

Speech: SOLACE Annual Elections

Conference speech: 25 January 2018

I'm extremely pleased to be here before you today and it's an important part of my role to speak to the people charged with the responsibility for the effective running of the electoral processes that underpin our overall democratic system.

As some of you might be aware, I was the Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform five years ago and being able to look back at the work I was leading then gives me an opportunity to acknowledge just how much has been achieved by you all.

We have much new work in train, such as changing the provisions relating to overseas electors, responding to the recommendations in the report on electoral fraud by Sir Eric Pickles – including the piloting of ID in polling stations and changes to postal voting that will be tested at the elections in May – and plans to reform the position on the annual canvass.

Change has not stopped whilst I have been away from the elections brief and I hope to take forward further change for the better in the coming years also. That is a journey we will want to make together, taking account of our various needs and views and involving other major partners such as the AEA and Electoral Commission.

We have had, on a UK-wide basis, two General Elections, a European Parliamentary election and a referendum, plus the whole range of more local level polls that happen on a regular basis – and that these have been successfully delivered. That is an impressive track record and I thank you for your role in delivering those polls alongside substantive system changes.

Modernising registration to build on IER

First I'd like to deal with IER, familiar to us all. IER represents the biggest change to electoral registration in over 100 years and has brought some aspects of registering to vote into the 21st century. The introduction of IER was managed in such a way that register completeness remained stable – thanks to a major effort by government and EROs during the transition – while register accuracy improved considerably. IER has also significantly reduced the risk of registration fraud.

Making registration more digital was also transformative. More than 30 million people have used our digital service, most of them directly through the website which continues to receive very high user satisfaction. Use of the website peaks around an election and whilst this has an impact on your administration teams which we are keen to address, we need to recognise that our registers are more complete because of this. The availability of the website until midnight on the deadline day far surpasses the use of Household Notification Letters or other means of trying to get people to register ahead

of an election.

But our public service reform agenda does not end with the introduction of IER and the digital service. There are further changes we can make to improve service effectiveness and efficiency. As with IER, our reform programme will work best if it is a collaboration, involving all key delivery partners with a focus on the practical changes we can make now.

We need EROs and their teams to be open to change if our reform programme is to have the benefits we all want. We have already made changes to allow more of the registration process to take place digitally – for example, allowing the e-mailing of Invitations to Register.

Take up of these new flexibilities has been much slower than expected. When so many other elements of local services are online or digital, why should so many teams continue to use so many paper forms? Especially when citizens' expectations around communication have shifted so radically.

I am keen to work with you to understand delivery barriers and to promote good practice – but there will also be a need for leadership within your organisations to build capability in your electoral teams in the same way you have met the challenge of modernisation in other services.

Reforming the canvass

So of course, there is a clear role for government to make changes that only we can make to allow you to deliver more modern services. That is why we have put reforming the annual canvass, through legislation to support innovation, at the heart of our modernising registration agenda.

We recognise that by law the current process is very paper-based, with EROs under a duty to issue sometimes several copies of the same forms to the same households, with inevitably diminishing returns.

We also know there is a huge opportunity cost here, with much statutory activity involving the pursuit of information from households where there has been no change.

Of course, we must make changes to the annual canvass only with care. It matters that we give people an opportunity to register to vote as circumstances change and it matters that we keep our registers updated. That's why we have been piloting changes to the canvass through which we can properly understand the effect of doing things differently and be confident that any changes we make will be not just more economically sustainable but also support high quality registration.

Our latest pilots ended in December and we are currently evaluating them. The Electoral Commission is also conducting an evaluation. We are confident the pilots will help us make the case for canvass reform to benefit all EROs and their teams. It is too early to say exactly which changes we will make as a result of this process, but we believe there will be ways of harnessing the power of government data, supplemented by your local data, to focus the

canvass on areas of change, significantly reducing overall activity without affecting the quality of the register. I very much look forward to working with SOLACE colleagues, the Electoral Commission and the AEA and others as we seek to roll out ideas developed following the pilots.

Democratic Engagement Plan

One of the opportunities we want to explore linked to canvass change is refocusing current activity away from form processing to engagement with those people who have been persistently under-represented on the register.

As I said in Parliament recently, my predecessor, Chris Skidmore, did excellent work in the Every Voice Matters project where he visited every region and nation across Great Britain.

During this tour he met more than 100 organisations, including representatives of the electoral community to understand some of the barriers to registration for certain groups and how they might be overcome. There was a lot of great activity underway, but also evidence that innovation and engagement could be more widespread.

In December, the government published its first democratic engagement plan which sets out how we plan to tackle democratic exclusion and increase participation among under registered groups, over coming years. The plan sets out the evidence on registration levels. But it also shows that there is more we can do to understand the picture of registration across the country.

As part of this, we are going to launch an Atlas of Democratic Variation. Made up of interactive maps, this will bring together a lot of different sources of information on registration, the use of the online service and population data.

The Atlas will help complete our understanding of what the registration picture is like across the country. And we expect it to inspire activity across the country to plug gaps or build on positive action already under way. I have no doubt that EROs should be among the first users of the Atlas so that you can understand the impact of your activity and judge your success in maintaining a complete and accurate register.

National Democracy Week

One other aspect of our democratic engagement work I want to touch on is National Democracy Week. Our inaugural week at the beginning of July 2018 is timed to link in with the Suffrage Centenary celebrations. The overarching aim for the week is to bring together organisations from across the public, private and charity sectors for a week of unified national action.

A National Democracy Week council has been formed in order to shape and deliver the main focus and format of the event in July and I really welcome the involvement of a SOLACE representative on the Council.

The government will work with this council and other partners to develop a

full programme of events and activity, which will include stakeholder owned activity to promote and encourage engagement in democracy.

And we are encouraging all local authorities to plan early so that they are able to deliver activity during National Democracy week.

The aim of that is to inspire people about UK democracy and its importance. Much suffrage-linked activity is aimed at inspiring young people in particular, as well as encouraging more women to get into political and public life. These are both priorities I hugely endorse and I very much hope you will all start putting in place plans to mark National Democracy Week and the Suffrage Centenary in your local area if you do not already have things arranged.

Elections and other areas

I will move on now from the package of registration measures now to look at other areas of our work where we want to drive forward positive changes

Integrity of elections

Given that you have already heard from Mark Hughes this morning, I will just touch on the area of electoral integrity and tackling fraud, the potential for fraud and, importantly, the perception of fraud.

We have a clear path for building a democracy that is clear and secure. Over the coming months and years we will be working closely with key partner organisations to deliver a comprehensive programme of work for reforming our electoral system and strengthening electoral integrity.

This work is guided by Sir Eric Pickles' comprehensive review, which made a number of recommendations for strengthening the integrity of the electoral process. Mark has already updated you on the progress of these recommendations which will include our plans to trial forms of identification at polling stations in five local authority regions across the country at this years local elections.

But introducing Voter ID is just one strand of the government's commitment to improve the security and resilience of the electoral system that underpins our democracy and will ensure that people have confidence in our democratic processes.

Intimidation in Public Life

Related to integrity, the Committee on Standards in Public Life has recently published its report on intimidation in public life. If we are to have a strong and effective democracy we need to attract capable people to stand for public office at all levels and we need to ensure that they are supported to be able to get on with their jobs when in office. That report makes a number of recommendations in relation to elections and which we will want to look at carefully.

Accessibility of Elections

And just as we need to support those willing to take office, we need to support eligible electors who face challenges in choosing whom they want to represent them. As the Minister responsible for elections it is important to me that everyone in society can participate in our democratic process, and the government is committed to improving the accessibility of future elections, including for disabled people.

As a government we have taken action to address the challenges disabled people face by ensuring that the register to vote website is compatible with assistive technology, in supporting the production of Easy Read guidance in partnership with the Royal Mencap Society and in working with the Department of Health to bring elections within the remit of the Certificate of Vision Impairment so that people with visual impairment can be more readily informed of support available to them.

But I do recognise that more needs to be done, as reflected in the 256 responses to the recent Call for Evidence on accessibility of elections. We will use the information and evidence they provide to enhance the government's understanding of the experiences of disabled people in registering to vote and in casting their votes. In partnership with the Accessibility of Elections Working Group, the government will be publishing a report in Spring of key findings and recommendations to be taken forward.

The group which includes representatives from SOLACE, the Association of Electoral Administrators, the Electoral Commission and leading charities, is also providing valuable input to the ID pilots, as it is important to the success of those pilots that anyone with a right to vote is able to so.

Citizen focus

The citizen focus is something I am keen to promote. I want us to think of the citizen in all aspects of the changes we bring about going forward. The Register to Vote website is a recent product of that kind of thinking, and whilst it may bring some issues in terms of processes, I think it is undeniable that it provides a better and more accessible service for the citizen.

Law Commission work

That said, I do appreciate that you and your teams face hurdles in delivering elections also, not least in the actual legislation itself.

I mentioned the work of the Law Commissions earlier and their review of the legislation and I am pleased to say that this work continues with the support of Cabinet Office as well as the Electoral Commission, the AEA and SOLACE.

We are hopeful that in the absence of any primary legislative slot, we can find a way to make changes through secondary legislation which brings a reduction in the volume of legislative instruments and consistency to the

processes applicable to all polls.

I recognise that this is also part of removing risk from the delivery aspect of elections. That simplification and consistency can help to avoid errors and helps to reduce demands on resources that are ever more pressured in the context of savings within local authorities and a continuing loss of experienced staff.

Resilience of electoral services and future planning

Those demands are something we want to continue to look at, despite the change of the scheduled General Election from 2020 to 2022. 2020, of course, still poses a challenge with the range of elections planned including the new Combined authority mayors alongside PCC and the GLA polls as well as local elections.

I'm keen to see you, as Returning Officers with personal responsibility for delivery, play a role in discussions on this area, whether through SOLACE or individually, in order to get the strategic perspective from within local authorities on how we can best tackle resource and planning issues.

Overseas electors

Many British citizens who have moved overseas wish to continue to vote in parliamentary elections in the UK. The government is committed to scrapping the rule that bars British citizens who have lived abroad for more than 15 years from voting. We will shortly publish further details about what we intend to do before the next scheduled General Election in 2022.

I look forward to continuing to work closely with the electoral community in order to introduce votes for life for British citizens overseas.

European Parliamentary elections and EU citizens

The Prime Minister has made clear her intention that the UK leaves the European Union in March 2019.

Subject to Parliamentary confirmation, we intend to remove the requirement to hold by-elections for the European Parliament where existing party lists are exhausted in the near future, which should remove a previously ever-present risk of resource demands and cost.

Given that intention to leave, the government is exploring the voting and candidacy rights of EU citizens resident in the UK once we leave the European Union.

There are many other ongoing initiatives and challenges that face us that I have not included in this speech.

I repeat my thanks to you for your work.

I am keen that we most definitely – and collectively – look forward.

We still have much to do that can improve the electoral process for the public both in terms of registration and the conduct of polls.

There will be challenges in doing this work as there always are and I look to you, both as SOLACE the organisation and each of you as Electoral Registration and Returning Officers, to play a significant role in helping us to achieve change for the better.

[Speech: We must never forget diplomats who rescued Jews from Nazis: article by Boris Johnson](#)

British officials are not given to expressions of righteous anger; the dispatches in my red boxes usually reflect the Foreign Office tradition of measured and judicious prose.

Thankfully, there are exceptions. As we approach Holocaust Memorial Day tomorrow, I've been paying tribute to British diplomats who voiced outrage over the persecution of Jews in Nazi Germany – and acted on their words. After the Kristallnacht pogrom cast Jews onto the streets in November 1938, our Charge d'Affaires in Berlin, Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, sent the following telegram to London.

"I can find no words strong enough in condemnation of the disgusting treatment of so many innocent people," he wrote. "The civilised world is faced with the appalling sight of 500,000 people about to rot away in starvation."

Ogilvie-Forbes let his embassy passport officer bend the rules and issue travel documents to thousands of Jews, allowing them to escape Germany. Margaret Reid was one official who processed the permits.

Earlier, our Consul-General in Munich, John Carvell, secured the freedom of 300 Jews from Dachau in 1937. His counterpart in Lithuania, Sir Thomas Preston, helped hundreds of Jews escape to Sweden in 1940. This week, [their descendants came to the Foreign Office](#) to receive Hero of the Holocaust Medals, granting their forebears posthumous recognition.

The diplomat in Berlin who handed out thousands of travel documents was MI6 station chief Frank Foley (his duties as passport officer were his cover). Today, he is commemorated at Yad Vashem in Jerusalem as one of the Righteous Among Nations.

In truth, too few people in that era strained every nerve and sinew to help the Jews. It was left to individual diplomats of great moral courage to do what was possible, sometimes in breach of the rules.

As Holocaust Memorial Day approaches, we would be committing a grave error if we dared overlook its message. The bigotry and hatred that paved the way for the Holocaust has never wholly disappeared. You can find it today on the internet and sometimes in our public discourse.

Recent genocides have not always encountered a determined response. A United Nations inquiry found in 2016 that the persecution of the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq by Daesh (otherwise known as IS) amounted to the “crime of genocide”. Yet some in this country resolutely opposed our military action against Daesh.

Even today, the truth about the Holocaust is sometimes denied. Comparisons are drawn between Zionism and Nazism, including by people who should know better. Hence the importance of the commemoration this weekend; the tragedy is that it remains necessary.

News story: David Davis' Teesport Speech: Implementation Period – A bridge to the future partnership between the UK & EU

Thank you for that kind introduction.

Welcome everybody to tropical Teesport.

When the Cabinet meets next week and various of my colleagues moan about how cold it was in Davos I'll suggest they try the North Sea in January.

Teesport – this is the export capital of England really.

Teesport handles more than 40 million tonnes of cargo a year, importing and exporting goods that are used in sectors right across the economy. It acts as a gateway to the world for businesses not just in the North East, but also across the UK and Europe.

And as we get on with the job of leaving the European Union – a move backed overwhelmingly by the people of Teesside – there will be new opportunities for ports like this, as you actually outlined in your speech, and for businesses like the ones in this room to cast their sights beyond Europe, to new markets around the whole world.

Today I want to talk specifically about the bridge that we plan to build, to smooth the path to our new relationship with the European Union after Brexit.

A strictly time limited implementation period, which forms a sound basis for the UK's future prosperity.

That allows us to grasp the benefits of Brexit by setting in place the fundamental building blocks for the country as we leave and a bridge that will give more certainty and clarity for ports like this, and businesses right across the United Kingdom and Europe.

Setting the scene

Firstly – let me set the scene.

At the end of last year, we made an important breakthrough in the Brexit negotiations.

It was a landmark of which we can proud.

Giving confidence to more than 4 million citizens across our continent that their rights would be protected and reassurance to the wide range of businesses and institutions that have a vested interest in our discussions.

It also meant that millions of British people, whichever way they voted in the referendum could be reassured that we are one step closer to securing Britain's open, free trading exit from the EU.

Securing our parliamentary independence as we leave and a sensible deal that ensures a smooth exit from the European Union when we leave on the 29th March 2019.

In the coming days and weeks, my officials and I will travel to Brussels to meet with our counterparts, and talk about the next phase.

We will launch exploratory talks about the future relationship.

But our immediate goal, our immediate goal, will be to reach an agreement on the implementation period.

And because our objectives are largely the same, I am confident that political agreement can be reached at the March European Council.

The rationale

Now I know that there are many people who question why we need an implementation period – some of them very strongly and sincerely.

So I want to explain why we need this period, on the terms the Prime Minister set out in Florence.

Fundamentally it is in no one's interest in the United Kingdom or the European Union to see businesses delay decisions about their future, or rush

through contingency plans based on guesses about the future deal rather than planning on the basis of knowledge.

Without a bridge to the future – that is exactly what they would have to do.

We would see delayed investment, slowing job creation and a stifling of hard-won economic growth upon which our continent depends.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that similar arguments for this bridge, this implementation period, have been deployed by both sides.

Firstly – it will allow the United Kingdom time to build new infrastructure, and set up new systems, to support our future partnership and allow for as free and frictionless trade as possible.

It will ensure our businesses are ready, and only have to adjust to one set of changes.

Secondly – it will allow European governments to do the same.

Ports like Teesport, like Rotterdam, like Antwerp, will need time to prepare for our new customs arrangements.

As I told business leaders last year, while we're already planning for all scenarios, many European Union Governments may not put their plans in place until the deal is struck.

Thirdly – and perhaps most importantly – we need to ensure that the move to our future relationship is in keeping with both sides' legal commitments.

As the Prime Minister set out in Florence, the European Union is not legally able to conclude an agreement with the United Kingdom as an external partner while we are still a Member State.

It is only possible for us to sign this agreement when we are outside the European Union.

And such an agreement on the future partnership will require the appropriate legal ratification, which would itself take time.

This will need to happen during the implementation period.

Extending Article 50, staying a member of the European Union for a further few years, would not solve that problem. And it would not solve the problem either of navigating the legal structures of the European Union.

In fact, it would create a new uncertainty about whether and when we would actually leave the Union.

So, it's only by being outside the EU but continuing with the existing structures of rules and regulation that we can meet the requirements for a smooth, orderly and successful exit.

And Britain's argument is reflected in the European Union's stance.

So there's much we agree on.

We agree the implementation period should be delivered as a part of the Withdrawal Agreement, to be adopted under Article 50. That means it can be adopted quickly and efficiently.

That it should see the UK outside of the European Union, no longer a Member State.

We also agree on the need for this period to have a strict time limit, guided by how long it will take us all to prepare and implement the new processes.

And we agree on the need to base this period on the existing structure of rules and regulations.

Including, crucially, on continued access to each other's markets on current terms.

I want to stress – this is not a zero-sum game.

We both stand to benefit.

Which is why Britain and the European Union are on the same page on the need for this period.

The details

For such a period to work, both sides must continue to follow the same, stable set of laws and rules.

Without compromising the integrity of the single market, and the customs union to which we will maintain access on current terms.

Maintaining the same regulations across all sectors of the economy – from agriculture to aviation, transport to financial services, as part of a new international treaty.

In keeping with the existing structure of EU rules that will allow a strictly time-limited role for the European Court of Justice during that period.

During this implementation period, people will of course be able to travel between the UK and EU to live and work.

And as agreed in December, we will fulfil the financial commitments we have made during the period of our membership.

With Britain upholding its responsibilities during this period, it follows the European Union will need to respect our rights and our interests too.

And this means we must discuss how regulators and agencies can best provide continuity and clarity for businesses during this period in a way that benefits everyone.

Continued cooperation

Of course, we will leave the institutions of the Union next March.

But we will still make our voice heard.

This will be a relationship where respect flows both ways – as we move from being a member of the European Union to its closest partner.

A relationship which will not just be for the short term, but one which will endure to our mutual benefit for decades and indeed generations to come.

And it's in that spirit we should approach the implementation period as the bridge to this new relationship.

That means each side committing to not taking any action that undermines the other.

Because it usually takes around two full years for major legislation to make its way through the European Union system into law – virtually all of the laws that will come into effect during this time will have been drafted while the United Kingdom was a Member State.

However, we will have to agree a way of resolving concerns if laws are deemed to run contrary to our interests and we have not had our say and we will agree an appropriate process for this temporary period.

So that we have the means to remedy any issues, through dialogue, as soon as possible. It's very, very important. If there are new laws that affect us, we have the means to resolve any issues during that period.

International agreements

Now, the implementation period has implications beyond the relationship between the UK and the European Union.

It's also relevant to our relationships with the rest of the world – both our existing international agreements – struck during our membership of the European Union and the new trading relationships the United Kingdom will build on the outside.

The existing international agreements we are party to should continue to apply during this period.

They are an important part of the existing EU structure of rules and regulations, to which we will remain a part during the implementation period.

And they cover a wide range areas from aviation through to security.

They also include the trade agreements the EU has struck while we were a member. So this matters particularly with respect to Teesport.

These trade deals are – by their definition – mutually beneficial.

So whether you're a Dutch manufacturer or a British farmer, it's in the UK and EU's interests that the deals that have already been signed, stand during this period.

That's also in the interests of countries who have signed those trade deals with the European Union.

So since the terms of trade between the UK and EU will not have changed, a simple step forward is for all parties, all parties, to agree that the United Kingdom will continue to be party to these agreements while we continue to work on ensuring they maintain their effects in perpetuity.

And, of course, the biggest international challenge we face is ensuring the security of our continent.

Throughout this period, as in our future partnership, the United Kingdom and European Union will need to work together and respond to the ever changing threats we face in areas from terrorism to cyber crime.

There are both known and unknown threats.

Therefore, there should not be any obstacles, any obstacles at all, to us jointly deciding to take action in the face of these shared challenges during that implementation period.

Our top priority will always be the safety of our citizens.

What will change

While the aim of the implementation period is to provide certainty and continuity, we must keep sight of the fact that this is a bridge to a new future partnership.

Where, crucially, the United Kingdom is outside of the single market, and outside of the customs union.

Where the United Kingdom courts are sovereign once more.

And where the United Kingdom can take advantage of its status as an independent trading nation, forging its own way in the world.

So, during the implementation period, the UK must be able to prepare for this new relationship not just with the European Union, but with the rest of the world too.

The United Kingdom will be able to design a new immigration system, that works in the national interest.

That welcomes talent from around the world, and people who want to come to Britain to work hard and contribute.

During the period, when people from the EU move to the UK freely, we will have a registration system in place.

It will have no bearing on people's ability to work or visit.

But the system will allow us to better plan for our future public services, and prepare for our future immigration system.

And as an independent country, no longer a member of the European Union, the United Kingdom will once again have its own trading policy. This is a vital aspect of this period.

For the first time in more than 40 years, we will be able to step out and sign new trade deals with old friends – and new allies – around the globe.

Increasingly, we are trading with the key emerging markets of the world in Asia and the Americas.

The UK's fastest growing export markets between 2005 and 2014 included countries like China and Brazil.

These are the future.

We will be able to build on this in coming years.

Of course maintaining access to each other's markets on current terms means that we will replicate the effects of the EU customs union during the implementation period including new rights and obligations of trading arrangements entered into by the European Union.

But participating in a customs union should not and will not preclude us from formally negotiating – and indeed signing – independent trade agreements.

Although, of course, they would not enter into force until the implementation period has ended.

Talking to other countries about our future trade will allow businesses – like those in this room – to take action and make decisions based on the new opportunities that will be open to them.

It will also allow us to kick-start a new global race to the top in quality and standards.

Because Britain cannot outcompete emerging economies with cheap labour.

There is no future in us trying to be cheaper than China, or other emerging economies which have enormous low wage cost advantages.

Instead we must work with our international partners to drive up quality and standards.

And with 90% of future global growth expected to happen outside Europe's borders – driven by developments in new technologies and innovations and industries that haven't even yet been invented, the premium for agility in national policy-making has never been higher.

Over the coming years and decades we, as a country, need to be flexible and

nimble to take advantages of the changing landscape of the global economy.

We start from an incredibly strong position.

A world leader in engineering, life sciences, medicine, media, commerce, law.

From our skilled workforce to our world-class universities or the simple fact that English is the language of business throughout the entire world, we are well placed to take advantage of these new opportunities.

So getting ready for that is all part of our preparation for when the implementation period is over – and Britain and the European Union are enjoying their new partnership.

Because we want companies to have more confidence, to take investment decisions, to exchange contracts, to employ workers, to make plans.

Conclusion

The value of the implementation period is strongly correlated to the speed at which political agreement is reached.

Many decisions which businesses and governments need to take have long lead times.

From investing in a new office or a factory, to hiring people. Businesses like those represented in this room need to start making these decisions well before they become operational.

Speed is of the essence.

Because the longer we leave talking about the implementation period, the less valuable it becomes to the businesses right across Europe.

The next few months therefore are unprecedented. An unprecedented chance for the United Kingdom and the European Union to work together to build on the progress we have already made and provide that much needed clarity and security.

For our firms.

For our economies.

And for our citizens.

That's what they expect us to do. And that's what we will do.

Thank you.

News story: New Shetland radar to better protect UK Northern airspace

Chief of the Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier, visited the site of the new £10m Remote Radar Head facility, at Saxa Vord, Unst, Shetland, to inspect its progress.

The radar will improve RAF and NATO understanding of the airspace north of Britain and further out across the Norwegian Sea, improving the UK's sovereign capability at a time of heightened Russian military activity. It will see the island return to the role it performed during the 1960s and 70s, when the site was used as an early warning radar on NATO's northern flank.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

We will always protect our skies from Russian aggression. This radar is a vital part of the UK's defences as we react to intensifying global threats and reinforce our ability to tackle them. Russia's actions are not limited to Europe's eastern borders - the threat to British livelihoods is severe and real.

Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier, Chief of the Air Staff, said:

The radar system at Saxa Vord is an important part of ensuring that the RAF can fully protect both the UK's airspace and that of our NATO allies, in the face of increasing pressure from Russia.

Right at the tip of Shetland, Saxa Vord is a very remote site, so I'm extremely grateful to the team who have been working hard through the cold of winter, with snow and 120 mph gales, to ensure that the construction has remained on schedule.

The Saxa Vord Radar head will provide key information on aircraft movements to the north of the UK and feed the nationwide Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) operation which is responsible for policing international and UK airspace from RAF Lossiemouth in Moray and RAF Coningsby in Lincolnshire, as well as supporting civil air traffic control.

During the last five years, the RAF has carried out 69 QRA launches. Just last week (15 Jan), two Typhoon aircraft from RAF Lossiemouth were scrambled to intercept two approaching Russian military aircraft which did not respond to the air traffic control authorities.

The RAF monitored the jets as they passed through international airspace, before escorting the Russian Blackjacks out of the UK's area of interest. At no time did the Russian bombers enter UK sovereign airspace.

Defence, Equipment and Support, the MOD's procurement organisation, managed the redevelopment of the site and delivered the new infrastructure and capability for the RAF, commissioning the works through the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) Services. The Saxa Vord remote radar head will be operated remotely by RAF personnel and contractors will only attend the site for maintenance.

Simon Dakin, Director Intelligence Surveillance Target Acquisition and Reconnaissance, for Defence Equipment and Support, said:

The Air Defence and Electronic Warfare Delivery Team has shown outstanding innovation and teamwork to deliver this vital capability ahead of time and within budget.

During his two day visit to Shetland, Sir Stephen Hillier also toured the adjacent Saxa Vord RAF and Exhibition Centre and met representatives from Shetland Islands Council, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, Sullom Voe and Shetland Space Centre Ltd, as well as delivery personnel from FCO Services & ADEWS, Brody-Forbes, 90 SU, Serco, Mobile Met Unit and McDonald Scaffolding.

Scotland is home to more than 10,000 regular and 4,000 reserve armed forces personnel, whilst Scottish industry benefits from defence spending £1.5bn with it each year. This investment supports 9,750 private sector and highly skilled jobs in Scotland.

[News story: Preferred Candidate Selected for Charity Commission Chair](#)

Baroness Stowell of Beeston was Leader of the House of Lords and the Lord Privy Seal until July 2016.

Tina Stowell was made a peer in January 2011 and joined the Government in September the same year. As a junior minister she led the landmark Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act through the House of Lords in 2013 before being promoted to Minister for Communities. She received awards from the Spectator, Stonewall and PinkNews later that year. She was promoted to Leader of the House of Lords and the Lord Privy Seal in 2014 and re-appointed to the same Cabinet post after the 2015 General Election.

Before joining the House of Lords Tina Stowell's career over the previous 25 years crisscrossed government, politics and the media. Until September 2010, she was the BBC's Head of Corporate Affairs. Prior to this, she spent a short spell working for Granada Media, and for David Frost at Paradine, his own independent television and film production company.

She was a civil servant for ten years, working at the Ministry of Defence in London, the British Embassy in Washington and 10 Downing Street from 1991 to 1996. She left the Civil Service at the age of 28 and was awarded the MBE in the 1996 Queen's Birthday Honours List.

Baroness Stowell was born and brought up in Beeston, just outside of Nottingham. She attended a local comprehensive and moved to London aged 18 to join the civil service.

In December 2016 she received an Honorary Doctorate from Nottingham University. She is currently a member of the House of Lords Communications Select Committee.

The Charity Commission is the regulator of charities across England and Wales, it maintains the charity register and actively supports our nation's incredible charities to strengthen and grow.

The Select Committee for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport will hold a pre-appointment hearing with Baroness Stowell on 20 February.

The Committee's conclusions will be considered carefully before deciding whether or not to proceed with the appointment.

Notes to Editors

1. The appointment of the [Charity Commission](#) Chair will be made on merit, and following a fair, open, and transparent competition, regulated by the Commissioner for Public appointments.
2. The appointment will be made in accordance with the [Cabinet Office Governance Code for Public Appointments](#).
3. Under the Charities Act 2011, the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport makes the appointment of the Charity Commission Chair.
4. The current Charity Commission Chair, William Shawcross, has agreed to extend his tenure until 23 February 2018 when the new chair will take up post. [Read his biography](#).
5. It is a requirement of the Cabinet Office Governance Code for Public Appointments that the political activity of successful candidates be publicly disclosed. Baroness Stowell has declared that: She was leader of the Conservative Party in the House of Lords from 2014-2016; she has spoken on behalf of the Conservative Party and candidates during elections campaigns; and has canvassed on behalf of the Conservatives during election campaigns.
6. If her appointment as Charity Commission Chair is confirmed following a hearing by the Select Committee on 20th February, though not a statutory requirement, she has decided to resign immediately her party membership, the Conservative Whip in the House of Lords and become an independent, unaffiliated peer.