SKYPORTS DRONE SERVICES TO LAUNCH DRONE DELIVERY FLIGHTS FOR ROYAL MAIL

News / Business aviation

Skyports Drone Services announced the launch of the Orkney I-Port operation, a fully electric drone logistics project established in partnership with Royal Mail, Orkney Islands Council Harbour Authority and Loganair. The project is set to revolutionise connectivity, access and safety throughout the rural island region. Benefitting from Skyports Drone Services' extensive experience in the operation of highly automated cargo drones, the project will deliver two new capabilities: daily inter-port delivery of Royal Mail items and the demonstration of shore-to-ship deliveries. The I-Port project is significant as it represents the first UK drone delivery project which can be conducted on a permanent basis under existing regulatory frameworks, a milestone made possible due to the unique landscape of Orkney.

Orkney's island geography and harsh weather impact the ability to provide an uninterrupted delivery service. Postal deliveries arrive from mainland Scotland to Kirkwall Airport via the Loganair RMA Orkney Flyer, where they are delivered to residents on Orkney's main island, Mainland, or transported to one of the 19 other inhabited islands via ferry or small passenger

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plane. Pauses in the ferry schedule are common during poor weather due the challenges of docking safely.

Skyports Drone Services will establish a daily inter-island mail distribution service, initially operating between three locations across Orkney for three months, with the intent to extend. Post will be delivered by ground transportation from Kirkwall to a Stromness hub and transported by drone to Royal Mail sites on Graemsay and the North of Hoy, from where postal workers will carry out their usual island delivery routes. The new service, which is set to launch in Q2 2023, will provide considerable benefits including time, cost and emission savings and improved connectivity for island residents.

The project's shore-to-ship flight operations will demonstrate the benefit of a seamless link between Orkney Islands Council Harbour Authority and vessels in its port. Skyports Drone Services will provide logistics for several use-cases, including delivery of documentation and provisions and the transportation of bunker samples. Alongside the demonstration, Skyports Drone Services will conduct a feasibility study in partnership with Loganair to explore the future of heavy payload operations in Orkney.

The I-Port project is funded by the Department for Transport's Freight Innovation Fund and executed by the Connected Places Catapult. The fund focuses on accelerating the adoption of commercial solutions to address challenges in the UK's freight sector and make it more efficient and cleaner. Skyports Drone Services is one of nine winners of the Freight Innovation Fund Accelerator.

Alex Brown, Director at Skyports Drone Services, commented: "Rural and maritime logistics are contingent on access, weather and personnel; if one of these factors is compromised, so too is the ability to provide a safe and reliable service. Orkney is just one example of a hard-to-reach location that will benefit significantly from regular recurring drone operations. We're looking forward to showcasing how our flights can improve existing services on the island, improve connectivity for residents and support the work of Orkney's postal staff."

Chris Paxton, Head of Drone Trials at Royal Mail, said: "We are proud to be working with Skyports to deliver to some of the more remote communities that we serve in the UK. Using a fully electric drone on a permanent basis supports Royal Mail's continued drive to reduce emissions associated with our operations, whilst connecting the island communities we deliver to."

David Dawson, Orkney Councillor and Chair of the Council's Development and Infrastructure Committee, stated: "Orkney has a strong tradition of playing a central role in the introduction of new ways of doing things, advanced technologies and innovation. The proposals within this project offer some interesting opportunities for our island communities - and I'm sure they'll be watching with interest as things develop. The possibility of drone deliveries from shore to ship in particular, could add an extra dimension to the services provided by our Marine Services team, vital as we look to position ourselves as innovators within the marine and harbour operations sphere."

Nicola Yates OBE, CEO at Connected Places Catapult, said: "The freight sector has an enormous opportunity to support jobs and growth across the UK which is why today we are pleased to welcome the nine SMEs to the first round of the Freight Innovation Fund Accelerator. "Working with innovators and industry partners through our accelerator programme allows us to develop a pipeline of technology and new ideas that promise to help tackle the freight sector's emerging needs, ensuring that resilience, efficiency and carbon reduction are core to the sector's future."

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