

FRONTLINE RESPONSE TO R116 REPORT

Following the recent publication by the Air Accident Investigation Unit (AAIU) of its final report into the fatal R116 helicopter crash at Black Rock, Co. Mayo, Peigin Doyle asked the statutory agencies to outline the main lessons they may have learned and taken on board about their specific roles in light of the report's 42 recommendations.

Since the R116 crash in March 2017, the AAIU published a Preliminary Report on 13 April 2017, followed by four interim statements – one each year since 16 March 2018, before the publication of its Final Report on 5 November 2021.

The AAIU report summed up what happened as follows: "The helicopter was manoeuvring at 200ft, 9 NM (nautical miles) from the intended landing point, at night, in poor weather, while the crew was unaware that a 282ft obstacle was on the flight path to the initial route waypoint of one of the operator's pre-programmed FMS routes.

"The crew, which was from the east coast, had intended to refuel at Blacksod before proceeding as tasked to provide top cover for another helicopter engaged in airlifting a casualty from a fishing vessel approximately 140 nautical miles off the west coast. At 00.46 hours, while positioning for approach to Blacksod from the west, the helicopter, which was flying at 200ft above the sea, collided with terrain at the western end of Black Rock, departed from controlled flight, and impacted with the sea."

R116 crashed into Black Rock Lighthouse off the coast of North Mayo in the early hours of Tuesday 14 March 2017. Four crew members lost their lives in the crash – Captain Dara Fitzpatrick and Captain Mark Duffy



The R116 crew who lost their lives (clockwise): Captain Dara Fitzpatrick and Captain Mark Duffy were recovered but winch operators Ciarán Smith and Paul Ormsby are still missing.

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Key findings of the report:

- Black Rock was not listed in the EGPWS (Enhanced Ground Proximity Warning System) databases.
- The BLKMO [navigational] magenta waypoint symbol and track line likely obscured radar returns from Black Rock (which might have been detected on the 10 NM range);
- 1:250,000 Aeronautical Chart, Euronav imagery did not extend as far as Black Rock, and
- The 1:50,000 OSI (Ordnance Survey Ireland) imagery in the Toughbook did not show Black Rock, but instead showed open water at Black Rock. Furthermore, the Operator did not have formal processes or procedures to approve mapping data/imagery for use in its helicopters.

Several other contributory factors were reported in detail and wider weaknesses were identified in organisation, oversight, legal mandate, aviation expertise, roles and

functions.

The Final Report made 71 findings as to the cause of the tragedy and 42 recommendations for the agencies involved in the sea air rescue service.

The report stressed that the brief of the AAIU investigation was to discover the circumstances and cause of the crash, and to recommend actions to prevent such an accident happening again. It does not say who or what agency was responsible.

FEEDBACK FROM STATUTORY AGENCIES

'Emergency Services Ireland' asked the Irish statutory agencies, in addition to CHC Helicopters (the operator of the Sea Air Rescue service), about the main lessons each one had learned about its own specific role in light of the AAIU recommendations. And we also asked them what progress, if any, had been made in implementing the recommendations, along with further questions concerned with specific recommendations made about their operations.

The Department of Transport said it fully accepted the report recommendations. "Since receiving the draft final report in September



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2019, the Department of Transport has undertaken a significant programme of change across key areas to take account of issues raised and recommendations addressed to the Minister for Transport.”

The Department said that this comment also applied to the Irish Coast Guard, whose main role is to rescue people from danger at sea or on land and organise immediate medical transport.

CHC Ireland repeated the statement it had made when the report was published on 5 November 2021, saying that it would not be making any further comment. Whilst acknowledging that it would make “difficult reading for all those involved” this CHC Ireland statement had said: “We are committed to implementing the appropriate safety recommendations that are directed towards CHC Ireland in the Final Report.

“CHC Ireland will ensure that it collaborates with all the relevant stakeholders to address the recommendations. The most important thing is that we collectively ensure that all areas identified for further strengthening are actioned.

“CHC Ireland continues to advance aviation safety by investing in ongoing employee training and development, working to global standards and engaging with aviation stakeholders.”

SAR SAFETY STANDARDS REVIEWED
The Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) told ‘Emergency Services Ireland’ that it had reviewed and fully accepted the recommendations addressed to the IAA, which it noted have already been implemented or proceeding to full implementation.

“We will verify our progress in this regard to the AAIU. At the time of the R116 accident, the IAA exercised safety oversight of the operator through the Air Operator Certificate and a national Search & Rescue approval. As indicated in the AAIU report, Search & Rescue regulation is not covered by ICAO or EU safety rules.

“The AAIU has recommended that the EU Commission review Search & Rescue safety standards at European level with a view to developing guidance material, and the IAA supports this recommendation. The IAA continues to work on an on-going basis with the European Commission and EASA in the development of safety rules.

“We want to restate our commitment to working with all stakeholders to achieve this aim, including the implementation of all safety recommendations in the AAIU report. The IAA is currently undergoing a programme of institutional restructuring, which will establish a new, single, independent aviation regulator for civil aviation in Ireland.”

TRANSPORT MINISTER’S REACTION
During the Dáil debate on the AAIU’s Final Report the Minister for Transport, Eamon Ryan, TD, made a detailed statement including the following points. “The main conclusion by the AAIU is that the accident was what’s known as an ‘an organisational accident’.

“Organisational accidents have multiple causes involving many people operating at different levels of their respective organisation. The Department would require some time to examine its findings and recommendations in detail.”

He said he would formally respond to the Chief Inspector of Air Accidents in respect of each safety recommendation addressed to him, in advance of the 90-day timeframe

Number of recommendations per stakeholder

- 19 for CHC
- 5 for Irish Aviation Authority
- 14 for Minister for Transport of which seven related to the Coast Guard; one to Irish Aviation Authority; three about a Search and Rescue (SAR) review, and SAR/HEMS (Helicopter Emergency Medical Services) operations and training for SAR; and two regarding ensuring aviation expertise within the Department of Transport.
- 2 for Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation
- 2 for European Union Aviation Safety agency (EASA).

required under the relevant EU legislation. The Department and, in particular, the Irish Coast Guard, had undertaken a significant programme of change across key areas to take account of issues raised,” he continued.

Following the AAIU Preliminary Report in 2018, the Department had commissioned an independent review of Irish SAR aviation operations. This review made 12 recommendations which the Minister was committed to implementing.

These recommendations addressed a new national search and rescue framework, the national SAR plan, NSP; enhancing safety and oversight across the SAR system; addressing oversight of search and rescue aviation elements; review and revision of all relevant standard operating procedures; training for Coast Guard personnel; an externally accredited safety management system in the Coast Guard; review of governance arrangements for the aviation contractor, enhancing aviation expertise in critical areas and legislative reform of the IAA. A second deliverable was an implementation plan for the recommended model for a Joint Rescue Co-ordination Centre.