



Ministry of Defence

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4/8/1/2

23 June 2025

Dear Tan,

Thank you for your letter of 27th March 2025 on A400M in-service performance. I apologise for the delay in replying which was the result of several significant milestones for the A400M Atlas Programme occurring in April, at the same time as the Financial Year End where budgets for FY25/26 have been formalised. I am pleased to be able to provide you and the Committee with the most up to date information regarding the A400M Programme.

I would like to start by clarifying that, in co-ordination with the National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority, the A400M Programme off-boarded from the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP) on 31 March 2025. This represents a major milestone for the Programme. In early 2025, the Programme successfully completed the trials undertaken and full clearance for low-level parachuting from Atlas to serve as a frontline capability. The Block Upgrade 0 is now also on contract to enhance the scope of the aircraft's capabilities in the continued upgrade plan with the Partner Nations. This sets the foundation for future spiral upgrades to ensure the A400M's technology maintains its ability for global access.

Many of the decisions taken as part of the Programme were done so before 2024 by the previous government. You will appreciate, therefore, that I can only provide factual information where it is held by the current government or recorded in the Programme of Record. There are also some aspects of the future operating targets that I would not wish to provide in public to protect the security of relevant operating forces. Consequently, while the information provided below is releasable, I am also providing the committee with additional information in confidence that is not for public release. This statistical data can be found a separate Annex.

You asked me to provide detailed availability metrics; I have taken them as section headings.

Your first questions were:

- *How are A400M availability targets set and how is availability calculated;*
- *If a different metric is now being used to calculate availability please provide details and explain why.*
- *Please explain any shortfall.*

Tan Dhesi MP
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At the start of the Programme, the Development and Production Phase contract signed in May 2003 between OCCAR, the Organisation for Joint Armament Cooperation (on behalf of the partner nations) and Airbus did not include a manufacturer's contracted figure for availability. Therefore, the original availability target within the Programme of Record was set internally by MOD. Further data on the original target is provided in the separate annex owing to the sensitive nature of this information.

However, as the Department gained further operating and maintenance experience, over time this was revised to reflect more realistic expectations of year-to-year performance in overall fleet capacity for good budgetary and operating reasons. The Annual Flying Task (AFT) metric essentially ring-fences a budget for a given Financial Year. If realism factors mean that targets cannot be met, then that ring-fenced budget ends as an underspend. If the targets are set closer to realism experience, the money that would have been ring-fenced and underspent can instead be redeployed to support other operating fleets.

The technical calculations that comprise the many definitions in the broad category of 'availability metrics' are complex. In broad terms, the Actual Operating Fleet (AOF) is defined as the Delivered Fleet minus the aircraft in scheduled capability upgrade and base maintenance, and the number of aircraft which cannot be made Fit For Purpose (FFP) in the short-term. That latter category often requires other longer-term measures outside of manufacturer or maintenance organisation control like bespoke repair to operating damage.

It has been agreed through engineering working groups that based on operating experience, that the Engineering team can sustainably deliver 70% of the AOF as FFP aircraft. The remaining 30% of the AOF comprise aircraft undergoing fault rectification, reconfiguring the aircraft between cargo and parachute roles or standard turnaround servicing and washes to prepare aircraft for future tasking. There has also been a relatively minor recent adjustment to how availability is calculated from FY24/25 to FY25/26. In FY24/25 a FFP aircraft was counted as either an aircraft that undertook a sortie or was otherwise serviceable and available for tasking for 4 consecutive hours within a 24-hour period. In FY 25/26 this changed to either an aircraft that undertook a sortie or was otherwise serviceable and available for tasking for 10 consecutive hours within a 24-hour period. This change aligns with how FFP is calculated for other Air Mobility Force aircraft and will result in a very minor reduction in quantity of aircraft being measured as FFP compared to previous reporting years.

From the 22 aircraft Delivered Fleet, at any given time, 2 or 3 aircraft are undergoing capability upgrades in Spain, 2 or 3 aircraft are undergoing scheduled base maintenance, and 2 to 4 aircraft are categorised as long-term unserviceable owing to a lack of critical dependencies. This equates to an AOF average of 14 aircraft, resulting in an average 70% FFP of 9-10 aircraft--currently around 45% of the Delivered Fleet.

The fluctuation in exact 70% FFP numbers has largely been due to the number of airframes being sent for planned capability upgrades, rather than any significant trends in short-term unserviceability at the frontline. The number of FFP aircraft has, in fact, remained broadly similar in 2023 and 2024: from an average of 9.4 per day in 2023, to an average of 10.1 per day in July 2024

The relationship of FFP aircraft to Task Lines is known colloquially as 'the offer'. The agreed offer target last increased from 9 to 10 FFP aircraft in March 2023, again reflecting realism in the modest growth. In relation to the setting of Task Lines, the closer we set the target to what is expected from realism experience, the more certainty the Defence Supply Chain Operations and Movements Team will have in successfully fulfilling their Logistics plan.

- *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, and explain how this work has affected trends in availability over the past three years.*

The Air Mobility Force supported efforts to improve availability through the DE&S-managed Availability Improvement Programme (AIP), working closely with our many contracted industry partners. This has already delivered concrete improvements since 2022. For example, the critical dependencies that impacted the AOF size historically included a lack of propellor gear boxes, core engines and propellor assemblies due to uncertainty in the manufacturing global supply chain. However, work has advanced through both Availability Improvement Programme and the GSS3 multi-national support contract to remedy the shortage of these items, and this is beginning to provide benefits in long-term resilience.

The Committee is likely aware that following OCCAR agreement across the partner nations, there is a programme of capability upgrade modifications for the A400M Atlas fleet. Since 2023, 2 or 3 aircraft at any time are being cycled through the modification at the Airbus Military facility in Spain. The fact that we have been able to keep AOF and FFP broadly stable and increase flying hours as a metric of frontline capability, at the same time as we have cycled an increasing number of airframes into the upgrade programme, shows Air Command and DE&S internally managed improvements are providing real benefit. As the capability upgrade programme concludes in the coming years, we would expect to see a commensurate increase in the numbers of Atlas that are AOF and FFP, this is factored into our planning as detailed in the Annex.

- *Why does availability appear to have dropped significantly since 2023?*

Availability has not significantly decreased since 2023 and overall flying hours have instead increased measurably. The 2023 statistical data you quote appears to derive from a letter dated 20 June 2023 from James Cartlidge MP (then Minister of State for Defence Procurement) Ref MSU/4/8/1/2/is which contains 'availability figures' for A400M from October 2022 to April 2023. While that response was provided by the previous Government, the figures quoted in that response appear to relate to the statistics of AOF for that period. My response of March 2025 used a different metric, the lower figure of FFP which is 70% of AOF and more closely reflected in the frontline 'offer'.

As I explained above, it is a complex set of metrics, but I will endeavour to ensure that in any future correspondence, where statistics are labelled as an availability metric, we will ensure that we are clear to the committee which sub-set metric that relates too.

- *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.*

The Annual Flying Task (AFT) is set at the beginning of the financial year in the annual budgetary cycle (ABC). It sets the budgeted total for the year ahead as a resourcing tool. This funded resource while given in flying hours to be achieved, reflects the full resource required, not just for the frontline need but also the level of training and level of personnel resourcing needed to retain frontline capability. While plans for future years' AFT are considered as part of ABC future year resource planning, they are not confirmed until the annual FY budget is confirmed. While I can say it remains the plan to budget for increasing flying hours over the coming years, exact metrics give a strong measure of our future frontline operating capability,

and it is for this reason that for FY25/26 and future years we are only providing the detailed figures in confidence in the Annex, in order to protect the operational security of the fleet.

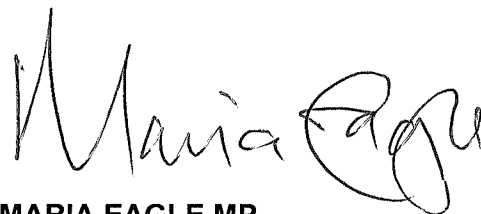
Annual Flying Hours (AFH) flown metrics are assessed at the end of the Financial Year and are used to assess if there has been an underspend or overspend against the resourced AFT. While the AFH flown metric can be constrained by lower FFP levels, is not directly related to availability as many other factors can impact it for example average Task Line sortie length. In FY2023/24 we actually flew more flying hours than we had budgeted for in the AFT ring-fenced funding. Consequently, this required budgetary rebalancing from Air Command's wider budget, including a claim from the Net Additional Cost of Military Operations. (NACMO).

In terms of exact metrics for previous years, with FY2024/25 now available, you will see annual flying hours flown output has increased by 20% between 2022 and 2024:

- FY2022/23 - 7,685 flying hours flown
- FY2023/24 - 9,280 flying hours flown
- FY2024/25 - 9,301 flying hours flown

I hope this letter helps explain why realism measures in setting targets and AFT budget limits remains an appropriate measure. The Availability Improvement Programme and new multi-national Support Contracts are delivering sustainable growth, albeit some of this will not be readily apparent in frontline capacity until the last aircraft has cycled through the capability upgrade programme with Airbus. I am happy to communicate that the number of flying hours achieved will continue to grow year on year.

Best Wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Maria Eagle', with a stylized flourish at the end.

RT HON MARIA EAGLE MP