

News story: £260m deal signed to keep RAF giants flying

The Foreign Military Sale agreement will provide support for the RAF's fleet of eight C-17A Globemaster III aircraft, which provided lifesaving humanitarian relief following Hurricane Irma last summer.

Defence Minister Guto Bebb said:

Our C-17 giants take everything from heavy equipment to vital troops to where they're needed right across the globe. This deal keeps them in the air into the next decade and affirms our leadership, alongside our American allies, in providing global security and humanitarian aid as we stand together in defence of our shared values.

This bilateral deal will deliver spares, design services, reliability and maintenance improvements, access to technical resources, and RAF aircrew and maintenance crew training programmes.

It will sustain more than 50 jobs in the UK through the support of a Boeing team at RAF Brize Norton, the home of the UK's C-17 operators, 99 Squadron RAF. Further work will be carried out in the US at Boeing facilities in San Antonio, Texas.



An RAF C17 transport aircraft pictured in transit. Crown Copyright.

The new agreement, which extends and builds upon support arrangements that have existed since the C-17 came into UK service in 2001, will run until 2022.

As part of the UK's Joint Rapid Reaction Force, the C-17 provides the RAF with long-range strategic heavy-lift ability, meaning it can deliver equipment and supplies close to where UK troops are on operations. Support for the RAF's C-17 fleet is delivering an important need laid out in the Strategic Defence and Security Review 2015.

Defence Equipment & Support Chief of Materiel (Air), Air Marshal Julian Young, said:

The signature of this deal has come about through the close relationship the Ministry of Defence has with our counterparts in the US, and will deliver world-leading support for the front line.

It means the UK will be able to continue to depend on the C-17's remarkable capabilities in support of operations all over the world.

With a maximum airspeed of around 510 miles per hour, the jet can transport 77 tonnes of cargo, equivalent to three Apache attack helicopters or a Challenger 2 tank, and has a wingspan equivalent to the length of five double-decker buses.

Press release: Appeal your tax bill online

The initiative means people no longer have to print out, manually fill in and post their forms. It is also drastically cutting the number of applications being returned, as incomplete or inaccurate forms can be amended over the phone with the help of HMCTS staff.

Over 2,000 taxpayers have already benefitted from the quicker, streamlined system, with on average a quarter of appeals made online since the scheme was introduced.

The move is part of the Government's £1 billion investment to digitise the court service, making it quicker, simpler, and easier to access for everyone.

Justice Minister Lucy Frazer said:

We are spending £1 billion on transforming the justice system so it is fit for the digital age.

Allowing people to submit their tax appeals online is just one example of how we are making the system quicker, smarter, and much more user-friendly.

Online appeals are submitted to the tax tribunal service so that the case can be considered by a judge and, if necessary, proceed to a hearing.

The simplified forms spell out exactly what steps applicants must have already taken, preventing people from wasting time submitting applications which are then returned.

The online tax system continues to develop and in the early stages of 2018 will be extended to cater for an increased range of business.

Other examples of the government's court reforms which are making access to justice easier for everyone include:

- Launching the first divorce application services online at four sites – making the process easier to understand for divorce applicants and helping to progress applications.
- A new paperless system, in operation at Lavender Hill Magistrates' Court, which means thousands of offenders caught dodging fares or using fraudulent tickets can now be punished more swiftly and effectively.
- The increased use of video links – meaning more vulnerable victims can give evidence away from the courtroom and without having to meet their attacker face to face.

Disused office block at Dundee Technology Park – an update



As residents know, I have on many occasions expressed concern over the deteriorating state of an empty prominent office block in Luna Place in the Technology Park that sits beside the Riverside Avenue Ambassador Route, a key entry road into Dundee, with many thousands of vehicles passing every day.

The office block has lain empty for some time and it is understood the owner lives in Ireland. Late last year, with planning authority, new fencing was erected round the site which I felt was a positive sign, but thereafter there had been poor workmanship including trenches around the site and also significant vandalism.

I took this up with planning officers at the council and the selling agents who are local and I asked them to advise the owner to take steps to rectify the situation and properly restore the building.

The council's Planning Enforcement Officer advised me in November 2017 as follows :

“(The owner has) confirmed the trenches outside were dug to allow electricity providers to put in cables. However when they arrived on site they were unable to supply the required amount of power needed for the building.

Work then come to a standstill. The transformers have been paid for last week but it takes 6 -8 weeks to get on site. When the electricity providers arrive on site, the other workmen will also start on site to enable to building to be leased again. The owner hopes the work will be completed by the end of January 2018.”

However, that works has not happened by the end of January and I therefore asked the council's Planning Enforcement Officer to intervene. She updated me last week as follows :

“I managed to get hold of the owner today. He has been chasing Scottish Electric but the transformers still haven't arrived. The owner has chased the manufacturers. Once the transformers arrive they will be given a two week window for when the work will commence on site. I advised the owner to let me know when he receives the two week time slot and I will keep you updated.”

The deterioration of this building is very obvious on such a prominent site. It is a terrible advertisement when visitors enter the city, so removing the eyesore as soon as possible is vital.

Transcript of remarks by FS at media session (with photo/video)

Following is the transcript of remarks by the Financial Secretary, Mr Paul Chan, at a media session after attending a radio programme this morning (February 17):

Reporter: Mr Secretary, we are expecting a huge surplus this year. How do you plan to use the money to invest for Hong Kong, in particular, which industry, or that the money will be given back to the people of Hong Kong in the form of tax refund?

Financial Secretary: We are going to have a high level of surplus, although the amount may not be as high as those predicted by some of the accounting firms. In utilising this surplus, we have to balance, we have to first take into consideration the nature and amount of such surplus. For this year and actually the same for last year, the substantial surplus is attributable to substantial land premium income and stamp duty income. Part of it may not be recurrent, so we have to be very careful. In utilising this surplus, I have to take into consideration the long term needs of the community, the short term pressing demand of the community as well as the aspiration of the people. So it must strike a proper balance between this short term relief, rebates and long term requirements. As to long term requirements, innovation and technology is one sector we would give serious consideration because this will help across-the-board many industries in enhancing their competitiveness. And innovation and technology alone can be a substantial industry, bringing quality jobs for people, so this is one area.

And apart from economic development, we need to use our surplus wisely to prepare for the future. Ageing society is a pressing issue that has to be tackled. In that sense, healthcare, elderly homes are areas that deserve serious considerations. As to short term rebates, we have received numerous suggestions. Basically, the guiding principle is to use this short term measures on a targeted basis, so that those who are in need, those that we want to take care, would be able to benefit from those short term measures.

Reporter: Do you plan to cut further the income tax and corporate tax to make the tax system more competitive?

Financial Secretary: In terms of profits tax, in my view, after the implementation of the two-tier tax system, our profits tax regime is quite competitive in the region. So, any proposal for an across-the-board tax cut in profits tax rate, I won't consider. But, rather, I would consider targeted

tax measures to help, say, for example, a particular industry or to induce a particular behaviour which may benefit the society, or to create jobs. For this kind of proposals, I would give a serious consideration; but across-the-board tax cut, sorry, I am not going to do that. In terms of salaries tax, the standard rate at the moment is 15 per cent. By any standard, this is not high. In the region, this is very competitive. Although I acknowledge, for some of our salaries tax payers, given the current high property price, high rental, high living costs, the burden is felt. But on the other hand, given the competitiveness of the tax rate at the moment, I would rather prefer keeping the standard rate intact, but addressing the needs of a larger group of other salaries tax payers. Thank you.

(Please also refer to the Chinese portion of the transcript.)



Sharing data and security information

I find it strange that three Heads of Security Agencies had to speak out for fear that Brexit would damage exchanges of information between France, Germany and the UK after Brexit. Why should it? They would have to want to change their current procedures, or their governments would have to stop instructing them to make sensible exchange.

It is already the case that if the UK gets intelligence about a threat to lives in France it will tell the French authorities and vice versa. There are data sharing agreements, based on what we can usually share with due consideration of how each Intelligence service protects its own sources. The UK belongs to the Five Eyes grouping of the USA, UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada where trust is even stronger and the sharing has gone further, and that will clearly continue after Brexit.

This seems to me to be another non problem, unless the EU side wants to make it a problem. As we have high quality and extensive intelligence it is unlikely they will want to reduce the flow of information, so they can just agree to carry on. The information share is usually bilateral anyway. Issues in the UK should be adjudicated by our court, and issues on the continent by

their court.

An Extradition Agreement might be a better route for bringing suspects to trial in another country rather than trying to continue with the Arrest Warrant, where ECJ jurisdiction would be a problem.