

British Army trains 500th Somali soldier in infantry skills

The British Army has trained its 500th Somali soldier in the essential infantry skills they need to combat armed groups and ensure security and stability in the country. The latest batch of 113 troops marked the end of their training with a ceremony in Baidoa, Somalia on 31 December.

The eight-week Company Collective Training course is designed to prepare officers and soldiers from the Somali National Army (SNA) to conduct security operations in the country's South West State, countering the threat from Al-Shabaab and other jihadist and criminal organisations. The 26-man British training team from 2nd Battalion, Princess of Wales's Royal Regiment taught students skills including marksmanship, patrolling, medical aid and counter improvised explosive device (IED) techniques.

On completion of the course, soldiers were provided with uniforms and equipment which, when combined with their training, will allow them to operate much more effectively. The contingent are the fifth Somali company trained by Britain since the course was rolled out in the country in September 2019. The UK has also provided the SNA with military vehicles to support security operations and a new barracks in Baidoa that can accommodate 450 troops.

Minister for the Armed Forces James Heapey said:

This milestone shows Britain's ongoing commitment to help Somalia provide security and stability for its people, while combating terrorist groups that threaten the UK's interests at home and abroad.

The United Kingdom and our Armed Forces will continue to support Somalia, with plans to double the number of troops trained under this scheme in 2021.

Ben Fender OBE, British Ambassador to Somalia, said:

The UK remains fully committed to training the Somali National Army in Baidoa. In September, we ran a course for headquarters staff in how to plan and run operations, and this week are graduating another infantry company (of 113 soldiers). We expect to train a new company around every eight weeks next year, and to complete our training of 8 Brigade by the end of 2021".

The graduation ceremony was attended by Brigadier General Mohammed Sheik Irow, Commander of SNA 60 Sector, and Lt Col Andy Wareing. Following a parade

and speeches, the two officers inspected the graduating soldiers and presented individual awards.

Lt Col Andy Wareing, SNA Training and Advisory Team (STAT) Commander, said:

I congratulate the soldiers from 60 Sector stood here today. They displayed impressive professionalism and commitment during eight weeks of tough training and are well prepared for the challenges that lay ahead.

I would also like to thank their Somali and British instructors, whose relentless pursuit of excellence set a fine example to the soldiers. We look forward to the next Company Collective Training course which starts in January 2021.

The milestone graduation of the 500th soldier from the course underlines the UK's commitment to Somalia's longer-term security, with plans to train five more companies comprising around 600 troops in 2021.

Over 1,750 officers and soldiers have attended various military courses at the British-funded training centre in Baidoa.

It follows an announcement in September 2020 that the British Army had trained the first Brigade Headquarters for a generation in Somalia. A total of 19 SNA officers attended the course – adapted to ensure it could take place in accordance with COVID force health protection measures – which covered planning and delivery of stabilisation operations and prepared the officers to work alongside international partners to deliver security for the Somali people.

Lt Ibrahim Madkus Abdurahman of SNA 60 Sector, said:

The Brigade Staff Course gave me the tools to plan operations, and the Company Collective Training course gives our soldiers the skills to conduct those operations.

The UK Minister for Africa, James Duddridge MP, recently underlined Britain's continued commitment to Somalia with a new support package worth £21.8 million. The package included £1.6 million to counter the threat from roadside bombs, and a further £3.37 million for the Somali Security Forces engaged in joint operations with the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM).

Government safeguards vital ferry services

- the government announces £6.5 million to keep key ferry services running between Isle of Wight and mainland
- the vital transport link helps support jobs, ensures islanders can access key medical services and essential supplies like food and medicine
- £21.2 million has now been provided to keep lifeline ferry services running since the start of the pandemic

This funding will help ensure these communities continue to have access to vital services such as medical care on the mainland. They will also ensure key supplies of food and medicine are delivered, as well as continuing to support jobs on the island.

Ferry services play an important role for the island's 141,000 residents, providing essential supplies and access to critical services in mainland hospitals such as Southampton and Portsmouth, including cancer care, dialysis and Covid-19 emergency care, as well as providing crucial links for essential travel.

This funding builds on the £10.5 million announced in the Spring for these services and those in the Isles of Scilly.

This is in addition to the temporary suspension of competition law to allow ferry operators to work together to continue to run essential services despite reduced usage during the pandemic, maintaining a vital route for those who cannot work from home and those needing medical treatment.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Steve Barclay, said:

These ferry services are essential to everyday life on the Isle of Wight, and this further package of funding will help ensure residents can continue to access healthcare and essential goods and services.

It's vital no community or region is left behind as we fight the Coronavirus pandemic and build back better.

Sarah Williams, Associate Director of Research & Improvement at Solent NHS, said:

The commitment of Hovertravel and other carriers to continue their service across the Solent has been a lifeline to the NHS and other communities through the pandemic – myself and colleagues (including the ambulance service) have been able to support the pandemic

response across Hampshire & The IOW, the resource supply chain has been maintained, and patients have been able to access the critical services that they need.

Without their support and service, there is no doubt that the quality of services both on the Island and the mainland would have been severely compromised, and patients would not have received treatment and care that they needed. Within the NHS and care system, we consider Hovertravel, Wightlink and Red Funnel part of our critical infrastructure and have been struck by the extra efforts they've gone to in supporting us in a COVID safe manner. The adaptability, positivity and cheer that they do this with is something that we won't ever forget and for which we are extremely grateful.

Maritime Minister Robert Courts said:

We took immediate action at the start of the pandemic to protect these vital routes, keeping the services people depend on running between the Isle of Wight and the mainland, and protecting jobs.

This additional funding will continue this essential support for local transport operators, ensuring people can access medical care as well as other crucial services.

So far the government has invested over £12 billion to keep public transport services across England running during the pandemic in order to support the economic recovery and help frontline NHS staff and other key workers get to work. This investment to keep the Isle of Wight's ferry services running to the mainland is the latest in this support to keep the UK connected.

The government continues to work closely with industry leaders and operators across the transport sector to provide them with the support they need.

Further information

The government is providing up to £6.5 million to support lifeline operators servicing the Isle of Wight. The funding will be available to support operators costs on five lifeline routes between November 2020 and March 2021.

[Defence scientists ramp up their support to the Covid-19 pandemic](#)

Scientists from Dstl have been working tirelessly since the start of the pandemic to support a whole host of government agencies and civilian authorities.



British Army Royal Engineers deliver Covid-19 tests to European lorry drivers on the M20 in Kent, to enable the drivers to make the border crossing back into mainland Europe.

Recently, Dstl experts were called on by the MOD's Standing Joint Command (SJC) to provide short notice analytical support to the Dover crisis between Christmas and New Year, by helping the military and the police clear the backlog of heavy goods vehicles and their drivers. Dstl – the science inside UK defence and security – provided information to aid effective queuing and Covid-19 testing strategies which enabled a rapid return to normality.

As the current vaccine is rolled out, a number of scientists and technicians have been building data science and computing models for the NHS England IT system to tackle a range of vaccine related challenges, from vaccine population estimation to vaccine phasing and regional planning tools.

Dstl's Dr Kit Waterman, said:

It has been a privilege to contribute to one of the nation's largest logistical feats at this critical time. Modelling the phasing and delivery of the vaccine has proved an intellectually challenging and rewarding experience, and the opportunity to work with colleagues from across Dstl has really brought home the versatility and quality of skills developed through the delivery of science and technology support to UK defence.

Dstl's work has been crucial in both the response and building up of national and international scientific understanding of Covid-19. 180 defence scientists are currently working on multiple assignments, with more than 300 scientists in total who have worked on hundreds of Covid support areas. These include supporting the safety guidance for military personnel, ensuring supply chains for military equipment can operate, through to providing scientific support to a number of agencies, including the NHS, Public Health England, the Department for Health and Social Care, as well as the Government Office for Science (GO-Science) and the Joint Biosecurity Centre.

Dstl's Chief Executive Gary Aitkenhead said:

Our people are carrying out some outstanding work, including helping to make sure that defence maintains its operational output during the pandemic. Dstl has helped to widen the Government's scientific understanding on the spread of the pandemic, we've supported the national health response and are helping to increase the understanding of the virus. It is a truly national and global effort and Dstl is a critical part of that.

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[Education Secretary launches review of children's social care](#)

A wholesale independent review of children's social care will set out to radically reform the system, improving the lives of England's most vulnerable children so they experience the benefits of a stable, loving home.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson will today (Friday 15 January) launch the review which aims to raise the bar for vulnerable children across the country, delivering on a 2019 manifesto commitment that pledged to look at the care system to make sure children and young adults get the support they need.

In a speech to children's charities and sector organisations, the Education Secretary will also announce that he has appointed Josh MacAlister to lead the review.

A former teacher, Mr MacAlister founded the social work charity Frontline in 2013. He will step down from his role as Chief Executive to lead the review.

The review will reshape how children interact with the care system, looking at the process from referral through to becoming looked after. It will address major challenges such as the increase in numbers of looked after children, the inconsistencies in children's social care practice, outcomes across the country, and the failure of the system to provide enough stable homes for children.

Running throughout the review will be the voices and experiences of children, young people or adults who have been looked-after, or who have received help or support from a social worker. Their experiences will be considered and reflected sensitively and appropriately, with their views included in full in the work.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson will say:

We have known for some time that despite the best efforts of hardworking and dedicated social workers, the children's social care system is not delivering a better quality of life and improved outcomes for those it is designed to help.

This review will be bold, wide-ranging and will not shy away from exposing problems where they exist. Under Josh MacAlister's leadership, it will benefit from his understanding of the challenges facing the system and his experience of improving outcomes for children and young people.

It is part of the golden thread that runs through everything we are doing to level up society, especially for those who are too often forgotten or marginalised. It is going to help us raise the bar for these vulnerable children, it's going to help us improve their life prospects and most importantly, it's going to help give them the chance to achieve their potential and not be held back from the futures they deserve.

During the virtual launch event today (Friday), Josh MacAlister will launch a 'Call for Advice' to help shape the early work of the review and invite applications for an 'Experts by Experience' group to advise him on how to include the voices of people with a 'lived experience' of the children's social care system. The review will consult widely and bring in a broad range of expertise.

Chair of the Review Josh MacAlister will say:

If 2020 showed us the grit, commitment and creativity of social workers, teachers and other professionals, then 2021 is our chance to think afresh about how we support children without the safety, stability and love that many of us take for granted.

This review will listen deeply and think boldly. That is why I am recruiting for an 'Experts by Experience' Group that will direct an ambitious effort to hear the diverse experiences of children and families who have had social workers. I also need advice and challenge as we start this review, which is why I'm launching a Call for Advice.

Deep down I think many of those working in the children's social care system and certainly many of those who have experience of it, know that radical change is needed. My commitment is that this review will deliver a wide-ranging plan to extend the joy, growth and safety of childhood and the esteem, love and security of family life to all children.

The Review will address the clear need for change that supports children to achieve their potential. Children who have been in care comprise 25% of the homeless and 24% of the prison population. Over a third of care leavers (39%) are not in education, employment or training, compared to 13% of all 19-21-year-olds and just 13% progressed to Higher Education by age 19 compared to 43% of all other pupils.

In addition, statistics published today revealed the number of serious incident notifications between April and September 2020. Every death or harm of a child is tragic and we are working to understand the impact of COVID on the nature of serious incidents. This data will provide important information to the care review to help address major challenges.

The Department for Education will publish terms of reference for the review, setting out the themes and questions that will be addressed and how it will respond to the changing needs of children in care or at risk of going into care, especially given the impact of the pandemic.

These will include how to improve accountability for those responsible for children's outcomes, how to ensure children have a positive experience of care, and how to support and strengthen families – helping children stay safely with their families where possible.

The Education Secretary will also announce today that the Adoption Support Fund will continue beyond March 2021, helping new adoptive and special guardianship families overcome challenges through therapies like family support sessions, or music and play activities. Nearly 64,000 families have benefitted from the fund since it was launched in 2015.

It builds on the government's commitment to levelling up across the country, starting with children and families – particularly the most vulnerable – to reduce the impacts and costs to both the children themselves and society.

The review of children's social care builds on recent work from the Department of Education to support the most vulnerable children in society, including an investment of almost £4.4 million to extend Covid-19 response programmes run by major children's charities aimed at reaching 'hidden' children, as well as setting out plans to create a National Centre for Family Hubs that will improve families' access to vital services across the country.

There was also confirmation in November's Spending Review of an additional £24 million investment in 2021-22 to expand capacity within secure children's homes, as well as £165 million funding for the Government's Troubled Families programme.

The Government will also respond to the consultation on unregulated provision, where the views of the sector and care-experienced young people were sought on banning the placement of children under the age of 16 in this provision and introducing national standards for provision for 16 and 17-year-olds.

Citizen Space Survey – National Strategy for Disabled People

The Disability Unit in the Cabinet Office is working with government colleagues, disabled people, disabled people's organisations, charities and businesses to develop and deliver a National Strategy for Disabled People. We intend to publish the Strategy in spring 2021.

Despite the unprecedented challenge we face as a nation, this government is committed to delivering an ambitious National Strategy for Disabled People with expert advice and the lived experience of disabled people at its heart.

The Strategy will make practical changes to policies which strengthen disabled people's ability to participate fully in society and will place fairness at the heart of government work on disability, to level up opportunity so everyone can reach their potential and participate in life in this country.

We want to place the lived experiences of disabled people at the centre of our approach, as well as views from people across the country including those caring for and related to disabled people, as well as the general public.

Today, we are launching a public survey to gather views. This survey continues the engagement that was carried out across government throughout 2020, and continues to be this year. It includes engagement nationally and across the regions with a diverse network of stakeholders, including leading charities, disabled people's organisations and individuals from all parts of society that are affected by disability.

The survey is hosted on Citizen Space. If you share your views by 13th February, your views will inform the development of the National Strategy for Disabled People, but thereafter we will continue to listen. The survey will remain open until 23rd April, and your views will be used to inform the delivery of the plans we set out.

The survey, hosted on Citizen Space, is fully accessible to ensure as many people as possible have their voices heard. It is available in Easy Read, BSL and written responses can be sent to: DUCitizenspace@cabinetoffice.gov.uk.

Read our [privacy notice](#).

If you would like to know more about the National Strategy for Disabled People, follow the [Disability Unit](#) on Twitter and sign up to the [mailing list](#).