

7 May 2019

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Convener
Justice Sub-Committee on Policing
The Scottish Parliament
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ASSISTANT CHIEF CONSTABLE

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Dear Convener,

Thank you for your correspondence in relation to the introduction of Police Scotland Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS). Police Scotland has purchased 3 RPAS, 2 of which will be deployed operationally in the North of Scotland. The third RPAS is retained at Glasgow and will be utilised for training, research and development.

As you are aware, the Police Scotland air support capability consists of one light utility helicopter which provides police air support to the 13 territorial divisions and specialist departments throughout Police Scotland. The Police helicopter is based in Glasgow and is available for deployment anywhere in Scotland 24 hours per day, 365 days per year, providing crucial support to a variety of policing operations and incidents.

This deployment model has existed since the formation of Police Scotland in April 2013 and is continually reviewed to ensure that it is effective, proportionate and provides the best possible specialist service to our officers and the communities we serve.

Police helicopter operations in Scotland are often challenging, particularly given our weather, topography and terrain. The Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) regulate our Police air operations and provide strict weather minima to ensure that all flying is conducted safely and within the given weather limits. Subsequently, there are occasions when the helicopter cannot safely deploy to the North of Scotland due to inclement weather conditions which fall below the mandatory limits.

Divisions in the North of Scotland manage a significant number of missing person investigations, some of which require air support as part of the search strategy, particularly given the nature and remoteness of the terrain.

To ensure that Police Scotland continues to deliver a crucial specialist service in the North, RPAS have been introduced as a localised air support solution. RPAS will primarily be deployed to support missing person investigations, however their use will also be considered for other policing operations and incidents such as major events, public order and firearms incidents. All RPAS deployments will be overt, using uniformed Police officers in marked Police vehicles.

Where possible, officers will engage with the relevant local communities both via social media and in person raising awareness of RPAS prior to the deployment.

RPAS tasking and deployment, like the Police helicopter, is managed by the Air Support Unit who will determine the best and most appropriate asset to deploy depending on the nature and location of the task. It should be noted that the Police helicopter remains the primary air asset for Police Scotland and is a more capable and effective resource. However on some occasions, in the event that the helicopter is unable to deploy due to poor weather or is otherwise deployed elsewhere, then RPAS use will be considered as an alternative depending on the incident.

In order to ensure suitable consultation was undertaken, a project team was established within Operational Support Division in October 2015 to explore the use police use of RPAS. This work included internal consultation with officers and staff and external with the CAA, NATS (Air Traffic Control) and the Scottish Police Authority. Furthermore, the project team conducted significant engagement with emergency services colleagues in England and Wales already utilising RPAS operationally.

As part of the RPAS project and in line with Data Protection reform in 2018, a Data Protection impact assessment was completed covering all aspects of RPAS use. Similarly an Equalities & Human Rights impact assessment was also completed and both are reviewed annually.

A communications strategy was developed at the start of the project and is managed through Police Scotland Corporate Communications. A media event, prior to the operational go live date, was held in Inverness, hosted by Chief Superintendent Mathew Richards. This was an opportunity for Police Scotland to engage with national and local media as well as key stakeholders who also attended the event. The event was successful attracting positive feedback from both the media and the public. Since the formation of the project, regular informative updates have been provided to the Force Executive, Scottish Police Authority and officers and staff internally. Again, feedback has been extremely positive.

RPAS has already been deployed in support of a missing person search in a rural area of Scotland. Relatives of the missing person and the local community have been extremely supportive of the search activity and in particular the use of RPAS.

This will be a typical RPAS deployment and will help to ensure that Police Scotland will continue to deliver the best possible service to communities around Scotland.

I trust this information is helpful and answers your queries.

Yours sincerely



Mark Williams
Assistant Chief Constable
Operational Support