

RAF Shawbury Gliding Club

Group Captain Chris Mullen, Station Commander RAF Shawbury gave a presentation on the latest activity and the relocation of the Wrekin Gliding Club from RAF Cosford to Shawbury in September 2020.

RAF Shawbury values the relationship with the community and the Parish Council; they are very pleased to be able to attend meetings to discuss local issues as it is acknowledged that the Parish Council is the voice of the community. Group Captain Mullen will be coming to the end of his time as Station Commander in December 20, but he is grateful for the fantastic welcome and support that he and the Station continues to receive from the Shawbury community. His successor will be Group Captain Phil Wadlow, who is very much looking forward to taking up his new role.

RAF Shawbury had to pause training for a few weeks whilst they introduced initiatives to meet Government and Public Health for England (PHE) guidelines. The base has now returned to normal levels of training and flying activity is now almost back to pre-COVID-19 levels. RAF Shawbury continues to provide trained aircrew and Air Operations personnel for the front-line, to support operations and meet their Defence tasks.

With regards to the decision to relocate the Wrekin Gliding Club, the Club is classed as a Service Sports' Club, meaning that it is formally supported by the military and it provides a service in direct support of the military. It is regulated by the British Gliding Association which covers such things as medical fitness, age of pilots, qualifications and the currency that pilots must abide by. There is a rigorous process by which the Club proves to the Station, RAF and national regulatory bodies that they meet all the relevant regulations. In terms of COVID-19 specific rules, the Club will abide by all relevant British Gliding Association regulation and PHE advice.

The primary purpose of the Club is not leisure, but to provide an opportunity for service, civil service, MoD partner Contractors, partners and dependent children to experience aviation and to hopefully encourage some into the military, or to better understand military roles; the Club's purpose is similar to that of the Volunteer Gliding Squadrons which have a proven and enduring positive effect on recruitment for the Services. At RAF Shawbury, that opportunity will be primarily open to the 300+ tri-Service trainees, which is the average day to day strength, who pass through either No 1 Flying Training School or the Defence College of Air and Space Operations as well as permanent staff who will benefit from increase aviation awareness.

The decision to relocate the Gliding Club, had not been taken without thorough consideration of all aspects both at the RAF Shawbury base and in relation to the surrounding residential and business areas. The Wrekin Gliding Club had been operating at RAF Cosford for 53 years, but for a variety of reasons (including expanded operations by the Air Experience Flight and University Air Squadron), they have not been able to glide from Cosford when they have needed to in order to attract those people for whom the Club is established. If change had not been undertaken, the Club would have closed and with it a hugely valuable and proven resource would have been lost.

RAF Shawbury was approached in early 2019 to ask if they would be willing to host the Club and an Organisational Safety Assessment was conducted, which rigorously examined all options available in terms of potential locations from which the Club could operate. Ternhill for example was initially considered, but research into regulations and available space showed that there was not room for both the Air Cadet Volunteer Gliding Squadron and the Wrekin Gliding Club to operate simultaneously whilst ensuring safety, which always had to be the primary consideration.

Although RAF Shawbury have now committed to the Club moving to Shawbury in September 2020 (that firm decision was only made recently at the end of May), the process for providing the Station Commander with the necessary assurances is ongoing. In June, the Station Commander wrote to all the Chairmen of the local parishes to ask that the community be informed and provide the opportunity to ask questions and raise any concerns through the Parish Councils.

The Station Commander, as the Head of Establishment, is legally accountable and is ultimately responsible for ensuring the safety of all activity at RAF Shawbury, including approving gliding operations. When gliding does commence, it will be limited to the weekends only. Gliders will be launched by aero-tow launch only; there will be no winch-launched gliding activity. The Club's fleet comprises 5 gliders and it operates a single tug aircraft, which is itself a motor glider powered by an extremely quiet 1500cc turbo charged and silenced engine; at 70dBA it is quieter than a washing machine and about 25 times quieter than a normal powered aircraft. At this stage, it was not possible to confirm how many launches there would be per hour. It was acknowledged that increased noise at weekends was an understandable concern to the community and the following points were made to reassure the community that a lot of planning and thought had gone into minimising any disturbance and ensuring the safety of the activity:

- Wherever possible, flying will be to and from the main (southerly/northerly) which is approx. 1 mile long. runway. However, safety is paramount and there will be times when the other runway 15/23 may need to be used.
- All flying will be in good meteorological conditions and the on-site Shawbury Met Office would be available to provide up to date information.
- All aircraft will endeavour to avoid Stanton and Shawbury village by the maximum possible margins in both height and lateral distance.
- Stanton and Shawbury villages will be detailed in the relevant Orders, meaning that everything possible will be done to avoid direct overflight, both on take-off and landing by tug, glider or combination of both.
- No noise complaints have been reported at Cosford as a result of their activity in the last 5 years.

RAF Shawbury is also engaging with Shropshire Council to ensure that they understand that gliding activity will commence in September. Similarly, RAF Shawbury is in close liaison with the Shropshire Aero Club at Sleaf to ensure that safety is maximised, and formal processes are initiated to deconflict Sleaf and RAF Shawbury weekend activity.

Regarding membership, the Club is primarily formed from serving military personnel and civil servants, supported by a small number of civilian members to provide specific technical expertise. To maintain its status as an RAF Sports Club, the Club must be able to demonstrate that all members provide a service to the club and most of their membership must be from the entitled group. There may be future opportunities for non-members in the local community to experience gliding, but the Club will need to settle into their new location and processes before considering any expansion. The potential for the Shawbury Air Scouts to participate in air experience opportunities in the future, once the Club had bedded in, would be explored.

The decision to relocate from Cosford has not been taken lightly but is for the benefit of Defence and is being marked by a name change from the Wrekin Gliding Club to the RAF Shawbury Gliding club to emphasise that this is both an RAF (military) club and belongs to RAF Shawbury.

At the end of the presentation there were some additional questions. These included:

- Would the Shawbury Air Scouts be able to access air experience flying in the future? This would be investigated and reported back to the Parish Council.
- Whether gliding opportunities would be available to veterans. This would be investigated and reported back to the Parish Council.
- The Gliding Club activities would be included in the 6-monthly meetings of the Helicopter Noise Liaison Group, which is chaired by Councillor Simon Jones, Shropshire Council and this meeting would provide a forum to discuss any future concerns.

The Station Commander thanked the Parish Council for the opportunity to speak to them

If there are any other questions or concerns about the future use of RAF Shawbury please direct them through the Parish Council to RAF Shawbury, who will answer any additional questions to the best of their ability.