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Transport / Norway's arctic region embraces remote tower technology



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WHILE remote air traffic control is proving a hugely controversial issue locally amid fears over safety, reliability of broadband connections and potential job losses, the technology is not appearing to raise such concerns from politicians and residents of Shetland's Norwegian neighbours.

Earlier this week, a second airport was connected to a new remote tower centre in the Norwegian city of Bodø, with two more to follow next month. Vardø, the latest airport controlled remotely, is almost 500 miles from the remote tower in Bodø.

The first airport linked to the new system last year was Røst, a tiny island at the southern tip of the Lofoten group. It has two scheduled daily flights to Bodø plus the occasional air ambulance flight.

By the end of 2022 the air traffic control service for as many as 15 airports could be managed from the centre making it the world's largest remote tower infrastructure, according to Avinor, the company behind the technology.

The largest airport to be connected to the system will be Bodø, which handled as many as two million passengers a year before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The other airports are: Hasvik, Berlevåg, Mehamn, Røros, Rørvik, Namsos, Svolvær, Sogndal, Molde, Førde, Lakselv and Kirkenes.

A company spokesman said requirements for the remote tower system are to provide at least the same level of service or a better service level than the traditional tower services.

As to connectivity, Avinor said it had its own backbone network in place while all airports are equipped with either double or triple back-up.

“The system is CAA-approved and also adheres to the European Union Aviation Safety Agency’s (EASA) resiliency requirements, in line with all other airports in Europe,” the spokesman said.

“However, seeing that the system we have procured from the Kongsberg Group has more camera functionalities, our system goes beyond the minimum requirements of the CAA.

“This includes night vision/infrared capabilities, zoom function and movement trackers, which can track birds, drones, people and other moving objects on the airfield and in the airspace around the airports.”

The new remote tower in Bodø will provide employment for about 60 people. All staff have been offered to transfer to the new centre. Personnel who have opted to not move have been offered redundancy packages or other types of jobs at the local airport, if possible.

“The new centre with more staff available will be beneficial in terms of providing a more stable rostering situation,” the spokesman said.

“This in turn will benefit local communities as we then aren’t as prone to airport closures if a member of staff at the local airport towers gets ill or otherwise can’t make it to work.

“The remote towers centre will also provide a higher level of knowledge sharing between staff, which is an important factor in within the aviation sector.”