

<b>Agenda Item</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Report No</b>	<b>ECI/38/2024</b>

# The Highland Council

**Committee:** Economy and Infrastructure

**Date:** 22 August 2024

**Report Title:** Highland Council Airfields

**Report By:** Assistant Chief Executive – Place

## 1 Purpose/Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides Members with an update on:-

- the current condition of the Highland Council's three general aviation airfields;
- progress made towards the key recommendations outlined in the report of 4 May 2023<sup>1</sup>; and
- any factors which may affect future progress towards the previous recommendations.

1.2 Good progress has been made towards the lease of Dornoch and it is hoped that a tenant will be in place soon. A key block to progressing with the sale or long-term lease of Plockton has been addressed and discussions now need to progress with interested parties to identify the best route forward. Ashaig is continuing to operate as previously, and opportunities for additional aeronautical activity and storage are being explored.

## 2 Recommendations

2.1 Members are invited to:-

- Note** the progress made towards a lease on Dornoch Airfield and works remaining to be undertaken to enable this;
- Note** the resolution of an historic title issue at Plockton Airfield, enabling progress to be made towards a long-term lease or sale of the site;
- Agree** that the Council should progress discussions with interested parties at Plockton Airfield and report back to Members with a recommended approach to long-term lease or sale of the site; and
- Agree** that the Council should continue to operate Ashaig airfield in a manner which meets all necessary legal obligations and ensures the airfield is maintained to a level which will support development of potential future aeronautical activities.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81484/item\\_13\\_highland\\_council\\_airfields](https://www.highland.gov.uk/download/meetings/id/81484/item_13_highland_council_airfields)

### **3 Implications**

- 3.1 **Resource** - The offering of a five-year lease on Dornoch airfield has generated some initial expenditure required to make the site ready for a new tenant, but once handed over all responsibility for site maintenance and the consequent expenditure will be the responsibility of the tenant.

No substantive change with regards to resource is expected for either Ashaig or Plockton Airfields within this financial year.

- 3.2 **Legal** - The Council has no statutory duty to operate or facilitate the operation of airfields.
- 3.3 **Risk** - Until such time as a formal lease is signed with the proposed tenant for Dornoch Airfield, The Highland Council's (THC) exposure to liability at this airfield remains as previously assessed.
- 3.4 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – None arising from this report.
- 3.5 **Gaelic** - None arising from this report.

### **4 Impacts**

- 4.1 In Highland, all policies, strategies or service changes are subject to an integrated screening for impact for Equalities, Poverty and Human Rights, Children's Rights and Wellbeing, Climate Change, Islands and Mainland Rural Communities, and Data Protection. Where identified as required, a full impact assessment will be undertaken.
- 4.2 Considering impacts is a core part of the decision-making process and needs to inform the decision-making process. When taking any decision, Members must give due regard to the findings of any assessment.
- 4.3 This is an update report and therefore an impact assessment is not required.

### **5 Background: Previous Report 4 May 2023**

- 5.1 This report serves as an update to the previous report to the Committee presented on 4 May 2023. That report asked Members to agree to three key recommendations:-
- i. that the Council should continue to operate Ashaig airfield in a manner which meets all necessary legal obligations and ensures the airfield is maintained to a level which will support operation of commercial services, until such time as further developments with regards to scheduled air services are made;
  - ii. that the Council should seek to offer a lease on Dornoch airfield to one of the interested parties in the local community; and
  - iii. that the Council should explore opportunities for either the sale or the long-term lease of Plockton airfield.
- 5.2 As officers have made progress with each of these three recommendations, it was felt that Members should be given an update on the current position with regards to each of the above airfields.

## 6 Update on current position

### 6.1 Ashaig Airfield

The first part of the recommendation made is that Ashaig airfield should continue to be operated and maintained to a level which will support operation of commercial services. This has continued to be achieved since the date of the last report through a mixture of preventative and reactive maintenance.

Officers have continued to engage with local stakeholders at Ashaig, most notably the Skye Flying Club, to identify and address any issues with the airfield infrastructure and to monitor local aspirations with regards to the airfield. It should be noted that as of the date of this report, the Skye Flying Club is currently in abeyance, resulting in a substantial drop in usage. Officers continue to engage with the Club secretary.

Notwithstanding the drop in Flying Club traffic, the airfield has continued to see good and continued usage, with 86 landings in year 2023/24. Two notable visits include:-

- a large group of visiting light aircraft from Germany, led by the editor-in-chief of Flieger Magazin, a special interest publication for private pilots; and
- a large group of visiting light aircraft from France

With regards to the longer-term ambition to return commercial services to the airfield, officers have continued to progress these discussions with counterparts in HIE, HIAL and HITRANS. However, in light of the ongoing pressures on public sector budgets – including a notable reduction in money available to support air services – the position with regards to commercial services has not moved forward since the last report.

Officers have had very early-stage discussions with the HITRANS team responsible for the Sustainable Aviation Test Environment (SATE) project about the possibility of using Ashaig to deliver certain streams of activity through that or future sustainable aviation projects. No concrete decisions have yet been made but Ashaig remains under consideration as a site for future activity in this sphere.

Unrelated to aeronautical uses of the site, we are aware that the Council has received a number of requests from renewable energy companies to make use of the airfield for laydown/storage of wind turbine components.

### 6.2 Dornoch Airfield

Following the agreement from Members that a tenant should be sought for Dornoch Airfield, officers engaged with colleagues in the Council's Estates team to draw up and issue a lease offer in October 2023.

A number of offers were received and, following deliberation and a recommendation being made to local Members, a note of intention to offer a 5-year lease was made to one of the applicants on 30 April 2024.

Work has since been ongoing to finalise the details of the lease, with final site boundaries drawn up in consultation with the prospective tenant, and pre-entry maintenance work (most notably substantial grass / vegetation cutting) carried out to ensure that these boundaries are clearly delineated.

As of the date of this report's production, it is hoped that final agreement will be reached soon with regards to the boundaries and that Legal colleagues can then be instructed to draw up and offer a formal lease agreement.

In the interim, the Council has continued to operate Dornoch Airfield as normal, engaging with all relevant stakeholders and visitors and carrying out such maintenance works as are required.

### 6.3 Plockton Airfield

Following the delivery of the previous paper to Committee, colleagues engaged with the Council's Estates team to ask that draft sale particulars be drawn up with a view to assessing potential market demand for the site.

In August 2023, officers were made aware of an historic title issue with the site, relating to the Council's permitting the construction of an industrial unit which did not adhere to the title restrictions on the site. This meant, effectively, that it would not be possible to proceed with a long-term lease or sale without first securing a title waiver from the National Trust for Scotland.

As of the date of this report, officers have engaged with counterparts in the National Trust for Scotland and an agreement has been secured to grant a title waiver as required. This is in the process of being finalised between the relevant Legal/Conveyancing teams within the Council and the NTS and it is hoped this will be fully resolved by the end of July 2024. This would then allow the Council to proceed with the previously agreed intention to seek a long-term lease or sale of Plockton Airfield.

There is now a requirement to consider a number of approaches that have been made to the Council with regards to the future of the site, as well as to engage with the site's existing tenant with regards to their future plans.

In August 2023, an expression of interest in pursuing a Community Asset Transfer (CAT) was received from the Plockton & District Community Development Trust. While this remains in the expression of interest/pre-application phase, the Council will continue to work with the community to understand their needs and the potential for a formal asset transfer request to be made. Should such a request be made, the Council would then be bound by the timescales laid out in the Procedure Regulations to make a decision on the request.

In discussion with members of the flying community who regularly use Plockton, officers have been given indications, including one written indication, of an interest in commercial purchase of the site, with a view to retaining Plockton as an active general aviation airfield.

Officers have also received communications from an individual representing a "Community of Interest" of around 100 pilots and aviation enthusiasts indicating an intention to form a not-for-profit body and make an asset transfer request for both Plockton and Ashaig airfields.

In summary, there are four distinct groups or organisations whose interests must be considered going forward, in addition to the requirement to seek best value for the Council from the sale or lease of the site:-

- the local community, as represented by Plockton Community Development Trust;
- the flying community, as represented by those wishing to make a commercial purchase of the airfield;
- the flying community, as represented by the “community of interest” seeking to make an asset transfer request; and
- the existing tenant on the airfield.

Our recommendation to Members at this stage is that officers should now undertake a period of close engagement with each of these four groups, with a view to making a more detailed assessment and recommendation to a future meeting of this Committee.

## **7 Next Steps**

7.1 The following next steps are recommended:-

- The Council should continue to operate Ashaig airfield in a manner which meets all necessary legal obligations and:-
  - officers should continue to explore the potential for development of commercial air services from Ashaig; and
  - officers should continue to work with HITRANS colleagues with regards to siting sustainable aviation activity at Ashaig.
- The Council should seek to finalise a lease on Dornoch as a matter of urgency.
- The Council should undertake a period of close engagement with interested parties in the lease or sale of Plockton, with a view to making a detailed assessment of the possible future options for the site and presenting a recommendation to the next meeting of this Committee.

Officers will progress all of the above and seek the input of local Members before bringing a recommendation back to this Committee.

Designation: Assistant Chief Executive - Place

Date: 22 July 2024

Author: David Swanson, Project Officer - Wick Public Service Obligation

Background Papers: None

Appendices: None