



# DELIVERY TRIAL FOR NHS IN SCOTLAND TO SUPPORT UK COVID-19 RESPONSE: THALES, SKYPORTS AND WINGCOPTER

News / Business aviation, Manufacturer



The trial is backed by Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP) – the integrated partnership of NHS Highland and Argyll and Bute Council directed by the local Integration Joint Board – and aims to prove the feasibility of delivering urgent medical cargo, such as COVID-19 test kits and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), between remote medical facilities by delivery drone. UK drone delivery provider Skyports will conduct the trial and operate the flights using delivery drones supplied by unmanned aircraft-maker Wingcopter, because of its proven capability through numerous delivery operations around the world. These trial flights will be planned through Thales' leading drone operations management platform, SOARIZON, which offers digital tools to maintain compliant and safe drone flying operations. Based at Lorn and Islands Hospital in Oban, the trial will consist of two-way flights between the hospital and Mull and Iona Community Hospital in Craignure 10 miles (16km) away on the Isle of Mull.

As COVID-19 testing rapidly gathers pace in the UK, the proposed delivery service will help to ensure that isolated communities have access to tests, delivered in a fast and efficient way. Currently, the majority of medical supplies and specimens are transported between

the laboratory at Lorn and Islands Hospital, surrounding general practitioners' surgeries and other healthcare settings by sea and road, a long and complicated journey.

This service will see delivery times cut from up to 6 hours one-way by ground transport and ferry to around 15 minutes, on-demand, by drone, bringing considerable savings in terms of time and resource, as well as contributing to keeping front line medical and delivery personnel safe.



Answering the call from government and Argyll and Bute HSCP, in response to the COVID-19 crisis, this trial is the result of rapid mobilisation from industry as well as the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), Local Government, NHS Scotland and the Department for Transport (DfT). Argyll and Bute HSCP has been at the forefront of exploring with Skyports the use of unmanned aircraft technology, building on preliminary work with the Scottish Government on the possibility of drone use by the public sector emergency services in Scotland.

The two-week trial represents a crucial milestone for unmanned aviation in the UK. Under current rules, drones must always be flown within visual line of sight of the remote pilot. To undertake these more extended flights, the project team has been in close consultation with the CAA.

Through this trial, the alliance aims to prove the long-term, sustainable viability of such services; bringing together regulation, government and industry to unlock the transformational potential of drones for society when used in a safe, secure and controlled way.

**Alex Cresswell, CEO of Thales UK, said of the project:** "Thales's technologies are playing a crucial part in the response to COVID-19 - both globally and here in the UK. This trial demonstrates the positive role that unmanned technology can play in our society and represents a landmark step to accelerate its adoption. We look forward to continuing to work collaboratively with industry partners, regulators and government to establish the UK as a world leader in this exciting new industry."

**Duncan Walker, CEO of Skyports, said:** "Delivery drones are a fast and reliable solution for vital medical supplies. Skyports is proud to assist the NHS in Scotland with their COVID-19 response, helping to provide the essential healthcare that people need in harder-to-reach areas. Our trial in Argyll and Bute provides an important short-term response to the current pandemic and lays the foundations from which to grow a permanent drone delivery operation across a network of healthcare facilities around the country."

**Wingcopter Co-Founder and CEO Tom Plümmer:** "Drones offer the opportunity to quickly and easily take corona tests, drugs or personal protective equipment to places that are difficult to reach by conventional means of transport. We are delighted to be able to help in Scotland in this way and hope to soon be able to help contain the pandemic in other countries and regions as well. For example, such a drone based on-demand service can be of enormous help to holiday regions that currently do not know how to deal with the upcoming holiday season. This is because those affected receive certainty more quickly if they suspect they have been infected with COVID-19, and appropriate measures can be initiated earlier."

The test in Scotland is already the **second corona-related project for Wingcopter**. Last week, Wingcopter, together with its partners UNICEF and the African Drone and Data Academy (ADDA), won up to EUR 3 million for the establishment of a delivery drone network in Malawi, Africa, at the **SmartDevelopmentHack**, a global hackathon under the auspices of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation. Further corona-related projects are in the starting blocks.

**Joanna Macdonald, Chief Officer for Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership, said:** "I am delighted that Argyll and Bute Health and Social Care Partnership is again at the forefront in Scotland using new technologies to benefit our patients. The use of drones provides real opportunities to improve services and will help enable quicker diagnosis for our patients. We are excited to be working with Skyports in the design of this new service."

Thales and Skyports are also working together within the CAA Regulatory Sandbox programme, exploring how regulatory approvals can be granted for more widespread BVLoS drone operations in the UK.

Once the trial has been successfully completed, the team will continue to work closely with the CAA and the NHS to make services available in Scotland and across the UK to provide access to this innovative technology to a wide range of organisations, in particular a number of other NHS Boards and Trusts.





26 MAY 2020

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