

UK donating undersea minehunter drones to help Ukraine clear coastline

The UK is giving underwater drones to Ukraine and training Ukrainian personnel in Britain to use them to clear their coastline of mines.

Six autonomous minehunting vehicles will be sent to the country to help detect Russian mines in the waters off its coast. Three of these will be provided from UK stocks, with a further three to be purchased from industry.

The lightweight autonomous vehicle is designed for use in shallow coastal environments, operating effectively at depths of up to 100m to detect, locate and identify mines using an array of sensors so the Ukrainian Navy can destroy them.

Dozens of Ukrainian Navy personnel will be taught to use the drones over the coming months, with the first tranche having already begun their training.

Russia has been weaponising food by destroying Ukrainian agriculture and blockading the country's Black Sea ports to prevent exports, with devastating consequences for the world's poorest people as food prices rise.

A small number of ships carrying grain have left Ukraine since the UN brokered a deal in July to allow food exports, but efforts to get food out of the country continue to be hampered by sea mines left by Russian forces along Ukraine's coast.

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:

Russia's cynical attempts to hold the world's food supply to ransom must not be allowed to succeed.

This vital equipment and training will help Ukraine make their waters safe, helping to smooth the flow of grain to the rest of the world and supporting the Armed Forces of Ukraine as they look to defend their coastline and ports.

The Royal Navy's Diving & Threat Exploitation Group will conduct the three-week training courses, alongside the US Navy 6th Fleet. Having considerable experience using the equipment already they will conduct training at sea to operate the vessels and interpret the data they send back to identify mock mines.

Admiral Sir Ben Key, First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff, said:

Through the expert skills being taught here, our Ukrainian allies

will be able to clear their own waters of mines. These weapons target shipping indiscriminately, but particularly affect civilian traffic and trade and have had a devastating impact on freedom of navigation in the Black Sea.

This training is another powerful demonstration of the UK's ongoing commitment to Ukraine in their fight to defend their country and repel Russian aggression.

Captain Ben Vickery Royal Navy, Captain of Royal Navy Diving and Mine Warfare said:

The Ukrainian personnel have been fantastic, and it is a pleasure to be working with them and helping them in their struggle to defend their homeland against the aggression they are currently suffering.

These incredible, motivated and very professional sailors have thrown themselves into the task and have made incredible progress gaining an excellent level of proficiency.

I am hugely proud of them, and the Royal Navy Clearance Divers and Mine Warfare specialists delivering the training, standing shoulder to shoulder – stronger together to achieve this vital training mission driven by our shared values and a common bond.

The Royal Navy is also training Ukrainian sailors to operate Sandown Class Minehunter vessels.

Armed Forces Minister James Heappey and his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Havrylov [visited Scotland in July](#) to watch trainees practicing key skills at sea, such as weapon drills and damage control, whilst learning to operate the machinery on the vessels.

The UK is also leading a major international programme to train up to 10,000 Ukrainian volunteer recruits in basic military skills, which Canada, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Germany, Latvia and the Netherlands have all announced they will support.

[Museums and galleries urged to sign up for VAT refund to support free entry](#)

for the public

- Minister encourages more museums and galleries to join the scheme
- Those added to the scheme in 2020 are set to benefit from more than £70 million

Museums and galleries are being urged to apply for VAT refunds to support opening free of charge as part of plans to boost visitor numbers and give more people access to arts and culture.

Any museum and gallery open to the public free of charge for 30 hours a week can apply. It will help organisations boost their finances and open up their collections more regularly.

The VAT Refund Scheme, which has been running since 2001, was last open to new applicants in 2018/19 and is estimated to have refunded up to around £1 billion to museums and galleries so far.

Ahead of a speech at the Edinburgh International Culture Summit, Arts Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay today announced that the scheme will reopen for new applications in the autumn.

He is encouraging museums and galleries which are considering putting on exhibitions for free, as well as institutions already eligible but not currently taking advantage of the scheme, to apply.

Arts Minister Lord Parkinson of Whitley Bay said:

The UK's brilliant museums and galleries can be proud of the huge range of free exhibitions they put on and the role they play in increasing access to arts and culture.

We want to see even more museums offering free entry, and to support organisations which are providing great opportunities for the public to enjoy.

I encourage cultural institutions across the UK to apply for the VAT refund scheme so they can help make sure people from all backgrounds get to experience great arts and culture for free.

Institutions taking part in the scheme are entitled to a refund on VAT incurred on goods and services which are purchased in order to provide free admission. A total of 159 sites across the UK currently benefit from the scheme, including the People's History Museum in Manchester, the Peter Scott Gallery in Lancaster, the Burns House Museum in Kilmarnock, Falkirk's Callendar House, the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh, the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool, and National Museum Cardiff.

The Athelstan Museum in Malmesbury used the scheme to improve its public

exhibition spaces for visitors. When the museum acquired a J.M.W. Turner watercolour of Malmesbury, it used the scheme to help enhance its mezzanine gallery area to display the artwork.

It is estimated that museums and galleries which were added to the scheme in 2020 will benefit from more than £70 million in VAT refunds in the six years after joining. New museums and galleries wishing to benefit from the scheme can apply in the autumn.

Commissioner for Cultural Recovery and Renewal Lord Mendoza said:

In my review of museums I identified this specially designed scheme as one of the most important government interventions to help museums right across the United Kingdom.

I hope that we continue to see growth in the number of applications to ensure that as many people as possible can visit our outstanding museums for free.

Free entry for museums is a distinctive cultural intervention and I'm thrilled that the government hopes to help even more places this year.

Helen Smout, CEO, Culture Perth and Kinross Limited, said:

The VAT Refund Scheme for museums and galleries alongside the Museums and Galleries Tax Relief has been of enormous benefit to our organisation and critically has helped us sustain a programme of free-to-access exhibitions.

This work has helped us re-engage with audiences after the disruptions of the pandemic and to date in 2022 we are outperforming our pre-pandemic footfall bringing additional benefits and income to the organisation.

Without the support this scheme provides for museums our programmes would not be as rich, ambitious, or engaging and our future would be much bleaker.

Sharon Nolan, Chair of Trustees, Athelstan Museum, Malmesbury, said:

Athelstan Museum Malmesbury has benefited greatly from the VAT Refund Scheme for museums and galleries. When we first joined the scheme we were in the process of acquiring an old Moravian Church (now the Julia and Hans Rausing Building) for renovation, to create a new museum store and event/ workshop/ talks space to attract more diverse audiences. The scheme enabled us to save the VAT on our building work and supplies.

Similarly, when we acquired a Turner watercolour of Malmesbury and wanted to enhance our mezzanine space to display it, we again benefited from the scheme. It helps with the day-to-day running of the museum; we receive no funding other than donations, Gift Aid, and income from the gift shop.

We are totally volunteer-run. The scheme is invaluable to small, volunteer-run museums like ourselves. It enables us to retain our free-entry status, and to be ambitious and take on new projects. Our visitors really appreciate the museum and numbers are now increasing post-Covid.

The Government has also extended the sunset clause on the Museums and Galleries Exhibitions Tax Relief scheme, which aims to encourage cultural venues to develop new exhibitions through financial incentives. The scheme has been given a temporary uplift, meaning there will be 45 per cent tax relief for permanent and temporary exhibitions and 50 per cent tax relief on touring exhibitions respectively up to a maximum of £100,000. From 1 April 2023, these rates will be reduced to 30 per cent and 35 per cent respectively, before returning to their usual rates of 20 per cent and 25 per cent on 1 April 2024.

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- The full criteria for a museum and gallery applying are:
 - being open to the general public for at least 30 hours per week, without exception
 - offering free entry without prior appointment
 - holding collections in a purpose-built building
 - displaying details of free entry and opening hours on the museum website
- More information, and a full list of current organisations on the scheme, can be found at:
<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/vat-refund-scheme-for-museums-and-galleries-notice-998>
- Between April 2001 and June 2022, the total amount of VAT refunds issued to museums and galleries, under Section 33A of the VAT Act 1994 is estimated to be between £900 million and £1,000 million. This is based on HMRC VAT returns and assessments of the proportion of non-business activities.

[Sale of horticultural peat to be banned in move to protect England's](#)

precious peatlands

All sales of peat to amateur gardeners in England will be banned by 2024, the Government has announced today (Saturday 27th August).

Peatlands are the UK's largest carbon store but only approximately 13% of our peatlands are in a near-natural state. This degradation has occurred due to drainage for agricultural use, overgrazing and burning, as well as extraction for use in growing media. Bagged retail growing media accounts for 70% of the peat sold in the UK and is frequently misused, for example being used as a soil improver rather than a medium in which to propagate plants. When this extraction takes place, the carbon stored inside the bog is released as carbon dioxide, contributing to climate change.

Peat extraction also degrades the state of the wider peatland landscape, damaging habitats for some of our rarest wildlife such as the swallowtail butterfly, hen harriers and short-eared owls, and negatively impacting peat's ability to prevent flooding and filter water. A significant proportion of the UK's water supply lands or flows through peatlands.

The measures announced today will contribute to efforts to achieve our ambitious target of restoring 35,000 hectares of peatlands by 2025 and wider efforts to achieve net zero.

The announcement follows an [extensive public consultation](#), which received more than 5,000 responses with over 95% in favour of government taking action to ban retail peat sales. The Government has also pledged to continue to work closely with the professional horticulture sector on speeding up their transition to peat-free alternatives ahead of a ban for the professional horticulture sector, recognising that the professional horticulture sector faces additional technical barriers that will take longer to overcome.

The Government is also launching a new £5 million fund to promote the use of peatlands for sustainable farming. It will support the uptake of paludiculture – the practice of farming on rewetted peatland – which will help further safeguard food security, produce alternatives to horticultural peat and reduce environmental impacts.

Environment Minister Richard Benyon said:

This Government understands the importance of keeping peat healthy and in the ground, here and around the world – to lock up carbon, strengthen drought resilience and serve as a powerful nature-based solution to climate change.

The actions announced today mark a new chapter in the story of our iconic peatlands – safeguarding their long-term health and vitality as part of our commitments to achieve Net Zero and deliver our 25 Year Environment Plan.

Chair of Natural England, Tony Juniper said:

Peatlands are precious ecosystems that harbor beautiful and fascinating wildlife, shape the character of iconic landscapes, purify water and help to reduce flood risk. They are also our largest natural carbon stores, locking away over 580 million tonnes. This ban on the sale of peat-based compost and work to phase out use in other areas is an essential step toward protecting these valuable natural assets and allowing for the recovery of degraded areas.

We are working with Defra and partners on the ground to restore thousands of hectares of peatland habitats, and today have awarded over £11 million to restore lowland sites in the south-west of England, and upland sites in the north of England. These projects will have multiple benefits, holding carbon, helping some of our scarcest wildlife to recover, reduce flood risk and render landscapes more resilient to climate change impacts such as drought and fire.

Professor Alistair Griffiths, Director of Science and Collections at the Royal Horticultural Society, said:

Peatlands are the world's largest carbon store on land, with great potential to store carbon long term, helping to reach net zero. They reduce flooding, when rewetted reduce fire risks and provide valuable habitats for both plants and animals. To tackle the climate and biodiversity crises, it is essential that we have a sustainable transition to peat-free alternative growing medias. The RHS stopped selling peat-based growing media bags in 2019 and will continue to work with Defra, industry and gardeners to accelerate the transition to peat-free.

Through round two of the Nature for Climate Fund Peatland Restoration Grant, Natural England has today awarded nearly £11 million to six projects to support restoration works on over 7,000 hectares of peatland, adding to more than 8,000 hectares already funded through round one.

Round two of the Restoration Grant has supported a blend of lowland and upland restoration works, with the Somerset Peatland Partnership convening to restore lowland sites in the south-west of England, and the Great North Bog and Moors for the Future partnerships restoring upland sites in the north of England. We will also shortly be announcing the winners of our second round of Discovery Grants.

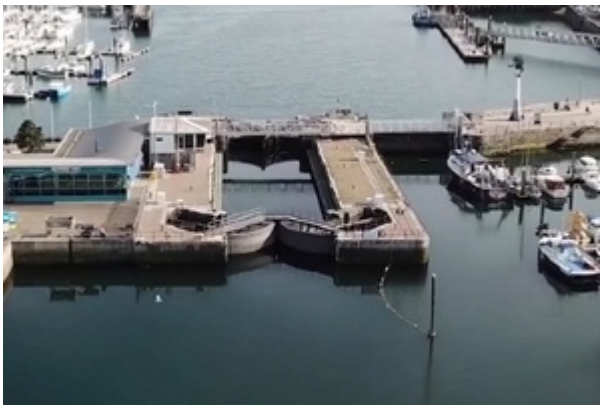
New alternatives to horticultural peat, produced through paludiculture and otherwise, present the opportunity for England to protect nature through green job creation, as well as become one of the global leaders in the

production and sale of sustainable growing media.

Sutton Harbour maintenance rescheduled for 2023

Press release

Essential work to repair Sutton Harbour lock gates for mid-September 2022 to April 2023 will be rescheduled following feedback from engagement meetings.



Sutton Harbour needs repair and maintenance work which will involve divers working underwater

Image credit: Sutton Harbour Group

Meetings in July and August between the Environment Agency and Sutton Harbour Group and harbour users recognised that the [scheduled £3m of maintenance work needed to happen to replace worn underwater lock gate cills and other key maintenance items.](#)

The discussions yielded many helpful comments, including the need for the work to be put back to allow for more conversation about ways to mitigate impact. The Environment Agency and Sutton Harbour Group agree with the feedback received and are grateful to all who have expressed interest in this project.

No new date has been set, but the works will commence in 2023. Further engagement is now planned with working groups currently being established representing the fishing fleet and berth holders. These groups will provide the opportunity to inform the project in finding an optimum time and supplemental alternative arrangements to facilitate the carrying out of the essential work.

Further feedback gained from the meetings to date will also be considered. The schedule for the working sessions and rescheduling of the stakeholder meetings previously announced will be published in due course.

The maintenance work involves replacing worn underwater lock gate cills, to ensure the locks can continue to reduce flood risk and provide commercial and amenity benefit to Plymouth. Funding for the works is allocated and the works must be completed no later than April 2024 to maintain the harbour's integrity, reduce any risks of further damage from delaying the repairs, and provide essential flood protection.

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Secretary of State announces the appointment of new Commissioner to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Press release

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the Right Honourable Shailesh Vara MP, has announced the appointment of Justin Kouame to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.



Mr Kouame will take up the appointment with effect from 1 September 2022.

Mr Kouame was formerly Chair of the Northern Ireland Community of Refugees and Asylum Seekers and member of the Northern Ireland Race Equality Sub-Group and Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities.

Background

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (the 'NIHRC') was created by the Northern Ireland Act 1998, as part of the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

The NIHRC was established in 1999 and operates as an executive non-departmental public body sponsored by the Northern Ireland Office.

Its powers and duties are set out in legislation, and it operates in compliance with UN General Assembly resolution 48/134 (the 'Paris Principles') on National Human Rights Institutions. The NIHRC's functions include keeping under review the adequacy and effectiveness in Northern Ireland of law and practice relating to the protection of human rights and promoting understanding and awareness of the importance of human rights in Northern Ireland.

Further information about the work of the Commission can be found [here](#).

Terms of appointment

- This position is part-time for a period of three years ending on 31 August 2025.
- The position receives a fixed annual remuneration of £7,500.
- The position is not pensionable.

Political Activity

All appointments are made on merit and with regards to the statutory requirements. Political activity plays no part in the selection process. However, in accordance with the original Nolan recommendations, there is a requirement for appointees' political activity in defined categories to be made public.

Mr Kouame has declared that he has not been politically active in the last five years.

Regulation

The Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointment (OCPA) regulates appointments to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

Statutory Requirements

The Secretary of State makes appointments to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

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