The Transport Select Committee in the UK Parliament, House of Commons (Lower House) has indicated that a full, independent, public inquiry must be convened to address whether commercial pressure from oil and gas companies affects the safety of offshore helicopter operations. Furthermore, this inquiry must also examine the role of the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA). Members of the Transport Select Committee reflected early in July at the time its report was published.

**Introduction**

On 23rd August 2013, a helicopter crashed into the sea while on approach to Sumburgh Airport on Shetland. Four passengers were killed. This crash prompted the CAA to undertake a wide-ranging review into offshore helicopter safety which reported in February.

Launching a report* examining the lessons to be learnt from recent accidents and that CAA review, Louise Ellman chair of the Transport Committee said on 7th July, “After four accidents in five years, offshore workers’ confidence in helicopter safety is understandably low."

“Despite work by the CAA, serious questions remain unanswered about offshore helicopter safety in the competitive commercial environment of the North Sea. We fear a creeping complacency may be affecting safety standards.

“The role and effectiveness of the CAA has not been adequately examined. Only a full and independent public inquiry would have the power and authority to investigate properly.”

Members of Parliament in this connection have highlighted how the Air Accidents Investigation Branch (AAIB) investigation into the Sumburgh crash uncovered a number of serious issues. In particular, AAIB found pre-flight safety briefing did not accurately explain how to use the type of Emergency Breathing System (EBS) supplied on the helicopter.

Commenting on this Louise Ellman said, “Survivors of the Sumburgh crash told us that they did not use the emergency breathing system provided on the helicopter because the information given to them by the safety video was flawed.

“It is appalling that it took a fatal accident in such circumstances before inadequacies in safety briefing were identified.
“Workers in the offshore industry have the right to know everything possible is being done to keep them safe. We call for the CAA to ensure that helicopter operators review all safety arrangements to guarantee all are fit for purpose.”

The House of Commons Transport Committee also concluded:

- Regulatory inertia at the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) is exposing offshore workers to unnecessary risk by slowing down the implementation of safety improvements. The UK Government must uphold and entrench the CAA’s ability to act quickly and unilaterally.

- There is no conclusive evidence that Super Puma variant helicopters (which make up some 60% of the UK offshore helicopter fleet) are less safe than other helicopters. Nevertheless, operators, manufacturers and industry safety groups should continue to engage with the offshore workforce to address their concerns in this area.

- The CAA review of the Sumburgh crash found that since 2008 more incidents were reported in Norway than in the UK despite the Norwegian fleet being smaller. The CAA must conduct a joint review with its Norwegian counterparts to examine this disparity and report back within 12 months.

- The Government must push the European Aviation Safety Agency to implement changes recommended by the AAIB more rapidly and become more transparent in its dealings.

In addition, the Committee urged:

- AAIB to keep crash survivors better informed on the progress of investigations in future.

- CAA to meet survivors to hear their experiences and to consider their suggestions for safety improvements.

- CAA to use its chairmanship of the Offshore Helicopter Safety Action Group to lead the reduction of risk for passengers across the industry through improved standardisation of customer requirements for helicopter operators.

- Operations managers in the North Sea to prioritise safety by facilitating a culture of approachability and openness at all levels.
CAA to set out how it will address problems that mean passengers wearing safety equipment will currently struggle to evacuate through egress windows after a helicopter has capsized in the sea.

* (House of Commons Transport Committee. Offshore helicopter safety. Second Report of Session 2014-15 which was ordered to be printed on 30th June.)