



## DEBATE PACK

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# UK defence rotary strategy

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Debate initiated by Robert Courts MP

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The House of Commons Library prepares a briefing in hard copy and/or online for most non-legislative debates in the Chamber and Westminster Hall other than half-hour debates. Debate Packs are produced quickly after the announcement of parliamentary business. They are intended to provide a summary or overview of the issue being debated and identify relevant briefings and useful documents, including press and parliamentary material. More detailed briefing can be prepared for Members on request to the Library.

# 1. Background

Helicopters (rotary-wing aircraft) are in use across all three services.

The Ministry of Defence's current strategy for helicopters is predicated on the conclusions of the Defence Rotary Wing Study of 2012, which was commissioned after the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review.

The publication of sector-specific strategies for surface ships and combat aircraft has prompted several MPs to urge the Ministry of Defence to consider a similar approach for helicopters.<sup>1</sup>

## The Defence Rotary Wing Study

In 2012 the MOD confirmed its intention to focus its rotary wing capability on four core fleets: Chinook, Wildcat,<sup>2</sup> Merlin and Apache helicopters, and extend the out of service date for Puma to 2025. This was announced as the results of its [Defence Rotary Wing Capability Study](#).

The conclusions of the 2012 study were reiterated in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, which set out the intended force structure under Joint Force 2025 and confirmed existing plans to upgrade the Apache and Chinook helicopter fleets. The 2018 Modernising Defence programme set out the intention to improve the readiness and availability of some key defence platforms, including helicopters, but did not provide specific detail.

## Calls for a new strategy

The Ministry of Defence has in recent years published several sector-specific strategies, on [naval shipbuilding](#) in 2017 and future [combat aircraft](#) in 2018. Robert Courts, while welcoming the combat air strategy, pressed the Defence Secretary during a debate on the RAF Centenary in 2018 to "start thinking about helicopters".<sup>3</sup>

Both the shipbuilding and combat air strategies discussed at length the sovereign capabilities needed to maintain skills in these areas.

At the 2018 Farnborough Airshow the Managing Director of Leonardo Helicopters UK called on the Government to commit to a future military helicopter procurement programme in order to guarantee the long-term viability of Leonardo's production site in Yeovil. In a 2017 debate Marcus Fysh pressed the Government to support the helicopter industry in his Yeovil constituency.<sup>4</sup> Lord Ashdown, who previously represented Yeovil, in a debate in the House of Lords in July 2018, called for solid

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<sup>1</sup> [HC Deb 26 November 2018 c114](#)

<sup>2</sup> The Wildcat replaced the Lynx Mk 7 and Mk9a in service with the Army in 2014 and the Lynx Mk8 in service with the Royal Navy in 2017/18.

<sup>3</sup> [HC Deb 26 November 2018 c114](#)

<sup>4</sup> [HC Deb 24 January 2017 c39-46WH](#)

commitments by the Government in order to ensure the sustainability of the UK helicopter industry in the longer term.<sup>5</sup>

## Strategic Partnering Arrangement with Leonardo

Boeing is the prime contractor for the Apache and Chinook; while Leonardo (formerly AgustaWestland) is the prime contractor for the Wildcat and the Merlin and supports the current Apache fleet. Leonardo Helicopters is based in Yeovil.

In July 2016 the MOD signed a new 10-year Strategic Partnering Arrangement with Leonardo Helicopters which envisages the MOD spending approximately £3 billion with the company over the next decade on the upgrade and support of its helicopter fleets.<sup>6</sup>

The arrangement recognises the mutual relationship that exists between the MOD and Leonardo as the only helicopter *through-life design and manufacturing capability* in the UK<sup>7</sup> and the provider of maintenance and support to over a third of the MOD's helicopter fleet.<sup>8</sup>

The arrangement commits both sides to working together to achieve improvements in cost-effectiveness, ensure innovation to meet the UK's future defence needs and promote exports.

However, it is worth noting that the agreement is not a legally binding contract with a definite financial value attached, but an indication of support.<sup>9</sup>

## Helicopters in the UK Armed Forces

Helicopters (rotary-wing aircraft) are in use across all three services and Strategic Command. There are 322 rotary-wing aircraft in the UK armed forces, as of 1 April 2019. Chinooks are the most common type with 60 aircraft, followed by Apache. The 322 figure includes training and other helicopters.<sup>10</sup>

The **Chinook** is one of the most easily recognisable of the helicopter fleet. It transports personnel and goods and carries heavy loads, either internally or underslung. It first entered service in the early 1980s. The Chinook (heavy lift) sustainment programme will see it extended in service until the 2040s.

**Apache** is an attack helicopter used by the Army. It first entered service in 2004 and originally had an out of service date of 2030 but this was extended in the 2010 Strategic defence and Security Review to 2040.

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<sup>5</sup> [HL10 July 2018 c893](#)

<sup>6</sup> The MOD and Leonardo (formerly Westland) first agreed an SPA in June 2006. That original agreement has subsequently been revised and renewed. "[MOD signs new partnering arrangement with Leonardo Helicopters UK](#)", Ministry of Defence, 11 July 2016

<sup>7</sup> There are other helicopter manufacturers in the UK, such as Airbus, but Leonardo in Yeovil is the only company that offers "[end to end](#)" capability, from research and design through to production, in-service support and upgrades.

<sup>8</sup> "[MOD signs new partnering arrangement with Leonardo Helicopters UK](#)", Ministry of Defence, 11 July 2016

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> [UK armed forces equipment and formations 2019](#), Ministry of Defence, 8 August 2019

Under the *Apache Capability Sustainment Programme*, in 2016 the MOD opted to upgrade the fleet with the [purchase](#) of 50 Apache Ah-64E (replacing the Mk1) from the US Government under a Foreign Military Sales arrangement.<sup>11</sup> The helicopters will begin entering service with the Army in 2022<sup>12</sup> with final delivery planned for 2024.<sup>13</sup> In 2019 the MOD extended the support contract for in service Apache's with Leonardo until they retire in 2024.<sup>14</sup>

**Wildcat** is a multirole aircraft used by the Army and the Royal Navy. The Army uses the AH Mk1 variant primarily for reconnaissance, command and control and transport although it does have attack capabilities. The naval variant operates from surface ships and perform a variety of roles.

**Merlin** helicopter variants are used by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines. A number of Merlins will be fitted with Crowsnest to support the aircraft carriers. Crowsnest is a helicopter-borne radar system that provides long-range airborne surveillance, control and early warning capability. Amid concerns about delays to the project, the Minister for Defence Procurement said the MOD is "confident" the Merlin Mk2 helicopter, fitted with Crowsnest, will be available for HMS Queen Elizabeth's first operational deployment in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

The **Puma** HC Mk2 is the RAF's medium support helicopter. It has a number of roles, including tactical transport of troops, weapons etc on the battlefield. The Puma is expected to leave service in 2025. Puma is [supported](#) by Airbus Helicopters UK Ltd.

Others helicopters include the Gazelle and the Bell 212, used by the Army, and the Juno, Prefect and Jupiter training helicopters.

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<sup>11</sup> "[MOD orders new fleet of cutting-edge Apache helicopters for the Army](#)", Ministry of Defence, 11 July 2016

<sup>12</sup> "[MOD orders new fleet of cutting-edge Apache helicopters for the Army](#)", Ministry of Defence, 11 July 2016. The number of Apache variants in service between 2018 and 2024 is set out in [correspondence](#) with the Defence Committee, 12 December 2018

<sup>13</sup> [PQ272138](#), 9 July 2018

<sup>14</sup> "[£293 million deal for Apache fleet](#)", Ministry of Defence, 17 January 2019

<sup>15</sup> [PQ5524](#), 22 January 2020; [PQ5522](#) and [PQ5523](#), 23 January 2020

## 2. Press Articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or the accuracy of external content.

[\*\*UK MoD signs contract to boost Rotary Wing pilot training services\*\*](#)

Air Force Technology  
22 January 2020

[\*\*UK orders four additional H145 Jupiter training helicopters\*\*](#)

UK Defence Journal  
21 January 2020

[\*\*UK puts ships and helicopters on standby in Gulf\*\*](#)

BBC News  
8 January 2020

[\*\*Have 50 new Apache helicopters actually been ordered?\*\*](#)

UK Defence Journal  
George Allison  
11 July 2019

[\*\*UK military studies high-speed helicopter benefits\*\*](#)

Flight Global  
5 February 2019  
Dominic Perry

[\*\*In focus: the Wildcat multi role helicopter in service with the Royal Navy\*\*](#)

Save the Royal Navy  
4 February 2019

[\*\*Special Operational Forces' Requirements for Rotary Wing Platforms\*\*](#)

RUSI Defence Systems  
Andrew White  
18 September 2017

[\*\*Helicopter Fleet Strength \(2020\)\*\*](#)

Global Fire Power

## 3. Ministry of Defence

### [£183 million boost for military helicopter training](#)

**Ministry of Defence**

**21 January 2020**

The MOD's UK Military Flying Training System (UKMFTS) has signed a £183 million contract to boost training services for new Rotary Wing pilots.

The contract amendment includes:

- An uplift of four new Airbus H145 helicopters
- A state-of-the-art simulator and infrastructure improvements
- Support in attracting and training personnel to meet the increased helicopter demand from the frontline
- The new H145 helicopters and simulator will enable students to learn how to fly a range of missions, covering expected scenarios on operational deployment. In addition, the H145s enable students to practice winching tasks and rear crew activities.

Defence Minister James Heapey said:

This £183 million boost for our helicopter training will see our student pilots benefit from an ultra-modern simulator, new infrastructure at RAF Shawbury and four brand-new Airbus H145 helicopters. These crucial upgrades will help our students become the finest helicopter pilots in the world.

The Rotary Wing contract amendment was signed by UKMFTS - part of Defence, Equipment & Support (DE&S) - and Ascent Flight Training Management Ltd, which delivers pilot training for the UKMFTS in a partnering arrangement. It is part of a wider programme to increase training capacity for UK military pilots overall, as part of the £3.2 billion UKMFTS programme and helps address the increased demand for pilot training identified in the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review.

The four new H145 helicopters and simulator will be based at RAF Shawbury, Shropshire, which is where the Rotary Wing element of UKMFTS is delivered. The infrastructure improvements will cater for the increased student numbers.

Commodore Tom Manson, UKMFTS Head, Defence Equipment & Support, said:

I am delighted to uplift the capacity of our tri-service military helicopter pilot training services that we deliver in partnership with Ascent. The new twin-engine Airbus H145s will enhance the current mix of H135 and H145s that are used on UKMFTS, providing increased flexibility to

deliver the range of training required for both pilots and aircrewmen in advance of flying front line helicopters.

The H145 family (BK117, EC145 and H145) is a well-proven training aircraft with more than 1,300 helicopters in service around the world and has clocked more than 5.5 million flight hours.

The UKMFTS Programme is delivering a world-class, state-of-the-art training system which is a global exemplar for training aircrew in preparation for the operational front line.

## 4. PQs

### [Military Aircraft: Helicopters](#)

21 Jan 2020 | 4324

**Asked by: Jeremy Hunt**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, what estimate he has made of the average per hour maintenance cost for the (a) AgustaWestland Apache AH1, (b) AgustaWestland AW159 Wildcat, (c) Eurocopter AS365 Dauphin II and (d) Westland Gazelle.

**Answering member: James Heappey | Ministry of Defence**

The average per hour and per annum maintenance costs are given below:

Type	Apache <sup>1</sup>	Wildcat <sup>1</sup>	Gazelle <sup>2</sup>
Cost per annum	£33million	£48million	£13million
Cost per hour	£3,451	£4,033	£3,250

\* Numbers are rounded and to the nearest hour.

<sup>1</sup>Apache and Wildcat figures are based on actual figures from financial year 2018/19.

<sup>2</sup> Gazelle figures are the annualised cost for the period 1 April 2019 to March 2025 (planned out of service date).

The Dauphin II aircraft is maintained via a civilian contract, on an availability basis, with maintenance cost per flying hour/per annum managed by the contractor. The Ministry of Defence does not therefore hold figures relating to that platform.

Figures are based on estimates and are not official statistics produced by Defence Statistics.

### [Apache AH-64 Helicopters: Procurement](#)

09 Jul 2019 | 272138

**Asked by: Andrew Rosindell**

To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, when her Department plans to complete its order for all 50 AH-64E Apache attack helicopters.

**Answering member: Stuart Andrew | Ministry of Defence**

The order for all 50 Apache AH-64E attack helicopters was placed with the US Government in June 2016 and deliveries are planned to be complete by early 2024. The US Government manages the timing of subcontracts to support the required aircraft delivery schedule.

### [Wildcat Helicopters](#)

20 Jun 2019 | HL16307

**Asked by: Lord Carlile of Berriew**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to improve the performance, endurance and range of Royal Navy Wildcat helicopters by

the introduction of (1) tactical data links, and (2) in-flight refuelling equipment.

**Answering member: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

The requirement for a Wildcat tactical data link, as well as options for extending fuel ranges, remain under review by the Royal Navy. I cannot comment further on matters relating to the future capability of our assets as it is likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of the Armed Forces.

**Defence: Helicopters**

**14 Jun 2018 | 791 cc1767-1768**

**Asked by: Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what plans they have to sustain the United Kingdom's standalone capacity to design and manufacture helicopters as part of their modernising defence programme.

**Asked by: Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville**

My Lords, on behalf of my noble friend Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon, I beg leave to ask the Question standing in his name on the Order Paper.

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

My Lords, we continue to assess the military effectiveness of rotary unmanned aerial systems and carry out ongoing capability studies that will help inform our future manned and unmanned equipment choices.

**Asked by: Baroness Bakewell of Hardington Mandeville**

I thank the Minister for his response, but the Government's failure to provide a clear strategy for the preservation of our onshore sovereign capability to design and manufacture helicopters is now endangering investment, jobs and prosperity, both in the south-west and nationally. Is the Minister aware that, if this is not remedied either in the modernising defence paper this summer or in the Budget, long-term real damage will be done to the crucial national defence and aerospace capability, as well as to local jobs in the Yeovil area and to the UK economy?

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

The noble Baroness raises some very important points and I understand the emphasis that she attaches to this aspect of UK industry. Our approach to rotary capability will be considered as part of the modernising defence programme, as she mentioned. It is worth remembering that we already have a long-term close relationship with Leonardo helicopters, which represents the design and manufacturing capability in the south-west, through our strategic partnership arrangement—a 10-year arrangement from 2016. That arrangement is unique and it enables us to maintain a continuing dialogue with the company to ensure that we are speaking the same language on capabilities, needs and requirements.

**Asked by: Lord Browne of Ladyton**

My Lords, another NATO summit is imminent. This brings to mind the frustrations of 15 years of shortfalls in NATO's helicopter capability, which was much-needed in Afghanistan. Despite the fact that most of our European allies had helicopters available—at one stage I counted over 1,000—we could not get 17 into Afghanistan. Our stand-alone capability reminds me of the relevance of this Question. We have an opportunity with the MDP for the noble Earl and the MoD to sit down with Leonardo, Boeing, Airbus and other providers of our helicopter capability. Will the noble Earl refresh his memory of the 2005 defence industrial strategy, which is still the last strategy any UK Government have had and is still relevant? He may want to look at page 90 in particular.

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

My Lords, I shall do exactly that. I am grateful to the noble Lord for his suggestion. We are on track to share headline conclusions from the modernising defence programme by the NATO summit in July. At that stage we expect to describe what the changed strategic context means for defence policy and planning, including the area in which the noble Lord is interested; how our overall approach needs to evolve, as surely it must; and how we intend to pursue improved capability in the new domains of warfare.

**Asked by: Lord Houghton of Richmond**

My Lords, does the noble Earl not agree that, given both the size of our defence budget and the multiple challenges of affordability it faces, the idea that we can for all time sustain a whole range of sovereign defence capability is simply untenable?

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

My Lords, I do not think that this Government or any preceding recent Government have pretended that we can maintain sovereign capability in every area of our defence requirements. We certainly consider maintaining sovereign capability where that is in the national interest but, in general, competition ensures best value for money, best capability and innovation.

**Asked by: Lord Razzall**

My Lords, following up on my noble friend's Question, I am sure the Minister will agree that this is not only a question for the south-west but also affects the position of Airbus, which, after all, provides at the moment one-third of all UK defence helicopters. Bearing in mind the likely pressures on Airbus to shift production to France or Germany if Brexit happens, what steps are the Government taking to ensure that Airbus's helicopter capability remains in the UK?

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

The noble Lord is right: Airbus provides the majority of police and emergency services helicopters and has the largest share of the UK's civil and military market. Its main base is in Oxford, where it modifies and customises helicopters, although the design and manufacture is completed in France, as the noble Lord is aware. We are in regular contact and have regular discussions with the company. The aerospace growth partnership, in particular, enables the industry and Government

to engage on a formal basis to tackle the barriers and unlock market opportunities across these sectors of the economy.

**Asked by: Lord Hamilton of Epsom**

I know it is not my noble friend's responsibility but does he have any idea when the Metropolitan Police will start using unmanned aircraft for surveillance over London rather than flying helicopters, which is the most expensive form of aviation?

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

My Lords, I am afraid I shall have to write to my noble friend on that issue as it is not in my brief.

**Asked by: Lord Tunnicliffe**

My Lords, in researching this Question I discovered the defence industrial policy December 2017, which I believe is the latest statement of the Government's intentions. I word-searched it for the word "helicopter", which appeared under two pretty pictures and nowhere in the main text. Are we really going to get by the middle of July in the modernising defence programme a definitive answer to the original question?

**Answered by: Earl Howe | Ministry of Defence**

I might suggest that the noble Lord should turn his attention to the Government's industrial strategy White Paper as well. We are very alive to the issue he raised concerning helicopters. We are committed to keeping the UK as a leading aerospace nation. The industrial strategy White Paper identifies a range of cross-government measures to boost productivity, employment, innovation and skills. Indeed, my honourable friend Philip Dunne has recently completed a review of prosperity arising from our defence industries which will help to inform our future thinking in this area.

**[Departmental Funding](#)**

**23 Apr 2018 | 639 c594**

**Asked by: Marcus Fysh**

One way to ensure that we have enough money to spend on defence is to take full account of British industry's opportunities and contribution when making procurement decisions. End-to-end helicopter manufacturing in the south-west is a strategic asset supporting more than 10,000 jobs and £700 million-worth of exports. Will the Secretary of State discuss with me developing a specific defence industrial strategy for helicopters?

**Answered by: Gavin Williamson | Ministry of Defence**

My hon. Friend is a strong advocate on this issue and a defender of jobs in his constituency. We are committed to spending more than £3 billion with Leonardo over the next 10 years, but I would be very happy to meet him to discuss how we can develop our strategy. It is about not just manned rotary but unmanned rotary. What are the options and opportunities that we can exploit to ensure that our world-leading industry continues to hold that top spot?

## 5. Other Parliamentary material

### 5.1 Debates

#### [RAF Centenary](#)

26 November 2018 | 650 cc69-122

#### [Helicopters: UK Design and Manufacture](#)

10 July 2018 | 792 cc892-904

#### [Defence Capability](#)

19 October 2017 | 629 cc395-420WH

#### [UK Helicopter Industry](#)

24 January 2017 | 620 cc38-46WH

### 5.2 Written Ministerial Statement

#### [Defence Rotary Wing Capability Study](#)

12 Jun 2012 | 546 17WS

**The Minister for the Armed Forces (Nick Harvey):** The Defence Rotary Wing Capability Study was commissioned to ensure that the Department has the right plans in place to meet the demands on helicopter capability in the future. I am pleased to say that the study is now complete and, given the interest taken in the study by Parliament, I wanted to take the opportunity to announce its key findings. As the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Peter Luff), who has responsibility for defence equipment, support and technology, stated in his response on [30 April 2012, Official Report, column 1142W](#), I should reiterate that the findings include no major changes to our previously announced plans.

The study reviewed the full rotary wing requirement for the land, sea and air environments. This encompassed all helicopter roles: attack, lift, reconnaissance and search and rescue. The study was broken down into six work strands covering future force structure, training and simulation, support, specialist roles, basing, and search and rescue.

The aim was to look across all areas of the Department to ensure that we are working as efficiently as possible to deliver the plans for rotary wing capability outlined in the strategic defence and security review. The study confirmed the following plans:

to move the MOD's rotary wing capability to four core fleets, the Chinook, Wildcat, Merlin and Apache helicopters;

to complete the Puma life extension programme, which extends the out of service date for Puma Mk2 to 2025; this offers resilience to the Department's lift capability as it transitions to the four core fleets; and

to transfer the Merlin Mk 3/3a to the Royal Navy's commando helicopter force.

As a result of this review, the Department has:

identified opportunities in training and support as the most promising areas to achieve rationalisation and efficiencies. Broadly this includes making better use of simulated training and adopting a simpler approach to procurement and alternative models for support;

considered alternative ways of organising our helicopters and concluded that Joint Helicopter Command should continue to command land-based (battlefield) helicopters and Navy Command should continue to command maritime helicopters;

confirmed the end of MOD provision of Rotary Wing Search and Rescue at the remaining eight military bases upon withdrawal of the Sea King in April 2016. This will then be performed by a contractor through the Department for Transport, as the Secretary of State for Transport announced to Parliament on 28 November 2011, *Official Report*, columns 52-53WS.

The MOD and other interested parties will now consider the recommendations and these findings will now be taken forward as part of routine departmental business.

## 6. Further reading

[Combat Air Strategy: An ambitious vision for the future](#), Ministry of Defence, 16 July 2018

[The defence capability review: equipment](#), House of Commons Briefing Paper CBP 8112, 17 October 2017  
(\*Chapter 4: Helicopters)

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