



Ministry of Defence

ALEX CHALK KC MP
MINISTER OF STATE FOR DEFENCE PROCUREMENT

MSU/4/5/2/23/is

9 January 2023

Dear Tobias,

Since my predecessor wrote to you in February this year, the 'Tranche 2' buy of a further 26 F-35B Lightning aircraft has been announced. This measure will realise the long-term capability ambition to deepen our Carrier Enabled Power Projection capability and will bring the UK fleet up to 74 aircraft allowing us to create a third front line squadron by 2033. It also extends the Out of Service Date (OSD) of UK F-35B to 2069 to align OSD with the Queen Elizabeth Class Carriers. The first 48 aircraft ('Tranche 1') continue to be delivered as scheduled, with 30 aircraft received (as of 2 December 2022), and three remaining in the US for test and evaluation. 'Tranche 1' deliveries will be complete by the end of 2025.

Lightning Force growth remains slower than planned due to insufficient numbers of RAF and RN aircraft maintainers. Significant work has been completed to fully understand the impacts of this reduced growth rate and the changes required to the numbers of personnel on the Force. Corrective measures are being advanced (e.g. an uplift in maintenance personnel on the Lightning Force) and it is anticipated that the benefits from this will start to show during 2023. Despite these Force growth challenges, since January 2022, 207 Squadron (the Operational Conversion Unit) have graduated eight F-35B pilots for the Force: four UK pilots previously qualified on other Combat Air platforms, two ab-initio pilots and two F-35A pilots on exchange from the Royal Australian Airforce and the United States Airforce.

The Lightning Force also has an exchange pilot from the United States Marine Corp on 617 (The Dambusters) Squadron with the exchange programme continuing to provide international 5th Generation Combat Air experience adding depth of experience to the Lightning Force. The UK has four pilots on F-35 exchanges, three in the US and one in Australia with such exchanges remaining a core part of our engagement with key Allies. A further five pilots are due to graduate in January 2023. Four new Qualified Flying Instructors have been trained with a fifth due to graduate in Quarter 1 2023, providing vital additional instructor depth to the Force.

The Rt Hon Tobias Ellwood MP
Chair, Defence Committee
Committee Office
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London
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Following Russia's unprovoked and illegal invasion of Ukraine, 617 Squadron have provided a key component of the UK contribution to NATO unity and Enhanced Vigilance. The Squadron has been regularly undertaking long range missions from RAF Marham. Supported by Voyager tankers, 617 Squadron provided assurance to NATO partners by employing the benefits of 5th generation capabilities, whilst seamlessly integrating with our own 4th generation Typhoon, and fighters from other partner nations, to form a potent force mix.

In June, 617 Squadron also deployed to Finland for an exercise with regional partners of the Joint Expeditionary Force. The Lightning, alongside Typhoon, conducted high-end warfighting training with Finnish F-18 Hornets and Swedish Gripen aircraft, underlining the UK's commitment to strengthening our collective defence capabilities. Further demonstrating our commitment to NATO assurance via Operation ALUMINIUM, 617 Squadron has undertaken short deployments to Estonia and embarked on HMS QUEEN ELIZABETH as part of the Joint Expeditionary Force in support of Operation ACHILLEAN. The focus of this activity has been tactical and operational interoperability between the RAF, Royal Norwegian Air Force, Royal Netherlands Air Force and United States Air Force (Europe) F-35s alongside other partner strategic air assets, culminating in a Tri-Lateral Large Force Exercise that included live drops of Paveway IV controlled by Norwegian troops. Observing how other F-35 partners utilise their F-35s as part of an Large Force Exercise provides the UK Lightning Force with appreciation of coalition capabilities and how tactics, techniques and procedures differ between nations. Training in this way ensures that 5th generation UK Combat Air power can seamlessly integrate with our strategic partners, when called upon by Defence. These activities further demonstrate F-35's operational pedigree and interoperability with our own Combat Air Force, the forces of NATO allies and other regional partners.

A planned period of developmental test using Joint Program Office Integrated Test Force F-35Bs on HMS PRINCE OF WALES to expand the embarked operating envelope of UK F-35B and explore the utility of Shipborne Rolling Vertical Landings has been delayed due to HMS PRINCE OF WALES serviceability issues. Planning is underway now to identify the next suitable opportunity to conduct this activity.

Programme Costs

Global inflation and FOREX challenges have been the key themes of the previous six months. Aircraft price has reduced by 32% over the period 2014 to 2022 but the price of each aircraft in Lots 15-17 (delivered between 2023-2026 and inclusive of the engine cost) is increasing by around 6% compared to the 2021 F-35 Joint Programme Office Production Annual Cost Estimate forecast. This is predominately due to increased manufacturing costs /associated with inflationary pressures, as well as supply chain impacts following the withdrawal of Turkey from the programme. FOREX appears to be returning to norms despite a spike during the middle of 2022. We are close to agreeing the "LANCE23" UK support contract with BAE Systems which will deliver a 5-year national support solution at Marham, and I look forward to providing you with details of that in my next update.

Capability Milestone Timeline Progress

The next key programme milestone is the stand up of 809 Naval Air Squadron in 2023; it will further mature to deliver an operational capability in 2025. Lightning Force Final Operating Capability is still predicted to be achieved in 2025 and, beyond Final Operating Capability, the next significant operational capability development will occur in 2028 with UK weapons (METEOR and SPEAR 3) being fielded on the UK's front-line.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alex Chalk', followed by a period.

ALEX CHALK KC MP