

Royal Navy warship sails into Arctic Circle for High North operation

Once again demonstrating the UK's commitment to the High North after leading a multi-national task group into the region in September, the Royal Navy has sailed above the Scandinavian countries into the North Cape.

By successfully operating in the challenging sub-zero conditions, the warship gained valuable experience of operating in the icy High North environment and further enhanced the UK's cold weather capability.

Minister for the Armed Forces James Heappey said:

The High North and Arctic region is vitally important to our security of the UK, as well as some of our closest Allies in Scandinavia, the Baltic Region and northern Europe.

Deployments such as this, as well as our active engagement in the Northern Group and leadership of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF), demonstrate to our allies and adversaries alike that the UK will be forward-leaning in supporting the security and stability of the region.

On approach to the Arctic Circle, Type 23 frigate HMS Lancaster took the opportunity to gain valuable training experience alongside the Norwegian Navy – one of the UK's closest partners in the region. The Norwegian warship HNoMS Fridtjof Nansen joined HMS Lancaster for a passing exercise that allowed both NATO navies to further boost their cooperation capability, following previous shared activity in the region earlier this year.

The operation, entirely conducted in international waters and in a responsible manner, demonstrated the freedom of navigation on the high seas provided by the rules-based international system. This was also the case in September, when Type 23 frigate HMS Sutherland, supported by RFA Tidespring, commanded a task group comprising Norwegian frigate HNoMS Thor Heyerdahl and the United States Navy's destroyer USS Ross.

Norway is a fellow member of the Joint Expeditionary Force (JEF); the UK-led high-readiness force of northern European nations that is capable of countering hybrid and conventional threats, as well as the Northern Group; a UK initiative formed of 12 nations aimed at providing effective defence and security cooperation in the region.

Commander William Blackett, the Commanding Officer of HMS Lancaster, said:

For HMS Lancaster, this short operation was a great way to close out a challenging year of trials and training. The Queen's Frigate and her fine company have come a long way since emerging from refit – we are back where we belong on the front line and ready for the next task.

Through such groups, the UK is committed to working with Allies to upholding the security of the High North and Arctic and recent deployments ensure that our ships and people are ready and able to operate in the region. Changes to the Arctic landscape wrought by declining sea ice levels open up new trade routes and raise the risk of economic competition and states looking to monopolise the region – sharpening the need for the UK's Armed Forces to remain ready to respond to any potential instability.

Response to media coverage of the UK government's procurement of the Moderna vaccine

Front page articles in The Guardian and Metro today (16 November) regarding the UK government's procurement of the Moderna vaccine are entirely misleading.

It is inaccurate to say that Britain is “back of the queue” for vaccines, or there was a scramble to secure access to Moderna’s vaccine.

Firstly, if the Moderna vaccine is approved by our regulators, it will be available to the UK in spring 2021 at the earliest – the same timetable as other countries in Europe.

Secondly, the UK was already in advanced discussions with Moderna for some time to procure 5 million doses of their vaccine. Yesterday we were able to finalise that agreement following the publication of their positive Phase III results.

As Moderna is currently scaling up their European supply chain, their vaccine was never going to be available in the UK before spring next year – no matter when we ordered it.

Thirdly, the UK is one of the first countries in Europe to sign a deal with Moderna. Furthermore, the UK was also the first country in the world to sign a binding agreement for the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine in July 2020.

The EU are yet to formally sign a deal with either developer. If we had joined the EU vaccine programme, the UK would not have secured doses from

either Pfizer/BioNTech or Moderna at this stage.

Finally, the UK will be one of the first countries in the world to receive the vaccine being developed by the University of Oxford and AstraZeneca, of which we have ordered 100 million doses – if it meets robust standards of safety and effectiveness.

The UK has now secured access to 355 million doses from seven different vaccine developers, more per head than almost any other country. This includes 40 million doses of Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine, which is expected to begin delivery as early as December 2020, if approved by our regulators.

The government, through the work of the Vaccine Taskforce, has put the UK in an extremely strong position if and when a vaccine meets robust standards of safety and effectiveness.

Read our full [announcement around securing 5m doses of the Moderna vaccine](#), as well as our [response to the Pfizer vaccine data](#).

Christmas and New Year closures for courts and tribunals 2020

News story

Details of which courts and tribunals will be closed over the Christmas holiday.



Crown Courts, magistrates' courts, County and Family Courts, the Royal Courts of Justice and the Rolls Building, and tribunals will close over the Christmas period, although some emergency courts may operate over the holiday on these days. Please check before travelling. See [Find a court or tribunal](#) for details.

The holiday dates for 2020 are:

- Thursday 24 December 2020
- Friday 25 December 2020
- Monday 28 December 2020
- Friday 1 January 2021

Offices in Scotland will be closed on:

- Friday 25 December 2020
- Monday 28 December 2020
- Friday 1 January 2021
- Monday 4 January 2021

Any hearings that do take place over the Christmas break will either take place in person, via video or telephone. Your hearing notice will confirm this if your hearing is taking place. See our full information on [attending a hearing during the coronavirus pandemic](#).

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Self Assessment customers warned about scammers posing as HMRC

Self Assessment customers should be alert to criminals claiming to be from HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC).

As the department issues thousands of SMS messages and emails as part of its annual Self Assessment tax return push, HMRC is warning customers completing their returns to take care to avoid being caught out by scammers. The annual tax return deadline is on 31 January 2021.

The department knows that fraudsters use calls, emails or texts to contact customers. In the last 12 months, HMRC has responded to more than 846,000 referrals of suspicious HMRC contact from the public, and reported over 15,500 malicious web pages to internet service providers to be taken down. Almost 500,000 of the referrals from the public offered bogus tax rebates.

Many scams target customers to inform them of a fake 'tax rebate' or 'tax refund' they are due. The imposters use language intended to convince them to hand over personal information, including bank details, in order to claim the 'refund'. Criminals will use this information to access customers' bank accounts, trick them into paying fictitious tax bills, or sell on their personal information to other criminals.

HMRC's Interim Director General for Customer Services, Karl Khan, said:

We know that criminals take advantage of the Self Assessment deadline to panic customers into sharing their personal or financial details and even paying bogus 'tax due'.

If someone calls, emails or texts claiming to be from HMRC, offering financial help or asking for money, it might be a scam. Please take a moment to think before parting with any private information or money.

Pauline Smith, Head of [Action Fraud](#), said:

Criminals are experts at impersonating organisations that we know and trust. We work closely with HMRC to raise awareness of current scams and encourage people to report any suspicious calls or messages they receive, even if they haven't acted on them, to the relevant channels.

This information is crucial in disrupting criminal activity and is already helping HMRC take down fraudulent websites being used to facilitate fraud.

It's important to remember if you're contacted out of the blue by someone purporting to be from HMRC asking for your personal or financial details, or offering you a tax rebate, grant or refund, this could be a scam.

Do not respond, hang up the phone, and take care not to click on any links in unexpected emails or text messages. You should contact HMRC directly using a phone number you've used before to check if the communication you have received is genuine.

If you've been the victim of fraud, contact your bank immediately and please [report it to Action Fraud online](#) or by calling 0300 123 2040.

HMRC is also warning the public to be aware of websites that charge for government services – such as call connection sites – that are in fact free or charged at local call rates. Other companies charge people for help getting 'tax refunds'. One way to safely claim a tax refund for free is to log into your [Personal Tax Account](#).

HMRC has a dedicated Customer Protection team that identifies and closes down scams but asks the public to recognise the signs to avoid becoming a victim. HMRC regularly publishes examples of new scams on GOV.UK to help customers recognise phishing emails and bogus contact by email, text or phone.

Ways to spot a tax scam

It could be a scam if it:

- is unexpected
- offers a refund, tax rebate or grant
- asks for personal information like bank details
- is threatening
- tells you to transfer money

Self Assessment customers can complete their tax return online and [help and support](#) is available on GOV.UK.

To protect against identity fraud customers must verify their identity when accessing HMRC's online services. They must have two sources of information including:

- credit reference agency data
- tax credits
- P60/payslip
- UK Passport

Further information

In the 12 months to October 2020, HMRC:

- responded to 846,435 referrals of suspicious HMRC contact from the public. More than 495,937 of these offered bogus tax rebates
- responded to 306,219 reports of phone scams, an increase of 47% on the previous 12 months. In October 2020, HMRC received reports of 44,543 phone scams
- worked with the telecoms industry and Ofcom to remove more than 3,387 phone numbers being used to perpetrate HMRC-related phone scams
- reported 15,518 malicious web pages to internet service providers to be taken down

If you're concerned about falling victim to a potential scam, remember:

Stop:

- take a moment to think before parting with your information or money
- don't give out private information or reply to text messages, and don't download attachments or click on links in texts or emails you weren't expecting

Challenge:

- it's ok to reject, refuse or ignore any requests – only criminals will try to rush or panic you
- read about [avoiding scams](#) on GOV.UK: information on how to recognise genuine HMRC contact and avoid and report scams

Protect:

- forward suspicious emails claiming to be from HMRC to phishing@hmrc.gov.uk and texts to 60599.

- contact your bank immediately if you think you've fallen victim to a scam, and report it to [Action Fraud](#)

UK appoints champion to spur business on to net zero emissions

The Prime Minister has appointed Andrew Griffith MP as the UK's Net Zero Business Champion to support the country's business community to make credible plans to net zero by 2050 or earlier and showcase the UK's place as a global leader in tackling climate change.

With the UK committed to build back greener from the coronavirus pandemic and with only one year to go until the COP26 summit is held in Glasgow, the role of the Net Zero Business Champion has never been more crucial.

In his new role Mr Griffith will work closely with Business Secretary and COP26 President Alok Sharma to support as many UK businesses as possible to commit to net zero targets.

Over the next year, Mr Griffith will play a vital role in harnessing the potential of British firms as they launch new products, attract new investment and create new jobs.

Business and Energy Secretary and COP26 President Alok Sharma said:

I am very pleased to welcome Andrew Griffith today as our UK Net Zero Business Champion. His wealth of experience in business will be invaluable in supporting companies to embrace the opportunities of the green industrial revolution.

I look forward to working with Andrew in our efforts to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 and build back greener from the coronavirus pandemic.

UK Net Zero Business Champion, Andrew Griffith said:

I am delighted to have been appointed as the UK's Net Zero Business Champion. Business has a central role to play in making a successful transition to a low carbon economy.

Our global leadership on climate change can open up new large and attractive sectors in the world economy in which British businesses will be well placed to succeed.

Today's announcement follows [last week's appointment of Anne-Marie Trevelyan](#) as the UK's International Champion on Adaptation and Resilience for the COP26 Presidency.

Andrew Griffith served as the Prime Minister's Chief Business Adviser between July and December 2019. He was elected the Member of Parliament (MP) for Arundel and South Downs at the 2019 general election and is a member of the House of Commons Science & Technology Select Committee, excusing himself from BEIS related matters.

Mr Griffith served on Sky Group plc's Board of Directors from 2008-19 as Chief Operating Officer and previously Chief Financial Officer. Throughout his tenure at Sky, the company was a leader in taking action on climate and the environment attaining carbon neutral status back in 2006. He is also a former Senior Independent Non-Executive Director of Just Eat plc.

Andrew Griffith studied Law at Nottingham University and is a qualified chartered accountant.