

Written evidence submitted by Mr Hamish Mitchell (DIS0006)

Defence in Scotland - October 2021

Submission to House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee – 5 October 2021

I very much appreciate the opportunity to comment on this Call for Evidence. All comments are from my own personal experience and do not represent those of my employer.

I served in the RAF for 6 years as an Air Traffic Controller, leaving in the rank of Flight Lieutenant. I have continued to work (since 1991) as a civil Air Traffic Controller for NATS Ltd, currently at the Prestwick Air Traffic Control Centre, where we control some 65% of the UK's civil airspace and 50% of the busy North Atlantic routes between Europe and North America.

The drawdown of defence resources in Scotland since 2012, resulted in the closure of RAF Leuchars (Fighter base and annual Airshow), RAF Prestwick (Scottish Air Traffic Control Centre), RAF Kinloss (Maritime Patrol) and associated Distress, Diversion, Rescue and Co-ordination Centres - there now being only one RAF base remaining, RAF Lossiemouth in Moray, with some 40 fast jets and 8 maritime patrol aircraft..

The scale and haste of closures would seem to have been an incredibly short-sighted and ill-judged decision, given the importance of Scotland's strategic location to NATO, both for air defence, maritime patrol, military exercises, future space operations and Danger Area activities. There has been recent large re-investment in Lossiemouth, with the arrival of the new P8 Poseidon fleet, but all our eggs 'so-to-speak', are now in one basket.

The net reduction in active resident Service Personnel has removed 1000s of skilled and well paid jobs from many communities. This has also greatly reduced the footprint and presence of the RAF, which in itself was an inspiration for many (myself included) and an excellent recruiting tool – drawing many children and young adults towards aviation as both an interest and a career.

This loss of RAF presence has left a vacuum - interest in aviation is still definitely there (as evidenced by the huge annual turnouts at the Scottish International Airshows in Ayrshire) – but Government has done nothing to help harness that interest or fill the void. I would respectfully suggest, that as has happened at many ex-Military locations around England, funding and support to establish an Aviation and ATC Visitor Centre at Prestwick might help to re-engage local communities.

Together with the lack of diversity in RAF posting locations, this reduction in presence has undoubtedly led to recruitment issues. It would be interesting to compare the percentage of Scottish personnel in the 1990s with current levels.

As a specific example, the closure of RAF Prestwick (the military part of the ATC Centre) in 2013, removed some 50 highly skilled jobs from Scotland and relocated operations to a single location at Swanwick near Southampton, and with that, the strategic control of all military aircraft as far north as Shetland was transferred to the high cost south coast of England.

Recently there have been retention and recruitment issues at RAF Swanwick, with an estimate of up to 50% understaffing of military ATCOs. At the time the forecast cost savings of centralising, were questionable, and again it would be interesting to see if any of these forecasts were achieved.

As an operational ATCO, I also believe that the removal of our RAF military colleagues from the same operations room at Prestwick has been detrimental to the general understanding, co-operation, co-ordination, diversity and day-to-day efficiency of the ATC task overall. Consideration should be given to re-establishing RAF Prestwick and re-introducing a locally-recruited military ATC function.

In summary.

- Funding to establish an Aviation and ATC Visitor Centre at Prestwick and support for an annual Airshow, might help to re-engage local communities.
- Consideration should be given to re-establishing RAF Prestwick and re-introducing a locally-recruited military ATC function.
- Projected cost-savings from closing RAF Prestwick should be examined to see what savings were actually achieved and what reduced operational and recruitment capabilities resulted.
- A comparison trend of the %age of Scottish personnel in the RAF since 1980s would be illustrative.

Yours sincerely

Hamish Mitchell

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