

The Royal Navy leads an international task group of warships on a security patrol of the Baltic

Frigates HMS Lancaster and Westminster, tanker RFA Tiderace and vessels from all three Baltic states – Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – have joined forces for a concerted demonstration of Britain’s commitment to the security and stability of the region.

It is the first operation of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force – a partnership of nine northern European nations committed to working together on operations as varied as warfighting through to humanitarian assistance and defence engagement.

In this instance, the expeditionary force is focusing on maritime security in the southern Baltic Sea.

The Royal Navy ships have been joined by Estonian minehunter Wambola, Latvian patrol vessel Jelgava, and from Lithuania minehunter Jotvingis and patrol ship Selis.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

Some of the UK’s closest and most steadfast Allies are found in the Baltics. This deployment is both the latest example of a long and proud history of defence cooperation and a clear demonstration of the capability of the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF).

As the first maritime patrol of made up of exclusively JEF nations, we are ensuring our ships and people are ready to operate in challenging conditions alongside our Estonian, Latvian and Lithuanian allies.

Commander Will Blackett, Commanding Officer of HMS Lancaster:

It is a real privilege to command the first task group of this type and I have been impressed by the capabilities on display from our partner nations.

My ship’s company are continuing to deliver success on operations against the hugely challenging backdrop of the Coronavirus pandemic.

His ships conducted a series of combined manoeuvres to test collective seamanship and get used to working together as a united task group, all played out in unrelenting sub-zero temperatures.

HMS Lancaster warfare specialist Able Seaman James Hearn said:

It is hugely exciting to be working with allied navies on live operations and a real privilege for me to experience.

Lancaster's Wildcat helicopter is flying patrols by day and night, in particular making use of its cutting-edge thermal imaging camera to refine identifying shipping in the Baltic, as well as practising secondary duties such as search and rescue and winching.

The weather in the Baltic in March – glorious sunshine one minute and a few hours later the aircraft is flying through snow squalls – is placing demands on the aircrew as well as the engineers maintaining the helicopter.

The British ships underwent a week of 'full-throttle' individual and combined training in the North Sea on their way to join their Baltic allies.

The workout has covered firefighting, medical training, damage control, ships sailing in close formation, refuelling at sea, gunnery, air defence, and intensive training with helicopters – plus adjusting to sub-zero temperatures and snowstorms as the ships pushed deeper into the Baltic.

[Government breakthrough on £500 million support package to boost rural mobile coverage](#)

- Government is to provide more than £500 million of support to extend mobile coverage through the landmark Shared Rural Network
- Major post-Brexit infrastructure project will see new and existing phone masts built or upgraded to end poor or patchy 4G signals

The [Shared Rural Network](#) is one of the first UK infrastructure programmes to confirm funding post-Brexit through a new process that is faster and less bureaucratic. The world-leading £1 billion government deal with the UK's four Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) EE, O2, Three and Vodafone will see both public and private investment in a network of new and existing phone masts

closing not-spots and levelling up connectivity across every corner of the UK.

Total not-spots are the hard-to-reach areas of the UK where there is currently no coverage from any mobile operator.

Minister for Digital Infrastructure Matt Warman said:

The Shared Rural Network is a key part of the government's infrastructure revolution to level up and unlock new economic opportunities in every corner of the UK.

Mobile firms are making great progress boosting 4G services in countryside communities as part of their side of this landmark agreement.

With the publication of this notice, we shall now push on with making patchy or poor coverage a thing of the past as we build back better from the pandemic.

Closing total not spots will give rural consumers a better choice of providers, with more now offering coverage across new areas for the first time. People will also benefit from improved access to mobile banking, government and emergency services as well as shopping and other online benefits thanks to improved connectivity.

The funding will enable new masts to be built, getting rid of total not spots, and to upgrade radio equipment built as part of the Home Office's Emergency Services Network (ESN) Programme which will enable MNOs to provide even more coverage.

The MNOs have already begun work as part of the deal to close the majority of 'partial not-spots' – areas where there is coverage from at least one but not all operators – by mid-2024. There have already been over 700 sites announced so far this year to help close not-spots across the UK.

With £500 million in funding now available, the government and the MNOs remain confident that combined coverage will be delivered to 95% of the UK by the end of 2025, with areas around the UK starting to see improvements to 4G coverage long before completion.

The measure has been developed in compliance with the UK's subsidy obligations under the UK-EU Trade and Co-operation Agreement, including the publication of a transparency notice. The Shared Rural Network notice sets out how the programme will pursue better coverage to remedy market failures in a proportionate way, and how the subsidy will mitigate any negative effects to EU-UK trade and investment.

ENDS

Shared Rural Network

The government announced on [9 March 2020](#) that it had agreed a £1 billion deal with the four Mobile Network Operators (MNOs) to deliver the SRN. The programme is made up of private and publicly funded elements:

- The four MNOs will collectively invest over £530 million in a shared network of new and existing phone masts. This investment is in areas of partial commercial coverage, referred to as partial not spots (PNS) – areas where there is currently coverage from at least one, but not all operators.
- Government will invest over £500 million to target hard-to-reach areas where there is currently no coverage from any operator (Total Not Spots or TNS).

We are already starting to see improvements as a result of the SRN programme. Devauden in Wales became the first rural community to benefit from the programme, when a mast went live in the village on 17 June 2020. This was followed by Longnor in the Peak District on 23 July. Initial radio plans have now been submitted to the regulator, Ofcom, and an open, fair and transparent competitive procurement process for the publicly funded elements of the programme has commenced.

On 27 January 2021, the operators O2, Three and Vodafone announced a new joint venture to build and share 222 new mobile masts to boost rural coverage across the United Kingdom and deliver the first stage of the SRN. This programme of investment will increase coverage in each of the UK nations – 124 new sites will be built in Scotland, 33 in Wales, 11 in Northern Ireland, and 54 in England, with each operator leading on 74 of the new sites.

On 23 February 2021 EE announced it will upgrade more than 500 4G sites in 2021 as part of the SRN to extend coverage in rural areas across the UK. This will include 333 in England, 132 in Scotland, 76 in Wales, and 38 in Northern Ireland.

On 10 March representatives of the UK's mobile operators, EE, O2, Three and Vodafone signed a key agreement in the development of the Shared Rural Network. The contract sets out how the four organisations will work together to build new sites that will deliver mobile broadband in areas where there is no existing 4G coverage from any operator (total not spots).

EU–UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement

EU State aid rules no longer apply to subsidies granted from 1 January 2021 in the UK, except for aid within scope of the Withdrawal Agreement, including aid under Article 10 of the Northern Ireland Protocol. However, public authorities must comply with our international commitments on subsidies in the UK-EU Trade and Co-operation agreement (TCA), and other trade agreements, as well as the World Trade Organisation rules on subsidies.

From 1 January 2020, subject to any applicable exemptions, a subsidy in scope of the TCA must follow and apply the principles and prohibitions in the

agreement before it can be awarded. The TCA also requires certain information about the subsidy award to be made publicly available. BEIS has developed a new publicly accessible transparency database for public authorities to record subsidies to meet this obligation.

Having left the EU, we can design a subsidy control regime that reflects the needs of the UK economy. On 3 February, the Government published a consultation on the future UK subsidy regime, the consultation will run for 8 weeks until 31 March, and invites views from stakeholders on its design. Subject to the outcome of the consultation, the Government will bring forward legislation in due course and before the end of the year.

JCVI advises prioritising homeless people and rough sleepers for COVID-19 vaccine

Many people who are homeless or sleeping rough are likely to have underlying health conditions which would place them in priority group 6. These are likely to be under-diagnosed or not properly reflected in GP records.

Due to current restrictions, many thousands of people who sleep rough have been housed in emergency accommodation. This provides a unique opportunity to offer vaccination to those often unable to access basic healthcare.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) advises that local teams consider a universal offer to adults experiencing homelessness and rough sleeping alongside those in priority group 6.

They should also be offered the vaccine without the need for an NHS number or GP registration.

Local decisions should be taken on whether a shorter schedule may be offered if they are unlikely to return for the second dose at 12 weeks.

Operationally, it is anticipated that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine will be easier to deploy to this group of people. The optimal timing for the second dose of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is 8 to 12 weeks after the first dose.

Professor Wei Shen Lim, COVID-19 Chair for JCVI, said:

The JCVI's advice on COVID-19 vaccine prioritisation was developed with the aim of preventing as many deaths as possible.

People experiencing homelessness are likely to have health conditions that put them at higher risk of death from COVID-19.

This advice will help us to protect more people who are at greater risk, ensuring that fewer people become seriously ill or die from the virus.

Rosanna O'Connor, Acting Director for Health Improvement at Public Health England, said:

People who are homeless or who sleep rough face reduced access to healthcare, and experience some of the highest rates of poor health outcomes and undiagnosed health issues.

We welcome this decision of JCVI and are pleased to have supported the committee with the evidence that helped make this decision, which will protect those who are most vulnerable and may be at increased of severe illness or death from COVID-19.

The JCVI will continue to consider the emerging evidence and will keep its advice under review.

The [JCVI letter](#) outlining the recommendations is available in full.

[International women's day: UK statement](#)

Thank you Chair

International Women's Day is a moment to recognise past achievements, and to look ahead to future challenges. A time to reflect on where we are falling short, and on what we can and must do to address these shortcomings. Over the last year, we have all had to respond and adapt to the challenge of a pandemic. And we have depended on our front-line workers to help us through this. Women have been on the frontline in the fight against COVID-19, globally accounting for around 70% of health workers, although only 25% of leadership positions in the health sector. And we've seen women play a leading role in vaccine development.

But during this period we have also seen a shocking increase globally in gender-based and domestic violence, with women and girls accounting for the overwhelming majority of victims. We need to reverse this worrying trend and to face the challenge of achieving gender equality with renewed vigour.

Empowering women and girls, and preventing violence against them, is a UK priority. We are committed to ensuring every girl receives at least 12 years of quality education, and to ending the preventable deaths of mothers, new-

born babies and children by 2030. Supporting comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights is fundamental for gender equality: it ensures that all women and girls have control over their own lives and bodies.

One of the themes for this year's International Women's Day is "Choose to Challenge". As we look to a post-pandemic world, we need to ensure that we build back better and more inclusively. We can only fully achieve this if we challenge gender inequality, and put gender equality at the centre of all we do.

At the OSCE, this includes fully implementing the Women, Peace and Security agenda, ensuring women are fully, equally and meaningfully included in peace processes and in conflict prevention, and enabling women's economic empowerment. It also means calling out stereotypes and harmful behaviours.

Over the last week, we've focussed on some of these areas. Today I want to speak on two additional ones – intersectionality, and building a resilient future.

Women and girls not only experience inequality and discrimination because of their gender. This can also be compounded by intersecting factors – such as age, ethnicity, sexuality, religion or belief, and many others. To ensure that all women and girls are free from discrimination and violence, and are able to reach their full potential, it is essential to build intersectional approaches into gender equality.

As we look to build a resilient post-pandemic future, one of the immediate challenges we face is that of climate change.

In our COP26 presidency, we will champion inclusivity. We want to see all countries stepping up their commitments to centre gender equality in climate action and finance. The inclusion of diverse views enables innovative solutions and drives better climate outcomes. It can catalyse greater economic opportunities for individuals and communities, improved health and well-being and better management of natural resources. The full, meaningful and equal participation of women in national and local level climate policy development is vital to achieving climate goals. And there is evidence of better outcomes when women are brought into adaptation and resilience action. The lack of deaths following Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua has been ascribed to women's involvement in preparedness education and their monitoring of the hurricane early warning system.

International Women's Day is not just a day. It is about the actions we take every day to ensure the equal rights of all women and girls.

Improving educational outcomes for learners with specific learning difficulties

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