

Coronavirus (COVID-19): letter to councils about extending the statutory audit deadlines for 2019 to 2020

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Puma helicopter performs first island medical evacuation

An RAF Puma helicopter based at Kinloss has supported the NHS in Scotland with the first transfer of a critically ill patient from the Isle of Arran.

Three Pumas are currently based at Kinloss Barracks in Scotland as part of a new Aviation Task Force which was set up to support the government's response to coronavirus.

The crew were called at 0100 on Wednesday to support the transfer of a critically ill patient from the Isle of Arran to the University Hospital Crosshouse in Kilmarnock after the patient showed severe symptoms of coronavirus. The three-person helicopter crew flew to Arran, where they landed at Knockenkelly and met the emergency medical care team on site.

UK Government minister for Scotland Douglas Ross said:

"I would like to wish the patient a speedy recovery and thank the team from Kinloss Barracks who were involved in the airlift. This is another example of the fantastic effort the UK's Armed Forces are providing to support patients across the UK and help health professionals tackle coronavirus."

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

"Today's medical evacuation is a great example of the UK Armed Forces' ability to support our most remote communities across the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. I am proud of the skill and professionalism of our personnel and their support to colleagues in the NHS and social care."

The Scottish Ambulance Service has significantly increased capacity for airlifting patients off the islands and to ensure that any patients from our island communities, including those with coronavirus symptoms, can be transported to receive the appropriate healthcare when they need it. This includes the use of SAS resources, ferries, maritime coastguard, Logan Air and the armed forces.

Squadron Leader Johnny Longland, Detachment Commander said:

“Just over 3 hours after the crew received the call, the patient had travelled 162 nautical miles and was in the Intensive Care Unit. The training that we conducted with the emergency medical teams across Scotland ensured that, when the time came, we were all ready for a quick and smooth transfer of a patient.

“We’re extremely proud to be able to help the NHS in Scotland and it’s rewarding to see the team pull together so quickly and effectively when they were needed. Our thoughts are with the patient and their family and we wish them a swift and full recovery.”

On its arrival on the Isle of Arran, the aircraft temporarily shut down while the emergency medical team attended to the patient and prepared them for transfer.

The Scottish Ambulance Service Emergency Medical Retrieval team travelled on the aircraft with the patient and met their Special Operations Response Team and Divisional crew on landing for onward transfer to hospital.

Using procedures previously rehearsed with the emergency care teams, the patient was then swiftly loaded onto the aircraft and transported to the Intensive Care Unit in Crosshouse Hospital, Kilmarnock. The patient is now receiving the enhanced care required to support their recovery.

The aircraft crew were wearing PPE for the duration of the flight and both the crew and aircraft underwent strict decontamination procedures on their return to Kinloss.

The COVID Aviation Task Force has helicopters on standby across the UK to support the government’s response to coronavirus. The RAF Puma, Army Air Corps Wildcat, RAF Chinook and Royal Navy Merlin provide essential medical evacuation capabilities as well as the ability to swiftly deliver essential equipment and personnel to where they are needed across the nation.

[Positive progress in the Great Lakes](#)

Region must continue despite Covid-19

Thank you very much, Mr President, and let me join others in thanking Special Envoy Xia Huang for his briefing to the Council today. It's also been good to hear such broad consensus in the Council, particularly on the impact of COVID-19 situation across the region and, as others have, the elections in Burundi.

First, on COVID. As detailed in the Special Envoy's briefing, it's really encouraging to see renewed regional momentum towards the implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework (PSCF) by the countries in the Great Lakes region, particularly over the last year or so. But hopefully we can continue to capitalise on this. But as others have said, we are meeting during uncertain times because of the COVID-19 pandemic, which will undoubtedly create challenges for maintaining this momentum. The pandemic demonstrates once again the necessity for really effective regional cooperation. And I was really glad to hear the Special Envoy speak about his role in engaging countries to try and address the challenges of COVID together. I think this will be really critical. So we encourage the Special Envoy and his team to consider innovative ways to support the Great Lakes region to ensure there is continued progress in this period. The threat of the pandemic might engender cooperation in combating COVID across the region, in line with the spirit of the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire.

And I was very glad also to hear the Special Envoy talk about the way that he was seeing real progress, not just in the main conflict areas, but in the states across the region, trying to do more to enhance their security cooperation as well.

I think the other thing we need to think about in this format, is how we come together at some point to begin to analyse the impact that COVID is having, and what we can do to address some of the longer term impacts that it will have on regional stability and also on the economic and humanitarian situation.

Looking at the security situation specifically, we also think it's critical to continue to address the underlying security challenges across the Great Lakes. We've seen in recent weeks increased reporting of cross-border incursions, as others have mentioned, and also other security spikes across the region. I think this underscores the need for full and swift implementation of the PSCF. And it was very good to hear Special Envoy Xia's list of priorities focusing on advancing regional security cooperation, including military and non-military measures.

I think while we commend Special Envoy Xia's efforts to promote economic integration, we just want to reiterate here that economic initiatives will only be successful if we are simultaneously tackling those underlying drivers of the conflict: challenging aspects such as the illicit cross-border trade of natural resources and the war economy. Those things should not be

overlooked.

I want to touch briefly on Eastern DRC. The UK encourages Special Envoy and his team to work closely with MONUSCO to develop a joint strategy on the conflict in Eastern DRC. And we think the Special Envoy can provide an important link between MONUSCO's efforts within the DRC and the regional efforts that need to be built around that. This will be critical to ending the conflict.

We had hoped to receive more information in this briefing on the status of the UN Peace and Security strategy for the Great Lakes region. This has been under development for quite some time now and we'd be grateful for more information from the Special Envoy, including whether MONUSCO and the international community will be consulted on the strategy relatively soon.

Finally, Mr President, the UK is concerned about the electoral environment surrounding Burundi's May elections. It's vital that all political parties are given equal access to the media and that special measures are implemented by the Government in response to COVID-19 to ensure that the elections are fair, in this regard.

Thank you very much, Mr President, and thank you, Special Envoy Xia.

How we set standards across government

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Minister for Women and Equalities Liz Truss sets out priorities to Women and Equalities Select Committee

Thank you to the Committee for convening today.

As you rightly say, the work of the Government Equalities Office has been very focused on Covid, making sure we're dealing with the immediate equalities issues during the crisis, but also making sure that the recovery we're planning benefits all across our nation equally, which is a key part of the Government's levelling up agenda.

In terms of my work as Minister for Women and Equalities we have three key priorities.

First of all reshaping the Government Equalities Office and bringing it more closely together with the Cabinet Office units – so the Racial Disparity Unit and the Disability Unit – to create an equalities hub. My intention is to move the department physically, so that all of those people are sitting together. And also to bring the work more closely together. Because I think we need to move away from the idea that we're simply dealing with groups that need to be catered for and instead make sure that we're looking at individuals across the country and really identifying who are those most in need, where are the biggest barriers to success, and where are the unequal delivery of public services.

So I want the unit to become much more focused on analysing that data, looking at it very closely, and then working to a hub and spoke model with the rest of Government – so whether it's the Home Office on issues of crime, whether it's the Department of education on issues of education, implementing those policies, so that is the change that I am making to the Government Equalities Office, and indeed the whole equalities unit, and I am working very closely with Theo Agnew in the Cabinet Office to do that, because I want our policies to be focused around individual dignity, individual opportunity, and we need to look really at where the biggest barriers are.

And I would like to see us working more closely on issues like geography, so where are communities being held back, and also on issues on background, income, as well as issues of gender, race and disability too. So we have a much more holistic picture. So that's the overall direction I want to take the Government Equalities Office.

A particular focus is going to be women's economic empowerment, and I think this will be particularly important as we leave the immediate issues of Covid and then to the recovery., Of course we've had success in terms of getting more women employed ever before in the UK, but it's nevertheless the case that women are significantly behind comparative countries in terms of setting up businesses and entrepreneurship. We know that it would contribute 10% extra to GDP if women had the same levels of participation in entrepreneurship as men and one of the things we've done so far is we've hosted a major reception at Number 10 with women entrepreneurs and leading women to move that agenda forward.

I'm very pleased to say that as a result of the recent reshuffle we now have Kemi Badenoch supporting me as Equalities Minister, she's based at the Treasury, which is obviously extremely important in terms of that overall economic agenda, so that has been a major focus.

The other area we're focused on is our international work. We were planning to hold an international LGBT conference in May, regrettably that's had to be postponed due to coronavirus. We do want to hold that conference as soon as possible. We'd already made significant plans, with Nick Herbert to chair the conference, the theme of Safe To Be Me, that is very much about using the UK's strong record in terms of LGBT rights and human rights, to make that case across the globe, and make sure that wherever people live, wherever LGBT people live, they're safe to go about their daily business without fear of crime and harassment, and that is a very important priority. I've already participated in events, in fact in Tokyo, launching the Asian chapter of that initiative, and that's something we want to pursue further.

The final point I'd like to make, Madam Chairman, in this initial part, is on the issue of the Gender Recognition Act. We've been doing a lot of work internally, making sure we're in a position to respond to that consultation and launch what we propose to do on the future of the Gender Recognition Act. We will be in a position to do that by the summer, and there are three very important principles that I will be putting place.

First of all, the protection of single-sex spaces, which is extremely important.

Secondly making sure that transgender adults are free to live their lives as they wish without fear of persecution, whilst maintaining the proper checks and balances in the system.

Finally, which is not a direct issue concerning the Gender Recognition Act, but is relevant, making sure that the under 18s are protected from decisions that they could make, that are irreversible in the future. I believe strongly that adults should have the freedom to lead their lives as they see fit, but I think it's very important that while people are still developing their decision-making capabilities that we protect them from making those irreversible decisions. Of course some of these policies have been delayed, Chair, by the specific issues around Covid but I can assure you that alongside the Covid work, our officials continue to do those things to make them happen.