21 February 2018

Dear Convener

Thank you for your letter of 5 February 2018 about Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd’s (HIAL) Air Traffic Management 2030 Strategy.

The modernisation of air traffic management is essential if air services in the Highlands and Islands are to continue to operate in the future. As you will be aware, HIAL has been tasked with taking this process forward to find the safest and most sustainable long term solution to this issue. I have been kept up to date by HIAL throughout this process and will continue to receive updates as the project progresses.

The HIAL Board has agreed in principle to take forward the long term Remote Towers and Centralised Air Passenger Surveillance air traffic management solution proposed by independent aviation consultants Helios. This will mirror an already successful project in Sweden. It is important to note that this is a decision in principle and it is not the case that all aspects of the project have been finalised. The location of the Remote Tower centre, for example, has not yet been decided upon. The next phase of the project will involve more in depth work to establish the practical requirements of implementing the Remote Towers solution. HIAL has already involved their air traffic control staff and key stakeholders in the full review of their air traffic management operation and, following the Board’s decision, HIAL has been holding further talks with staff, stakeholder groups and politicians around the implementation of the project. This engagement will continue as the next phase of the project progresses.
The key factors in the HIAL Board’s decision were challenges surrounding recruitment and retention, regulatory issues, issues surrounding a limited number of training providers and a desire to not just maintain existing safety levels but to improve them further. You rightly raise the issues of the infrastructure’s capability and resilience. Clearly it is essential for the infrastructure, including the communications links, to be reliable and for there to be redundancy in the system in the event of the failure of an individual element. HIAL would not contemplate anything else and nor would the CAA, their regulator, permit it. The next phase of the project will identify a preferred location for the centre and from there scope out in more detail the exact specification for a system that will meet these requirements. HIAL has been clear that this is a long term project with at least 10 years until completion. I do not expect enabling works to start until around 2021.

While I note your comments about controlling two airports simultaneously presenting a safety risk, this is not the case. One of the main reasons for choosing this option is to improve safety. I received a very informative presentation from HIAL and Helios on this project. HIAL would be delighted to facilitate a presentation to the Committee on the Remote Tower solution in order to address some of the misconceptions that have been made about this project and the technology more generally.

In relation to the impact on staff, it should be noted that there will be no immediate changes to the existing HIAL operations. This is an opportunity to invest in new high-tech skills as well as in new technology and HIAL’s staff will have the opportunity to be involved in delivering the Air Traffic Controllers of the future. You may be aware that for some time HIAL has faced pressure in recruiting and retaining staff across its estate. This situation is likely to worsen in the future. A lack of controllers could see some of HIAL’s airports have to close during parts of the day. This happened at Stornoway in 2013 when a lack of controllers led to unscheduled closures of the airport. HIAL is, and will continue to be, a major employer in the Highlands and Islands offering good career opportunities across a range of professions.

While I recognise the impact that the potential loss of jobs in island areas would have, we should remember that this is about the continuation of air services in the Highlands and Islands overall. Doing nothing is not an option as which may well lead to the eventual cessation of services, the impact of which would be significant for the economy of the Highlands and Islands and jobs across the region. We will continue to have dialogue with Local Authorities and HIE about ensuring the economic and sustainable growth of the Highland economy. HIAL has a responsibility to ensure that air services can continue to operate in the future in a safe and efficient way and I fully support their work to this end.

HUMZA YOUSAF