

BRINGING IT HOME

As low-cost airlines reach critical mass, they are pulling more ground services and technical support in-house to achieve maintenance efficiencies

MICHAEL PHELAN / LUTON AND LONDON

The high utilisation rates and quick turnarounds demanded by low-cost airlines place particular emphasis on efficient line and light maintenance operations, as carriers aim for minimum aircraft downtime and schedule disruption. With Europe's low-cost operators growing, "out-source everything" is no longer always the most efficient business model, and the larger low-costers are seeking greater control of their technical operations.

Some are blurring the line between "traditional" airlines and themselves by pulling more of their ground services and technical support in-house. UK low-cost operator EasyJet is using its EasyTech joint venture with third-party maintenance, repair and overhaul (MRO) provider FLS Aerospace to exercise greater control over its fleet support, and German low-fares airline Air Berlin hopes to bring even heavy

maintenance such as C-checks in-house as it looks to expand its hangar capacity.

Paul Kimberley, general manager at EasyTech, says one of the biggest advantages of the joint venture is the feeling that staff are part of the EasyJet group. "Because we sit with the airline's operations staff, we can react more readily to the airline's needs," he says.

EasyTech is 75:25 owned by FLS and EasyJet, with the MRO provider supplying the company's 170 staff and the airline providing hangar facilities at London's Luton Airport, where 10 of EasyJet's Boeing 737s are based. Line personnel wear EasyJet's orange overalls, and the engineers adhere to the company's informal no-tie dress code.

This January, FLS renewed its prime maintenance provider (PMP) contract for EasyJet and Go's combined fleet of 68 Boeing 737-300s and -700s, providing total



maintenance support until 2011. Under the agreement, EasyTech carries out front-line support including line and light maintenance, with FLS covering heavier checks.

The joint venture is one of several EasyJet service divisions that have gradually pulled peripheral services back in-house as the airline expands. EasyJetServices handles check-in, departures, boarding and flight despatch, while EasyJetRamp provides baggage handling, refuelling and passenger boarding at Luton and Geneva, Switzerland.

Kimberley says about 40% of EasyJet's line maintenance is now handled in-house by EasyTech, with the rest contracted out to third-party providers at destination airports. The 80-person Luton operation has a single-aircraft hangar, with rotables storage and technical operations. One Boeing customer service representative and a shared CFM International representative help with technical queries.

Line operations

EasyTech also maintains a hangar at Liverpool, where it employs 40 staff, and has smaller line operations at Aberdeen, Geneva, Malaga and Nice.

"We do our light maintenance at night at Luton," says Kimberley. "We've got aircraft downtime built in between 11pm and 6am each night to work through scheduled and unscheduled tasks. Ideally, we like to do all our required maintenance in the night-time blocks, so we only have to remove the aircraft from service every 18 months."

The line maintenance team at Luton are the main troubleshooters for EasyJet's fleet. "We've got eight guys on our tech ops team," says Kimberley. "The real key is crew notification; we need to know of any problems the aircraft has on approach or taxi. This gives us the time to have solutions ready." Depending on the severity of problems, corrective action can be deferred by three or even 10 days, says Kimberley.

Although the 737-700s have longer maintenance intervals than the -300s, Kimberley says they are much more prone to "transient glitches". The -300s need A-checks every 300h, or 28 days, whereas the -700s need to be brought in only every 500h, about 42 days of operations for EasyJet. "We keep a lot of -700 LRUs [line replaceable units] as spares for in-service faults, only to find later that the originals run fine once they're powered off and on again," says Kimberley.

EasyTech's Luton rotables store holds roughly equal numbers of Classic and Next Generation 737 parts, with the -700 racks heavily populated by electronic items. "We keep an inventory of about 200-250 items, mainly instruments, back-up equipment and cabin equipment," says Kimberley.

EasyJet is using EasyTech to exercise greater control over its fleet support

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