



Military Search and Rescue to end in 2016

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The Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy will no longer provide a Search and Rescue Helicopter service in the UK after March 2016.

UK Search and Rescue is currently provided by Royal Air Force and Royal Navy personnel and from a civilian helicopter service under contract to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA). The service is jointly managed by the MCA and the Ministry of Defence.

In 2005 the Government established a project to bring the SAR-H services into a single entity. Initially the plan was to use both civilian and military aircrews. However after abandoning its first attempt to secure a private sector bidder for the contract in February 2011, the Government later re-launched the competition seeking a purely civilian operated service. The military Search and Rescue service will be drawn down in 2015 and early 2016 ahead of the retirement from service of the Sea King helicopter fleet in March 2016.

The Department of Transport is taking over full responsibility for maintaining the UK Search and Rescue Helicopters (SAR-H) capability. The new service will be managed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and run by Bristow Helicopters Ltd, who won the contract in March 2013. They will progressively take over the service from 2015 and be fully operational across the whole country by summer 2017.

Further information about changes to the Coastguard service can be found in HC Library standard note 186, *Shipping: HM Coastguard*, 9 April 2013.

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1 Introduction

The military has formally been providing a Search and Rescue capability since 1941 (largely as a result of the Battle of Britain), when the Directorate of Air Sea Rescue was formed at the HQ of RAF Coastal Command. The Directorate had a mandate to form a combined and effective air/sea rescue service for downed Allied aircrew. The RAF Mountain Rescue teams were first established in 1943.

The RAF Search and Rescue Force celebrated its 70th anniversary in February 2011 and the Royal Navy celebrates its 60th anniversary of Search and Rescue operations in 2013.

The current arrangements for Search and Rescue (SAR) in the UK have evolved over the years and largely in response to obligations imposed under various international treaties such as the *Maritime Search and Rescue Convention 1979* and the *Convention on Safety of Life at Sea*. Search and Rescue is a coordinated service that is provided by a number of separate departments and organisations including Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA), the Ministry of Defence via the Royal Navy and the Royal Air Force, the emergency services and organisations such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) and the Mountain Rescue Council (MRC).¹

The Ministry of Defence is responsible for providing SAR facilities for military operations, exercises and training within the UK and, by agreement, exercises responsibility for the co-ordination of civil aeronautical SAR on behalf of the Department for Transport, according to the Search and Rescue Framework document.² It adds that “where the coverage provided by military SAR assets meets the civil SAR coverage requirements, they will be made available for civil maritime and land-based SAR operations.”³

¹ [Search and Rescue Framework for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), Maritime and Coastguard Agency, April 2008

² For a detailed breakdown of each service please see the [Search and Rescue Framework for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#), Maritime and Coastguard Agency, April 2008

³ Ibid p11

A harmonisation project was launched in 2005 to unify the Search and Rescue Helicopters (SAR-H) services currently provided by the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency through service contracts. The project originally envisaged a new, single entity that would comprise of a mix of civilian and military personnel, while all of the airframes would form part of a commercially owned and registered fleet.

The Soteria consortium was chosen as the preferred bidder for the project in February 2010. However, the project was suspended in June 2010 following a Treasury review of the Government's major spending projects. In February 2011 the Government announced that the SAR-H contract had been cancelled after it emerged that irregularities had arisen in the bidding process relating to the consortium that had gone on to win the competition.

After a period of assessment, the Department for Transport announced on 28 November 2011 that a new civilian operated search and rescue capability would be established and that military involvement in search and rescue would cease once that capability becomes fully operational.⁴

The MOD confirmed in June 2012 that the MOD provision of Rotary Wing Search and Rescue will end in March 2016 with the retirement of the Sea King helicopter fleet.⁵ Both the Royal Navy and the RAF use Sea King Helicopters.

Bristow Helicopters Ltd was awarded the ten year contract for providing UK Search and Rescue Helicopters in March 2013.⁶ The new service will be a wholly civilian one and will be managed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. Bristow will progressively take over the service from 2015 and be fully operational across the whole country by summer 2017.

The Ministry of Defence is separately looking at the provision of Search and Rescue – Helicopters in the Falkland Islands post-2016, when the Sea King's deployed there reach the end of their service life.

It should be noted that combat search and rescue (CSAR) on overseas operations is not provided by the military assets assigned to the UK SAR framework. CSAR is provided as part of a broader Combat Recovery Operations Capability and utilises assets from Joint Helicopter Command. CSAR provision in Afghanistan is currently a coalition responsibility.⁷

Full responsibility for Search and Rescue now rests with the Department for Transport.⁸

2 Privatisation of Search and Rescue

In 2005 the Government established a Joint Search and Rescue Harmonisation project with a view to replacing the search and rescue helicopter capabilities in the UK provided by the Royal Air Force, the Royal Navy and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) with a single SAR entity. This would comprise a mix of civilian and military personnel. However the Government abandoned a first attempt to secure a private sector bidder for the contract in

⁴ HC Deb 8 February 2012 c27WS

⁵ HC Deb 12 June 2012 c18WS

⁶ HC Deb 26 March 2013 c98WS

⁷ HC Deb 22 January 2008, c1830W

⁸ [Letter](#) from the Secretary of State for Transport, Rt Hon Patrick McLoughlin, to Louise Ellman MP, dated 29 November 2012, written evidence to the Transport Select Committee.

February 2011. When it re-launched the competition, the decision was made to make the service entirely civilian operated and to end the military contribution to Search and Rescue.

2.1 The first competition

The Department of Transport outlined its plans in May 2006, citing the approaching end of service life of the Ministry of Defence helicopters – the Sea Kings – and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency service contract coming up for renewal in the next decade. It proposed a competition under the Private Finance Initiative. It envisaged a service managed jointly by the Ministry of Defence and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency comprising both military and civilian aircrew.⁹ Future basing arrangements for SAR were also expected to be reviewed as part of the plans with a possible reduction in SAR bases around the UK from 12 to eight,¹⁰ although this reportedly prompted disagreements between the MOD and the MCA.¹¹

Four consortia initially bid for the SAR-H contract and the preferred bidder – the Soteria Consortium - was announced in a Written Statement on 9 February 2010. At the time, the Government anticipated the new service would begin with a phased introduction from 2012.

The new service was still to be managed jointly by the Ministry of Defence and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and would retain a proportion of military aircrew alongside civilian aircrew. It anticipated the new fleet of helicopters would be 30% faster than the Sea Kings.¹²

The Government separately confirmed it would not be procuring any helicopters itself. That would be the responsibility of the contractor, who would need to ensure they had “sufficient helicopters to meet the requirement to be able to field one helicopter to incidents from each base during its operating hours.”¹³

The helicopters were to be based at: RAF Boulmer, RMB Chivenor, RNAS Culdrose, Glasgow Airport, Leconfield, Lee On Solent, RAF Lossiemouth, Portland, Stornoway, Sumburgh, RAF Valley and Wattisham Airfield.¹⁴

There was some controversy, however, over specific elements of the deal which would see the provision of a 24-hour SAR service from only 9 of the 12 search and rescue bases and a reduction in the overall total of helicopters provided under the contract. An EDM tabled by the then Liberal Democrat Defence Spokesman, Nick Harvey, in March 2010 expressed concern about the cost of the PFI contract, the reduction in total helicopter numbers, the reduction in cover from 24 to 12 hours and urged the Government to find a more economical alternative that would sustain 24 hour cover at all SAR stations.¹⁵

In June 2010, the SAR-H contract was suspended following a value for money review of all of the Government’s major spending projects.

An announcement on proceeding with the project had been expected in December 2010 but instead the Department of Transport announced it was delaying the deal in order to clarify an

⁹ HC Deb 9 May 2006, c12-14WS

¹⁰ See HC Deb 13 January 2009, c559W

¹¹ Ibid

¹² HC Deb 9 February 2010, c42-3ws

¹³ HC Deb 11 March 2010 c461W

¹⁴ HC Deb 11 March 2010, c461-2w

¹⁵ EDM 1227, Session 2009-10

issue which had been raised by Soteria, the preferred bidder.¹⁶ Two months later the Government confirmed that irregularities had been identified and “it would not be appropriate to proceed with either the preferred bid or with the current procurement process.”¹⁷ Philip Hammond, then Secretary of State for Transport, gave further details in his written statement:

In mid-December, the preferred bidder in the SAR-H competition, Soteria, voluntarily came forward to inform the Government of irregularities regarding the conduct of its bid team which had only then recently come to light. The irregularities included access by one of the consortium members, CHC Helicopter, to commercially sensitive information regarding the joint MoD/DfT project team's evaluations of industry bids and evidence that a former member of that project team had assisted the consortium in its bid preparation, contrary to explicit assurances given to the project team.

Since December, our two departments have been working with Soteria better to understand the situation and its implications for the procurement process. In addition, the Ministry of Defence Police are investigating how the commercially sensitive information came to be in the possession of the bidder. It would be inappropriate to comment further on the details of the investigation until it has finished.¹⁸

In April 2013 the Ministry of Defence confirmed the MOD police investigation into the contract had ended and had concluded that no further police action was warranted.¹⁹

According to the National Audit Office, £7.2m had already been spent on the privatisation deal by 31 March 2010;²⁰ while the MOD revealed in answer to a Parliamentary Question on 11 February 2011 that approximately £10m had been spent on the project, to date.²¹

2.2 The second competition and a purely civilian service

The October 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review made no mention of the possible future of the SAR-H project, leading many to speculate that the military element of the deal remained uncertain, was possibly unaffordable and could include the phasing out all military involvement in search and rescue provision.²²

The Government announced on 28 November 2011 that a new civilian-led UK-wide search and rescue capability would be established and that military involvement in search and rescue would cease once that capability is fully operational. The contract length is approximately ten years and Search and Rescue operations will cease at RAF Boulmer in 2015 and at MCA Portland.

In a statement to the House, then Secretary of State for Transport, Justine Greening, stated that the Defence Secretary had “agreed that the new contract will provide a search and rescue capability provided by civilian crews, enabling our armed forces to focus activity on their front-line operations.”²³ She commended the crews of the Royal Navy and Royal Air

¹⁶ HC Deb 16 December 2010, c134WS

¹⁷ HC Deb 8 February 2011, c7-8WS

¹⁸ HC Deb 8 February 2011, c7-8WS

¹⁹ HC Deb 16 April 2013 c286W

²⁰ National Audit Office, *Major Projects Report 2010*, HC 489-II, Session 2010-11

²¹ HC Deb 11 February 2011, c455W

²² See “SAR-H contract delayed as Soteria steps back”, *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 17 December 2010

²³ HC Deb 28 November 2011 c52-53WS

Force for their dedication and professionalism in “delivering an exemplary search and rescue service for many years, and we owe them all great thanks for this.”²⁴

She confirmed the RAF and Royal Navy will continue to provide search and rescue coverage until the replacement is in place, with the goal of achieving the MOD’s need to withdraw from service and retire its fleet of Sea King helicopters by March 2016.^{25 26}

The MOD confirmed in June 2012 that its provision of Rotary Wing Search and Rescue (i.e. helicopters) will end in April 2016 with the withdrawal of the Sea King helicopters. This was announced as part of the findings of the Defence Rotary Wing Capability Study in June 2012.²⁷ Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin told the Transport select committee that after the cancellation of the PFI contract, and because of its experience in Afghanistan, the Ministry of Defence decided “it gained no operational advantage from military personnel being engaged in SAR activity in the UK.”²⁸

Civilian contract awarded

The Government signed a £1.6 billion contract with Bristow Helicopters Ltd in March 2013 to provide SAR helicopter services in the UK. In making the announcement, Transport Secretary Patrick McLoughlin expressed confidence that the contract “represents the best solution for the UK over the next 10 years.”

- Operations will commence progressively from 2015
- Fully operational across the United Kingdom by summer 2017
- Managed by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency
- New contract will operate from 7 to 10 years

Mr McLoughlin confirmed “the contract will enable the RAF and Royal Navy to withdraw from search and rescue activities in the UK and retire their fleet of Sea King SAR helicopters.” He said further:

Experience of front-line operations has informed the military decision that the skills required for personnel recovery on the battlefield and in the maritime environment can be sustained without the need for military personnel being engaged in UK search and rescue. I want to pay tribute to the outstanding service personnel who have displayed such enduring commitment and bravery in RAF and Royal Navy search and rescue squadrons. The service they have provided for over 70 years has been exemplary and the country owes them all an enormous debt of gratitude. The decision to cease military involvement in search and rescue in the UK was not made lightly. But with the Sea King nearing its 40th year of service, the time has come to change the way the service is provided and the aircraft used.

²⁴ HC Deb 28 November 2011 c52-53WS

²⁵ HC Deb 28 November 2011, c52-3WS

²⁶ Sea King helicopters are also used in non-SAR roles and those aircraft are to be replaced by Merlin helicopters when the Sea King fleet is retired in 2013. Defence Committee, *Future Maritime Surveillance*, 19 September 2012, HC110 2012-13, Q84 and EV38

²⁷ The study was commissioned to examine the MOD’s future helicopter needs. The MOD’s rotary wing capability will focus on four core fleets: the Chinook, Wildcat, Merlin and Apache helicopters

²⁸ [Letter](#) from the Secretary of State for Transport, Rt Hon Patrick McLoughlin, to Louise Ellman MP, dated 29 November 2012, written evidence to the Transport Select Committee.

The Maritime and Coastguard Agency, and its predecessor bodies, has 30 years experience of operating contracted search and rescue helicopter services using civilian aircrew. The existing MCA search and rescue contracts have delivered services of the very highest standards, and highly skilled civilian crews have won numerous awards for their bravery and dedication.

Bristow Helicopters Ltd is a UK company which has 36 years experience of providing search and rescue services in the UK, including 24 years with the MCA [...]

Bristow Helicopters Ltd has completed more than 44,000 search and rescue operational hours in the UK and conducted over 15,000 missions, during which more than 7,000 people have been rescued by their crews.²⁹

The new service will operate a mix of 22 Sikorsky S92 and AugustaWestland AW189 helicopters from 10 locations, including three new bases. All will be operational 24 hours a day. Mr McLoughlin said the base locations “are strategically placed near areas with high SAR incident rates and will help ensure maximum operational coverage across the UK while reducing transit times to incidents.”³⁰

In addition, short contracts were signed in February 2012 for SAR-H to replace the existing contracted Maritime and Coastguard capability in Stornoway and Shetland, and Portland and Lee-on-Solent, until June 2017. After 2017 they will be taken over in their entirety by Bristow Helicopters Ltd. Bristow was awarded the contract for services from Stornoway and Shetland, and CHC Scotia Bristow Helicopters Ltd for services from Portland and Lee-on-Solent.³¹

3 Military Search and Rescue capabilities and locations

The primary role of military SAR is to assist military personnel in difficulty, but the majority of their work involves searching for and rescuing civilians and assisting the civilian emergency services.

Both the Royal Air Force and the Royal Navy use Sea King helicopters for Search and Rescue. The oldest of the Sea King helicopters entered service in the early 1970s³² and the previous Government confirmed in 2009 its intention to withdraw its Sea King helicopter fleet from service in 2016.³³ The current Government has similarly confirmed 2016 is the retirement date.³⁴

Search and Rescue are based in eight locations around the UK: RAF Lossiemouth; RAF Boulmer; RAF Leconfield; RAF Valley; RAF Chivenor; RAF Wattisham; RNAS Culdrose and HMS Gannet, based at Prestwick airport (the latter two are Royal Navy). They operate 24 hours a day on 15 minutes’ notice during the day and 45 minutes’ notice at night and provide

²⁹ HC Deb 26 March 2013 c98WS

³⁰ HC Deb 26 March 2013 c99WS

³¹ HC Deb 8 February 2012 c27WS

³² HC Deb 19 December 2012 c969

³³ HC Deb 15 December 2009 c99WS

³⁴ HC Deb 11 July 2011 c8WS

coverage throughout the UK.³⁵ The Government has said that all the bases “have a wider military role and their future is not linked” to the change to Search and Rescue.³⁶

SAR helicopter coverage is coordinated by the Aeronautical Rescue Coordination Centre (ARCC), based at Kinloss Barracks.³⁷

The RAF SAR-H is divided into three squadrons and operates from six locations around the UK, each with two aircraft:³⁸

- No. 22 Squadron is headquartered at RAF Valley and maintains three detachments at Chivenor ('A' Flight), Wattisham ('B' Flight) and Valley ('C' Flight).
- No. 202 Squadron is also headquartered at RAF Valley but maintains three detachments of 2 aircraft each at Boulmer ('A' Flight), Lossiemouth ('D' Flight) and Leconfield ('E' Flight).

The standard SAR crew is made up of four members: two pilots, one of whom is the aircraft captain, a radar operator who acts as the winch operator at the rescue scene and a winchman, normally trained to paramedic standard, who will supply immediate first-aid and recovery services at the rescue site.

The RAF previously used the Nimrod MR2 maritime Patrol Aircraft (fixed-wing) out of RAF Kinloss which provided a long range SAR capability, but that aircraft was withdrawn from service in March 2010 and its replacement, the Nimrod MRA4 aircraft, was cancelled as part of the recommendations of the Strategic Defence and Security Review, published in October 2010.

RAF Sea King helicopters are distinctive for their yellow colour.³⁹



2013 marks the 60th anniversary of Royal Navy Search and Rescue.⁴⁰ 771 Naval Air Squadron Search and Rescue operates Sea King Mk5 helicopters out of RNAS Culdrose in Cornwall and Prestwick in Scotland. Royal Navy Sea King Mk5 helicopters are red and grey:

³⁵ Four other bases in the UK belong to the Maritime and Coastguard Agency: Stornoway, Sumburgh, Portland and Lee on Solent

³⁶ “[Future of Search and Rescue agreed](#)”, *Department of Transport news story*, 26 March 2013

³⁷ RAF Kinloss closed as an RAF station in March 2013 and is in the process of transferring to the Army.

³⁸ “[Maritime patrol and Search and Rescue](#)”, *RAF website*, accessed 19 April 2013

³⁹ *RAF website*, accessed 19 April 2013



The BBC broadcast an hour-long documentary on the Sea King's, present by John Sergeant, in February 2013.⁴¹ BBC One has broadcast two series of *Helicopter Rescue* focusing on RAF Search and Rescue crews in Wales.⁴²

Mountain Rescue Teams

The RAF has four mountain rescue teams based at four locations around the UK: RAF Lossiemouth, RAF Leuchars, RAF Leeming and RAF Valley. The team from RAF Kinloss transferred to RAF Lossiemouth in July 2012.⁴³

Falkland Islands and Cyprus

The RAF also provides Search and Rescue in the Falkland Islands and in Cyprus. No. 84 Squadron is based at RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus and uses Griffin helicopters. Two Sea King HAR3s provide SAR cover in the Falkland Islands. The new civilian service announced by the Department of Transport covers UK Search and Rescue only. In June 2012 Peter Luff, then Defence Minister, confirmed the MOD is examining "alternative means of replacing the Sea King search and rescue capability in the Falkland Islands"⁴⁴ when it retires in 2016.

4 Military Search and Rescue statistics

- In 2012 Military Search and Rescue units attended 1,761 incidents resulting in 1,865 callouts and 1,547 persons being moved⁴⁵

Summary statistics on the number of Search & Rescue (SAR) incidents, the associated callouts and people assisted by military units in the UK and Overseas (Falklands and Cyprus) are compiled monthly and annually by *Defence Analytical Services and Advice* and are available on DASA's website at the following locations:

- [Monthly statistics](#)
- [Annual statistics](#)

⁴⁰ More information about the history of Royal Navy Search and Rescue and the 60th anniversary are available on the Royal Navy [website](#)

⁴¹ "Sea King: Britain's flying past", *Royal Navy website*

⁴² More details available on the [BBC website](#). Series 2 began broadcasting on 15 April 2013

⁴³ "SAR Annual - Military Search and Rescue Statistics", *Defence Analytical Services and Advice*, 31 January 2013, edition 12

⁴⁴ HC Deb 11 June 2012 c113W

⁴⁵ "SAR Annual - Military Search and Rescue Statistics", *Defence Analytical Services and Advice*, 31 January 2013, edition 12