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The Social and Cultural Role of Small, Remote Airports in the Northern Periphery

**Conversations from the North Conference
Aberdeen, 27-29 August 2017**



Image: Benbecula History Society

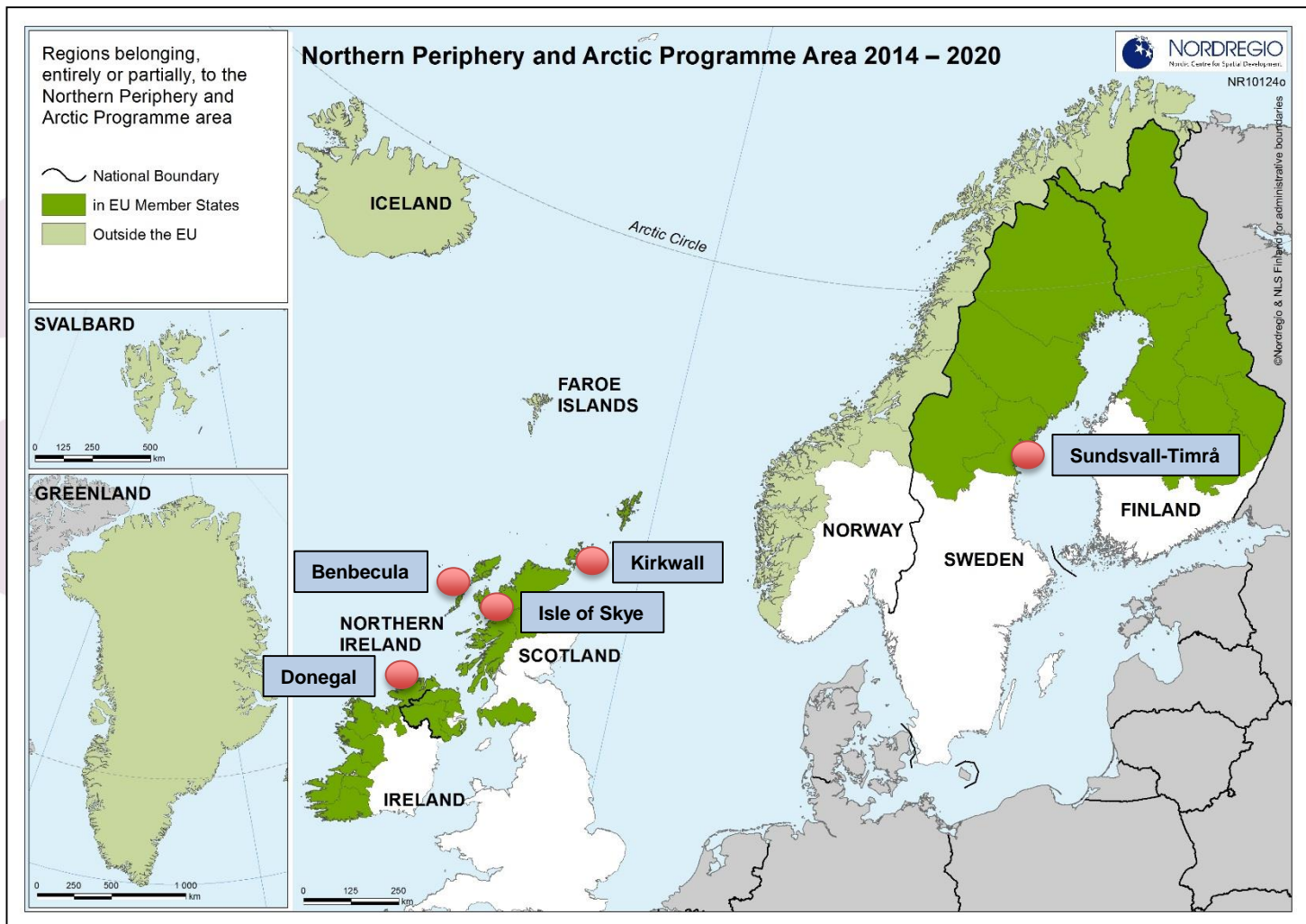
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Smart Peripheral and Remote Airports (SPARA) 2020 2015–2018

- **Part of the Northern Periphery and Arctic Programme 2014-2020**
- **Partners in Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Norway and Australia**
- **Main objective: to deliver increased innovation within remote airports supported by local, regional and national governments**
- **Over 130 civil airports in Northern Periphery, but just around 5% operate profitably**
- **Work Package 7.1: Qualitative research exploring the social and cultural importance of remote airports**



Case Studies Conducted in Five Northern Periphery Communities



Case Studies: Four Operational Airports with Passenger Services, plus Isle of Skye

Airport	Passenger Services	Passenger Numbers 2015-16
Sundsvall-Timrå	Since 1945	271,461
Kirkwall	Since 1948	177,755
Donegal	Since 1986	36,552
Benbecula	Since 1936	33,938
Isle of Skye	1935-1938 1972-1988	n/a



Sundsvall-Timrå Airport. Image: Genetec.com



Broadford Airfield, Isle of Skye. Image: HITRANS

Methodology

- **Primarily photo elicitation, via exhibitions of old photographs**
- **Photos sourced from: the airports; libraries and archives; local aviation enthusiasts; and online**
- **Supplemented by extended interviews and focus groups**
- **575 participants in total**



Themes Emerging (1): History, Culture and Local Identity

- **Participants spoke knowledgeably about history of their local airport**
- **Accounts intertwined with personal memories of physical fabric of airports and flying experiences**
- **Spoke with regret about modern security arrangements**
- **Different “atmosphere” from larger airports, e.g.:**

“very relaxed”

“nice and comfortable”

“homely”

“more laid-back”

- **Sense of pride in, and ownership of, their local airport**

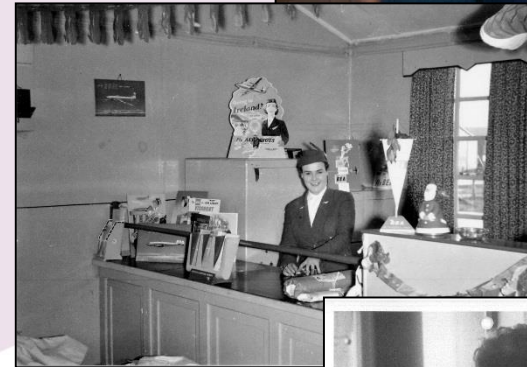
“The airport is a part of Orkney, and it’s a part that Orkney can’t really be without”



Images: Sundsvall Museum; Donegal Airport; Duncan McCallum; Neil Thain

Themes Emerging (2): The Airport as a Local Employer

- **Remote airports seen as significant sources of secure and “steady” jobs**
- **Many examples of other family members having worked at local airport, often through different generations**
- **Contributed to “family atmosphere”**
- **Strong emotional attachments to their local airport amongst some staff**



Images: Donegal Airport; Benbecula History Society; Orkney Libraries

Themes Emerging (3): Serendipitous Social Function

- **Expectation that they will meet people they know:-**

“My theory is that never will you be long in the airport without seeing somebody, so you’re as well to be early”

- **Many make a point of looking around for family, friends and acquaintances**
- **Perception that such encounters are becoming less common, due to “incomers” and tourists**
- **Far less common in Sundsvall-Timrå Airport, where 80% of passengers are business users**



Image: Donegal Airport

Themes Emerging (4): 'Lifeline' Services

- **Medical and emergency services (patient travel)**
- **Education**
- **For business and industry, including tourism**
- **Connection to the 'outside world'**

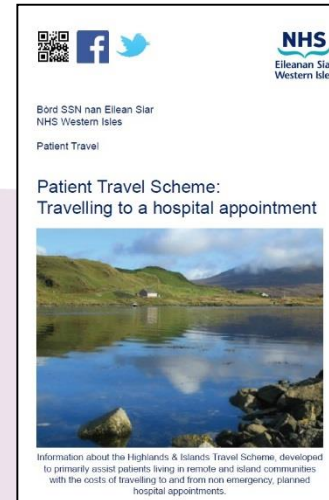


Image: Orkney Libraries



Themes Emerging (5): Social and Cultural Uses of Airport Facilities

- **Café or restaurant use**
- **Meeting spaces**
- **Events and exhibitions in terminal**
- **Use of outdoor space**



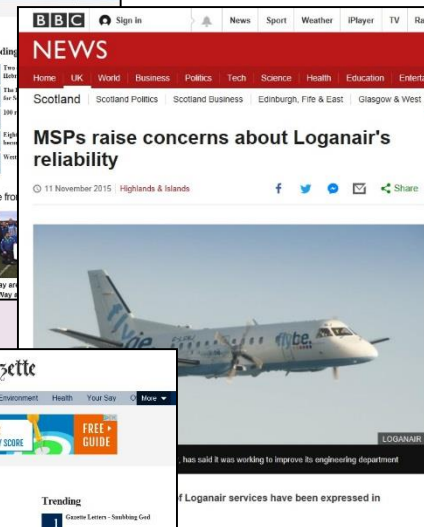
Image: Sundsvall-Timrå Airport



Image: HIAL

Barriers to Air Travel

- **Prohibitive flight costs**
- **Delays and disruptions**
“We don’t call them Flybe here, we call them Flymaybe”
- **Service cuts**
- **Parking and connecting public transport**



Future Research

- **Produce resources to assist remote airports in exploiting their social and cultural capital**
- **Develop a typology of remote airports, based on their social and cultural value.**
Four facets:-

- 1) Gateway**
- 2) Venue**
- 3) Business**
- 4) Community**



Thank you...



Image: Orkney Libraries