

Government contract uses the latest technology for search and rescue

The MCA, an executive agency of the Department for Transport, has today signed a circa £1.6 billion contract with UK company Bristow Helicopters Ltd following an extensive 18-month procurement process.

Minister for Maritime and Aviation, Robert Courts MP, announced today that the contract for the UK Second-Generation Search and Rescue Aviation programme – known as UKSAR2G – would be awarded to Bristow Helicopters Ltd to deliver both rotary and fixed wing services for the next ten years.

Bristow Helicopters Ltd has provided the UK search and rescue helicopter service for the MCA since 2013, with the aerial reconnaissance aircraft provided by 2Excel Aviation since 2019. These aircraft fly not only for HM Coastguard but also on behalf of other Government Departments.

The new contract will see the UK search and rescue region benefit from both innovation and advances in technology to save more lives, even more quickly. It will combine the existing two separate aviation contracts for both fixed wing aircraft and rotary aircraft. It will also include the use of uncrewed aircraft (drones). This will provide better value for money for the taxpayer and allow for more innovation throughout the life of the contract.

As part of the new contract, Bristow Helicopters Ltd will continue to operate from their current ten helicopter bases and launch two new seasonal bases in Fort William and Carlisle, to serve areas around two of the busiest locations for summer tourism.

All helicopter bases will continue to be operational 24 hours a day. The Fort William and Carlisle will operate 12 hours a day from April to September. The transition out from the current contracts will start 30 September 2024 and run through to 31 December 2026, to ensure a continuation of search and rescue aviation services across the whole of the UK. There will be three fixed-wing bases at Doncaster, Prestwick and Newquay.

The MCA has undertaken extensive sophisticated modelling to project future demand on our services. This makes sure the MCA can tailor future services to meet the demand required and to provide enhancements to the service using new systems and technology. Bristow will operate:

- 18 Helicopters including existing Leonardo AW189s and Sikorsky S92As augmented with the introduction of Leonardo AW139 helicopters.
- six King Air fixed-wing planes, including the B350, B350ER and the B200; and
- one mobile deployable Schiebel S-100 drone system.

Drones became part of HM Coastguard's aviation fleet in March 2022 and are currently deployed supporting search and rescue activity in the English

Channel. Bristow Helicopters Ltd will therefore continue to build upon this to enhance situational awareness for emergency responders as part of UKSAR2G. Drones have the capability to transmit real-time data including live imagery from the scene to Coastguard operations rooms as well as other responders. As HM Coastguard celebrates its 200-year anniversary, innovations like this will help evolve search and rescue for the next decade and beyond.

A high degree of innovation has also been proposed by Bristow Helicopters Ltd in the form of a new state-of-the-art search and rescue helicopter simulation training facility at Solent Airport next to the Coastguard Training Facility which will house a synthetic rescue hoist and helicopter suspended over a large training pool. Other innovation includes the use of sustainable aviation fuels, reducing our carbon footprint in the delivery of these services.

Today's announcement represents a major investment by the government in providing a national search and rescue aviation service using a tailored solution, making sure the most appropriate aircraft are at the most suitable locations to meet the Maritime and Coastguard Agency's commitment to the public. These services will continue to support the work of other Government Departments in detecting and deterring illegal activity at sea and supporting other Government work where needed.

Damien Oliver, Senior Responsible Owner for UKSAR2G said:

We know there are people alive today because an HM Coastguard helicopter came to their rescue. When looking at the next decade of service and rescue services, the thought of the future people whose lives may well also be saved as a result of this contract was a huge incentive to make sure this will build on that success and improve it still further. I am also delighted that we can continue to support the work of our partners across Government in all the work that they do.

This is the excellent result from an 18-month procurement to deliver a new highly capable and innovative search and rescue aviation service. The new service will build on the success of the current arrangements that have been in place since 2015.