

The following is a written ministerial statement from the Minister for the Armed Forces Bob Ainsworth on Programme Belvedere; to be published tomorrow (8th May 2009) "I wish to inform the House today of the decision to close Programme Belvedere - the study into possible rationalisation of the Joint Helicopter Command's Battlefield Helicopter Estate. During this complex study, the main bases under consideration were Royal Air Force (RAF) Odiham, RAF Benson, Royal Naval Air Station (RNAS) Yeovilton, Wattisham Station and Dishforth Airfield. Some other airfields were also considered including RAF Lyneham, in light of the previously announced decisions to relocate C130 aircraft from there to RAF Brize Norton.

Programme Belvedere has been a complex and lengthy study taking into account a large number of factors including:

- operating issues including aircraft numbers, command and control and flying hours;
- environmental issues including noise;
- availability and standard of domestic and technical accommodation;
- accessibility for aircraft and vehicle types;
- aircraft capacity of the airfield;
- opportunities for efficiencies and rationalisation;
- airfield location - low flying areas, training areas and local communities;
- future requirements; and,
- affordability and value for money.

It is now apparent that efficiencies that could be achieved from a major rationalisation programme would not produce the necessary return on the significant investment that would be required to implement change. We have therefore decided that to continue Programme Belvedere does not represent best value for money for the Department and the programme is to close with immediate effect. This means that there is no change at this stage to the current arrangements whereby Chinook helicopters are based at RAF Odiham; Puma and Merlin helicopters are based at RAF Benson; Apache helicopters are based at Wattisham; the Joint Helicopter Command operates the Lynx helicopter from Dishforth; and its Commando Helicopter Force, comprising Sea King and Lynx helicopters, operates from RNAS Yeovilton. This decision also means that RAF Lyneham is no longer under consideration as a basing option for the Joint Helicopter Command. The then Minister for the Armed Forces announced on 4 July 2003 (Official report, column 38WS) that following movement of the C130 fleet to RAF Brize Norton, 'if no further Defence use is identified for Royal Air Force Lyneham, the Station will be closed and disposed of'. On current plans the C130K and C130J fleets will move from RAF Lyneham to RAF Brize Norton in summer 2011. The transfer is planned to complete to enable the Royal Air Force to vacate RAF Lyneham by the end of 2012. It now seems unlikely that a further use will be identified for the site. It is too early to say exactly what the impact will be for civilian staff at the station but the Trades Unions have been kept informed and my officials will engage with them and the local authorities around RAF Lyneham to ensure we do everything possible to support our people and to manage the drawdown sensitively. Meanwhile, RAF Lyneham continues to play a key role in supporting current operations through the provision of strategic and tactical airlift, and I am deeply grateful to staff at the station for their service, and to the local population for their support. Further work is being undertaken to determine the optimum basing arrangements for the Future Lynx helicopter, and I shall keep the House informed about progress."