



House of Commons
Defence Committee

**Aviation Procurement:
Winging It?:
Government Response
to the Committee's
Tenth Report of
Session 2022–23**

**Second Special Report of
Session 2023–24**

*Ordered by the House of Commons
to be printed 7 November 2023*

The Defence Committee

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Second Special Report

The Defence Committee published its Tenth Report of Session 2022–23 [Aviation Procurement: Winging it?](#) (HC 178) on 10 September 2023. The Government’s response was received on 6 November 2023 and is appended below.

Appendix: Government Response

Introduction

The Ministry of Defence (MOD) would like to thank the House of Commons Defence Committee (the Committee) for the comprehensive report of its inquiry into Aviation Procurement. We welcome the report, which represents the first dedicated deep dive into the RAF and its capabilities for a number of years, and the Committee’s observations and recommendations, which we have carefully considered in producing this response.

We are also grateful to Committee members for taking the time to visit RAF Marham to see at first hand the work of RAF personnel on one of the RAF’s cutting-edge platforms, the F-35B Lightning, and we are also pleased they were able to visit RAF Lossiemouth in October, to learn more about the station’s vital role in protecting the UK, at home and overseas, with its Typhoon and Poseidon fleets.

Before addressing the Committee’s specific recommendations, however, it will be no surprise that the MOD rejects the Committee’s central assertion that the UK’s—in the words of the Committee, “diminished”—air capability leaves it “dangerously exposed”. The decisions taken in the 2021 Defence Command Paper (DCP) were around modernisation: enabling the RAF to meet current and future threats head-on, being ready to fly and fight in the modern operational environment.

Alongside the Royal Navy, Army and Strategic Command, the RAF plays a central role in the security and prosperity of the UK and our allies. In addition to 24/7 air defence of the UK and space domain surveillance, last year the RAF deployed 7,500 personnel on 41 operations across 75 countries. This has included a near constant presence in the Black Sea and an enhanced presence on NATO’s eastern flank to reassure our Allies following Russia’s illegal invasion of Ukraine. This has led to a doubling of the number of operational combat air sorties conducted by Typhoon compared with the previous year. Moreover, since 2014, the RAF has flown over 10,000 sorties over Iraq and Syria, releasing 4,000 precision weapons to help defeat Daesh. UK air and space power will continue to provide the UK choice through the ability to act globally, at range and speed, and with precision, across the military domains.

Our responses to each of the Committee’s recommendations (shown in bold) are set out below.

Combat Air

1. **With the prospect of UK involvement in a major war on the European continent closer than it has been for decades, there are serious questions as to whether the UK's reduced combat air fleet still provides a sufficient deterrent and whether its limited numbers of admittedly highly capable aircraft could overcome a peer adversary in a warfighting context. These questions arise not only in the context of the UK's sovereign capability, but also in relation to its contribution to any wider alliance. (Paragraph 21)**

2. **The RAF's combat aircraft fleet now provides a boutique high capability: it lacks numerical depth and has an inadequate attrition reserve. Exquisite capability has its place, but in a peer-on-peer conflict such as a shooting war with Russia, every airframe will count. Combat aircraft numbers are already low. The Defence Command Paper cuts will create a combat air capability gap which, on current plans, will persist well into the 2030s. This is unacceptable. *The MoD and RAF must consider as a matter of urgency how they can increase combat air mass in the short term.* (Paragraph 22)**

Defence is threat-led, and decisions on the UK's combat air mass will always be determined by the threats we face, now and in the future, with major decisions routinely taken as part of strategic defence reviews. Decisive hard power and the ability and readiness to fly and fight are essential parts of being able to operate and deter. As we set out in our written and oral evidence, however, in a world of multi-domain operations, effectiveness should not be judged solely by numbers of people or platforms; the conflict in Ukraine has further reinforced that competitive advantage does not always stem from mass alone. The decisions taken in the 2021 DCP, reinforced in the refresh in 2023, ensured investment will be directed to capabilities that will endure and provide relevance well into the next decade.

While the F-35B Lightning fleet continues to grow in parallel, RAF Typhoon will remain the backbone of the combat air fighting force. Its newest 40 Tranche 3 aircraft will be equipped with the advanced 'European Common Radar System 2' which will enhance survivability and lethality, not only for the platform itself, but for other co-operating UK and allied force elements. The multi-role capabilities of Typhoon mean that it can be employed concurrently in both air-air and air-surface roles that would previously have required multiple platforms to conduct. Working as a force multiplier with other Typhoons and combat air platforms, by suppressing enemy air defences and achieving control of the air, it will enable operational effectiveness for the wider force. Typhoon and our growing F-35B Lightning fleet work in tandem, enabling their strengths to be multiplied and ensuring both 4th and 5th generation combat aircraft are integrated seamlessly, using each other's impressive capabilities to maximise survivability and lethality.

Moreover, when it comes to 'mass' it should be remembered that we are a leading member of NATO, and do not stand alone in countering the threats we face, making a significant contribution to a vast NATO-wide combat air force, and will continue to do so.

3. ***Increasing the UK's F-35 fleet beyond the 74 aircraft already planned would be one way to address the combat air capability gap, and this was an approach supported by several of our witnesses. However, although acquisition costs for the aircraft may have reduced, sustainment costs remain unacceptably high. The fleet's slow force growth rate is a continued concern: the RAF's failure to correctly calculate the number of***

maintainers required to service the aircraft is simply inexcusable. At present there are too many unresolved questions about the development and operational deployment of the fleet. (Paragraph 35)

4. *The MoD must be transparent and realistic about the eventual size of the F-35 fleet, recognising that the planned deferral of this decision to the middle of this decade will damage the ability of UK industry to maintain an ongoing production capacity for combat air, and should also make clear whether it is attributed to the Royal Navy or the RAF. When deciding whether to purchase further F-35s, the MoD should carefully consider the advantages that would be offered by a mixed fleet of F-35A and B variant aircraft. The MoD should also clarify whether its intention is that the fleet will routinely be deployed alongside US Marine Corps F-35Bs on UK carriers.* (Paragraph 36)

UK F-35 aircraft are being procured in ‘Tranches’, in line with Defence need. Delivery of our Tranche 1 buy (48 aircraft) will complete by 2025. The Government has outlined plans to buy a further 27 aircraft as part of a ‘Tranche 2’ purchase, which we expect to complete in the early part of the next decade, and which will allow the formation of three front-line Squadrons. We expect the production line to continue to run for many years. We will consider again in the mid-2020s the F-35 fleet size as part of the next Strategic Defence Review. Our decisions on F-35 will align with the needs of the Global Combat Air Programme to ensure the UK has the mix of combat air types it needs to meet Defence requirements and evolving threats; as part of that investment decision process, we will also consider the best variant (A or B model) to meet Defence’s needs. It is also right to point out that no procurement decisions on F-35 have been deferred; indeed, procurement was accelerated in 2015 to form two front-line Squadrons from the Government’s Tranche 1 procurement.

We acknowledge the Committee’s concerns on F-35 technician numbers, though we reject that it was “inexcusable”. We set the number of technicians on our F-35 squadrons based on the programme’s original assumption of the number of maintainers required per aircraft. As we have gained experience of operating the aircraft, we have found that an increase in maintainers (by around 20%) will improve resilience in the engineering task and have adapted our plans accordingly.

While RAF “owned”, the UK Lightning force is jointly-crewed and operated from both land bases and our carriers. The versatility of F-35, such that it can operate at high readiness from both environments, depending on the operational requirement, is a real strength and offers the UK more flexibility and productivity.

The UK will continue to look for opportunities regularly to operate alongside our US Marine Corps (USMC) allies, as well as other partner nations, to improve interoperability, but it is not UK policy to routinely deploy the Queen Elizabeth Class carriers with USMC aircraft embarked.

5. *Planned sensor and weapons upgrades to the Typhoon fleet must be delivered at pace. In light of the RAF’s lack of any operational reserve, the MoD should seriously consider mothballing the Tranche 1 Typhoons which are due to be retired in 2025 rather than disposing of them.* (Paragraph 41)

In deciding to retire the bulk of Tranche 1 Typhoon in 2025 (four will be maintained until 2027), the MOD has carefully considered all available options. While it would be feasible

to retain the aircraft in storage, maintaining them in a condition where they could be regenerated to provide an effective capability would require investment in excess of £300 million (and potentially much more) to address significant capability, obsolescence and regulatory needs. All the other core Typhoon nations are also expected to retire their Tranche 1 aircraft over the next decade.

The Tranche 1 design is such that some of these limitations would remain even after significant investment. Additionally, retaining these aircraft in storage would also preclude the planned harvesting of key components (known as ‘Reduce to Produce’) to sustain Typhoon Tranche 2 & 3; inability to harvest these components would materially affect Typhoon availability beyond 2025 or require a compensating major investment in component manufacture and repair above that currently planned. A decision to retain Tranche 1 in storage would therefore only be possible through significant reductions in investment for Typhoon Tranche 2 & 3 or in other capabilities, offering neither operational benefit or financial value for money.

6. Uncrewed Aerial Systems (UAS) offer a cost-effective means of increasing combat mass. As we identified in our 2021 report “We’re Going to Need a Bigger Navy”, the role of UAS within the force mix on the UK’s aircraft carriers remains unresolved. This may have implications for decisions around the eventual size of the F-35 fleet. The MoD must rapidly progress its work to develop and deploy UAS alongside the 41 UK’s existing combat air fleet. Publication of the Autonomous Collaborative Platform strategy should be accompanied by clear (and ambitious) timescales and an adequate funding commitment for a UAS capability programme. (Paragraph 47)

The RAF has recently completed work on its Autonomous Collaborative Platforms (ACP) Strategy, which will be published in the near future. Aligned with the Defence’s approach to Uncrewed Systems Strategy, it forms a foundation upon which the RAF can aggressively deliver ACP into its force mix. It is clear in its ambitious, time bounded targets for delivery of air vehicles and key technology enablers. A priority enabler, and focus of the RAF’s research and experimentation efforts, is in the military application of autonomy within the air domain, where the RAF seeks to be a world-leader.

In the near term, the RAF will focus on the delivery of ultra low-cost air vehicles, that bridge known capability gaps, whilst increasing force mass. In parallel, operational analysis for larger more survivable systems will inform the development of more modular and adaptable ACPs that will become a mainstay augmenting the future combat air fleet.

Airborne Early Warning & Control

7. With only a limited number of (comparatively vulnerable) fixed and mobile landbased radars on UK soil, all of which would be primary targets for our opponents were the current Ukraine conflict to escalate, the capability gap in Airborne Early Warning & Control coverage created by the retirement of the E-3 Sentry and compounded by the delays to the E-7 Wedgetail and Crowsnest programmes presents a serious threat to the UK’s warfighting ability. (Paragraph 51)

8. Of all of the Defence Command Paper’s cuts, the decision to reduce the UK’s Wedgetail E-7 fleet from five to three aircraft stands out as the most perverse, with the fleet cut by 40% for an acquisition saving of just 12%. Moreover, our witnesses told

us that three aircraft will simply not be sufficient to meet the UK's commitment to NATO and our own sovereign needs. The MoD has committed almost £2 billion for a fleet of aircraft that, due to its reduced size, will be unable to meet the basic capability requirement. *The MoD should set out in its response to this report what discussions it has had with NATO regarding the UK's Airborne Early Warning & Control obligations to the Alliance. The decision to reduce the Wedgetail fleet must be revisited at the earliest possible opportunity with a renewed commitment to a fleet of at least five aircraft.* (Paragraph 58)

The Wedgetail programme replaces the E-3D Sentry Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft, and will offer a step change in capability, providing 5th generation airborne surveillance, command and control that is essential to counter current and expected threats. The UK has committed c.£2 billion to the procurement of Wedgetail with a further £2 billion investment expected to sustain the capability out to 2042, a high proportion of which will be returned to the UK economy through UK-based suppliers.

Our decision to reduce the scope of the programme from five to three aircraft has allowed us to save more than £700 million, while still meeting both our key user requirements and Defence operational outputs with a smaller fleet. We accept there is some increased risk against the UK's ability to provide sovereign commitments and the UK's contribution to NATO, but these were factored into the overall decision. As with all capability, the Government will keep decisions on the appropriate size of our force under review, in line with the threats we face.

The UK remains engaged with NATO via the regular series of meetings under the NATO Airborne Early Warning and Control Programme Management Organisation (NAPMO), where UK representatives update NATO on the latest developments of the UK Wedgetail programme. The priority for the UK Wedgetail programme is to enable the UK to conduct NATO operations at the earliest opportunity once it has entered service.

9. *Whilst the E-7 is undoubtedly a capable aircraft, its procurement has been a woeful but depressingly familiar story of MoD failings and contractor underperformance combining to deliver a programme over time and over budget. Our recent report on defence procurement made a series of recommendations to tackle the systemic procurement issues which persist at the MoD: these must be implemented without delay.* (Paragraph 60)

The Government has responded separately to the Defence Sub-Committee's report on Defence Procurement.

10. *The Ukraine war has underlined the importance of a thriving and resilient domestic defence industry. The Government must ensure that where it buys equipment off the-shelf, it demands meaningful and sustainable investment in the UK from contractors in return, and holds them rigorously to account for fulfilling their pledges.* (Paragraph 63)

The war in Ukraine has reasserted the importance of a robust defence industrial base that also contributes to our economic growth and prosperity. Since 2021, the MOD has applied the Cabinet Office Social Value Model to all its in-scope competitive procurements and in doing so contributes to delivery of the Government's key policy objectives, including creation of new businesses, jobs and skills, and increased supply chain resilience and

capacity. Recent estimates show that MOD expenditure with UK industry supports around 209,000 jobs nationwide, and the most recent Joint Economic Data Hub report also demonstrates the important contribution industry is making to the UK industrial base. The report shows that of the £15.5 billion spent in 2021 by surveyed companies on supply chain purchases, 76.9% of these were with UK registered suppliers, which shows the important investment industry is making in the UK.

The Defence and Security Industrial Strategy (DSIS) recognised defence industries as strategic capabilities in their own right, and ensured that industrial implications were considered as early as possible in the procurement and contracting process. Furthermore, the recent DCP refresh emphasised the need for the MOD and industry to work even more closely together, forging a new alliance that underpins our credibility as a fighting force, demonstrates our dependability as an ally, and deters our adversaries. The MOD will also provide greater clarity on our future requirements, including where we require industrial capabilities to be sustained or developed in the UK. Alongside a hard-nosed and operationally-informed focus on industrial capability, whether that is the ability to design, manufacture, integrate systems, test and assure, or support and upgrade a capability through-life, this will give a clear signal to industry to invest in the UK.

The MOD is also actively engaged in de-risking critical defence supply chain vulnerabilities collaboratively with industry. The global supply chain will still be crucial to the resilience of the UK's defence industrial base and the effectiveness of our Armed Forces within an increasingly contested world, and we will work with our closest international partners to improve our collective resilience. As set out in the DSIS, we continue to identify critical pinch points in our supply chains to enable us to make informed decisions around how and if to intervene. This will be guided by, but not limited to, the priorities in the DCP refresh, our category management prioritisation, and the work we have already done via the Defence Suppliers' Forum identifying critical components and raw materials that matter most to both the MOD and industry.

Air Mobility

11. One of the most significant cuts in the Defence Command paper was the early retirement of the C-130J Hercules fleet some seven years before its planned out-of-service date. Our witnesses were almost unanimously critical of this decision, which has significantly reduced the overall capacity of the air mobility fleet, undermined the Integrated Review's "Global Britain" objective, and created a capability gap which could hamper Special Forces. We find it deeply unsatisfactory that the Government has sought to hide behind the cloak of secrecy which covers Special Forces to limit meaningful scrutiny of the capability decisions which will affect their operations.
(Paragraph 84)

12. The RAF has been left scrambling to migrate essential capabilities onto the A400M Atlas and will be reliant on this aircraft which, however capable it may be on paper, has a poor track record of reliability. We intend to closely scrutinise the performance of the A400M. *In its response to this report the MoD should commit to providing this Committee with six-monthly updates on the availability of the A400M fleet.*
(Paragraph 85)

In deciding to retire the C-130J Hercules, we understood there would be short-term and temporary drop in air mobility capacity, but can reassure the Committee that all critical operational commitments have—and are—being met, and will continue to be so.

As we set out in both our written and oral evidence, the Atlas A400M is a versatile aircraft carrying out a full range of air mobility tasks. Following the DCP 2021, the long-planned transfer of capability from C130 to Atlas was accelerated, and the RAF is working at pace to ensure the military effect delivered by the C130 is either replicated through A400M or delivered in a different way as soon as possible.

Recent operations, including Op POLARBEAR, demonstrated the A400M's worth: in the evacuation of Sudan, Atlas and C130 worked together, but there were no elements undertaken by C130 that could not be delivered by Atlas and, with its greater speed, power and lift capacity, Atlas was able to evacuate a significantly greater number of personnel than C130, getting them from Sudan to the agreed safe location in a safer and more timely manner.

Atlas availability is improving, but remains under close and focused senior attention in the RAF and DE&S to ensure this continues. We would be happy to provide the Committee with regular updates, if the committee would find such an update useful. Given we already provide six monthly updates on the F-35 programme, we would propose to combine the two.

Flying Training

13. Flying training is undoubtedly complex. Air Chief Marshal Sir Richard Knighton observed that “if you take your eye off it for a moment, it can get out of the tolerances that you set” and it is clear to us that for too long, the senior leadership of the RAF has been looking in the wrong direction. The result of this complacency is simple: a reduction in the MoD’s ability to produce combat-ready aircrew within expected timescales, with serious implications for the effectiveness of our armed forces and for pilot morale. The delays and backlogs of recent years have been completely unacceptable and cannot be allowed to continue. (Paragraph 93)

14. The former Chief of the Air Staff told us that current delays will be resolved by mid-2024, and we will hold the MoD and the RAF’s senior leadership accountable for delivering on that promise. *In its response to this report, and then on a quarterly basis to the end of 2024, the MoD should provide this Committee with updates on the number of pilots holding between courses at each stage of the flying training pipeline as well as the average time taken for a pilot to pass through each stage.* (Paragraph 94)

The UK Military Flying Training System (UKMFTS) continues to meet almost 100% of the tri-service Front Line ab-initio training demand for pilots and mission aircrew. The greatest proportion of the delays currently being experienced by tri-Service aircrew trainees are as they wait to begin Operational Conversion Unit (OCU) flying training, after they have completed the UKMFTS pipeline.

The MOD accepts that unforeseen issues, such as Hawk engine aircraft serviceability, has resulted in UKMFTS Fast Jet training capacity being below the required level. However, this has been mitigated through working with Allies and partners, to mutual benefit, to

use international training to ensure the frontline requirement will be met for the next three years, albeit with a minor shortfall this year of two trainees offset by a small surplus in two and three years' time. The MOD has taken concerted action with industry to rectify engine availability, with modifications being planned and replacement components procured for delivery in late 2024. In parallel, we have introduced novel, cutting-edge use of simulation, synthetics and augmented reality to ensure increased UKMFTS fast-jet training capacity in the future.

We are experiencing trainee delays as a result of a number of different factors (COVID-19, aircraft serviceability, changes to the frontline from IR21 decisions), but a number of recent initiatives have been introduced to mitigate these challenges. These measures have increased the numbers of trainees undertaking flying training and reduced numbers in non-flying training holding roles, but this remains a work in progress. A September 2023 Government Internal Audit Agency audit of RAF Pilot Pipeline management confirmed that these initiatives are working and commended the governance and management in place, particularly regarding oversight and planning.

Leadership of pilot training has been reinforced and it now sits solely under the Air and Space Commander at 3* level, supported by the RAF's Air Officer Commanding 22 Group (at 2*) and Head of Flying Training (at 1*). Issues are managed through a 3*-chaired Aircrew Pipeline Steering Group which sits quarterly and addresses the breadth of issues which influence pilot training.

We would be happy to provide the Committee with regular updates on holding numbers, which we are committed to driving down to optimum levels (the nature of the system means that there will always be holding periods for trainees), if the Committee would find such an update useful.

15. Changes to the number of frontline seats are a routine feature of Defence reviews. Whilst they will unavoidably have some impact on the training pipeline, this must be managed so that any consequential backlogs are minimal. A flying training model which cannot adapt to changed crewing requirements without introducing years of delay for pilots is clearly not fit for purpose. *The MoD should set out in its response to this report how it will ensure that the flying training pipeline is sufficiently flexible to adapt to future changes in requirement whilst still representing value for money for the taxpayer.* (Paragraph 97)

UKMFTS is taut by design, but the MOD recognises that the significant variations in the training demand signal have demonstrated a need for increased flexibility. Several initiatives aimed at increasing UKMFTS capacity are already being introduced. Building sufficient resilience into the system to cope with changing demands is an important lesson, but additional flexibility also comes at an increased cost, which will require agile contracting solutions to ensure costs can be recovered when the system is not used to capacity. Contracting spare capacity to NATO Allies is one method of achieving these recoveries.

Within the fast-jet training pipeline, an initiative is being enacted to use some of the unprecedented leaps forward in training technology which will see significant capacity improvements in synthetic training, both ground-based and in the live-virtual construct. An exciting area being considered is the introduction of a live-virtual construct, so

far unprecedented in the UK. With augmented reality, formation training, artificially intelligent adversary aircraft, and air-to-air refuelling simulation aircraft can become an augmented image in the trainee's field of view. This reduces the need for support aircraft, meaning more pilots can be trained for the same level of flying resource used.

Within the multi-engine pilot training pipeline, another initiative is underway to increase training capacity through optimising the use of our existing assets. This involves reviewing the original training design, learning/training techniques and examining how the existing equipment may be refreshed in light of new technologies. Whilst the programme is early in its development, it aims to include the 'downloading' of synthetic training to the lowest practicable level. When these lines of enquiry have been exhausted, consideration to procure additional assets will be made to deliver the required throughput.

To improve resilience in the event of aircraft unavailability, a network of outsourced training providers has been established over the past two years. This provides accessible training alongside an opportunity to build relationships with partner nations and widens the training development aperture of our own system through consideration of other training equipment and techniques. The cross-pollination of information has become an essential requirement to ensure the training quality within NATO training establishments remains at the very highest level.

In October 2023, the UK joined an important NATO initiative—the NATO Flying Training Europe (NFTE)—which aims to pool and contract spare flying training resource amongst NATO allies. The UK has recently benefitted from NFTE by training fast jet pilots at their facility in Italy and is now a full member. Additionally, with a shortfall of approximately 30% in pilot training capacity across Europe, access to this partnership enables the UK to offer training to partners in the UK to mutual benefit.

Whilst this is useful in the current UKMFTS construct, in the longer-term, it also offers an opportunity to bring in funding to the UK system, whenever the system is not being used to full capacity training UK pilots. This not only provides value for money for the taxpayer, but creates additional opportunities for UK Industry and additional skilled jobs here in the UK.

16. Fast-jet training in particular has suffered a significant reduction in capacity due to a lack of aircraft availability. As a result, the MoD will spend over £55 million sending pilots overseas for training whilst the contractors responsible will face no financial penalty, a farcical situation which only underlines the requirement for the MoD to better resource its legal and commercial teams, as we identified in our recent report on defence procurement. *We recommend that the MoD carry out a full review of contractual arrangements and processes across the flying training model, identifying areas where contracts can be streamlined and processes simplified, and ensuring that contractors are liable for costs incurred by their failures.* (Paragraph 107)

While we welcome the committee's recommendation, a full review of the contractual arrangements and processes across the flying training model would offer limited benefit to Defence, on the basis that the construct is already subject to regular amendments and refinements, with the training output being agreed on an annual basis. However, the MOD is already conducting a targeted review of the incentive structure within the existing contractual framework to promote flexibility across the joint military and

industry training partnership.

17. Synthetic training offers many benefits, but live flying cannot be replaced, and we are concerned that the RAF's stated intention for 80% of flying training to be synthetic by 2040 will be sub-optimal for both pilots and ground crew. The MoD should review the planned 80/20 mix of synthetic and live flying training, with particular regard to the implications for ground crew and engineers, and the increased need for warfighting readiness in view of the European security situation. The MoD should also ensure that the proposed mix is broadly in alignment with the approach taken across NATO. (Paragraph 111)

We are not planning for an 80/20 mix of synthetic and live flying training across the system. As set out in our written evidence, the balance will vary by platform, but the optimal mix depends on a range of factors and is constantly reviewed.

With regard to RAF technicians, the need to maintain the currency and competency is also constantly under review by the Head of the Engineering Profession and appropriate actions put in place, such as through the increased use of technical synthetic training, to mitigate the impact of any changes in live flying.

We can assure the Committee the UK works closely with our NATO allies on this issue, and UK's approach is in line with NATO policy and guidance.

18. The far-reaching cuts to aircraft numbers set out in the 2021 Defence Command Paper weakened the UK's air power capability at a time when the armed forces were already over-stretched. The scale of this gamble became clear less than a year later, when Europe faced its most serious security crisis in decades as Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The MoD's acceptance of capability gaps and its cuts to combat mass across the fleet have left the UK dangerously exposed at a time of increasing threat to national security and risk diminishing our role within NATO. (Paragraph 125)

19. Although these risks were acknowledged in the Defence Command Paper Refresh (DCPR), the actions taken to address them are totally inadequate to the scale of the challenge. The DCPR stands as a missed opportunity to reverse the deeply damaging cuts of 2021: the Royal Air Force, as with all our Armed Forces, must be afforded the funding and equipment it needs to properly carry out its critical role in protecting our nation. (Paragraph 126)

It is precisely because of its critical duty to defend the UK and its interests that at the last Spending Review, Defence received £24 billion over four years—the largest increase to defence spending since the Cold War. This increased investment will support the delivery of Defence's major transformation programmes outlined in in the 2021 DCP, which will deliver capabilities across the Armed Forces.

Far from being “diminished”, the RAF's air and space power will continue to play a vital role in the security and prosperity of the UK and our allies. Alongside, 24/7 defence of the UK, last year the RAF deployed 7500 personnel on 41 operations across 75 countries, including included a near constant presence in the Black Sea, and an enhanced presence on NATO's eastern flank, seeing a doubling of the number operational sorties compared with the previous year.

The decisions taken in DCP 2021, and endorsed in the refresh earlier this year, will see the RAF continue to modernise and transform, ensuring it becomes even more capable to meet current and future threats. Its journey to becoming a more networked and digitally-connected force, built around more capable platforms and the first-rate people who operate and support them, will ensure its enduring ability to fulfil its critical role in protecting our nation.