

News story: Armed Forces Minister confirms increase in support to Afghanistan

Speaking on his first visit to Afghanistan the Minister reaffirmed the UK's enduring commitment to the country.

Britain stepped up its support to Afghanistan this year, increasing by 50 the number of personnel in the country. They join personnel in country who are helping to train Afghan officers, advising the fledgling Afghan Air Force and working as advisors in the Afghan Security Ministries.

While UK and NATO combat operations drew to a close in 2014, Britain continues to support Afghanistan by training, advising and assisting the Afghan defence and security forces, as they continue to fight with increasing skill and capability. This year's increase in support brings the total number of the personnel committed to the operation to 500; Britain's second biggest overseas commitment after the campaign against Daesh.

During his visit, the Minister met with Afghan Cadet Behzad Hiedari, who won Sandhurst's Overseas Sword of Honour. The prestigious honour is awarded to the best overseas cadet in each year's class at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. The award highlights the talent in Afghanistan's security forces, which are being developed by the UK and our NATO Allies and partners.

One way in which British personnel are helping to develop Afghanistan's security forces is through the Afghan National Officer Academy (ANAOA). Minister Penning visited the site during the visit and met with the UK personnel helping to 'mentor the mentors'. Just as Afghan forces are in the lead for the security of their country, so are their UK-mentored officers, who are helping to train their country's next generation of leaders.



Mike Penning meets with a British adviser to female Afghan instructors for female cadets at ANAOA

Armed Forces Minister Mike Penning said:

Britain has an enduring commitment to Afghanistan. This year we're stepping up our support to the country, and have deployed 50 extra personnel, some of whom I visited at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, where the next generation of Afghan army leaders are being trained. The UK, along with our NATO Allies, is committed for the long term to developing the ever more capable Afghan National Security and Defence Forces to ensure Afghanistan is not a safe haven for terrorists.



Lunch with UK personnel who mentor Afghan trainers at the Academy

Since 2014, UK mentoring assistance has helped the ANAOA train over 1500 high quality officers.

The Government committed last year to provide £210 million to the Afghan security forces, until 2020, giving around £70 million a year.

[Press release: UK's rarest freshwater fish caught on film for the first time](#)

The film was shot on a remote controlled yellow submarine while assessing how much sediment is building up on the bottom of Derwentwater in Cumbria. [Watch it here](#)

Vendace (*coregonus albula*) is the UK's rarest freshwater fish and a relic of the ice age. Its UK habitat is in Derwentwater and like lamprey, Arctic charr, spined loach, allis shad, twaite shad and smelt, it is an international conservation priority.

The Environment Agency carries out regular surveys of water quality around the country and over the past five years has worked with farmers, businesses

and water companies to improve and protect over 15,000km of rivers, lakes, coastal waters and bathing waters. England's rivers are the healthiest they've been for 20 years and salmon, sea trout and other wildlife have returned to many rivers for the first time since the industrial revolution.

Andy Gowans, Environment Agency fisheries specialist, said:

It was a unique moment to capture this iconic fish live on film. Seeing the vendace is a good indication of the health of the lake's water. Derwentwater is the only place these fish inhabit in the UK, so maintaining the quality of the water is vital for their survival.

Dr Ian Winfield, from the [Centre for Ecology & Hydrology](#), who leads the survey on Derwentwater and operated the remote-controlled yellow submarine, said:

As the day closed, I decided I would go out to the deepest part of the lake which is about 20 metres and drop the submarine in. I'm able to view the images from the submarine's filming live and was keen to see what fish showed up.

Although, the vendace came and went within in a matter of seconds, I knew it was a vendace. This was an amazing moment for a scientist, I was not expecting to see one, never mind film one. I knew I had captured for the first time on film the elusive vendace species.

The Environment Agency and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology plan to do further surveying later in the year using more advanced filming technology.

[You simply cannot empower local government if you impoverish it – Pearce](#)

Commenting on the LGA's warning that local authorities face a £5.8 billion funding black hole by 2020, Teresa Pearce, Shadow Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, said:

"The £5.8billion funding gap facing local councils is a damning indictment of this Government's indifference to the fate of communities across the country. Year after year, councils have warned that the sheer scale of cuts they have

been dealt will lead to a tipping point. Now, we are at that tipping point, and the Government is simply not listening.

“The scale of funding cuts that local government has endured – predicted by the IFS to be a 79% cut in direct funding by 2020 – will leave them able to only offer a threadbare service, such as the minimum statutory services in adult social care and child protection, and little else. The libraries and museums have already been closed, youth services have been cut back and all viable efficiency savings have been made.

“There is an unprecedented crisis in social care, with care providers handing contracts back to councils, 1.2 million elderly people living without the care they need and bed-blocking in the NHS at an all-time high. Yet the Government failed to provide a penny extra for social care in the Local Government Finance Settlement. The Prime Minister’s claims of “new funding for social care” amount to nothing more than pushing the numbers around in existing budgets.

“Councils, such as Surrey County Council, have been forced into the unwelcome position of holding a referendum on steep council tax rises in an attempt to plug the funding gap. But council tax rises are a short-term sticking plaster for a problem that needs long-term solutions.

“Local councils play an invaluable role in society – caring for our elderly, looking after the disabled and supporting our young people. It is local services that support, shape and enrich the communities we live in. You simply cannot empower local government if you impoverish it.”

“Urgent action required” as Theresa May’s NHS Crisis continues – Jonathan Ashworth

New figures published today show that there were 315 cancelled urgent operations in the NHS in December, including 12 cancelled for the second or more time.

In total there were 4,093 cancelled urgent operations in 2016, up from 3779 in 2015 and 3216 in 2014.

The NHS situation report for the week ending 22 January has been published today, showing further evidence of the strain on the health service:

- 51 different trusts reported serious operational pressures at some point.

- 11 trusts registered an OPEL 4 incident – indicating that they were unable to deliver comprehensive care, with increased potential for patient care and safety to be compromised.
- 43 temporary diverts from one A&E to another to provide temporary respite.
- 18 Trusts had bed occupancy over 99 per cent.

Jonathan Ashworth MP, Labour's Shadow Health Secretary, responding to the latest winter pressure data, said:

"Theresa May's NHS crisis continues, and the problems are worse and more widespread than in previous years. By underfunding and overstretching the NHS, the Tories have pushed health services to the brink.

"Even urgent operations are now being cancelled in record numbers – 4,093 in 2016, up 27 per cent in just two years. The Prime Minister needs to explain what she's going to do to fix this mess – not just pass the buck to local health providers. Cuts to social care have left patients stuck in hospitals across the country even when they are ready to leave, with knock on effects for those waiting for treatment.

"Urgent action is required and Labour is calling for a sustainable health and social care package to be brought forward in the March Budget, so that the NHS and its patients never have to go through a winter like this again."

[Green Party politicians join Irish Brexit court case](#)



27 January 2017

* **Jonathan Bartley:** "This is about putting power in Britain's hands."

* **Keith Taylor:** "The Government plans to force an extreme Brexit on the public without a mandate to do so."

* **Steven Agnew:** "This case should be welcomed by all UK citizens whether they voted leave or remain."

UK Green Party politicians are among the politicians named today as plaintiffs in the 'Dublin Case' which seeks legal clarity on revocability of Article 50.

Jonathan Bartley, Co-leader of the Green Party of England and Wales, Northern Irish Green Party leader, Steven Agnew MLA, and the Green Party MEP for the South East of England, Keith Taylor, will join Jolyon Maugham QC, Director of the Good Law Project, as litigants in the case.

The proceedings seek a referral to the Court of Justice of the European Union on the question of whether Article 50, once triggered, can be unilaterally revoked by the UK government without requiring consent from all other 27 EU Member States.

The Green Party campaigned passionately for Remain in the EU referendum, but Bartley is clear that this case is about giving all of the British and Northern Irish public a 'legal safety net'.

He said:

"Any deal that will be negotiated around leaving the European Union would have consequences for the country for decades to come. The British people must not be kept in the dark. They must know what control and what options the country really has. This is about putting power in Britain's hands. We're asking the courts to give everyone clarity on the legal question of whether, in the event of things going badly wrong, or the country being driven over a cliff edge, the Government would be able to revoke Article 50."

"The Government claims that it can't revoke Article 50. But if it is wrong, the British people would have a safety net that could allow them a real choice in a referendum on the terms of the Brexit deal. They would be able to choose between accepting Theresa May's vision of extreme Brexit or rejecting it."

Keith Taylor, who represents the South East of England in the European Parliament, added:

"This case is particularly important as we learn more about the Conservative government's plan to force an extreme Brexit on the public without a mandate to do so."

"I believe Theresa May and Philip Hammond's proposals to send the country hurtling towards an extreme Brexit will see Britain as the ultimate loser in a global race to the bottom on everything from environmental regulations to workers' rights. The plan looks bad for Britain, the environment, jobs, and, ultimately, the British people. If the electorate reaches the same conclusion when the details become clearer, they must have the choice of putting a stop to the process."

Steven Agnew MLA believes the case is all the more important following the Supreme Court's ruling this week that the devolved administration has no legal right to have a say in Theresa May's negotiations with the EU.

Northern Ireland voted 56% to 44% to Remain in the EU in the June referendum.

Agnew said:

“The unique status of Northern Ireland is being ignored with our traditional parties involved in local squabbles. Any deal on the Irish border will have massive implications across the island and it is vital that the people of Northern Ireland have a say on the final proposal.”

“For that to be meaningful the option to Remain must still be on the table. Otherwise, the UK has no leverage in Article 50 negotiations, as the current assumption is that if we like the Brexit deal, we leave, and if we don’t like it, we leave anyway.”

“Only if this case is successful will the UK have a choice, which is why I believe that this case should be welcomed by all UK citizens whether they voted leave or remain.”

The £70,000 costs of the litigation were crowd-funded by Jolyon Maugham QC largely from small donations. There were almost 1,300 donations of £25 or less and over 1,700 donations of £50 or less.

Jolyon Maugham QC said:

“In 2016 the Country looked at the evidence and decided to leave the EU. I respect that decision: Article 50 should be triggered. But no one knows what lies around the corner. And it’s in our interests that we have the option of remaining if new evidence shows that leaving is damaging people’s job security or rights at work or our ability to fund the NHS or national security.”

“Establishing that the Article 50 notification can be revoked gives us a free option in an uncertain world. Whether to exercise that option is for the electorate. But no one can deny that our national interest is served by us having it.”

The plenary summons will be filed with the Irish High Court on Friday. The Plaintiffs are targeting a hearing date of the application for a reference of March or April.

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