SKYPORTS AND ROYAL MAIL TO EXTEND UK'S LONGEST RUNNING COMMERCIAL DRONE DELIVERY SERVICE

News / Manufacturer

Skyports Drone Services and Royal Mail have celebrated the one-year anniversary of their pioneering drone delivery service in Orkney by announcing it has been extended until at least February 2026. The award-winning* Orkney I-Port project is the first UK commercial drone delivery service to be implemented on a regular basis under existing regulatory frameworks (using a beyond visual line of sight with visual mitigation framework), establishing a daily inter-island mail distribution service between Stromness on Orkney's Mainland and the islands of Graemsay and Hoy. The project demonstrates how drone operations can support critical public services such as Royal Mail postal deliveries and help Royal Mail to meet its Universal Service Obligation.

The fully electric drone delivery project improves connectivity, safety and service provisions in the rural island region and explores how 5G technologies can enable rural drone operations. The extension is being funded by Connectivity for Remote Orkney Future Transport (CROFT), a UK Space Agency funded project announced by Skyports during Farnborough International Airshow.

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The 517 flights so far, operated in all weather conditions, have covered a total distance of over 1360km, the equivalent of the distance as the crow flies from London to Rome.

Working in partnership with Orkney Islands Council Harbour Authority and Loganair, Skyports' drone delivery operations have significantly improved service levels for rural communities, shortening Royal Mail delivery times by up to 24 hours and improving their efficiency and reliability. Royal Mail's local postal workers have acted as visual observers (VO) for the flights and Loganair has supported pilot transport to and from Orkney.

The new phase of the project will embed key learnings and improvements from the first stage of operations, including:

- Hardware and software upgrades: Skyports and drone manufacturer Speedbird have made significant updates to the drone technology in the past 12 months to enhance operational reliability and enable flights in higher winds and more adverse weather, in preparation for flying in the winter months.
- Remote pilots: Skyports' pilot-in-command now operates the drones remotely from the company's state-of-the-art Remote Operations Centre near Aylesbury. This change streamlines operations and significantly reduces the need for Skyports' staff to remain on the ground in Orkney.
- New take-off points: The touchdown and lift off area (TLOF) relocated to Royal Mail delivery office in Stromness to further streamline operations and reduce delivery times.
- Training of Royal Mail staff: Royal Mail staff trained to manage tasks related to the receipt and dispatch of mail delivery drones, reducing personnel demand and supporting more agile operations.

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Since its launch in 2017, Skyports has considered rural Scotland a prime example of where drone services can bring significant benefits. The company has completed several trials and tests across the country, including five projects with Royal Mail which explore the feasibility of using drone operations to deliver letters and parcels. The Orkney mail delivery project is the longest running project to date.

Alex Brown, Director, Skyports Drone Services, commented: “Our Orkney flights with Royal Mail demonstrate the viability of long-term drone operations and highlight the role that new aviation technologies can play in supporting essential public services. This project also shines a spotlight on the work we do beyond flying. To secure the strong growth trajectory we believe drones can achieve, we’re working hard to support the development of an enabling ecosystem for drone services. Our next phase of work in Orkney will explore how 5G can support drone operations in harsh rural environments and provide key learnings that we can apply to other future projects.”

Chris Paxton, USO Programme Manager, Royal Mail, said: “Royal Mail is always exploring innovative ways to continue to meet our Universal Service Obligation to deliver to the UK’s 32 million addresses. Through our successful trial with Skyports, we are making our deliveries to remote communities quicker, more reliable and more environmentally friendly. We’d like to thank our Orkney posties for helping with this trial and upskilling themselves in the process.”

*The trial won the ‘Best Use of Drones’ award at the Robotics & Automation Awards and the Step Change Award at the National Courier Awards.

Councillor Kristopher Leask, Orkney Islands Councillor (Kirkwall West and Orphir) and Chair of the Development and Infrastructure Committee, said: "The now proven operational ability of drone delivery technology for our postal service has shown how island communities can benefit from innovation. Supporting a better provision of services across organisations for our ferry linked isles is a priority for us as a council. I'm delighted to see the commitment to Orkney shown in the extension of drone deliveries, and I look forward to seeing how Skyports Drone Services and Royal Mail can further work with communities to improve the services the depend on."

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