LAUNCH-POINT CONTROLLER

Introduction

Any competent member can perform the role of launch-point controller (LPC) so long as they understand what is required. However the LPC is usually a pilot of Bronze Badge standard and above. No formal qualifications are required, although a RT licence is desirable. This guide is for anyone who wants to help. Remember if in doubt, stop and then ask!

Role of the launch-point controller

The primary function of the launch-point controller is to ensure safety at the launch-point at all times. Other functions are secondary to this aim and should not distract the launch-point controller from this main objective. The launch point controller needs to be a manager with good people-skills. If the activity is so high as to distract the launch point controller from ensuring safety, the other roles must be delegated.

The other roles of the launch point controller are the following:

- Keeping the launch point an efficient and fun place to be
- Being an ambassador of gliding to anyone new to the sport
- Controlling the flying list
- Maintaining the log sheets (delegate this task if possible)
- Ensuring that launching is efficient with no unnecessary delays
- Communicating to the winch or tugs any requests from the glider pilots
- Coordinating with ATC over airliner movements
- Communicating with any aircraft wanting any information on the radio
- Being a point of contact for anyone at the launch point who needs assistance
- Directing people/buggies towards landing areas that need clearing
- Maintaining an orderly launch point with people and planes in safe areas
- Being capable of good RT etiquette
- Being able to drive the bus
- Being able to delegate jobs at the launch point

Be alert for people who are new or who are looking lost at the launch point. If necessary brief them about safety, explain the flying-list and ask another member to supervise them.

Setting up the launch-point

Get a briefing from the group leader/CFI/DCFI as to where to set up the launch point. Make sure a tow-car driver for winch cables has been organised and you know about any ATC movements for the day. The best place for the fire truck should also be agreed at this time. The launch-point controller should take the flying list, logs and radio to the bus and then drive the bus to the launch-point.

When the launch point is set-up, ensure that the base station radios in the bus are switched on. Put the lectern at least 5 metres in front of the bus to ensure that the controller can see behind the bus that it is clear of landing aircraft. With the lectern should be the logs, radio and if the retrieve winch is not being used, the signal control box. The flying list is kept on the bus windscreen under the wiper. A light check will usually be required with the winch.

The launch-point controller should wear a high-visibility jacket to help identify him as the person in charge.

Before any launch

Each pilot should volunteer information to the log-keeper and should find the log-keeper if necessary before getting into the glider. However the launch-point controller must ensure that the next flight is on the flight log. An accurate flight log is an important safety precaution and is vital for Lasham's finances.

Pre-flight checks are the pilot's responsibility but many a good launch point controller has prevented accidents by noticing some of the following that the pilot did not. Prior to any launch, if possible, check the following things on each glider:

- Tail/wing dolly off
- Attached to the correct hook for the type of launch
- Canopy closed and locked
- Brakes closed and locked (though this is not always possible on aerotow with some types of glider)
- Water-ballast vent-tapes have been removed
- Wings are level
- The pilot is ready.

Before commencing any launch, the launch point controller must ensure that there is an adequate separation from the previous launch, either winch or aero-tow. This includes trial flights that may be taking-off elsewhere. The launch point controller must also ensure that there is no glider on an approach that could interfere with the launch. In particular the launch-point controller must ensure that all is clear above and behind. A glider that will touch down well before it is alongside the launch-point, and well to the side, will not interfere with a launch and so the launch can commence. If in doubt, then wait.

In addition the following checks are required by the launch-point controller:

- It is all clear in front within the 45 degree arcs across the ground on either side of the glider
- Everyone is clear of the cable and the glider (apart from the wing-tip runner)
- There is no other aircraft about to take off anywhere on the airfield.

During any launch

During any launch ensure that no other aircraft is allowed to take off in conflict with the launch that is in progress, particularly while the winch-cable is in the air. The launch-point controller should also ensure that the next gliders on aerotow and winch are ready to launch.

During a winch-launch

If there is a winch-cable break, and the winch-cable has landed across the take-off run of the aerotow, then no aerotowing is permitted until the aerotow run is clear.

If the winch-cable retrieve car is being used

During a winch-launch the launch-point controller should ensure that:

- Nobody touches the non-live cable (when two winch-cables are in use)
- When the winch-cable retrieve-car is being used, two people are waiting to unhitch the winch-cables

- While the first cable is being hooked onto the glider, the second cable is being fitted with the correct weak link for the next glider to launch.
- The tow car has been despatched to retrieve the cables.

When the retrieve winch is being used

When a retrieve winch is used, the whole of the winch-launching operation is under the control of the driver of the retrieve winch. The launch point controller should still perform all the other activities that are listed above but now should liaise with the retrieve winch driver to ensure that aerotows are co-ordinated.

During a grid launch

During a grid launch, priority is given to launching the grid as quickly as possible. However, it may be possible to winch-launch a few gliders in the intervals between movements. In this case the retrieve-winch driver and the grid-launch controller must co-operate closely. If there is any significant delay, the retrieve-winch driver must not start the winch-launch without checking again that no tugs or gliders that are likely to conflict. The LPC can assist the retrieve-winch driver by watching for future useable intervals.

Before an aerotow launch

Before starting an aerotow, the launch-point controller should ensure that the tug pilot has the glider-pilot's name and any special request

If the winch cable is in the air when you want the tug to start taking up slack, tell the tug- pilot eg "Fox Fox there is still a cable in the air but up slack". The winch cable must be at least half-way down before giving the all-out signal. Tell the tug-pilot that the winch-cable still airborne eg "Fox Fox when you are happy with the falling cable, all-out". Remember the tug pilot is P1 of the launch and might want more separation from the falling winch-cable.

If there is a lot of slack in the aerotow rope but the glider is not yet ready to launch, then you can tell the tug to "move forward" in order to save time taking slack up later. Do not forget to tell the tug-pilot to stop before the rope goes tight if the glider is not ready!

What to say on the radio

A visiting power pilot may call for joining information. Note that Lasham Airfield does not have the status to give instructions. Lasham Radio can only give information. You cannot even say "Land at your discretion". However "Land at pilot's discretion" is permissible.

In reply to a pilot of a plane with the call-sign Alpha Bravo Charlie requesting joining information, say for example:
"Alpha Bravo Charlie Lasham Radio. Winch launching in progress. Do not join overhead. Runway 27 in use. Right-hand circuit. Landing area is the grass area in the middle on the north side. Wind speed 10kts 260 Several gliders thermalling locally and in the circuit."

For Runway 09, the information would change to "Runway 09 in use, Left-hand circuit" and an appropriate wind speed and direction

ATC movements

ATC will generally give plenty of notice of any movement and so a few more launches are usually possible. However you should warn pilots further back in the queue is their launch is likely to be delayed by the movement.

When the movement is imminent then the procedures are:

- Start the bus
- Have the runway cleared of aircraft and equipment such as tyres, buggies and dollies
- Liaise with instructor in charge about where to park the bus and maybe set up an alternative launch-point during the movement period, if there is to be more than one
- Broadcast the movement information on Lasham's frequency so local pilots are aware of it
- The main runway is active until the flashing-light on the control hut was been switched off. Until then, do not move anything back onto the runway in case the jet has to return with an emergency.

Flying-list

Ensure that the flying-list is adhered to. Often someone is helping elsewhere when his/her name is called, do not forget them. Cross people off the list when have flown. It is important that people on the list are actually helping the Lasham operation. If they are not helping, then they are not to fly in preference to someone below them on the list that has been helping.

At the end of the day

After all launching has finished and the final landing has been logged:

- Ensure that the runway is completely clear in case of overnight airline movements
- Put gliders away, with covers if appropriate
- Put the other equipment away
- Put the bus on charge and switch off its radios
- Put hand-held radios on charge
- Put the logs at the office hatch
- Ensure that parachutes are not left in the bus, especially in winter.

Fire truck

Since it is possible that you will be the most experienced person at the launch-point, ensure that you understand how to drive the fire truck and its fire fighting equipment. Seconds could be vital in an emergency.

General advice

- If you witness any flying discipline issues then communicate it to the instructor in charge, unless you are qualified to deal with them yourself
- In the event of an accident/incident and there is no instructor at the launch point, use the accident procedures above the bus door
- Do not walk away from the job of launch-point controller without specifically ensuring some else is aware that they now have this responsibility. Do not be afraid to delegate.
- **Smile and maintain a sense of humour at all times!**