

Written evidence submitted by Airbus

Defence contribution to the UK's pandemic response

1. Introduction

1.1 Airbus is the largest space company and third largest defence company in the UK, with activity across most of the portfolio of defence and space services.

1.2 The response to the COVID-19 crisis from across the armed forces and the defence industry has been breathtaking in its scale and speed. It has shown the best of government and is an exemplar of government and industry working together.

1.3 This submission demonstrates how the Ministry of Defence's approach to working closely and constructively with industry also ensures that it is well placed to manage during times of crisis.

1.4 The UK defence sector needs the ability to rapidly fulfil unforeseen operational requirements during times of crisis. This ability should be retained outside of crises, with a strong UK defence and space industrial base supplementing this activity.

2. What capabilities can the Armed Forces offer and have these been employed appropriately and in good time?

2.1 The COVID-19 crisis has shown the vital importance of sovereign industrial and research capability. Whether in pharmaceuticals, with UK vaccine manufacturers already having reached deals to produce tens of millions of doses of a successful vaccine, or in medical technology production, with significant UK manufacturing presence enabling NHS ventilator production to be rapidly scaled up, the crisis has thrown into stark relief the importance of firmly grounding brain power and production and maintenance capacity on UK soil. That contribution firmly includes the UK's aerospace and defence sector, working closely with and alongside the Armed Forces.

2.2 The sector's complex, integrated and embedded presence can only be sustained through a conscious effort to ensure every defence pound spent is done so with suppliers with a lasting commitment to the UK's manufacturing and engineering base, which delivers in times of crisis as well as when times are good.

Military Aircraft

2.3 As a highly sophisticated aircraft, the UK's A400M Atlas platform has been maturing since its entry into service. The work of Team Atlas - RAF and Airbus engineers working seamlessly together - has contributed to 70 Squadron maintaining a high tempo of operations, as well as daily training sorties by 24 Squadron. Tasking during this crisis has included flights to the Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands and Belfast to move critically ill patients; Istanbul, to deliver PPE to the UK; and the Falkland Islands, to deliver a crucial oxygen generation plant. Those military and civilian engineers sustaining this national standby capability and delivering high aircraft availability in very difficult circumstances deserve our lasting gratitude.

2.4 AirTanker, the consortium delivering A330 MRTT Voyager services, in which Airbus is the lead shareholder, has been able to support increased air-to-air refuelling tasking for RAF crew training purposes during this crisis. It also developed a new capability to operate one of its civil registered aircraft non-stop between the UK and the Falkland Islands, achieving the fastest ever flight in 13 hours and 22 minutes, to establish an alternative air bridge should refuelling stops become unavailable due to the COVID-19 crisis. AirTanker has completed six flights for the repatriation of British citizens overseas for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, using its civil-registered A330 fleet, and a further flight for the transportation of PPE.

2.6 Puma 2 has played a key role as part of the rapidly formed COVID-19 Aviation Task Force with three aircraft deployed to Kinloss Barracks in Moray to provide medical support and COVID patient transfer from remote areas. Airbus Helicopters provides support for Puma at RAF Benson and it has enabled the annual flying task to be maintained, allowing seamless continuation of vital operations in Afghanistan and its status as the UK-based very high readiness National Standby aircraft.

Space

2.7 As the MOD's partner supporting the operation and delivery of the UK's highly resilient and assured military satellite communications system, Skynet 5, Airbus has been responsible for ensuring uninterrupted service for this critical Defence task. Skynet provides beyond-line-of-sight communications for the UK Armed Forces as well providing a backup civil communications option to the Cabinet Office and emergency services. System reliability has been incredibly high throughout this crisis due to strong cooperation between Armed Forces and Airbus engineers. Skynet 5 is also used by key UK allies.

2.8 Airbus has also doubled the WiFi bandwidth available to the Armed Forces for welfare purposes at no additional cost to the MOD, meaning those serving their country overseas, particularly on Royal Navy vessels, are able to have far more contact with loved ones back home using voice and video calls.

2.9 At no extra cost, Airbus has made its world-leading earth observation constellation available to the UK Government, through the Home Office's Joint Security and Resilience Centre (JSaRC), to allow monitoring, on clear days, of people's movements, as well as car and marine traffic, during the lockdown.

Personal Protective Equipment and Medical Ventilators

2.10 Airbus colleagues have worked tirelessly on a number of new work streams in support of the UK COVID-19 response. Airbus is a leading member of the VentilatorChallengeUK non-profit consortium, which has brought together major industrial players to rapidly scale up the production of 15,000 additional medical ventilators for the NHS. Airbus and Siemens have established an assembly line at the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre Cymru, adjacent to the Airbus site in Broughton, with around 550 engineers working in shifts to dramatically increase production of a Penlon design.

2.11 Colleagues at the Airbus satellite manufacturing site in Portsmouth have been 3D printing around 30,000 face visors for NHS facilities across the region.

2.12 Airbus test aircraft, including an A350-1000, have formed an air bridge to transport PPE from China. Airbus has procured, imported and donated more than two million pieces of PPE for use in the NHS in both England and Wales.

3. Has military readiness been maintained throughout the pandemic?

3.1 A crucial aspect of maintaining military readiness is the ability to sustain aircraft and service availability; it is even more important in times of great stress on the system. This means coordinating closely with MOD strategic suppliers. MOD and DE&S have been exceptionally good throughout the crisis. They have made it very clear what their priorities have been at all times, and Airbus has ensured resources are directed towards these programmes of national importance.

3.2 The situation highlights the nature of the UK aerospace and defence industry; it is a strategic asset more than capable of stepping up output and diversifying outputs when circumstances demand it.

3.3 In particular, logistics operations at RAF Brize Norton have been at the core of the military's response. Our military delivery business has proceeded as normal, with all operations being fully compliant with social distancing rules, through a red and blue shift model with orange emergency back-up, shift and crew room separation, and comprehensive and regular site disinfection. This has ensured absolute resilience in our contribution to this crucial Defence task.

3.4 This strict hygiene regime has contributed to an outstanding record on attendance across operations at RAF Brize Norton, including our colleagues at AirTanker. There has been minimal sickness, which has led to very high aircraft availability and mission accomplishment for both COVID-related and routine tasking. To ensure minimal disruption to RAF operations due to sickness, AirTanker has built additional resilience into its flight deck and cabin crew rotas.

3.5 Airbus Helicopters support to operations and readiness has been seamless despite many difficulties moving vital supplies from other countries. We were significantly helped by the authorities' willingness to facilitate cross border freight flow despite lockdown and quarantine, and our comprehensive planning and forward stock holding as a prudent response to potential Brexit import difficulties. At RAF Shawbury, the availability of Juno and Jupiter aircraft for the Military Flight Training System has been kept at pre-COVID levels while maintaining full compliance with both national and company social distancing rules with the use of red and blue shift systems, working from home where possible, crew room and operations room separation and rigorous disinfection of work areas and touch surfaces on aircraft.

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