

CAA chief Kane Patena on faster airport security screening and claims regulator is not fit for purpose



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This time a year ago, Kane Patena had the pleasure of facing an audience where some of the most influential people in aviation said his organisation needed to get its act together fast.

There was palpable dislike expressed for the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), where Patena had started as chief executive just a fortnight before a major aviation summit.

At that Aviation Industry Association (AIANZ) conference, industry leaders voiced concerns in private and public about a CAA they felt was out of touch and inclined to be heavy-handed.

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Six months before Patena started, a CAA review into workplace culture had [found bullying and leadership issues](#). And Patena said he faced challenges from outdated rules and a backlog of certifications, with "about 172 cases" waiting to be cleared.

"These were applications to have certain things certified. It might have been an aircraft, for example, and they had been sitting there without us necessarily taking action to process those certifications.

"We had to clear it. One of the benefits of us being able to achieve that, which we did in May, was that there have now been some months where we've been able to process more applications to certify than what we've had coming through the front door, which means that we're starting to get on top of the demand curve."

He said the backlog wasn't due to staff being lazy.

"There are a couple of issues that held us back. One was, when I first started, within the area where we carry out certifications activity, we were carrying a 20% vacancy. And that was just simply because [the CAA] went through quite a significant restructure last year, before I'd arrived. So we had focused quite heavily on recruitment and getting more people, and that certainly helped."

He also indicated archaic processes had been undermining efficiency, and the CAA was looking at how investment in digital technology could speed up licensing and certification.

"In some of our areas, an aviation business might send a PDF document. And then the staff member who receives it has to manually punch information into three different systems before they can actually get underway and process the application."

The broader aviation sector here and abroad [faces multiple skills shortages](#).

He said the CAA was also suffering from those challenges in getting people with experience as pilots or engineers, or specialist experts.

"But we've been able to, fortunately, plug up some of the critical areas and gaps where we've needed to."

In July this year, [NZ Jet director John Ambler](#) questioned whether the CAA was fit for purpose, saying it had systemic problems. And just a week earlier, Prime Minister Christopher Luxon told Newstalk ZB he perceived "major challenges" in the CAA, which he believed was failing in key areas.

"I look at comments like that as a challenge," Patena said. "When I first joined CAA, the immediate focus was to set clear priorities and direction and to try and generate some momentum, and we're very clear that our priorities are to strengthen safety and security, to enable innovation and to deliver value and efficiency.

"That's actually entirely consistent with the general direction of the comments that you've referred to."

He said the challenge was now capitalising on momentum built in the past year to "settle into a rhythm" where the CAA could consistently deliver better results without compromising safety.

"The culture that I want to create within CAA is one where we are bold and courageous and not afraid to tackle the tough issues, where we're active collaborators working across Government and across the sector, where we're deep and respectful listeners.

"And that doesn't mean we necessarily have to agree with everyone all the time, but at least we listen to other people's points of view or perspectives."

There is no shortage of perspectives, not only regarding the CAA but also when other groups within aviation are disagreeing. One such fissure is a split over agricultural drone use.

Last month, the AIANZ said it was [blindsided by a move to liberalise drone rules](#) but the Agricultural Drone Association and coalition politicians welcomed the changes.

The AIANZ said it would be raising concerns about the risks of uncontrolled drones with Patena's organisation.



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Associate Transport Minister James Meager, responsible for the aviation sector, has spoken about making 20 years' worth of changes in just two years, modernising the industry and abolishing useless old rules.

As part of that programme, a month ago, [changes to runway end safety area rules](#) for small airports were broadly welcomed.

The rules update covered projects in areas including adventure tourism, safety equipment, air cargo security and the agricultural drones mentioned.

"I'm seeing some really positive responses to the ambition that we've got," Patena said.

[A former prosecutor with virtually no prior aviation experience](#), Patena said he'd visited dozens of sites and met people working in agricultural aviation, tourism, aero clubs and training institutes over the past year.

"I can stand here one year later and say I'm absolutely convinced that the direction that we've got is the right one."

But the CAA, as with other public sector agencies, may have to find ways to work more efficiently if the country is to avoid soaring aviation system costs, which generally get passed on to airlines and ultimately consumers.

"Some in the sector are fine paying the costs to be able to service them ... provided we're delivering the value," Patena said.

"We are focused on making sure that we can drive as much efficiency as we can to keep our costs as low as possible because ultimately, we are funded through fees, charges, and levies. But also we need to be mindful that, irrespective of what it costs us to carry out our role, there's also a value to be added back into the sector."

Airports

As for the airport experience Kiwis have, Patena says there will be changes, but much is still to be decided.

He said the CAA was keen to examine what "the digital checkpoint of the future looks like" because technology was emerging that could produce better screening and a more seamless passenger experience.

That could mean in some cases at airports "people can go through a lot faster, but it also means fewer pat-downs", he added.

"We see Aviation Security services being one of the key areas where we can certainly unlock some value and efficiency, but also a better passenger experience."

Will passengers get a more consistent security experience nationwide, or a jumble of different rules causing angst and wasting time?

"We would need to work very closely with the airports to ensure that they've got the infrastructure to support the screening equipment that we need."

Some of the quirks in this area were outlined when [fire broke out at Wellington Airport](#) in June.

“With the fire, that meant that the southwest pier was out, the passengers had to be pushed into the only pier where the jet aircraft were operating out of.”

He said the relevant area had older equipment, with passengers having to remove laptops before passing through security.

“What we know is that if we were to put the new, modern screening equipment, that’s so heavy, compared to the current equipment, it would literally fall straight through the floor.

“It’s a challenge ... We know it impacts passengers, and we’re certainly keen to make that passenger experience as seamless as possible while making sure that we give the travelling public confidence that we’re keeping our skies safe and secure.”

As for safe and secure skies, it would be remiss not to mention the recent rugby flyover at Cape Town. The Airlink Embraer jets passed close to the stadium, but was it a case of wowsers, whingers and armchair critics overreacting to a spectacular gesture?

“I’ve seen the reports, and look, my attitude on it is they have a civil aviation authority and a regulator, and I will hold my judgment until they’ve carried out their inquiries,” Patena said of his peers in South Africa.

“For us, it’s not so much about being able to rush to judgment based on what’s been reported. It’s giving them the opportunity and space to carry out any inquiries they need to make. And if there are any lessons that are learned from it, we’re certainly



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and transparent and frank way, the challenges that they saw or observed with CAA, but also the willingness to help us get this right.”

John Weekes is a business journalist covering aviation. He also has experience covering consumer affairs, crime, politics and courts.

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