

19 September 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

Further to our letter of 10 March 2025, you will be pleased to know that the declaration of Lightning Full Operating Capability (FOC) for the first procurement phase, will occur no later than 31 December 2025, evidenced by the current Operation HIGHMAST, Carrier Strike Group 2025. Graduation from the Government Major Projects Portfolio programme should then follow by 31 March 2026.

The Strategic Defence Review further supported the increase of the fleet to 74 aircraft and the establishment of a third front line squadron by 2033. Additionally, we announced the UK's intent to procure 12 F-35A which marks a significant step in delivering a more lethal "Integrated Force" which deters, fights, and wins. The F-35A aircraft will be available to fly NATO's nuclear mission in a crisis, deepening the UK's contribution to NATO's nuclear burden-sharing arrangements, and will deter those who would do the UK and our Allies harm. The detail of F-35 procurement is subject to the outcomes of the Defence Investment Plan which is scheduled to complete later this year.

Programme: The UK F-35B Lightning Programme has undergone a National Audit Office (NAO) review, which reported in July this year. The NAO recognised that the day-to-day programme management has strong leadership and robust processes in place and that the F-35 is superior to any previous UK aircraft, with fifth-generation capabilities, including stealth and advanced Electronic Attack capability. Following this review, a Public Account Committee (PAC) briefing occurred on the 8th September. There were a number of areas of focus regarding wider MoD fiscal practices and the impact of directed savings. Also, the delayed integration of sovereign weaponry brought much discussion. The PAC were pleased to learn that the global F-35 program had started addressing their production delays and issues related to capability upgrades and that all delayed aircraft deliveries had been received. The first procurement phase of 48 aircraft continues to be delivered, with 41 aircraft received to date; delivery of the 48th aircraft is due by programme graduation. 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 2034; the sub-program will improve the survivability and lethality of the aircraft, safeguarding the UK's operational advantage considering ever-developing threats.

Operations: Operation HIGHMAST remains the focus for the Lightning Force. The two Front Line Squadrons (617 Sqn and 809 NAS) have now been at sea in HMS Prince Of Wales (PWLS) for over four months. They successfully conducted their first High End, 5th Generation focussed, Multi National Exercise from onboard a Queen Elizabeth Class Carrier when they participated in Exercise Talisman Sabre, off Northern Australia. This Exercise demonstrated the interoperability of the F-35B, with UK aircraft using United States Marine Corps provided forward mobile refuelling points, situated in the Northern Territories, to refuel and re-join the 'fight'. Our Squadrons worked alongside the F-35s of the United States Navy, United States Marine Corps and Royal Australian Air Force. This international fleet operated and briefed from sea, joining large tactical formations that were challenged by multiple complex adversaries, with large areas of airspace to control. Following the Exercise, PWLS sailed north to Japan where the Lightning Force took advantage of the proximity of F-35 Partner Nation aircraft carriers. Further interoperability was then demonstrated by landing, re-fuelling and launching from USS AMERICA and JS KAGA. This event helped the Japanese Self Defence Force to further develop their carrier capabilities, as they start receiving F-35Bs throughout this year.

Following a maintenance period in Japan, the UK Lightning Force has started the long journey home, which will culminate in a further major Exercise from sea. This NATO led Exercise will take place closer to home in the NATO area of responsibility and will be the culmination of the deployment. Operation HIGHMAST has clearly demonstrated both Carrier Strike and UK F-35B's range of operating abilities; upon its completion both capabilities are expected to declare FOC.

Atlas A400M

Further to our letter of 23 June 2025 about A400M in-service performance, I am pleased to be able to provide you and the Committee with a further update.

Capability: As explained in our letter the A400M Programme has progressed, with it being off-boarded from the Government Major Programmes Portfolio on 31 March 2025, a major milestone reflecting the programme's maturity. By this point, the UK had received all 22 contracted aircraft, with 14 upgraded to the Step2*+ standard, enabling them to meet all operational outcomes with only minor enhancements required for the final contracted standard.

In September 2024, the first upgrade to the contracted standard, known as Block 0, was agreed by six nations. This milestone and continued successful development, demonstrates strong international support for the A400M and has bolstered confidence in its export potential. Increased export sales are seen as critical for ensuring supply chain security and reducing ownership costs for all operators.

Airbus has proposed further block upgrades, which are in the early stages of negotiation and will need to align with Defence Investment Prioritisation.

Availability: Following significant enhancements to the engine support arrangements, through the DE&S managed Availability Improvement Programme Phase 3 (AIP3), there is now a full Fleet fit of serviceable engines for the first time since 2022. The increased availability of engines has enabled the recovery of three long term unserviceable aircraft and work continues to recover a fourth long term unserviceable aircraft. Availability has gradually increased and stabilised due to the recovery of these aircraft.

Other significant work to increase availability, under AIP3, aims to increase output to 12 Task Lines by Q4 2027.

In our letter of 23 June 2025, it was reported that the number of 'Fit for Purpose' (FFP) aircraft per day had risen from an average of 9.4 per day in 2023, to an average of 10.1 per day in Jul 24. In the latest full month, September 2025, availability was measured at 8.5 FFP aircraft. However, it should be noted that the calculation of availability changed in FY24/25, accounting for a reduction of ~1 FFP ac per day, and this was referenced in the June 2025 update. As of FY 25/26 an aircraft is Fit For Purpose (FFP) if it undertook a sortie or was otherwise serviceable and available for tasking for 10 consecutive hours within a 24-hour period. In previous years, the FFP availability for tasking was based on 4 consecutive hours.

In spite of the apparent reduction in availability it should be noted that output in flying hours (FH), arguably a more object measure of output, continues to increase, corroborating the broadly improving picture. In FY24/25 the output was circa 9,300FH whereas in FY25/26 the current projection is 9,600FH. Moreover, the overall health of the Fleet has significantly improved since 2024 through significant enhancements to engine availability and the subsequent recovery of 4 long-term unserviceable aircraft which will underpin future output growth. To this end, it is anticipated that average availability will increase beyond 9 by the end of October 2025 towards the longer-term goal to deliver 12 Task Lines sustainably by Q4 2027.

Operations: Throughout the period, the Atlas Force has delivered a series of strategically significant outputs that have directly enhanced Defence's global reach, interoperability, and operational resilience. Since March, A400M crews have supported the NATO Enhanced Air Policing mission in Poland, Op CHESSMAN, and Royal Marine cold-weather training in Norway, Op CLOCKWORK. In April, the Force contributed to Indo-Pacific sustainment and tested Agile Combat Employment (ACE) concepts during Exercise VENTURE SPIRIT. In May they participated in Ex SWIFT RESPONSE, a multinational military exercise designed to bolster rapid deployment capabilities and enhance the interoperability of NATO allies, in Eastern Europe, strengthening Joint Airborne Task Force delivery capabilities alongside the Air Mobility Force's second air drop capable platform, the C17 Globemaster.

From June onwards, in the run up to the Carrier Strike Group 2025 Red Sea transit during Op HIGHMAST the tempo intensified. A temporary airbridge to Oman was established initially, followed by several tasks to the Far East and Australia to prepare for HMS Prince of Wales's arrival in the summer. Alongside additional Op HIGHMAST re-supply tasking, July and August were dominated by the annual Military Parachuting Schedule in the USA and Ex MOBILITY GUARDIAN. Ex Mobility Guardian is a US-led

annual air mobility exercise held in Guam delivering excellent crew training on aeromedical evacuation and Tactical Landing Zone missions and offered interoperability between our Five Eyes, NATO, and regional partners across the Indo-Pacific.

Most recently, Op ATLANTIC CITY saw A400M project UK and Norwegian air power to the Arctic Circle, reinforcing NATO deterrence in the High North.

These operations have significantly advanced the Atlas Force tactical proficiency, global interoperability, and strategic utility. They have also reinforced UK Defence commitments across Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific, while showcasing the versatility of the A400M.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Luke', with a stylized, cursive script.

LUKE POLLARD MP