

News story: Defence Secretary meets Canadian counterpart to further strengthen ties

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has met with Canada's Minister of National Defence, Harjit Sajjan, to further strengthen the historic relationship between the UK and Canada. Crown copyright.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson has met with Canada's Minister of National Defence, Harjit Sajjan, to further strengthen the historic relationship between the UK and Canada.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

The UK and Canada have enjoyed a close-knit relationship for more than a century and we we have further reinforced this bond, discussing the wide range of issues we face today.

At a time when our nations battle intensifying threats on numerous fronts, we must continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with Canada and all of our allies, to ensure the safety of our people.

The two nations have maintained a close alliance on a wide range of security issues for decades, and are uniquely linked. Both are members of G7, the Five Eyes Intelligence Community, NATO and the Commonwealth.

At the forefront of this bond is the posting of UK troops at British Army Training Unit Suffield (BATUS), in Canada, which will celebrate 50 years of operation in 2021.

Both countries have also expressed a desire to further reinforce their commitments to international diplomacy, and co-hosted the UN Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial in Vancouver last month.

The UK Defence Secretary also praised Canada for tripling its training effort in the fight against Daesh, as well as increasing their surveillance and intelligence in support of the counter-Daesh coalition, which both countries are key members of.

Along with the Netherlands and France, the UK and Canada also worked together to form the Multinational Caribbean Co-ordination Cell during Operation Ruman, providing aid to those caught up in the devastating aftermath of Hurricane Irma and Hurricane Maria in September.

News story: Multimillion-pound contracts awarded for apprenticeship training

Hundreds of training organisations across the country are being given a boost as government begins awarding contracts tomorrow (21 December) worth nearly £500m to provide apprenticeship training for learners and small businesses.

The Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) is awarding contracts to hundreds of organisations to provide apprenticeship training to non-levy paying employers. Each of these employers does not pay the apprenticeship levy because they have an annual pay bill of less than £3million.

This will ensure all businesses have a real choice of high quality apprenticeship training provision, no matter where they are in the country or what sector they operate in. It will also mean that more people of all ages and backgrounds will have the opportunity to get into skilled employment. Employers looking to find an apprenticeship provider can do so through find apprenticeship training, which will be updated in early January.

Apprenticeships and Skills Minister Anne Milton said:

We are investing in our workforce to make sure there is no barrier on anyone's ambition and that employers have the skilled workforce they need. The investment announced today will ensure that all businesses are able to benefit from high-quality apprenticeship training provision.

The awards follow a rigorous procurement process, designed to ensure the sustainable, ongoing provision of apprenticeship training for employers and learners over the next 15 months. Over 1,000 providers submitted bids.

The initial awards for this procurement total £485m, with successful providers able to bid for more funding over the contract period if they can demonstrate evidence of demand, and subject to the ESFA funding rules and affordability.

In cases where providers have been unsuccessful in the procurement, we are extending contracts by three months so businesses and apprentices have stability while completing existing training.

Contracts for the non-levy funding will run between January 2018 and April 2019.

Press release: Archaeological survey work to continue on A303 Stonehenge scheme

The survey work, which includes surface artefact collection, topsoil tests and trial trenching, is part of the company's continuing commitment to preserving the World Heritage Site and in particular its Outstanding Universal Value.

Highways England Project Director Derek Parody said:

Heritage is very much at the heart of our work at Stonehenge.

As well as removing the traffic bottleneck at Stonehenge and addressing the rat-running issue through local villages, the proposed scheme will remove the sight and sound of traffic from the iconic monument and reduce intrusion in the wider World Heritage Site landscape.

The environmental, archaeological and geophysical surveys we have been carrying out since 2016, and our review of existing surveys, have added to our knowledge and understanding of this unique landscape and helped us develop the design of our preferred route.

Our continuing archaeological survey work, which we are carrying out with experts in the field, will ensure we gather vital information about the environment and archaeology to inform the project as it progresses.

Among the experts is the Stonehenge Scientific Committee, a body of leading independent archaeologists, who have advised on the ongoing survey work, and will continue to do so as the company develops the details of the scheme.

The preferred route for the £1.6 billion A303 upgrade between Amesbury and Berwick Down was announced in September. It includes a free-flowing dual carriageway with a tunnel at least 1.8 miles long and a much-needed bypass north of Winterbourne Stoke.

Following public consultation earlier in the year and further engagement with local communities, heritage groups, archaeologists, historians and engineers, the preferred route was chosen so that the route now closely follows the existing A303 through the World Heritage Site.

This alignment avoids important archaeological sites and intrusion on the view of the setting sun from Stonehenge during the winter solstice.

The Government, as part of its £15 billion road strategy, is committed to upgrading all remaining sections of the A303 between the M3 and M5 to a high quality dual carriageway standard, starting with three schemes: one at Stonehenge, one between Sparkford and Ilchester and the third on the A358 between the M5 at Taunton and the A303 Southfields Roundabout.

Highways England plans to hold a statutory public consultation in early 2018, and in the meantime, details of the preferred route are available on the [scheme consultation page](#).

Ahead of Friday's Winter Solstice event at Stonehenge, Highways England has issued [travel advice](#) to drivers planning to travel on the A303.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

[News story: Minister Alan Duncan announces an additional £7m in funding for the Colombian peace process](#)

As part of the UK's continuing commitment to a lasting peace in Colombia, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Minister for the Americas Sir Alan Duncan has announced an increase in financial support for Colombia's Peace Agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

Over £7m of additional funding from the Government's Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) will support the peace agreement at a critical stage. This includes a new £5m contribution to the UN's Trust Fund, which will help reintegrate former combatants and support recovery in post conflict areas.

Sir Alan Duncan, Minister for Europe and the Americas, said:

I am delighted to announce that the UK is increasing support to Colombia's Peace Process with over £7m of additional funding, bringing our total support in 2017/18 to almost £12m.

There has been significant progress since the signing of the peace

agreement in November 2016. The FARC have laid down their arms and become a political party. But there is more work ahead. The implementation of the peace agreement is now entering a critical and complex stage, which is why we are increasing our support.

The new funding has enabled the UK to contribute an extra £5m to the UN Trust Fund, which will support projects that help stabilisation in post-conflict areas, and the reintegration of former combatants back into normal life.

The funding will also provide additional support to the Organisation of American States Peace Monitoring Mission in Colombia, and to the work of the UN Office for Human Rights. We remain committed to helping Colombia implement the peace agreement as swiftly and comprehensively as possible.

News story: Accelerator Innovation Network Event: Regenerative medicine at the front line

Suppliers who attend the event will hear presentations about the [regenerative medicine at the front line themed competition](#) which seeks to make a real difference by saving lives and reducing disabilities.

The competition is looking for proposals for regenerative technologies that can be applied very early after severe, traumatic injury resulting from combat or acts of terrorism.

Recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan saw step changes in trauma care that led to great improvements in survival following blast or ballistic trauma. This has meant, however, that people survive with increasingly life-changing injuries.

Our belief is that the very early use of approaches in regenerative medicine, one of the [UK Government's 8 great technologies](#), has the potential to further revolutionise front line trauma care to save lives and to improve the quality of life for survivors.

This competition has 2 challenges:

1. bioengineered blood and blood components
2. the preservation and regeneration of soft tissue using biophysical approaches

The outputs from this work would be developed for use by the UK's Defence Medical Services and other organisations who deliver trauma care in challenging environments. These approaches should also reduce the burden on later care supplied by both MOD and the NHS.

Up to £500,000 is available for Phase 1 of this themed competition and at least a further £500,000 will be available for Phase 2.

This competition closes at midday on 11 April 2018.