

Lessons from the Field

September 2026

Runway occupied but the take-off still started

Runway awareness at unattended aerodromes

A recent occurrence highlights how quickly situational awareness can break down. At an unattended aerodrome, a pilot began a take-off roll while another aircraft was still on the runway. No collision occurred, but several safety defences had already failed.

What was happening?

After landing, one aircraft reported it was backtracking to vacate the runway, then changed frequency to close its flight plan. Meanwhile, another pilot lined up and began the take-off roll without positively confirming the runway was clear.

What made this possible?

- The backtracking aircraft was no longer monitoring the operational frequency
- The departing pilot assumed the runway was clear
- Runway design and surrounding terrain reduced visibility from the threshold, and
- Flight plan closure was prioritised ahead of maintaining runway awareness.

Key lessons from the field

- > Stay on the operational frequency until fully clear of the runway
- > Treat runway status as something to confirm, not assume
- > Expect that radio calls may be missed
- > Where visibility is limited, increase your reliance on communication and positive checks



Photo: CAA

Spot the risk

Normal operations + frequency changes
+ reduced visibility = reduced situational awareness

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