

News story: Defence Minister sees Stockport firm finishing multi-million-pound military bridge order for Australian Army

- Defence Minister Stuart Andrew's visit to WFEL in Stockport signified the completion of the final Dry Support Bridge which is part of a £53m contract with the Australian Army.
- The Defence Minister described the firm, which has benefited from £600m-worth of export orders, as 'a model for how companies across the country can thrive on the global stage'.
- He witnessed a 90-minute demo build of a 46-metre bridge from the firm, who are renowned world leaders in the field.
- He visited with the Head of Australian Defence Staff London, Air Commodore Brian Edwards.

Defence Minister Stuart Andrew today visited a Stockport company which is world-renowned in building tactical military bridges. While there, he marked the completion of a multi-million-pound deal to supply the Australian Army with the vital logistics equipment.

The £53m deal with Australia is part of £600m-worth of export orders that WFEL has amassed over the past decade. The Defence Minister described the firm as 'a model for how companies across the country can thrive on the global stage' at a time when defence exports have surged by over 50% to £9bn.

The workers also demonstrated their world-class reputation by constructing a 46-metre Dry Support Combat Bridge in just 90 minutes whilst the Minister toured the factory.

The bridges will be used in combat situations providing rapidly-deployable temporary infrastructure ensuring vital equipment and soldiers can navigate their way through the most challenging terrain. The military bridges can also be used in times of crisis during natural disasters maintaining essential lifelines to those who need it the most.

Defence Minister Stuart Andrew said:

Through WFEL, Stockport is leading the world in military bridges which help troops defeat our enemies and provide essential aid to people in disaster zones. Not only does WFEL bring hundreds of jobs and millions of pounds of investment to the UK, but it enables relations with some of our closest allies to flourish. As they finish an order for Australia, kick one off for America and look towards more opportunities to build British bridges, they are a model for how companies across the country can thrive on the global

stage and play a key role in the defence of our nation.

Defence Minister sees Stockport firm finishing multi-million-pound military bridge order for Australian Army. Crown copyright.

Work continues at WFEL following the completion of this Australian order as the company has now turned its focus to new orders for the US Army, building upon the 116 military bridges that the company has already built for US forces.

Whilst 90% of its Stockport production is exported overseas, WFEL's contribution to UK defence can be traced back as far as 1915. The company has been designing and producing bridges for the UK military since the 1970s, and the relationship remains to this day – the British Army has over 50 sets in service. They have been proven in the field in the likes of Iraq and Afghanistan.

There are also potential UK opportunities in the pipeline for WFEL, with the company currently bidding to update and replace some of the MOD's military bridging systems. It could become part of the Mechanised Infantry Vehicle (MIV) programme's supply chain, which would support the current 227-strong local workforce.

The opportunities could mean a further boost to investment in the North-West, which already benefits from £2 billion of defence spending – supporting over 12,000 industry jobs in the region.

Ian Anderton, Chief Executive of WFEL, said:

As the leading tactical military bridge maker globally, WFEL continues to work to provide solutions for customers like the Australian Defence Force. Our long-standing relationship with the ADF first began over 30 years ago, when they chose our Medium Girder Bridges. We have been delighted to continue to support them again today, not only with the supply of further MGBs but also with a significant capability enhancement with the latest mechanised Dry Support Bridges.

The adoption of the DSB not only provides the ADF's Manoeuvre Commanders with the ability to cross significant wet or dry gaps quickly and efficiently, it allows a level of inter-operability with an ever-growing user base. We have worked collaboratively with the Commonwealth's Managing Contractor to reduce risk for this contract and are pleased to be providing an off-the-shelf solution to the ADF's wide-gap tactical bridging requirements.

Defence Minister sees Stockport firm finishing multi-million-pound military bridge order for Australian Army. Crown copyright.

The Minister was also accompanied by the Head of Australian Defence Staff

London, Air Commodore Brian Edwards.

Head of Australian Defence Staff London, Air Commodore Brian Edwards said:

The Australian-UK bilateral defence relationship has been forged over many years and is incredibly strong and enduring. In recent times, we have seen an increased emphasis in opportunities for collaboration from a defence industry standpoint. This project introduces into service the latest addition to the Australian Army's suite of combat bridging. It will ensure that the Australian Defence Force has an enhanced gap crossing capability which will enable land forces, both mounted and dismounted, to cross wet and dry gaps in support of operations.

The Australian deal was made up of two contracts, following an internationally competed tender. As a result, WFEL supplied its leading Medium Girder Bridges (MGBs) and Dry Support Bridges (DSBs) to the Australian Defence Force (ADF). This has resulted in a huge boost for the 132 organisations who have benefited from contributing the WFEL supply chain.

The UK enjoys a very close bilateral relationship with Australia, which has strengthened over recent years, with the introduction of annual conferences and close co-operation on many international issues – including a shared commitment to fighting extremism on coalition operations, especially in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Australia also recently decided to choose BAE Systems to build nine British-designed Type 26 warships. The deal, which could be worth up to £20 billion, has been hailed as the biggest Naval ship deal for a decade. It is not only another clear example of Britain's world-leading defence industry, but has been described by the Defence Secretary as 'the dawn of a new era in the relationship between Australia and Great Britain, forging new ties in defence and industry in a major boost as we leave the European Union'.