example, it is not at all clear where the idea of radar surveillance has come from. It certainly begs some questions about the £3.5 million that was spent on New Century house, which now seems to be a rather expensive white elephant in relation to ATMS.

That speaks to the concerns that both Rhoda Grant and I, and, more importantly, the petitioners raised about the incremental costs that have been incurred through the process on an objective that was seen as the only show in town but which has miraculously now been temporarily dumped.

There is an on-going concern that HIAL may simply dust down the remote tower proposals four or five years down the line and seek to reintroduce them.

The other point that I stress is about the extent to which HIAL is relying on co-operative surveillance.

There have been some suggestions from HIAL that that was up and ready to go, but that has been refuted by the CAA. It would be interesting to hear HIAL's response to that challenge, because, fundamentally, if the CAA is not convinced, it will not get off the ground.

There are many questions that remain to be answered. The immediate risk to jobs on the islands and at the other airports is to be lifted, but there is some deep anxiety about the medium to longer term.

There is also anxiety about HIAL's handling of a project that seems to have been calamitous and which looks set to rack up more and more costs at the public's expense.

If the committee were minded to hear directly from the petitioners and had time available in which to do so, that would be very valuable, in that more detail could be laid out on some of the issues that the committee could usefully continue to keep under review.

The Convener: Thank you very much, Mr McArthur. Has the immediate lifting of threats to jobs maybe underpinned Prospect's welcome? Have you had any contact with Prospect?

Liam McArthur: I think that that must be the motivation. We are at an impasse where, in a sense, HIAL was suggesting that installing remote towers was the only way of achieving the modernisation that everybody accepts is necessary for future air traffic services in the region.

Having reached an agreement that lifts that immediate threat to jobs, perhaps Prospect feels that things have been moved on. However, there is certainly an anxiety among staff at the local level that HIAL is buying the time that it was always going to need to achieve the remote towers.

I would be interested to know whether Prospect believes that that remains the case, but a number of its members, including staff in Orkney and, I understand, at other airports, remain anxious about the longer-term intentions of HIAL management.

Rhoda Grant (Highlands and Islands) (Lab): I agree with everything that Liam McArthur has said. The news that there has been a pause is welcome, because that is what Prospect was asking for and, indeed, what the staff and communities were asking for—they want time to look at the alternative solutions. Nobody is arguing that we do not need to improve safety; the argument was that HIAL's proposals did not provide additional safety but were about centralisation. They would cause huge economic damage without providing the safety that people want.

I would be grateful if the committee would look at a number of things.

The proposed discussions about Benbecula and Wick were overlooked because of the enormity of the proposals, which impacted all the airports.

There is concern that the downgrading of Benbecula and Wick will go ahead. Those airports need safe surveillance and locally based air traffic control.

Both Benbecula and Wick are looking at becoming satellite launch sites, so they need safe airspace. Benbecula is also host to QinetiQ's Hebrides range, which means that there is often a huge amount of air activity when tests are taking place.

The Hebrides range also provides a potential solution, in that it has radar. HIAL could work with the range to provide that in Benbecula. That would be a very affordable course of action that would not cause huge disruption.

One of the issues in all of this was the recruitment of air traffic control staff. The air traffic control staff in Benbecula tend to be young, so that airport has staff into the future. They are local people—they are not going to move anywhere. They will be lost to HIAL if it ends air traffic control at Benbecula.

There is also talk of a new island's impact assessment. Therefore, any downgrading of Benbecula should surely wait until that impact assessment has been done. That would be within the spirit of the law.

With regard to Wick, people will be aware of the closing of Dounreay and the need for an economic focus on the area. A lot of work is going on with renewables and with the maintenance of devices, but the area needs good air traffic links to other parts of the United Kingdom to be able to attract jobs. It is very important that it has a safe airspace. Indeed, we are trying to encourage more traffic there.

I will not repeat what the convener said about the CAA's comments, but it would be well worth the committee speaking to the CAA to find out what is happening, including about Wick perhaps being managed from Orkney.

There was some discussion about that, and the CAA was not keen.

HIAL used to be very good at staff recruitment. It used to recruit from local communities. It would train people up and those people stayed. HIAL had its biggest recruitment issue in Inverness, where people tended to be more mobile.

The committee should make HIAL look at that again and ensure that it starts recruiting again, because that is one of its reasons for stepping back—it says that if it cannot recruit, it will continue with the position as it was.

I know that the petitioners were keen to see Digital Scotland's second report published. HIAL has it so it would be useful if the committee would ask it to publish that report. There is also the centralisation of radar surveillance at Inverness. That does not make sense given that we are to have air traffic control at the airports, so how that decision was reached could be scrutinised.

I know that there are concerns in Shetland about that, because the airport there has its own radar and there might be an impact if radar were centralised at Inverness. I agree about the other issues that have been mentioned, such as the use of New Century house—I do not want to repeat everything.

The Convener: There are several increasingly focused and quite serious issues. Would anybody else like to come in?

David Torrance (Kirkcaldy) (SNP): The petition has been on-going for quite a while—since last session—and we have not been updated by the petitioner for a long time. I am sure that, like me, committee members have a number of questions that they would like to ask the petitioner and HIAL management. I would like to bring in the petitioner and HIAL management to give evidence so that we can ask those questions.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I very much concur with that. We have looked at the petition in depth, but from the information that we have

received, it seems that there are more questions than answers. It would be useful to get the petitioner in. There are also questions to be asked of the CAA about what it is doing with HIAL. It would be useful to have some correspondence with the CAA about the co-operative radar system that has been discussed in the papers. If we are to understand the situation, we require more information. Liam McArthur and Rhoda Grant have given us a lot of detail. That has been very useful, but there are still questions that we can ask of the petitioner and the CAA.

The Convener: Mr McArthur would like to come back in.

Liam McArthur: I will be extremely brief, convener. I very much welcome the comments from the deputy convener and Alexander Stewart. As Rhoda Grant said, local recruitment is essential. HIAL almost made the process an exemplar when it last recruited locally. Since then, it has moved away from that model and sought to hire ready-made air traffic controllers. That was always a short-term fix, and it has left the company with some retention issues. It would offer staff at various airports some reassurance if HIAL were to embark on a local recruitment drive. The approach has proven to be the best way of not just recruiting but retaining staff. If HIAL management gives evidence to the committee, that is a point that could be very usefully put to them.

The Convener: In your role as Deputy Presiding Officer, you promoted Mr Stewart; my deputy convener is David Torrance.

Liam McArthur: I was talking about the deputy convener and Alexander Stewart, rather than the deputy convener being Alexander Stewart.

The Convener: Thank goodness for that. David Torrance was on the previous Public Petitions Committee, which heard from the petitioner. Given the recent developments, I am minded to fall in with the suggestion that we bring in HIAL. I think that we should write to the CAA in the first instance to get its views on the petitioner's latest concerns. I would quite like to get some information from Prospect about what underpins its welcome for the developments and where it now sits in the process. It may well be that that would lead us to invite Prospect to give evidence as well. Are there any other suggestions? Does what I have proposed seem reasonable?

Paul Sweeney (Glasgow) (Lab): I would be interested to hear from airspace operators—the main scheduled carrier, which is Loganair, and others who use the airspace, such as the training school at Dundee airport—to understand what their concerns might be. I do not think that we have heard anything from them.

The Convener: Thank you. I was going to ask the clerks whether that had been covered by any evidence. I ask the clerks to review that and see whether there is scope to follow up on Paul Sweeney's suggestion, as I think that that is another facet of the approach that has to be understood. I do not think that there is anything for us to write to the Minister for Transport about at this stage. Are members content to take evidence as proposed in the first instance?

[Members indicated agreement].

Annexe C

Civil Aviation Authority submission of 11

February 2022

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

Thank you for your letter of 7 February 2022 to Richard Moriarty where you sought, on behalf of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee, the CAA's views in relation to statements made in the petition calling on the "Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to halt Highlands and 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."

Some elements within the text of the petition are beyond the remit of the CAA, so our view will be limited to those aspects that fall within our horizon. Namely:

1. The provision of surveillance capability to support the Air Traffic Management Strategy (ATMS),
2. The provision of services at multiple airports from one controlling position.

Aspects of the petition related to airspace change fall within the scope of the **CAP1616** process and progress for individual applications is made publicly available through the **CAA's airspace portal**.

Currently, surveillance throughout the UK is based on a set of layered surveillance capabilities made up of both cooperative (requiring both ground and airborne equipment such as secondary surveillance radar (SSR)) and non-cooperative (requiring only ground-based systems such as primary surveillance radar (PSR)). Although there are occasions when cooperative surveillance is the sole radar source used in the provision of an ATC service, these occasions are limited to those times when the primary (non-cooperative) radar has become temporarily unavailable. Currently **CAP670 - Air Traffic Services Safety Requirements states** that, below FL100 "All Terminal Control Areas

shall have at least a single layer of coverage by a suitable non-co-operative surveillance technique". It further states: "non-co-operative surveillance is required wherever an ATSU providing surveillance-based air traffic services identifies that it is probable for non-transponder equipped aircraft, whether identified or not, to present a hazard to operations due to the uncertainty of their positions"

Although, the text currently within CAP670 inhibits the provision of an ATC service based solely on non-cooperative surveillance, under the Civil Aviation Authority (Air Navigation Directions) 2017, as amended (the Air Navigation Directions), the Secretary of State has given the CAA the function to prepare and maintain a co-ordinated strategy and plan for the use of all UK airspace for air navigation up to 2040, including for the modernisation of the use of such airspace. **The Airspace Modernisation Strategy (AMS) – CAP1711** states that *"there are opportunities that allow for the phased modernisation of the UK's surveillance capability"*. Further developments to the Airspace Modernisation Strategy are currently under **consultation**.

While cooperative surveillance, as a standalone solution in the provision of air traffic services, is not something the CAA would consider in this case in the near term, the Airspace Modernisation Strategy strives to enable its wider use in the medium to long term and HIAL have been advised to scope trials or studies to assist in realising its benefits and bringing the Airspace Modernisation Strategy to life. The issues highlighted during the 12 January meeting relate to the timing of the implementation rather than overall possibility.

With regards to plans for a single controller to offer services at multiple airports simultaneously, the CAA considers the proposal to be feasible, but not without some limitations. HIAL are aware that there may be conditions or limitations placed on the ATC services offered by the proposal. HIAL have a mature and established safety management system (SMS) and have experience in implementing changes of this nature. Specific details of the change are not expected to be submitted to the CAA for some time, but the CAA will review the safety arguments related to the proposal when they are submitted. Any proposed change will be subject to approval from the CAA.

I hope the text above assists the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee in their deliberations, at least in those aspects related to CAA activities.

Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd submission of 3 March 2022

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

Following the meeting of the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on 2 February, we write to update the Committee on the outcome of the ballot of Prospect members on the future strategic direction for the ATMS programme agreed by the HIAL Board on 24 January.

The ballot closed on Monday 21 February, with the majority of HIAL's air traffic controllers accepting the new direction for the programme. We are pleased that our colleagues have recognised the level of engagement and the compromise position that HIAL and Prospect have worked hard to achieve.

There are fiscal and regulatory hurdles to overcome and moving forward we will continue to work closely with our air traffic colleagues and seek their input to develop the necessary detail.

We would like to take this opportunity to address some of the points raised by the Petitioners in their submission PE1804/UU and to address some of the points raised in the oral submissions given at the committee meeting held on 2 February 2022, from parliamentary members Liam McArthur and Rhoda Grant.

As we have previously informed the committee, we established new ATMS working groups to help detail the benefits and risks of a potential way forward.

The output from these groups was discussed by the Board when making their decision on 24 January.

Without wishing to reiterate our previously stated position, HIAL has resolved the impasse with Prospect and agreed a new way forward, which has now been approved by our air traffic colleagues.

This has taken compromise on both sides and all relevant parties are now focused on delivering a system that is safe and fit for purpose.

Once again, we reiterate that safety is paramount. At every stage, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) is informed of our plans.

Regarding cooperative surveillance and multiple endorsements, having received confirmation that the CAA see no regulatory impediment to either, HIAL will continue to develop proposals for scrutiny by the regulator.

The new proposal for a combined surveillance centre will bring all our approach services together under the one roof and enable controllers to operate approach services for multiple airports which increases resilience across the estate and is not uncommon in the UK.

We have also agreed with the union and notified the CAA that HIAL intends to phase out procedural air traffic control services and will move forward with more modern and widely used techniques, practiced globally.

To suggest that HIAL will “dust down” the remote tower proposals four or five years down the line and seek to reintroduce them is misleading and unhelpful.

Our goal in introducing remote tower technology was to provide an air traffic management system that would future proof air traffic provision and provide the overall resilience we believe the technology offers.

However, we acknowledge and respect the position of our colleagues, and have therefore agreed an alternative delivery strategy which has meant compromise on both sides.

In the medium to longer term, we cannot predict how the aviation industry and technology will advance in the years to come and that is why we have programmed in a review in five years against a framework, jointly agreed with Prospect to look at all aspects of ATC.

None of the petitioners are directly involved in the programme or directly impacted by it and we note that their opinion appears to be at odds with Prospect and the majority of HIAL's air traffic controllers who voted to accept the revised proposals for the modernisation of air traffic services in the Highlands and Islands.

Prospect submission of 7 March 2022 PE1804/WW - 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.