

Uncontrolled Aerodromes

Two of the country's busiest aerodromes have developed plans to deal with the surge of drone users, demonstrating how seasoned aviation participants can work with newcomers to ensure everyone's safety.

Over the last 18 months, Ardmore and North Shore aerodromes have seen a dramatic increase in drone activity. This increase has prompted both aerodromes to work closely with drone operators in their vicinity.

Recreational users haven't been too much of a problem for North Shore says Daryl Gillet, CFI at North Shore Aero Club.

"Most of the time, Part 101 operators are flying low and aren't much concern. Many of them seem to be aware that they need our permission to operate within 4 km of the aerodrome, and that's encouraging," says Daryl.

However, both aerodromes are on the outskirts of different sides of Auckland,

and the city is spreading with new developments edging closer to the aerodromes.

"Almost all the drone operations near North Shore Aero Club are commercial in nature," says Daryl. "And with lifestyle blocks near us in the \$2 million plus category, most of those operators are filming on behalf of real estate agents."

Daryl says the issues come down to three things: ignorance, incorrect interpretation, and lack of communication.

The rules specify that drone operators must have knowledge of airspace, but Allan Bostock, General Manager, Ardmore UNICOM, says that some users are often lacking that.

Allan says, "Part 101 operators should have a Wings badge from MFNZ, which demonstrates that they have some understanding about airspace.

"The airspace around Ardmore is complex with a multitude of bona fide low level operations, including low-level helicopter approach sectors.

"Without a real knowledge of the airspace around the aerodrome, drone operators can really put our pilots at risk."

Richard Milner, a helicopter pilot, drone operator, and instructor, echoes this sentiment.

Richard says that the better the communication with aerodromes and drone operators, the easier it will be for both industries to mould together.

"If I had a photography job as a helicopter pilot in Auckland control, I'd talk to them prior to the job – not just go into IFIS and hope for approval. I'd ring the tower with the details and ask if it's a suitable time, because I'm not going to be able to do it while there's aircraft stacked up in a holding pattern – it's not going to work, is it?"

"The same thinking that pilots have should be applied to drone operators."

Richard runs a training organisation certificated under Part 141 and passes on his extensive knowledge gained as a pilot in both helicopter and drone operations. His organisation also provides training to potential operators to help them prepare their expositions when applying for Part 102 certification with the CAA.

Both Daryl and Allan have worked closely with Mark Houston, CAA's Senior Technical Specialist, Unmanned Aircraft and Recreational Aviation, to develop plans to deal with drone operations near their aerodromes.

"To be certificated under Part 102, operators need to show us that they have developed a risk management

Photo courtesy of Richard Milner.



Richard Milner (left) pictured with Daryl Gillet operating a DJI Inspire 1 Pro outside North Shore Aero Club.

and Drones

system that includes a pre-flight risk assessment," says Mark. "Part of that assessment involves showing us that they have consulted aerodrome operators in areas where they're planning to fly.

"Having a Part 102 certificate isn't a free pass for the certificated operator to fly wherever and whenever they like. They need to ensure they're sticking to what they've agreed to do in their exposition."

Allan says one of his key issues is the amount of warning some Part 102 operators are giving Ardmore.

"Ideally, we'd like at least 48 hours' notice to ensure we can mitigate risks and notify all users where there may be drone activity. Unfortunately, sometimes we get as little as 15 minutes.

"We still do the best we can with that, but realistically, that's not enough time for us to give notice to pilots."

Both Allan and Daryl say that the key for drone operators and aerodromes working together is timely communication.

Allan says, "We had one user who wanted to operate at 400 ft, just over 1 km from our threshold – the altitude that aircraft are at on approach.

"However, explaining to him how that would conflict with aircraft, we agreed on 200 ft, and I alerted all our aircraft that drones were being flown in the area."

Both Daryl and Allan recommend that operators arrange for a NOTAM. For Part

102 operators, this may be an actual requirement of their certification.

While NOTAMs alert pilots that drones are operating in the area, Allan says some drone operators don't appreciate the timeliness needed.

"Operators need to allow time for pilots to see a NOTAM in their pre-flight planning," says Allan. "So issuing a NOTAM out 15 minutes prior isn't going to cut it. By this point, aircraft are either in the air or taxiing out and won't be aware that a NOTAM has been issued."

However, Daryl and Allan both say most of the Part 102 operators are actually pretty good in communicating with them.

"One operator is now emailing me about activity well outside Ardmore as he understands that it can still conflict with our traffic," says Allan. "For example, he has an operation at Pokeno, 10 miles south of Ardmore, where a lot of our aircraft go to practise simulated forced landings. They're coming down to 500 ft agl, and as he's operating at 800 ft, it creates the potential for conflict. But he always lets us know in plenty of time,

Drone is the popular term for these aircraft, but the current official (ICAO) name is Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems (RPAS). These include remotely controlled model aircraft.

where he's operating and we can let our pilots know where to avoid."

Richard Milner agrees good communication between operator and aerodrome makes everything smoother for everyone.

"We've filmed regattas on the harbour that require us to fly within 500 metres of the Mechanics Bay heliport, but we have a good relationship with them. By working with them, we can ensure we can get our work done safely, without impacting on the heliport's operations.

"One time, Whenuapai held the Hercules and Orion so that we could quickly finish our operations!" ■

