Dear readers,

The Network Manager works with 43 countries, over 500 airports and around 2,000 aircraft operators, as well as with the military and our aviation neighbours in other continents. So it is no surprise that collaboration is essential in everything we do. It's never boring, frequently surprising and often a challenge. However, it can be very rewarding to build the relationships required and then to see them result in practical steps to improve the performance of European aviation, something that is vital as traffic is now clearly growing again. We have seen record numbers this year, with nearly 36 thousand flights on a single day. Over the whole year, we expect to handle around 10.6 million flights.

In practice, this collaboration means maintaining effective working relationships with every Air Navigation Service Provider (ANSP) across Europe. We look at their performance, at their plans and at the forecast traffic levels; then we discuss how issues can be resolved, before they cause problems. Sometimes that means spending a lot of time with a particular country to see how to overcome a particular challenge. One example of this is the work on Greek island airports; here, the Network Manager, the local ANSP, airports and crucially, airlines all came together to address capacity issues that were causing significant delays in the summer months.

Airports are an integral part of the network now; 26 ACDM airports and 19 Advanced ATC Tower airports exchange data with the Network Operations Centre. We also, through the Airport Corner, have a much better understanding of issues coming up. For example, planned work on an airport tower, or on taxiways, may reduce the airport's handling capacity and that can have a network impact.

Airlines also recognise the value of collaboration and there are two dedicated staff seconded by airlines to the Network Manager. They attend operational meetings and briefings and make sure that the communication channels work effectively. This also helps build trust – they can see that we are working for the benefit of the network as a whole, impartially and fairly.

Aviation is a global industry and so the partners with whom we collaborate are not just European. For several years, we have exchanged real time operational data with North America – we can see a flight heading our way long before it even reaches the Atlantic, let alone our airspace. Making traffic more predictable helps us to make better use of capacity and we are currently putting in place data exchange with Brazil and the UAE; discussions on similar arrangements are also taking place with other countries/regions.

Collaboration has tangible benefits on a day-to-day basis but it really demonstrates its worth when problems arise. Where one country's ATC capacity is affected (for example, by industrial action) we regularly see neighbouring countries take action to make sure they have enough capacity to cope. The military also respond, postponing exercises to help out.

For larger disruptions, the European Aviation Crisis Coordination Cell may be activated – a body developed following the lessons learned from the Eyjafjallajökull volcanic ash crisis in 2010. Exercises are regularly held, both to make sure we have the systems in place and also to help build the relationships that are vital for getting things done quickly and effectively when problems arise.

I regularly meet with colleagues around the world and when I discuss with them the situation in Europe – with so much traffic across so many countries with different cultures and languages – many are amazed that we work together so well and so effectively. There is a lot of room for improvement, of course, but we should also recognise how well such a diverse and fragmented industry does come together through collaboration at an international level.

Joe Sultana
Director Network Manager, EUROCONTROL

Joe Sultana is Director of the Network Manager Directorate.

He graduated with an Engineering Degree from the University of Malta in 1975 and joined the Air Traffic Services Unit in Malta in the same year. He obtained ATCO Licences in Aerodrome, Radar and Area Control and was a Watch Supervisor for four years.

In 1982, he was appointed Head of Air Traffic Services in the Maltese Department of Civil Aviation.

He became Director of the Network Manager in 2013.