ARGYLL AIR SERVICES - CONNECTING THE ARGYLL ISLES TO THE SCOTTISH MAINLAND

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Argyll and Bute Council
1 Introduction – the Development of Local Air Services in Scotland

Public air services to the Scottish islands started in the 1930s and further developed after the Second World War, with regular services being introduced between the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland, Eilean Siar, Islay and Campbeltown in Kintyre, to the main centres of population in Aberdeen and Glasgow. Also at that time, the internal services throughout the Northern Isles were developed.

Over the years, all these services have become a regular and normal part of transportation throughout Scotland. These services provide a lifeline connection from these remote parts of Scotland and they ensure that business, health, leisure, tourism and social interaction are maintained.

Regrettably, Argyll and Bute’s remote islands were excluded from this network which resulted in significant population decline to such an extent that effective viability and sustainability of these islands was being questioned. Also, the increasing challenge of providing services whether from a National Health Service (NHS) or Local Government perspective were becoming more problematic. This is all within a society which expects good and appropriate access to services as being the rule rather than the exception.

Throughout the years, within Argyll and Bute, the airports at Campbeltown, Islay and Tiree have been developed to aid this integration. The recent provision of an Air Discount Scheme to these locations has ensured that for residents there is also an affordable fare structure. These Argyll and Bute airports are maintained by Highland and Islands Airports (HIA), who in addition to these three airports operate a further seven throughout Scotland, which are located at Barra, Benbecula, Inverness, Kirkwall, Stornoway, Sumburgh and Wick. From December 2007, Dundee Airport also joined this network.

Over the years, there have been a number of airstrips throughout Argyll and Bute which have been used for periodic air travel. These have included Bute (grass), Jura (grass), Gigha (grass), Coll (grass), Colonsay (grass), Glenforsa on Mull (grass) and Oban (blacktop). Argyll and Bute Council has maintained the final two locations at Glenforsa and Oban as unlicensed strips for many years and they were used mainly for private flying and for a very occasional charter. It is based on improving connectivity to these remote islands that there was significant debate on further developing air links to other Argyll and Bute islands over the past decade or so.
The Islands of Argyll and Bute – How Many and How Remote?

From a geographic perspective Argyll and Bute is a diverse area, spreading from Helensburgh in the east, to the many small towns, including Campbeltown, Dunoon, Lochgilphead, Oban, Rothesay and island communities in the west. It is the second largest administrative area in Scotland after the Highland Council, with a population of around 91,400.

From an island perspective Argyll and Bute has more inhabited islands than any other Scottish Local Authority. There are 25 inhabited islands within Argyll and Bute with 15,889 residents. This compares to 14 islands in Eilean Siar (26,502 residents), 15 in Highland (9,603 residents), 19 in Orkney (19,245 residents), and 16 in Shetland (21,988 residents). Overall there are 95 inhabited islands in Scotland.

The 25 Argyll and Bute inhabited islands fall within three separate groups:

• Bute, which lies to the south of the Cowal peninsula, with good transport connections to Cowal and Inverclyde/North Ayrshire, and central Scotland.

• The two islands situated within fresh-water lochs; Innischonan (Loch Awe) and Inchtavannach (Loch Lomond) both have reasonable transportation links.

• The Atlantic Islands consist of the other 22 islands.

Of all these islands, only one, Seil (south of Oban) has a fixed-link to the mainland by means of Clachan Bridge, sometimes referred to as “The Bridge over the Atlantic”. All the other islands rely upon sea or in the cases of Islay and Tiree which have additional air-links to the Glasgow area.

Ferry links between the Argyll and Bute islands are provided by Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac); Argyll and Bute Council; two private timetabled services to Kerrera (near Oban) and Ulva (off Mull) plus personal transport provided by the residents. The services provided are generally directed towards the rural mainland of Argyll and Bute rather than towards other islands. This does not compare favourably with the inter-island links that exist within the island groups of Eilean Siar, Orkney and Shetland.

Transportation links to the Argyll and Bute islands are at a reasonable level but there is significant scope for improvement.
3 Developing Air Services in Argyll and Bute

It is against this background of the desire to improve transportation links and with Local Government reorganisation in 1996 that galvanised Argyll and Bute Council to re-focus on looking to improve air services. Previously there was not the same will from the larger Strathclyde Regional Council to develop air services.

In 1996, the developing Argyll and Bute Council Corporate Strategy recognised the importance of air transportation and the Council’s Economic Development Strategy stated that there was development potential with relevant partners to provide air infrastructure improvements. This was clearly the foundation upon which the Argyll Air Services project was developed.

In 1998, there was continued discussions between the Highland and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and Argyll and Bute Council, which identified that action was needed to regenerate the failing economies on Tiree, Coll and Colonsay and that one common constraint was their poor transport links with the mainland particularly through Oban. Developing appropriate air links through Oban was seen as a critical element in meeting this challenge, which would also ensure that these remote island communities maintained social cohesion and community viability. These aspects were of particular importance to the islands of Coll and Colonsay as they were completely dependent on CalMac ferry services for transportation links. The ferry timetable at that time had a reduced number of winter sailings which restricted access to health, transport and leisure services.

During this time there were piece-meal maintenance improvements made at Oban Airport and although there was a modest increase in private aviation, there appeared no prospect of benefits being delivered that could support either core service delivery functions of the Council, or even to enable any significant wider benefits to the communities.

It was apparent that Oban Airport had the potential to provide opportunities to the surrounding areas and provide improved economic and social benefits to these remote Argyll and Bute islands.

From a transportation perspective the first specific mention by Argyll and Bute Council of developing air travel was contained in the Council’s first “Transportation Strategy – Access the Future”, which discussed of the possibility of improving Oban Airport to take scheduled services to these remote islands.

In 1999, the Council and their partners agreed that there was potential in studies being undertaken with a view of improving access to Oban, Coll and Colonsay, to stimulate economic activity.

As a result, Argyll and Bute Council and the HIE, commissioned James Barr and Alan Stratford & Associates to report into possible development opportunities for transportation improvements through Oban Airport. The
report identified a number of difficulties but generally indicated a potential to provide a licensed airport which could lead to the development of scheduled air services. A short development strategy was prepared which indicated that an application to the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) could be made to license the airport and that an air service and future development would assist the fragile and peripheral communities on these Argyll islands.

The following year Highlands and Islands Enterprise commissioned a separate study by Steer Davies Gleave but rather than focussing on just Oban, this was extended to include both Coll and Colonsay. The report identified that the development of air services through Oban to Coll and Colonsay could be provided on a cost effective basis; provide educational benefits; and improve accessibility for health board activities. The report built on the previous strategy and indicated licences should be sought from the CAA for these three airports. The report mentioned the importance of European Council Regulation No 2408/92 which sets out requirements for air service subsidy through a Public Service Obligation (PSO), which would be vital for development of the area.

In 2002, HITRANS, the regional transport partnership covering the whole of the Highlands and Islands area was working on their PSO Network Proposals which when fully developed would include the services previously identified as necessary to improve economic and sustainability by both the HIE and Argyll and Bute Council. HITRANS stated that air service development through the provision of a PSO had strong support and that the Government would treat any PSO application positively.

In 2003, the final external report was prepared relating to an Economic Impact Assessment for the entire Argyll Air Services by SQW Limited and HECLA Consulting which assessed the entire economic impact; the potential for growth and development potential; and the necessity to maintain fares to the islands from Oban to £60 return.

Following on, Argyll and Bute Council and relevant partners confirmed that a dedicated Argyll Air Service based on a Public Service Obligation model, which had been operating successfully in Orkney, Shetland and Eilean Siar and centred on a local hub at an upgraded and licensed Oban Airport should move to reality.

The potential for funding was confirmed with a variety of partners, which would allow the creation of completely new airfield infrastructure on Coll and Colonsay and for the complete redevelopment and reconstruction of the existing unlicensed airfield at Oban.
The Argyll and Bute Council Area
4 How the Argyll Air Services Fits into our National Strategies

4.1 Scotland’s National Transport Strategy 2006

Within a national context, the air element of the strategy requires that there is improved journey times and connections; with improved quality, accessibility and affordability. It also specifically identifies that there will be a need for enhancements at some of the smaller airports in the Highlands & Islands.

The Scottish Government has given a commitment to continue to support air services to ensure that there is appropriate economic growth, inward investment and inward migration in our peripheral communities.

On this basis the air service development for Argyll and Bute sits well.

4.2 HITRANS – Regional Transport Strategy 2008

The HITRANS regional transport strategy has identified a number of opportunities for increased air travel. There is reference to the recent Air Discount Scheme which allows residents in Shetland, Orkney, Eilean Siar, Islay, Jura, Caithness and northwest Sutherland access to 40% discount on air fares to Inverness, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen. This will better link isolated populations to commercial centres. On a similar basis Public Service Obligation (PSO) routes permit cheaper fares for all customers who may be flying on a particular route.

Clearly, developing an Argyll wide air strategy meets HITRANS aspirations.
5 Argyll Air Services Becoming Reality - 2003 until present

5.1 The Project Development

With project feasibility being confirmed it was then appropriate to move to the project development stage.

In 2003, Argyll and Bute Council appointed an aviation consultant to undertake the initial aviation design work with the task of achieving a CAA licence for Oban Airport. Coll and Colonsay would follow on thereafter. The first major issue to be overcome was the proximity to the north of Ben Lora, a hill rising to around 300 metres which obstructs a direct northerly approach. If the CAA considered this to be significant in terms of aviation safety, then the project would fail. Fortunately, the conclusion reached was that by adopting a novel curved approach then a licensable standard could be achieved.

The early discussions on funding were relatively successful and in general terms, outline support was agreed with the HIE, Scottish Executive, HITRANS and although an initial application for European Funding had been unsuccessful there were sufficient positive statements made to realise that a funding package could be secured at some stage in the future.

Significant consultation, design and construction work was undertaken over the following five years and some of relevant issues which arose are discussed below.

5.2 Project Issues

1 Initially, it was noted that in order to run scheduled services under the PSO criteria, the three airports involved had to be licensed. The physical constraints of potential runway length and other topographic issues on Coll, Colonsay and at Oban would only support a Code 1 runway standard based on an initial assessment which would also limit flights in terms of capacity. At inception stage it was confirmed that the proposal to extend the PSO between Oban and the central belt was not permissible as the Government already supported rail subsidy on this corridor.

2 From a safety perspective the provision of the Fire and Rescue Service was provided in association with Strathclyde Fire and Rescue (SFR) on Coll and Colonsay using Argyll and Bute Council owned fire appliances, but with the SFR staff operating this equipment on a service level agreement basis.

At Oban, it was necessary to provide Argyll and Bute Council dedicated airport Fire and Rescue staff.

Second hand fire fighting equipment was purchased for the three airports. It was decided that the existing 'Perren' trailer unit at Oban Airport could not be used because there is a legal requirement to provide a 'self-propelled' Fire Vehicle (where the legislation states that: “the extinguishing agents and...
rescue equipment shall be carried on self-propelled vehicles which have maximum mobility in all weather conditions on and off paved surfaces”.

All vehicles have been provided to meet or exceed Category 2 fire and rescue standard.

3 With the aviation consultant concluding his work in 2005 the project development, design and supervision work was then delivered entirely by Argyll and Bute Council staff. This required the project team to quickly familiarise themselves with the specialised aviation regulatory regime and design codes with which they needed to combine with their existing areas of expertise in civil engineering design, contract procurement and construction supervision. This was extended into planning issues, where specialised archaeological watching briefs were required. These were developed for all three sites and onsite evaluation and reporting was undertaken by Rathmell Archaeology based in Kilwinning.

4 A further application was made for support funding from the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) programme, which was provisionally secured in September 2005 based on a detailed application identifying the economic and social benefits that the project potentially brought to the area. This was eventually confirmed in May 2006.

5.3 Licensing issues with the CAA

There has been ongoing discussion with the CAA over the past 5 years, from when the initial application was made. The Council appointed an Airport Development Manager in 2005 with substantial experience on licensing issues to ensure that this matter was taken forward.

There are a number of relevant documents involved in aerodrome licensing which had to be complied with during this phase of the project.

The overarching legislation for aviation is the Air Navigation Order (ANO) a Statutory Instrument published in 2005 which relates to a variety of aviation activities, including air operators’ certificates; operations of aircraft; air traffic service; and aerodrome licensing, including rescue and fire fighting services (RFFS). For the purposes of the last two activities and more particularly the detail contained within Article 128, the CAA implements this Order by requiring that applicants/users comply with CAP168 – Licensing of Aerodromes. The document also describes the CAA’s aerodrome licensing requirements relating to management systems, operational procedures, firefighting equipment, medical provision, and physical characteristics.

The initial formal CAA inspections in November 2007 raised a number of minor matters which prevented the issue of the licences for the operation of the scheduled services. There was discussion with the CAA Inspection Team with a subsequent meeting at their headquarters at Gatwick Airport on 7 February 2008 to discuss the actions taken to address the issues raised at the formal inspection.
Eventually, three licences were secured for all three new aerodromes on 5 June 2008, the first time that three consecutive licences were awarded to one owner. The curved approach at Oban is only the second such occurrence in the United Kingdom.

Once granted a licence, the aerodrome owner is required to continually demonstrate an appropriate level of competency to the CAA. The licensee must comply with the relevant provisions of Air Navigation Order Article 128, the licence conditions and aerodrome manual procedures. In general terms, these are managed by the CAA carrying out audits on an annual basis.

One important addition at Oban Airport was the provision of an emergency buoy system. From a safety perspective Connel Sound to the south of Oban Airport provided a difficulty for emergency rescue should there be an accident. It was considered that providing a full-time rescue craft would be excessively costly, and therefore a bespoke emergency buoy system was designed to ensure that any emergency landings in this area would allow passengers to be corralled between these buoys. This system is innovative and there has been discussion with the CAA to extend this type of system to other relevant aerodromes throughout the United Kingdom and in Europe.

A secondary issue to the CAA Licence for Oban Airport is the Air Navigation Service Provider (ANSP) Certificate. There were several observations made at the initial inspection which were overcome to allow this certificate to be issued. Communication is air/ground at Coll and Colonsay and flight information at Oban.

The design stage produced the following aerodrome outputs.

The Oban airfield was essentially maintained in its existing location but it was substantially upgraded. A runway 1263 by 30 metres was constructed with a pavement strength of PCN11/F/C/Y/T. This relates to the actual pavement
strength (PCN11), construction type (F - flexible in this case, rather than rigid), subgrade strength (A to D), the relevant maximum aircraft tyre pressure (either X, Y or Z), and whether a technical evaluation has been carried out (T). Oban achieved a Code 2 Ordinary Licence with Category 2 Rescue and Fire Fighting (RFF) cover, but with Category 3 by prior arrangement.

Oban Airport

The existing private Coll grass strip was turned through 90 degrees and a runway 500 by 18 metres was constructed. The strength of the asphalt pavement is 1,500 kg for regular use. Coll achieved a Code 1 Ordinary Licence, with Category 2 RFF Fire cover.

Coll Terminal Building
The existing private Colonsay grass strip was maintained in its current location and a runway of 501 by 18 metres was constructed. The strength of the asphalt pavement is 1,500 kg for regular use. Colonsay achieved a Code 1 Ordinary Licence, with Category 2 RFF Fire cover.

The three airports all received Ordinary licences where this effectively relates to the length of the runway, the size of aircraft which can be accommodated on these runways, and also the opening times at these facilities.

5.4 Project Development and their Costs

In 1999, the initial cost of the project was £4.8 million. This was the expected cost but it should be recognised that this was based on little feasibility work having been undertaken.

In 2005, a funding package of around £6 million was secured in order to create a new regional air hub in Oban and new licensed airports on the islands of Coll and Colonsay.

This announcement was made by the First Minister Jack McConnell MSP, at the Convention of the Highlands and Islands Meeting in Inveraray in November 2005, when the First Minister said creating the new island airfields would mean islanders and tourists having an alternative to the existing ferry service, thus opening up the area to increased business and tourism.

The First Minister further added:

"Since the creation of the Highlands and Islands Development Board 40 years ago, this part of Scotland has been transformed. The economy is strong, tourism is booming and people are being attracted to live and to work here.

"These new airports will make sure that this Highland Renaissance can continue. They will open up some of the most spectacular scenery in the world to more tourists. They will make sure that businesses can remain connected. And they will make sure that more and more people choose to make the Highlands and Islands their home. This is an exciting project that will bring benefits to all of Scotland."

As a result of this announcement it was possible to issue tenders for a variety of projects including the civil works - drainage, earthworks, line markings, security fencing, and runway construction at the three airports; the three terminal buildings which included garage space for the fire vehicles, reception facilities and office space. The buildings are relatively small in Coll and Colonsay but of a larger scale at Oban.

Tenders for other elements including fire fighting vehicles and airport lighting were also issued at that time.

The major works were awarded to local contractors, Ennstone Thistle of Oban (airport runways and associated works); TSL Contractors of Oban (terminal
buildings on Coll and Colonsay) and MacLeod Construction of Lochgilphead (Oban terminal building).

The estimated cost at that stage was £6.2 million and over the next three years the final costs increased to just over £9 million. This increase is due to a variety of reasons including changes to the runway orientation on Coll, additional road repairs on Coll, increased contractor costs for both the civil engineering and building elements of the project, increased fire engine provision, and increased requirements as a result of the inspection process by the CAA.

The project was funded from the following sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tr>
<td>Highlands &amp; Islands Enterprise</td>
<td>£1.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HITRANS – Regional Transport Partnership</td>
<td>£1.2 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Regional Development Fund</td>
<td>£2.0 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Government</td>
<td>£2.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argyll and Bute Council</td>
<td>£1.4 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Area Committee</td>
<td>£50k</td>
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The costs for each aerodrome were as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aerodrome</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coll</td>
<td>£2.5 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonsay</td>
<td>£1.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oban</td>
<td>£4.8 million</td>
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5.5 Advertising for the PSO and Appointing Highland Airways

As mentioned previously these routes were to be offered on a PSO basis. The legal framework for the provision of PSOs, and the granting and maintenance of licences is contained within a number of European Union Council regulations, including EC regulation No 2407/92 (licensing of air carriers); EC regulation No 2408/92 (community air carriers); and EC regulation No 2409/92 (in relation to fares and relevant rates for air services); EC regulation No 2410/92 (relates to procedures on the competition of specific undertakings); and EC regulation No 2411/92 (specific agreements and practices).

Following an advert being placed in the European Journal, Argyll and Bute Council entered into a three year contract with Highland Airways Ltd, for the provision of the flights from Oban to Coll, Tiree and Colonsay. Part of the contract requirements are that the air services are operated in accordance with any applicable requirements of the CAA. One such requirement is that the company holds an appropriate Air Operator’s Certificate (AOC) for the type of aircraft to be utilised on the Argyll routes. Following proving flights held on 18 January 2008, the CAA issued an amendment to its AOC to include the operation of “Islander” type aircraft on the Argyll routes. (Pilot plus 8 passengers).
As mentioned during the feasibility stage, affordable ticket costs were of paramount importance, and this has been demonstrated in the following maximum cost of flights:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Flight</th>
<th>Cost</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oban to Coll return</td>
<td>£79.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oban to Tiree return</td>
<td>£96.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oban to Colonsay return</td>
<td>£79.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, if passengers book early, then 20% discounts can be obtained.

An additional benefit agreed was that in order to ensure that the secondary school children who attend Oban High School from Coll and Colonsay were afforded improved accessibility for weekend returns to their home; the cost of these flights was just £1. To date there has been an excellent uptake, and although due to the capacity of the Islander aircraft this restricts numbers who can use this service (Coll has 21 secondary school children, and Colonsay 7), the school children are still able to access the CalMac ferry service that supplements the air flights.

5.6 Staffing

Early in the development of the project it was established that it would be necessary to have a multi-tasking approach taken by the staff to ensure the project viability.

As a result, at Oban, the aerodrome fire fighters after being trained in aviation fire fighting techniques were further trained to CAA standard to provide the flight information services for incoming aircraft. In addition, they would undertake runway surveillance work, baggage and passenger handling and other general duties on the aerodrome.

On the island aerodromes, a service level agreement was entered into with Strathclyde Fire and Rescue that permitted the Council to employ community fire fighters on a part-time basis to provide the fire cover necessary for scheduled flights.

5.7 The Reality of Service Provision

With licences being granted by the CAA on 5 June 2008, tickets were put on sale on 10 June to allow the services to commence on Monday 16 June.

The first scheduled service lifted off at 08.30 bound for Coll and Tiree. At the service launch on Monday 16 June 2008, Councillor Duncan MacIntyre, the Council's Transportation Spokesperson, said:

"This is wonderful news. These flights will be a major benefit to the people of Argyll and Bute. Not only is this an extremely important element in improving access to the mainland for some of the most isolated communities in the
country, but it will also support economic development and encourage visitors to the area.”

The Islander Takes Off From Oban

The official opening of Oban Airport was on Thursday 14 August 2008 which was made by Stewart Stevenson MSP, Minister for Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change. Pictured below with Councillor Dick Walsh (Leader) and Councillor Duncan MacIntyre to his left.

Stewart Stevenson MSP with Argyll and Bute Councillors

Council Leader, Councillor Dick Walsh, said: "This marks the official opening of this wonderful new facility which will be a major benefit to the people of Argyll and Bute.

"Argyll and Bute Council and its partners share a vision which is to be a leading rural area, providing and improving services that will promote and improve the quality of life to the people that we represent.

"We are confident that the Argyll Air Services will support economic development in the area as well as attracting more visitors. In addition, this transport option will enable island children attending Oban High School to take advantage of our special scholar flights and fly home regularly.

The Minister, Stewart Stevenson, said: "This is a great day for Oban. This new airport is so important, opening up access for islanders, tourists and businesses alike."
"The new air services will improve the ease with which residents can access vital services such as specialist health care, education and business opportunities removing the need to undertake a three-day trip.

"I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to officially open this airport and I am sure it will go from strength to strength in years to come, making an important contribution to the local and national economy."

The airports at Coll and Colonsay were officially opened on 12 September by Charlie King the first Chairman of HITRANS the Regional Transport Partnership.

In the first nine months of the service, 1707 passengers have used the service - 1316 to Tiree/Coll and 391 to Colonsay. The reason for the variance is due to the significantly different size of population on Tiree/Coll in comparison with Colonsay. At inception it was anticipated that 180 passengers per month would use the service forecasted, and this has been realised. Bookings are healthy and the service is going from strength to strength.

As part of project development, Argyll and Bute Council together with Highland Airways are looking at extending the Colonsay flight to Islay.
6 Summary

Argyll and Bute Council has benefited from this project through the creation of three licensed aerodromes that offer potential for further development. Direct beneficiaries include the islanders on Coll, Colonsay and Tiree, the island schoolchildren from Coll and Colonsay who board in Oban during the school year and visitor and business interests, both island and mainland based.

Eleven new full time posts have been created at Oban Airport and five new part-time posts have been created on Coll and Colonsay. In addition, through the service level agreement with Strathclyde Fire and Rescue, this provides additional employment for some twelve community fire fighters on Coll and Colonsay on a flight by flight basis in providing the fire cover for scheduled flights as well as an air to ground radio service.

Argyll and Bute Council secured significant external funding from a range of partners that helped it achieve its political and strategic goals of implementing scheduled flights to its remote island communities.

The Council now has a major aviation asset at Oban that offers the potential either directly or in partnership with commercial interests, to further develop transport and transport related innovation for the benefit of its communities, businesses and service delivery.

The Argyll Air Services is not only an extremely important element in improving access to the mainland for some of the most isolated communities in the country, but it will also support economic development to allow businesses and public administration to run more efficiently; attract inward investment; help to develop tourism; provide better access to health, education and other services; and improve islanders’ quality of social, family and leisure life.

If you have the opportunity, then why not take to the skies and visit some of the most beautiful islands in Scotland.
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