

Air traffic controller

Job description

An air traffic controller is responsible for the safe, orderly and efficient movement of air traffic on and in the vicinity of airports and in the airspace for which Ireland is responsible. While their immediate concern is safety, controllers must also direct planes efficiently to minimise delays. Some regulate airport traffic through designated airspaces; others regulate airport arrivals and departures.

In very busy airports, the work is split between air controllers and ground controllers. Air controllers will guide the plane during landing, while ground controllers will manage planes on the runway, issuing instructions as planes taxi to and from parking stands and holding areas.

Work activities

- Working with complex radar and computer systems to closely monitor each plane to ensure a safe distance between all aircraft.
- Making calculations, checking flight paths and issuing directions and instructions to pilots.
- Guiding pilots between the hangar or ramp and the end of the airport's airspace.
- Taking into account weather variations and keeping pilots informed about changes in weather conditions such as wind shear, a sudden change in the velocity or direction of the wind that can cause the pilot to lose control of the aircraft.
- Responding to emergency distress calls and other unexpected events.

Work conditions

Travel: not a regular feature of the job. Overseas work or travel is uncommon, but in recent years overseas opportunities have opened up most notably in North America and the Middle East.

Working hours: a 35-hour week with regular, unsocial, rostered hours, including evening, weekend and bank holiday work. They are entitled to a break of 30 minutes for every two hours worked. They work five days followed by three days off, 182 days a year.

Location: mainly in commercial airports.

Opportunities for self-employment: none.

Typical employers

Republic of Ireland: The Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) at Ireland's airports.

UK (including Northern Ireland): National Air Traffic Services (NATS) at most of the UK's major airports, including all seven owned by BAA.

Career development

Career advancement to higher grades. Harmonisation of licenses exists across Europe, so opportunities for movement within the EU are now possible.

Salaries

Republic of Ireland: Students are paid an allowance of €18,969 per annum. The basic starting salary for fully qualified controllers is just under €51,000. With a shift allowance included, it comes to nearly €75,000. The maximum basic pay for controllers, including shift allowance, is more than €112,000. The top 10 per cent of air traffic controllers in Ireland earn between €170,000 and €230,000 a year, while the average pay is €160,000.

Northern Ireland: A newly qualified controller gets about £26,000 (€30,000), while the average pay is £60,000 (€69,000), potentially rising to £90,000 (€103,000) according to National Air Traffic Services (NATS).

Entry requirements and training

Applicants must be at least 19 years of age and have passed at least five subjects in the Leaving Certificate (including English and Mathematics) with Grade C in at least two higher level papers. An equivalent qualification may also be acceptable. Competition is stiff due to the limited places available.

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Other relevant degree subjects

- Computers
- Mathematics
- Physics.

Specific entry requirements

You must be at least 21 years old to be a licensed Air Traffic Controller. Because the training takes up to two years, an applicant must be at least 19 years old when applying for the Student Controller Programme. You must pass a computerised aptitude test consisting of:

- Planning ability
- Spatial awareness/orientation
- Figural reasoning
- Short-term memory – coping with distractions
- Following directions
- Reaction time
- Verbal reasoning
- Quantitative reasoning
- Dynamic alertness
- Style of coping with conflicts.

You will also receive a comprehensive medical examination every two years up to the age of 40, and thereafter once a year.

Training

The initial training takes place in the IAA's training centre at Ballycasey Cross, Shannon, Co. Clare. Students are then assigned to any of the three state airports (Cork, Dublin or Shannon) for practical training. Training lasts about two

years and is free. Once qualified you will work in either Shannon, Dublin or Cork, and must serve four years to repay your training costs.

Tips for applications

Mature applicants with experience in aviation such as military, civil or commercial flying will have an advantage. Military aircraft controllers can have their prior experience assessed and may gain exemption from some of the training course.

You can send your contact details to careers@iaa.ie and you will be notified approximately one week before the advertisement appears in the press.

Skills and qualities

- Excellent spatial vision, full colour vision and excellent hearing.
- Clear speaking voice and fluent English.
- Ability to work calmly under pressure.
- Ability to solve problems and make decisions quickly.
- Excellent communication skills to give clear instructions to pilots.
- Excellent numeracy skills and confidence working with technology.
- Ability to absorb and interpret information from different sources.
- Ability to check information quickly and accurately.
- Excellent teamworking skills.
- Willingness to work flexibly.
- Keen interest in aircraft and aviation.

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