



Defence Select Committee

From the Chair:

Tan Dhesi MP

27 March 2025

Rt Hon Maria Eagle MP
Minister for Defence Procurement & Industry
Ministry of Defence
Main Building, Whitehall
London, SW1A 2HB
(by email)

Subject: A400M update – follow-up

Dear Minister,

Thank you for your letter of 10 March in which you provided the Committee with an update on the F-35 and A400M programmes.

The Committee was concerned by the figures provided on A400M availability and would like to request more detailed information on availability targets and performance against them, observing that a target of 10 available aircraft a day from a fleet of 22 appears remarkably low. We note that figures provided by the Department in 2023 put A400M availability at between 13-16 aircraft, or between 65-75% of the fleet.¹

Additionally, we also observe that the annual flying hours for the fleet appear lower than we would expect.

With these points in mind, please could you provide the following information:

Availability

- How are A400M availability targets set and how is availability calculated?
- Why is the current target set at less than 50% of the aircraft in the fleet?
- What are the availability targets for the next three years?
- Why does availability appear to have dropped significantly since 2023 (see above)?
If a different metric is now being used to calculate availability please provide details and explain why.

¹ committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/122035/default/



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Please also provide an update on Air Command's work in 'developing an affordable choice to improve A400M availability', as noted by the NAO in 2022,² and explain how this work has affected trends in availability over the past three years.

Flying hours

- What are the current targets for annual flying hours, how are these targets set, and how do they compare with (a) the targets included in the original Programme of Record (please provide these figures in the response) and (b) current actual flying hours. Please explain any shortfall.

Capability and Sustainability

- Please provide information on platform capability and sustainability, to include (a) information on crew availability (noting the impact this will have on the ability to operate at warfighting scale) and (b) details of progress with spiral upgrades and expected timelines for achieving final frontline state.

The Committee may write separately requesting further information on F-35.

Yours sincerely,

Tan Dhesi MP

² [The Equipment Plan 2022 to 2032](#) p20, figure 6

4-8-1-2

10 March 2025

Dear Tan,

I am providing an update on the continuing growth and capability delivery of the F-35 Lightning Force and progress with the Atlas A400M.

F-35 Lightning

The declaration of Full Operating Capability for the first procurement phase is scheduled to occur no later than 31 December 2025, with graduation as a Government Major Projects Portfolio programme by 31 March 2026. The second front line squadron, 809 Naval Air Squadron (809 NAS), will continue to work-up readiness throughout 2025.

The first procurement phase of 48 aircraft continues to be delivered, with 36 aircraft received to date and delivery of the 48th aircraft due by programme graduation. The Strategic Defence Review, due to report later this year, will determine our future force mix between 4th Generation and 5th Generation operational capability. However, following the previous review, funding had been allocated to increase the fleet to 74 aircraft and establish a third front line squadron by 2033.

Programme: The global F-35 programme is addressing production delays and issues related to capability upgrades. Lockheed Martin had suspended aircraft release post-production due to software instability during developmental testing of a technical upgrade, required for future capability enhancements. However, the US-led Joint Program Office approved the continued delivery of aircraft in July 2024. This allowed UK aircraft to be delivered from the factory, meeting the needs of our Operational Conversion Unit and our Test and Evaluation Squadron with minimal impact. I would like to assure you and the Committee that the delivery plan will not impact the scheduled Full Operating Capability declaration at the end of 2025, with further UK aircraft deliveries planned in May 2025. The UK is scheduled to receive all aircraft from the first procurement phase before programme graduation in March

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2026, although risks remain to production line output and short delays could yet be encountered.

Looking to the future spiral upgrade of F-35, the UK is continuing to support the re-definition of the content of the Block 4 upgrade. A formal Block 4 'sub-program' of capability enhancements is being established, with Congressional oversight, to deliver by 2033; the sub-program will improve the survivability and lethality of the aircraft, safeguarding the UK's operational advantage considering ever-developing threats. The inclusion of capabilities will be based on warfighter priorities, technical maturity, and programme delivery capacity; UK weapons, including METEOR and SPEAR 3 are included in the review process. A decision on the content of the sub-program is expected later this year.

Operations: The Lightning Force continues to provide a key component of the UK contribution to NATO in response to Russia's continued illegal war and occupation of Ukraine. In Summer 2024, UK F-35 Lightning conducted NATO Air Policing from Iceland. This proved our ability to deploy and support Quick Reaction Alert Defensive Counter Air Missions from international air bases in the NATO arena. Following recovery to RAF Marham, the Lightning Air Wing then pivoted within a month to maritime operations, to again work with NATO from HMS Prince of Wales. 809 NAS led the embarkation period in the Autumn, signalling their continued growth from recommissioning as the second Front Line F-35 Squadron in December 2023.

The embarked team were able to continue interoperability training with F-35 partner nations such as the Norwegian and Dutch Air Forces. There were also training serials with Sweden, Denmark and Finland, enhancing our commitment and competence in Northern Europe and Scandinavia.

The focus now is to prepare for Op HIGHMAST, where HMS Prince of Wales will deploy with two embarked UK Front Line F-35 Squadrons, 809 NAS and 617 Sqn (The Dambusters), for the first time, and will see the Carrier Strike Group deploy to the Mediterranean, Middle East, Australia and Japan. This Operation will display our global Carrier Strike reach demonstrating the ability to deploy, operate and command a Carrier Strike Group consisting of two UK Lightning squadrons, with associated support.

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Atlas A400M

The UK Atlas fleet are fully operational in support of UK Defence via the provision of Strategic and Tactical Air Transport around the world. With all twenty-two aircraft delivered, Atlas's capabilities continue to grow: low-level parachuting in June 2024 marked a significant milestone in the expansion of our deployable airborne forces capability. Atlas also continues to play a critical role in operations including the Middle East and Ukraine, as well as contributing to many humanitarian relief missions. This included air dispatch of over 75 tons of vital food and aid in Gaza in 2024.

Previous shortfalls in the Global Supply Chain and lack of resilience in specific support resulted in lower-than-expected availability of the in-service UK A400M fleet in the early years of the programme. However, a robust Availability Improvement Programme (AIP) initiated in 2022, that included strong active management by Defence Equipment and Support means we have seen a steady improvement in aircraft availability and is now standing at an average of ten aircraft available per day which meets its current target. This represents 66% availability growth on FY21-22 and 26% on FY22-23. This also ensured that the Atlas fleet flew their full annual projected flying hours for FY23-24, achieving 9,280 hours.

We continue to work with all A400M nations and the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (OCCAR) to ensure this progress remains on track, including engagement at Ministerial Level through our standing meetings. Negotiations on the Future Engine Support Contract between OCCAR and Europrop International were successfully concluded, placing strong incentives on industry to deliver efficiencies and cost of ownership reductions. The UK element has a value of £256 million and this will secure continuing support to A400M engines out to 2028.

This has been a very positive period for both F-35 Lightning and Atlas A400M. Both of which will remain at the forefront of our military for decades to come.

Best Wishes



THE RT HON MARIA EAGLE MP

Minister for Defence Procurement & Industry

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