

Transport update: search and rescue

Following an extensive 18-month procurement process to procure the next decade of search and rescue aviation services, this process has now finished, and I wish to inform the House of the results.

I am pleased to announce that a £1.6 billion contract will be signed today (21 July 2022) to provide a search and rescue helicopter service for the whole of the UK with Bristow Helicopters Ltd. The new contract will see the UK search and rescue region benefit from advances in technology to save more lives, even more quickly.

A fleet of state-of-the-art helicopters, planes and drones will operate across the United Kingdom and far out to sea in support of the lifesaving work of HM Coastguard. These aircraft will also support the work of the other emergency services, border protection, fisheries protection and pollution prevention.

A strong competition led to this contract being signed, and a credible, data-led requirement resulted in a contract that is highly innovative and takes account of anticipated future demands such as increased tourism in certain areas.

The new contract will guarantee that there will be no base closures or job losses in this critical service. Instead, 2 new seasonal bases, operating for 6 months of the year, will be opened in areas of particular growing demand.

A new base at Fort William will meet the summertime peak tourism demand in the Ben Nevis area, while a new base in Carlisle will also meet similar demands in the Lake District area.

All helicopter bases will continue to be operational 24 hours a day, apart for Fort William and Carlisle which will operate 12 hours a day from April to September.

The transition out from the current contract will start 30 September 2024 and run through to 31 December 2026. The transition will be seamless and will follow extensive engagement with stakeholders including the thousands of rescue volunteers who rely on these arrangements.

In addition to our existing base in Doncaster, highly sophisticated surveillance planes will operate from Prestwick and Newquay. This will give the UK much more capability to search for people needing our help over large areas and prevent illegal or anticompetitive activity in UK waters.

Both Doncaster and Prestwick will be operational 24 hours a day, with Newquay operational 12 hours a day all year round. Some of these aircraft can reach the mid-Atlantic, which is the extent of the UK's search and rescue region.

The new service will comprise of:

- 18 helicopters including existing Leonardo AW189s and Sikorsky S92As augmented with the introduction of Leonardo AW139 helicopters
- 6 King Air fixed-wing planes, including the B350, B350ER and the B200
- 1 mobile deployable Schiebel S-100 drone system capable of operating anywhere in the UK

A new state-of-the-art search and rescue helicopter simulation training facility at Solent Airport next to the HM Coastguard Training Facility will house a synthetic rescue hoist and helicopter suspended over a large training pool.

This is a vital addition to training the next generation of technical winch crew. Further innovation throughout the life of the contract will involve the use of uncrewed aircraft and aircraft powered by sustainable aviation fuels.

This is a major investment by the UK government in critical national service which covers a wide range of activity. It protects the services we have come to rely on for years to come.