Sustaining an effective runway safety team

by Iain White

So, you've established a Runway Safety Team at your airport, but how do you sustain it once the lure of a free cup of tea for participants has lost its appeal? This is a question currently being asked by the Australian Runway Safety Program and it appears that some of the solutions are the same as when establishing the team.

Background – the Australian Runway Safety Program

The Australian Runway Safety Program was formally established in 2010 and incorporates a national Runway Safety Group (RSG) which includes representatives from Airservices Australia (the State ANSP), the Civil Aviation Safety Authority (the regulator), the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (the investigator), airport, pilot and ground safety organisations and Defence. In addition to the national group, Local Runway Safety Teams (or similar) have been established at 27 of Australia's 28 civilian-controlled airports.

Civilian-controlled airports across Australia range from major international airports to small airports operated by local government and six that are predominantly used for general aviation pilot training. The differences in airport size, operator, type of operations and culture (either safety culture, or urban/rural culture) are all considerations for the establishment and sustainability of an effective LRST.

Currently, Australia sees between 150 and 180 runway incursions reported each year – a figure which has reduced since the implementation of the program. Of these incursions, approximately 60% occur across three of the general aviation airports where low hour pilots operate. Fortunately, runway excursions are rare, with these generally comprising minor excursions by low hour pilots due to a minor mechanical malfunction or incorrect crosswind technique. These statistics are important when trying to maintain the enthusiasm of people to participate in (not just attend) a LRST.

Noting the significant differences that exist across the airports, let's have a look at some of them; how they influenced the implementation of the

LRSTs and how we are trying to use them to continue the forums as an effective enhancer of runway safety.

Our experience has shown that the best way to establish and maintain a successful LRST is to know the particular airport – its operations, organisational structure, number and types of occurrences and local culture – and then mould the LRST to that airport. While the guidance material[1] available is excellent, trying to force an airport to establish an LRST around a fixed methodology is likely to result in reduced or inappropriate participation. It is likely to be viewed as a compulsory forum rather than an opportunity to make a difference and, depending on competing priorities, organisations (particularly flying organisations) will either not attend, or send a junior representative in an effort to 'tick the attendance box'.

For example, most of Australia's major airports had enough local interest to establish a dedicated LRST with little support required from the national RSG. However, most smaller or regional airports expressed concern that establishing an LRST would be seen as simply creating another meeting for the same airport participants to attend (or not attend). After considering these airports individually, most had already established an Airside Safety Committee, Chief Flying Instructor/ Chief Pilot (CFI/CP) meeting, or another forum where all, or most of the proposed LRST participants would engage. At these locations, the LRST was incorporated into existing forums by adding the LRST topics to the agenda. Interestingly, many of these groups were already including runway safety topics in their discussions. Personally, I am a fan of this approach as there is always going to be an overlap between runway safety and other (operational) topics. Additionally, broadening the agenda increases the likelihood of encouraging the proposed participants away from their other duties.

Our experience has shown that the best way to establish and maintain a successful LRST is to know the particular airport – its operations, organisational structure, number and types of occurrences and local culture – and then mould the LRST to that airport.

This 'integrated' application of the LRST concept is now also being considered by one of our major airports to maintain its runway safety team. Initially, a dedicated LRST was successfully established, but with reported runway incursions at this airport extremely rare and runway excursions even more so, participation at recent meetings has been poor. It appears that some operators may perceive that the lack of recorded runway safety occurrences at the airport means that the LRST is no longer important. The airport operator is looking to subsume the LRST into the Airside Safety Committee which has a similar membership as the initial LRST but appears to be more successful maintaining participation due to its broader scope.

Iain White is a Safety Programs Specialist at Airservices Australia.
Iain was previously a pilot in the Royal Australian Air Force, with experience as an airport manager and safety specialist.
Iain is currently the Chairman of the Australian Runway Safety Group and has assisted with the establishment and maintenance of Australia's Local Runway Safety Teams.

In addition to the tailored implementation of the LRST, there are a range of other lessons we have learnt which can help to maintain an effective focus on runway safety:

Expand and maintain the focus of the team. Following on from the scenario above, another consideration is to provide the team with information and/or examples of runway safety occurrences or information from other locations that may be relevant to them. For example, given our good fortune with runway excursions, many locations seem focussed primarily on runway incursions. By providing an example of a runway excursion from elsewhere and relating that to the local environment will keep the team focussed on how they can proactively prevent a similar occurrence. CANSO

1- An example of the available LRST guidance material is the ICAO Runway Safety Team Handbook available at http://www.skybrary.aero/bookshelf/books/2618.pdf

Sustaining an effective runway safety team (cont'd)

We still get good participation even if it's quieter and less enthusiastic than when we started the Team...

recently released a range of information on unstable approaches, how they contribute to runway excursions and how pilots and controllers can prevent them. The program used statistics from a Flight Safety Foundation study showing that 3% of approaches are unstable and that 97% of these continued to landing (rather than going around). Ten percent of these resulted in abnormal landings. By using these figures and relating them to the number of aircraft movements at a particular airport (and therefore, the statistical likelihood of unstable approaches and abnormal landings) the team's focus and enthusiasm to prevent runway excursions has been enhanced.

In a similar vein, an ICAO Category 'A' runway incursion which occurred at Moorabbin was investigated by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau with the benefit of access to a video recording of the event provided by the passenger. The combination of the video and the investigation report[2], which highlighted distraction as a causal factor, was an excellent tool to encourage and focus many LRSTs and prospective participants across the country.

Facilitate and encourage. It should be noted that in Australia there is no regulatory requirement for airports to have runway safety teams and even if there is a team, there is no requirement for an aircraft operator, airport, ANSP or any other organisation to participate. This means that the backbone to successful implementation and sustainment of a LRST is the facilitation and encouragement by either the national Runway Safety Group or individual organisations. In Australia, Airservices has largely driven the LRSTs by having its Tower staff chair the Team during its establishment and by providing a link between the local and national programs. Some locations require little support: particularly where there is an enthusiastic individual to drive the process – we call these people 'local champions' and they are worth their weight in gold! At many other airports, ongoing support and encouragement is required to sustain the teams. A few tips that might assist are:

- **Recognition and reward for local efforts:** Even a small step forward is worth recognising to ensure that the local team is aware that their achievements are noticed. Don't forget to look after your local champions!
- **Transfer of information to/from the national group:** If your LRST is not part of a wider program, see if there is one which you can become involved with. A wider program will be able to provide relevant examples of occurrences, data from other locations and support to your team. Lessons learnt from different locations that relate to your airport can be an excellent way to help teams address their own problems. For example, the Perth LRST identified an issue with airside drivers accidentally sitting on their radio handsets and 'jamming' the Ground frequency. The team developed a sticker for vehicle dashboards to remind drivers to check that they weren't accidentally transmitting. When the sticker was offered to other LRSTs, it became apparent that the same problem had been identified at approximately half of the airports across the country.

The Local Runway Safety Team is the cornerstone of an effective runway safety program. However, teams must be implemented and continually refined to consider the individual circumstances of each airport. Also, I can't over-emphasise the importance of having (and maintaining) a local champion to drive the importance of runway safety and the runway safety team. While the Australian Runway Safety Program is still quite embryonic (I am continually learning new ways to improve our systems), I hope that some of the lessons from our program may help others.

2- ATSB Investigation number: AO-2011-165 and passenger video are available at: http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/investigation_reports/2011/aair/ao-2011-165.aspx