

## [News story: Laser Directed Energy Weapon \(LDEW\) testing](#)

Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) scientists are conducting trials that will enable Dstl to characterise the effectiveness of Laser Directed Energy Weapon (LDEW), in support of the LDEW Capability Demonstrator. The programme will culminate in a technology demonstrator in 2019.

The goal of the programme is to demonstrate a standalone laser directed energy weapon system that is capable of acquiring, tracking and engaging aerial and surface targets at various ranges and in different weather conditions.

The project will enable the Ministry of Defence's (MOD) Dstl to advise the MOD on the future procurement programme requirements and to establish a road map to an in-service capability. If it is successful, the first laser weapons could come into service in the mid-2020s.

Watch the video of a test laser melting a mortar bomb.

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Minister for Defence Procurement, Harriet Baldwin has said:

“The UK has long enjoyed a reputation as a world leader in innovation and it is truly ground-breaking projects like the Laser Directed Energy Weapon which will keep this country ahead of the curve.

“The Defence Innovation Initiative and £800M Defence Innovation Fund aim to encourage imagination, ingenuity and entrepreneurship, in pursuit of maintaining a military advantage in the future.

“With a rising Defence budget, and a £178 billion equipment plan, our commitment to innovation will deliver a safer and more prosperous Britain.”

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## [News story: New route to provide better journeys in Somerset](#)

A new route to upgrade a major south-west road has been proposed today (28 March 2017) by Transport Secretary Chris Grayling.

The A358 between the M5 at Taunton and the A303 Southfields will be made into a dual carriageway, leading to quicker journeys for motorists.

Currently, the road is a mix of single and dual carriageway, leading to bottlenecks and congestion. It also carries more vehicles than it was designed for, causing further delays.

Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said:

We are spending £15 billion on upgrading our major roads – the biggest investment in a generation.

This latest announcement is the next stage in our commitment to deliver improvements to the south-west. The A358 is a key route between the south-west and London and provides a vital link to Somerset communities. A dual carriageway will help existing businesses thrive and create opportunities for new companies as well as boosting tourism.

The upgraded route is long overdue, but we are now taking action to cut congestion on the A358 to give motorists quicker, safer and more reliable journeys.

The government is also improving the nearby [A303 at Stonehenge](#) and between Sparkford and Ilchester.

Today, Highways England started its [consultation into the A358 upgrade](#). It will close on 20 May.

Jim O’Sullivan, chief executive of Highways England, said:

This scheme will take us a step closer to transforming the A303/A358 corridor into a new type of strategic road which is as safe and reliable as a motorway and where fast and reliable journeys are the norm.

Our consultation and programme of public exhibitions will give everyone a chance to hear more about the proposal and tell us what they think of our plans to deliver the scheme.

The route would see the existing road upgraded between Southfields and West Hatch, where it will split into a new dual carriageway linking with M5 at a new junction at Shoreditch.

A new junction on the M5 would help support major development opportunities south of Taunton.

Alongside the upgraded road will be enhanced provision for cyclists, equestrians and pedestrians.

This consultation is your opportunity to express your views on the proposals ahead of further development work.

A preferred route will be announced this winter, with work starting in spring 2020.

View the proposed route options at the following events:

<b>Date</b>	<b>Venue</b>	<b>Time</b>
Friday 7 April 2017	Hatch Beauchamp Village Hall, Chestnut View, Hatch Beauchamp, Taunton TA3 6TH	10:00am to 6.00pm
Saturday 8 April 2017	Taunton Racecourse, Orchard Portman, Taunton TA3 7BL	10:00am to 6.00pm
Monday 10 April 2017	Holiday Inn, Deane Gate Avenue, Somerset, UK TA1 2UA	12:00 to 8.00pm
Tuesday 11 April 2017	Monks Yard, Horton Cross Farm, Ilminster TA19 9PT	12:00 to 8.00pm
Monday 8 May 2017	Holiday Inn, Deane Gate Avenue, Somerset, UK TA1 2UA	10:00am to 5.00pm

Consultation materials will be available to view from 28 March until 20 May 2017 during normal opening hours at the following places:

- Taunton Deane Borough Council, The Deane House, Belvedere Rd, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 1HE
- Taunton Library, Paul Street, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 3XZ
- Somerset County Council, County Hall, Taunton, Somerset, TA1 4DY
- South Somerset District Council, Brympton Way, Yeovil, Somerset, BA20 2HT
- Ilminster Town Council, Council Offices/North St, Ilminster, Somerset, TA19 0DG

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## **Statement to Parliament: Secretary of State's Oral Statement on NI political situation**

Mr Speaker,

With permission I would like to make a statement on recent events in Northern Ireland.

Since the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 2 March I have been engaged in intensive talks with the political parties and the Irish Government, in line with the well-established three-stranded approach.

There has been one clear purpose, to re-establish an inclusive, devolved administration at Stormont in accordance with the 1998 Belfast Agreement and its successors.

Progress has been made on a number of issues.

These include on a budget, a Programme for Government and ways of improving transparency and accountability.

We have seen further steps forward on agreeing a way to implement the Stormont House Agreement legacy bodies to help provide better outcomes for victims and survivors of the troubles.

In addition progress was made around how the parties might come together to represent Northern Ireland in our negotiations to leave the EU, which is so important in the context of Article 50 being triggered tomorrow.

That said, it is also clear that significant gaps remain between the parties, particularly over issues surrounding culture and identity.

Throughout this process the Government has been active in making positive proposals to try and bridge those gaps and help the parties to move things forward.

In law, the period allowed to form an Executive from the date of the first sitting of the Assembly after an election is fourteen days.

That fourteen day period expired at 4pm yesterday with no agreement and therefore no Executive.

This is a source of deep disappointment and regret to me and many and I know there is widespread dismay across the country.

From all my extensive engagement across Northern Ireland with business, civil society and members of the public, I am in no doubt inclusive devolved government is what the overwhelming majority of the people want to see.

Working for them, delivering on their priorities and continuing the positive progress we have seen in Northern Ireland over recent years.

Devolved institutions up and running and serving the whole community.

Yet following the passing of yesterday's legal deadline, Northern Ireland has no devolved administration.

This also means that other elements of the Belfast Agreement, including the North-South Bodies, cannot operate properly.

The consequences of all of this are potentially extremely serious.

And the most immediate is the fact that we are rapidly approaching the point at which Northern Ireland will not have an agreed budget.

From tomorrow a civil servant, the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary, will exercise powers to allocate cash to Northern Ireland departments.

This is an interim measure designed to ensure services are maintained until such time as a budget is agreed.

We are keeping in close contact with the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service on these matters and I understand that the Department of Finance will be setting out more details today.

But let me be very clear.

This situation is not sustainable and beyond a short period of time will have an impact on public service.

What we are talking about here is the health service, schools, voluntary groups and services for the most vulnerable in society.

This isn't what people voted for on 2 March.

During the course of the past twenty four hours I have spoken to the leaders of the five main Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government.

I am encouraged that there remains a strong willingness to continue engaging in dialogue with a view to resolving outstanding issues and forming an Executive and that must absolutely remain a priority.

But the window of opportunity is short.

It is essential therefore that the intensity of discussions is stepped up with renewed intent and focus and I believe a positive outcome remains possible.

To that end I will continue over coming days to work closely with the Northern Ireland parties and the Irish Government as appropriate.

I will need to keep the situation under review.

But if these talks are successful, it would be my intention quickly to bring forward legislation after the Easter recess to allow an executive to be formed, avoiding a second Assembly election, for which I detect little public appetite.

I am also determined to take forward the legacy bodies in the Stormont House Agreement in accordance with our manifesto commitments.

I will be involving a range of interested parties, including the Victims Commissioner.

But in the absence of devolved government it is ultimately for the UK Government to provide for political stability and good governance.

We do not want to see a return to direct rule.

As our manifesto at the last election stated 'local policies and local services should be determined by locally elected politicians through locally accountable institutions'.

But should the talks fail in their objectives the Government will have to consider all options.

I therefore want to give the House notice that following the Easter recess as a minimum it would be my intention to bring forward legislation to set a regional rate to enable local councils to carry out their functions and to provide further assurance around the budget for Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker,

It is vital that devolved government, and all of the institutions under the successive agreements, is returned to Northern Ireland as soon as possible.

And the Government's unrelenting focus is on achieving that objective.

Northern Ireland needs strong devolved government.

To deliver for teachers, doctors and nurses, business, industry and the wider community.

To ensure that it plays a full role in the affairs of our United Kingdom, while retaining its strong relationship with Ireland.

And to continue the work of the past two decades to build stronger, peaceful and prosperous future for all.

That needs to be the focus of everyone as we approach the crucial next few days and weeks.

And I commend this statement to the House.

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## [News story: UK government ministers attend first maritime trade mission in China](#)

A first of its kind, 27 of the UK's leading maritime companies, including MJM Group and Survitec Group are expected to attend the forum which will include a UK maritime showcase.

With the UK maritime industry directly supporting 500,000 jobs and contributing £22.2 billion to UK GDP the visit will be an opportunity for the UK government to strengthen maritime trade links between the UK and China and establish new partnerships between UK and Chinese companies.

As the government's champion for the maritime sector, Shipping and Ports Minister John Hayes will lead a number of events at the forum including the visit on board RMS Queen Mary 2 which is in Shanghai and promoting UK excellence in the maritime industry.

The Department for International Trade is working with Maritime UK and Pudong local government to identify new maritime trade and investment opportunities for both the UK and China and, in partnership with Maritime UK, the Maritime Minister will take the opportunity to highlight the UK as the world's maritime centre providing a complete package for the industry's businesses.

Maritime trade is central to the Belt and Road Initiative and the UK strongly supports its vision of a more interconnected world. UK companies are already working with their Chinese counterparts to deliver Belt and Road Initiative projects in third countries.

International Trade Minister, Mark Garnier, said:

The UK's maritime industry is world leading, generating an impressive £22 billion for our economy. China has ambitious plans to develop its marine sector and UK businesses have the skills, expertise, people and infrastructure to help them achieve their objectives.

As the UK leaves the EU, we are determined to take advantage of the opportunities opening up and will work with our thriving marine sector to develop stronger trade links with China and secure our place as a global trading nation.

Maritime Minister, John Hayes, said:

The UK is a world class maritime centre that provides a strong and resilient backbone to our economy. We are excited about continuing our strong trading relationship with China and to celebrate the growing link between our 2 nations.

This week will again highlight that the UK is a fantastic location for Chinese maritime firms to invest in, while also highlighting our world-leading expertise.

The International Trade Minister will also visit the International Investment and Trade Fair in Zhengzhou, Henan. Henan is China's third most populous province and aspires to become Asia's largest rail transport hub.

Over 400 delegates and groups visited the trade fair last year with more than 20,000 domestic and foreign exhibitors in attendance. The local government has invited the UK to be the 'Country of Honour' at the trade fair providing an opportunity for government and businesses to strengthen UK-Henan links.

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# Press release: Government launches company to create more free schools

[LocatED](#) has been established to acquire land and buildings across the country to help the government build 500 new free schools by 2020 and create 600,000 new school places by 2021.

Free schools are providing more good school places in more parts of the country. Recent analysis of Ofsted inspections shows 29% of free school inspected have been rated 'outstanding' – which means as a proportion free schools are the highest-performing group of non-selective state schools.

More than 9 in 10 free schools have been approved in areas where a need for more school places has already been identified, and the remainder have been created by local communities deciding they wanted more choice. Free schools are ensuring more parents have access to a good local school place for their children.

LocatED will act on behalf of the government to secure the right sites, at the right price, to ensure hundreds more free schools can open.

Schools Systems Minister Lord Nash said:

Part of the government's plan for Britain is building a fairer society, with a good school place for every child. Free schools are playing a vital role in creating those school places. They are popular with parents, ensuring thousands more families have the choice of a good local school.

We need to secure hundreds of new free schools in order to keep pace in creating 600,000 new school places by 2021. LocatED has the skills and expertise to find and secure land and buildings to ensure our free schools ambition becomes a reality.

With 29% of free schools inspected rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted – LocatED will play a vital role in helping us create thousands more good and outstanding school places for future generations of children.

LocatED's Chief Executive Lara Newman MBE said:

We understand the scale of the challenge and the property landscape. LocatED has the expertise and will operate at pace to negotiate with multiple partners across the private and public sector. We work directly with landowners, agents and developers to secure sites for new free schools, whilst ensuring the best value for the taxpayer.



Chief Executive of the Education Funding Agency Peter Lauener said:

LocatED will improve the experience for free school trusts, for many of whom finding a site is the main challenge to opening a school. The establishment of LocatED places this challenge in the hands of a specialist team of commercial property professionals.

LocatED is a government-owned property company and will operate with a £2 billion budget, making it one of largest purchasers of land in the UK. Working directly with landowners, agents and developers across Britain, LocatED has been established to help overcome some of the challenges of securing sites and land for new free schools.

LocatED will also secure sites to help deliver the additional 110 free schools announced in the budget (Wednesday 8 March).

LocatED has a multidisciplinary team with specialist skills and extensive property sector experience who will negotiate complex deals with multiple partners across the private and public sector to get the best possible value for money for the taxpayer.

Alongside the launch, the distinguished LocatED board with a range of private and public sector property acquisition and development experience has been announced.

Lara Newman MBE, Chief Executive of LocatED – with over 20 years of property experience, Lara has operated at the heart of the free schools policy since its introduction. Previously a Board Director at Cleanslate Ltd, a development and property consulting company, Lara worked with many of the UK's biggest landowners, agents and developers. Prior to that, Miss Newman was Managing Director at Navigant Consulting, where she specialised in property deals and complex capital investment projects for government education capital programmes.

Michael Strong, Board Chairman – 15 years as Chairman of CBRE, previously CEO of CBRE. Non-executive Director: NHS Property Services Ltd, The Osborne Group and Waterman Group.

Phil Ellis, Non-executive Board Member – Previously Client Portfolio Director at Aviva Investors, 33 years institutional property investment management, investor relations and business development experience through all business cycles.

Jayne MacLennan, Non-executive Board Member – Group Director of Property FirstGroup plc. Non-executive Board Member and Chair of Remuneration Committee for Glasgow Prestwick Airport. Non-executive Director Aberdeen Harbour Board.

Julian Rudd-Jones, Non-executive Board Member – Managing Director of Kajima Partnerships and Kajima Properties, the two principal UK operating businesses of Kajima Corporation, with extensive experience in commercial property

development and the funding, delivery and management of social infrastructure.

Caroline Tolhurst, Non-executive Board Member – Executive career as a Chartered Surveyor, Compliance Officer and Chartered Secretary. Operated at board level for 20 years including 10 years as Company Secretary to Grosvenor. Current, Board and Audit Committee member and Chair of Governance & Remuneration Committee at A2Dominion Housing Group.