

News story: Armed Forces Minister confirms increase in support to Afghanistan

Speaking on his first visit to Afghanistan the Minister reaffirmed the UK's enduring commitment to the country.

Britain stepped up its support to Afghanistan this year, increasing by 50 the number of personnel in the country. They join personnel in country who are helping to train Afghan officers, advising the fledgling Afghan Air Force and working as advisors in the Afghan Security Ministries.

While UK and NATO combat operations drew to a close in 2014, Britain continues to support Afghanistan by training, advising and assisting the Afghan defence and security forces, as they continue to fight with increasing skill and capability. This year's increase in support brings the total number of the personnel committed to the operation to 500; Britain's second biggest overseas commitment after the campaign against Daesh.

During his visit, the Minister met with Afghan Cadet Behzad Hiedari, who won Sandhurst's Overseas Sword of Honour. The prestigious honour is awarded to the best overseas cadet in each year's class at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst. The award highlights the talent in Afghanistan's security forces, which are being developed by the UK and our NATO Allies and partners.

One way in which British personnel are helping to develop Afghanistan's security forces is through the Afghan National Officer Academy (ANAOA). Minister Penning visited the site during the visit and met with the UK personnel helping to 'mentor the mentors'. Just as Afghan forces are in the lead for the security of their country, so are their UK-mentored officers, who are helping to train their country's next generation of leaders.

Mike Penning meets with a British adviser to female Afghan instructors for female cadets at ANAOA

Armed Forces Minister Mike Penning said:

Britain has an enduring commitment to Afghanistan. This year we're stepping up our support to the country, and have deployed 50 extra personnel, some of whom I visited at the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, where the next generation of Afghan army leaders are being trained. The UK, along with our NATO Allies, is committed for the long term to developing the ever more capable Afghan National Security and Defence Forces to ensure Afghanistan is not a safe haven for terrorists.

Lunch with UK personnel who mentor Afghan trainers at the Academy

Since 2014, UK mentoring assistance has helped the ANA0A train over 1500 high quality officers.

The Government committed last year to provide £210 million to the Afghan security forces, until 2020, giving around £70 million a year.

Press release: UK's rarest freshwater fish caught on film for the first time

The film was shot on a remote controlled yellow submarine while assessing how much sediment is building up on the bottom of Derwentwater in Cumbria. [Watch it here](#)

Vendace (*coregonus albula*) is the UK's rarest freshwater fish and a relic of the ice age. Its UK habitat is in Derwentwater and like lamprey, Arctic charr, spined loach, allis shad, twaite shad and smelt, it is an international conservation priority.

The Environment Agency carries out regular surveys of water quality around the country and over the past five years has worked with farmers, businesses and water companies to improve and protect over 15,000km of rivers, lakes, coastal waters and bathing waters. England's rivers are the healthiest they've been for 20 years and salmon, sea trout and other wildlife have returned to many rivers for the first time since the industrial revolution.

Andy Gowans, Environment Agency fisheries specialist, said:

It was a unique moment to capture this iconic fish live on film. Seeing the vendace is a good indication of the health of the lake's water. Derwentwater is the only place these fish inhabit in the UK, so maintaining the quality of the water is vital for their survival.

Dr Ian Winfield, from the [Centre for Ecology & Hydrology](#), who leads the survey on Derwentwater and operated the remote-controlled yellow submarine, said:

As the day closed, I decided I would go out to the deepest part of the lake which is about 20 metres and drop the submarine in. I'm able to view the images from the submarine's filming live and was keen to see what fish showed up.

Although, the vendace came and went within in a matter of seconds, I knew it was a vendace. This was an amazing moment for a

scientist, I was not expecting to see one, never mind film one. I knew I had captured for the first time on film the elusive vendace species.

The Environment Agency and the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology plan to do further surveying later in the year using more advanced filming technology.

RAF Typhoons Monitor Russian Aircraft Carrier

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Typhoon aircraft from RAF Coningsby have been monitoring the Russian aircraft carrier, Admiral Kuznetsov, as it sails through UK waters on its way home to Russia from the Eastern Mediterranean.

The RAF aircraft have been part of a wider ongoing operation that is being conducted in conjunction with the Royal Navy and our NATO allies to monitor the Russian carrier and its accompanying vessels as it passes through the waters of Western Europe on its way home.



Wing Commander Stu Smiley, Officer Commanding Operations Wing RAF Coningsby said "Whilst the British public are familiar with our role escorting Russian long-range aviation, on this occasion we launched to monitor the Russian warships as they transit near to our sovereign waters".

The air operation was planned and is being controlled by the UK Joint Force Air Component, based at RAF High Wycombe. Air Vice Marshal Steve Shell is commanding the Air Operation and said: "The operation to escort the Russian Task Group is part of our routine activity to insure the integrity of UK airspace and waters; the air elements were smoothly and professionally coordinated by the UK JFAC."

The Kuznetsov was sent to the Eastern Mediterranean to participate in Russian military operations in Syria but suspended flying operations after two aircraft were lost in accidents. The aircraft carrier has now been ordered home following the end of operations against rebels in the Syrian city of Aleppo.

The Russian Carrier has been slowly steaming back to Russia and its passage through the English Channels in International shipping lanes is entirely routine. The Secretary of State for Defence, the Right Honourable Sir Michael Fallon MP, however, said: "We are man-marking these vessels every step of the

way around the UK as part of our steadfast commitment to keep Britain safe.”



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Major Role for RAF at World's Premier Air Combat Exercise

MAJOR ROLE FOR RAF AT WORLD'S PREMIER AIR COMBAT EXERCISE

The world's premier air combat exercise is underway in Nevada, with the Royal Air Force (RAF) playing a major role alongside American and Australian counterparts.

Set at Nellis Air Force Base, Red Flag pits 'Blue' coalition forces against hostile 'Red Force' aggressors, mirroring real-life threats in air-to-air, air-to-ground, space and cyber warfare.

Typhoons, from 6 Squadron, RAF Lossiemouth, are operating in a swing-role capacity, fighting their way into hostile airspace, launching precision strikes on ground targets and fighting their way out again.



The Typhoons have also worked with the US Air Force (USAF) F-35A Lightning II for the first time, and with USAF F-22 Raptors – hugely rewarding exposure to 5th Generation aircraft for RAF crews ahead of the F-35B's introduction into the RAF's combat inventory in 2018.

Air Control Centre are supporting RAF assets at Red Flag, helping control air battles from the ground and conducting their 'taxy to target' capability: taking aircraft taxiing at Nellis and guiding them through to dropping bombs on target.

Voyager, the RAF's 'petrol station in the sky', is taking part for the first time to provide a key air-to-air refuelling capability during the exercise, while a Sentinel and Rivet Joint are gathering intelligence and other mission-critical information.

Defence Secretary Sir Michael Fallon said: "The RAF is playing a major role alongside our greatest ally in the world's leading aerial combat training exercise.

“Britain’s pilots and aircrews will receive unparalleled training and an opportunity to sharpen the combat skills they are demonstrating every day in the fight against Daesh.

“Training alongside our US partners and other nations shows how the UK is stepping up internationally, ensuring maximum interoperability with our allies, and in doing so helping keep Britain safer and more secure.”



Group Captain Graham Pemberton, RAF Detachment Commander for the exercise, said: “Red Flag replicates truly challenging, high-end warfare – from realistic aerial combat to emerging cyber and space threats. It’s as close as we can get to the real thing.

“Testing ourselves against highly capable enemy aggressors is hugely beneficial and improves and readies our personnel – from pilots to those in crucial support roles – for real-world operations.

“It’s a privilege for us to work with our US Air Force and Royal Australian Air Force counterparts and to cement our relationships with them at an exercise of this scale.”

Wing Commander Billy Cooper, whose 6 Squadron Typhoons are taking part in Red Flag, said: “We flew eight Typhoons here from RAF Lossiemouth to take part with our US and Australian counterparts.



“One of our UK day jobs is protecting sovereign airspace through Quick Reaction Alert, but in Nevada we’ve been air-to-air fighting and carrying out strike missions.

“Red Flag’s threat replication is truly unique. We can simulate fighting our way into a target area through a high-threat environment, drop precision munitions on specific targets and then fight our way back out again.”

Red Flag’s live element takes place over the US Air Force’s premier military training area in Nevada; over 15,000 square miles of airspace and 2.9 million acres of land – an impossible scale to achieve in Europe.

The exercise runs until early February and marks the start of three months of RAF Typhoon activity in the US, with 6 Squadron participating in Red Flag, 2 Squadron taking over for Exercise Green Flag and 1 Squadron taking part in a tri-lateral exercise with the US and France.

Editor: Gavin Brown

Photographers: Sgt Neil Bryden and Cpl Graham Taylor

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News story: One Public Estate expands to help councils deliver 44,000 jobs and 25,000 homes

One Public Estate expands to help almost three quarters of councils to deliver 44,000 jobs and 25,000 homes through property.

The Cabinet Office and Local Government Association have today announced that a further 79 councils will join the One Public Estate (OPE) programme, bringing the total number of councils participating in OPE to 255 – almost three quarters of all councils in England.

£3.6 million has been allocated to councils across new and existing partnerships on the programme.

The latest funding round means that by 2019 to 20 the partnerships on OPE expect to:

- create 44,000 jobs
- release land for 25,000 homes
- raise £415 million in capital receipts from land and property sales
- cut running costs by £98 million

The funding will support public sector partnerships to work collaboratively on land and property initiatives, generating new jobs and homes, creating more joined up public services to local communities, and delivering savings for the taxpayer.

OPE remains firmly on track to achieve the ambition of 95% of councils on the programme by 2018, with 72% of councils across England now delivering through OPE.

Ben Gummer, Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General, said:

One Public Estate is not just about creating savings and collecting land receipts, it also enables the delivery of houses and jobs.

Through this groundbreaking programme, local councils can transform services, unlock significant local growth and crucial efficiency savings through smarter use of property and land.

Lord Porter, Chairman of the Local Government Association, said:

In the drive to get Britain building again it is encouraging to see

that over 70% of Councils have now joined the OPE Programme. These councils will strive to collaborate with government and wider public sector bodies to deliver much needed Housing and services at a local level.

Background

One Public Estate is a national programme initially launched in 2013. It is jointly delivered by the Government Property Unit within the Cabinet Office and the Local Government Association. It supports joint working across central and local government to use land and property to boost economic growth, unlock regeneration, and create more integrated public services. It encourages public sector partners to share buildings, transform services, reduce running costs, and release surplus and under-used land for development.

Partnerships joining the programme will receive funding and both practical and technical support from our team to help solve issues and deliver ambitious transformational projects.

Launched in 2013, One Public Estate has grown from the original pilot scheme of 12 councils to 264, all delivering ambitious projects to meet local needs.

Following on from the successful pilot stages, it was announced in the Autumn Statement 2015 that One Public Estate would receive £31 million to further expand the programme.

A further application window for councils wishing to join One Public Estate will be open in April 2017. To find out more about the programme, email onepublicestate@cabinetoffice.gov.uk.