

Arrival of first US F-35 aircraft marks major milestone for DIO upgrades at RAF Lakenheath

This is an important milestone both for the US Air Force personnel stationed at the Suffolk base, and for the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), which has been working to prepare the infrastructure that the state-of-the-art aircraft and their crews will require.

RAF Lakenheath, home of the US Air Force's 48th Fighter Wing, will boast two squadrons of F-35s as well as its existing F-15s, a familiar sight in the skies of Suffolk for a number of years. The 495th Fighter Squadron, nicknamed "Valkyries" was reactivated in October and will have approximately 60 personnel.

To allow for the increase in people and aircraft, the infrastructure at the base is being upgraded. This includes resurfacing the aircraft aprons for the F-15s as well as a new apron for the F-35s, building maintenance hangars, training facilities, storage areas and more.

DIO awarded the contract for the upgrade works to a joint venture of Kier and VolkerFitzpatrick, collectively known as KVF35, in November 2018, with construction beginning in July 2019.

A number of facilities have been completed, with others nearing completion or under construction. A project of this size requires a large and specialist workforce and on average there are between 500 and 600 people working on the project every day. Safety is a key priority for DIO and its contractors and the project recently reached the impressive milestone of 1 million hours worked without a reportable accident or injury under the RIDDOR (reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences) procedures.

The work has generated £83m of social value, far exceeding the £1m target. Of this, £39m social value has been generated over the last 12 months alone, despite the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, members of the programme have volunteered at events for the local community, ranging from tree planting to providing insight on working in construction at school careers events.

There has also been a benefit to the local area, with 36% of project costs being spent with local small and medium enterprises, surpassing the target of 30%.

RAF Lakenheath will be the first permanent international site for US Air Force F-35s in Europe and continues the base's long and proud history of supporting US Air Force capability in the UK. Co-locating US and UK F-35 capability in the UK will help strengthen the historic military ties between the two nations, as well as the partnership between the RAF and US Air Force.

DIO's Programme Director Steve Rix said:

The arrival of the first US F-35 at RAF Lakenheath is an exciting point for all involved at the base. This is a very large and complex programme, which has continued construction through Covid-19 while ensuring workers stayed safe, so it's great to see this very visible sign of progress.

Today we are seeing the first glimpse of the future of RAF Lakenheath when this project is complete and all of the F-35s are here.

However, our job is not yet done and we look forward to continuing to work with our American partners on this important project.

James Hindes, Managing Director for Strategic Projects & Growth, Kier Construction London, South & Strategic Projects, said:

We are extremely proud of our ongoing relationship with DIO and we're delighted to have been trusted to deliver the crucial infrastructure to create the first international base for the cutting-edge F-35 aircraft.

In addition to delivering this highly complex project, I'm delighted that we've also taken the opportunity to build a lasting legacy in the local area through actively supporting the local economy as well as volunteering in the wider community and we look forward to continuing our work at RAF Lakenheath.

Deon Scholtz, Operations Director for VolkerFitzpatrick, said:

It is fantastic to see the project reach this key milestone, with the arrival of the first F-35 aircraft. Improvements to the base's infrastructure are progressing well and the team is also undertaking regular social value initiatives, within the local community. I am delighted that VolkerFitzpatrick is able to support this significant moment at RAF Lakenheath.

The project is the first in a wider programme of work to support US Air Force operations in the UK, with more than US \$1-billion expected to be invested in the UK over the next seven to ten years.