International Post Corporation

Royal Mail launches latest drone trial in Argyll and Bute

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Royal Mail has launched its latest trial to deliver mail by drone, in collaboration with drone specialists Skyports and Argyll and Bute Council.

The drone flights are running between the remote isles of Islay and Jura in the Inner Hebrides until 26 July, with postal workers loading and unloading mail on both sides for the first time.

The multirotor drone, which can carry payloads of up to 6kg, is the same one used in Royal Mail's previous trial in Orkney. It is transporting mail that is usually taken via ferry in a Royal Mail van.

This is the sixth time that Royal Mail has trialled drones and the second using Extended Visual Line of Sight (EVLOS) flying, which allows drones to travel further than the standard Visual Line of Sight by making use of 'trained observers' along its route. These observers keep the pilot, who is flying the drone remotely, updated on critical information to ensure the drone maintains a safe distance from other air users, structures and any hazards.

The weather and geography of the Inner Hebrides can impact the ability to provide an uninterrupted delivery service. For example, pauses in the ferry schedule - by which some mail is transported - are common during poor weather due to the challenges of docking safely.

The use of electric drones for inter-island delivery also brings significant safety improvements, ensuring postal workers can deliver between ports and marinas without risk, as well as emission savings.

Given its Universal Service Obligation to deliver next day to each of the UK's 32 million addresses, Royal Mail is exploring drones as a method to deliver to remote communities in a more reliable, efficient and environmentally friendly way.

The trial is being run in collaboration with drone specialists Skyports and Argyll and Bute Council to operate a number of essential services in Islay and Jura, including Royal Mail deliveries.

In November 2022, the UK Government awarded Argyll and Bute Council a grant of £250,000 via the Regulators' Pioneer Fund (RPF) to work in partnership with Skyports to conduct a series of trials that will serve as a building block to showcase the potential of drones in enhancing vital public services.

Argyll and Bute Council, in collaboration with

Skyports, is supporting organisations like Royal Mail which provide critical services in the area. This collaborative effort aims to demonstrate how these organisations can improve the safety, efficiency and sustainability of their operations and better serve customers by implementing electric drone services.

Chris Paxton, Royal Mail's Head of Drones, said: "This drone trial - Royal Mail's sixth - is the latest step in our innovative collaboration with Skyports. Trialling drones allows us to test out new ways of working to support our posties in delivering to the most remote areas of the UK. As parcel volumes increase, we are continually looking for new ways to provide a reliable, fast and lower emission service to all our customers no matter where they live."

Sir Patrick Vallance, Minister of State for Science, said: "Fresh thinking and new regulatory approaches will give confidence to investors, researchers and consumers alike. We want to encourage businesses to choose the UK as the best destination to develop their new ideas and bring great technologies to market.

"Our funding for these 15 pioneering projects – from drone deliveries for remote communities to using AI in healthcare – will give UK regulators and local authorities the support they need to accelerate innovation and turn it into success in every corner of the country. With our help, innovators working on these projects can experiment with technologies that will transform vital public services."

Alex Brown, Director of Skyports Drone Services, said: "Argyll and Bute has been an important region for our UK flight trial and demonstration work over the years. With its coastal and island geography, drone services can significantly improve connectivity and bring substantial time savings for essential services such as medical logistics. We're pleased to conduct more flights in the region with the Royal Mail and Argyll and Bute Council thanks to the Regulators' Pioneer Fund."

Cllr Jim Lynch, Leader of Argyll and Bute Council, said: "We are working hard to make good things happen in Argyll and Bute and these innovative trials could transform the way vital services are delivered to people in our most remote communities. Not just council services either, but other local authorities, businesses, organisations, and emergency services throughout the UK - there is huge value in partnership working to help bring benefits to the people of Argyll and Bute.

"In addition, by creating a permanent UAV Hub at Oban Airport, we will be investing in future industries. We will be delivering new, greener jobs, and boosting the local economy while continuing to drive down carbon emissions both now and in the future to create a climate-friendly Argyll and Bute. This is a very exciting time for everyone involved."

In 2020, Royal Mail became the first UK parcel carrier to use a drone to deliver a parcel. The company worked with a consortium of drone companies, including Skyports, to deliver to a remote lighthouse on the Isle of Mull using a

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drone.

Royal Mail and its partners achieved two further ‘firsts’ in 2021, becoming the first UK parcel carrier to deliver mail to a UK island via an out-of-sight autonomous drone flight and trialling the first inter-island drone flights in UK with a smaller vertical take-off and landing drone.

Source: International Distribution Services

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