

By Nigel Green. Additional material by Great North News Services staff reporters.

MANAGERS at one of the shipyards set to build two aircraft carriers have admitted that finding skilled workers is going to be a massive challenge and others may be prepared to look outside the UK for workers if necessary. BAE Systems at Barrow is one of four sites around the UK that have won a share of the £4 billion order, which was signed by the Ministry of Defence last week.

At 65,000 tonnes, HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales will be the biggest warships ever built for the Royal Navy. But managers at Barrow face the problem of finding staff with the right experience and attitude. The Cumbrian yard, which already employs 4,200 on submarine contracts, will be shipping in at least 350 workers from Tyneside and they will still need to find a further 500. And it is believed managers at the other yards in Portsmouth, Glasgow, Rosyth and Tyneside face a similar headache. The average age of shipyard workers in some areas of the country is now 50-plus, with many more having retired or finding more-profitable jobs abroad. BAE faces the additional problem of persuading staff to come to the town on the remote western edge of Cumbria. While it may be on the fringes of the Lake District National Park, Barrow has the image of a run-down industrial town, although millions of pounds are being spent on redevelopment. Its shipbuilding history stretches back to the 1870s, with the yard being particularly famous for submarines. In the early 1990s, the then Vickers yard employed more than 14,000. But, by the end of the decade, that figure had dropped to 3,500. The population has fallen from 74,000 to 70,000 in the last decade. In the last four years, the yard's fortunes have picked up, largely due to orders to build the next generation of nuclear submarines. Construction of the first Astute class submarine has already been finished, with three others at various stages of completion and up to three more expected to be built at Barrow in the next decade. The workforce now stands at more than 4,000 and the company plans to increase that to 5,000 by the end of the year in readiness for the carrier work and future submarine work. The carriers will be built in sections, with the work split between BAE's yards at Barrow and Glasgow, Vosper Thornycroft at Portsmouth and Babcock Marine at Rosyth. Each yard will have to compete for workers at a time when there is a national skills' shortage, made worse with the demand for workers from other huge projects, including building the 2012 Olympic venues in London.

Alan Johnston, CEO of BVT Surface Fleet, warned of the skills shortage issue when he addressed north east marine industry representatives at Newcastle's Marine Design Centre recently. He said: "....the issue of resource and skills must be addressed continually if opportunities like the carrier programme are to be fully realised." "We need to build a sustainable industry and a strong supply chain that has an abundance of skilled people capable of utilising new technologies to innovate and add value."

Christian Elliott, Human Resources Director at Barrow, has the difficult task of filling the vacancies. Mr Elliott said: "We have a huge, huge challenge to get people to come to this area of the country." "It's not just about having the right skills. They must also have the right attitude." "At a time of growth, it would be wrong to drag in just anybody because you then have people who are disinterested, not committed or not loyal and that ultimately affects on performance." "There is a perception that Barrow has closed down. But the truth is that it is thriving and it's going to get better."

Murray Easton, Managing Director of the Barrow yard, moved to Cumbria five years ago from Rosyth. He said: "I think Barrow is a brilliant place to live and work." "It's not very often you get the chance to work on such challenging engineering work in a significant growth market between submarine, carrier and civil nuclear work and yet, on your doorstep, you have the Lake District."

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well as recruiting nationally ♦ and even internationally - BAE is also expanding its apprenticeship scheme, with recruits drawn mainly from the local community.<br />"By the end of the year, 10 per cent of our workforce will be apprentices," said Mr Elliott.<br />Barrow will sub-contract a major share of the work to the A and P yard and McNulty's on the Tyne, who are expected to build a number of structural steel sections.<br />Manufacturing work is expected to start next year and the Tyneside yards will then build around 21 units which will be transported by barge around to Barrow.<br />Dave Skentelberry, Managing Director of A and P and a founder member of the Tyne Carrier Alliance, suggests careful management and co-operation in the industry and recruitment of apprentices are key because of the timeframe and phasing of work. "Our core workforce will rise from 120 to 250, and we use subcontractors for electricals and pipework. We must ensure companies aren't grabbing people when they don't need them." But if this fails, he warns "We are fishing in a European pond now."<br />This approach is echoed by BAE Systems on the Clyde, who, with agreement from Unions, have already filled skills gaps with Polish workers, as well as recruiting 100 apprentices a year in recent times.<br />Once in Barrow, the section will be assembled by BAE Systems staff, as well as 350 contractors many of whom are expected to come from as far away as Tyneside.<br />When completed, sections will be floated to Rosyth, in Scotland, where they will be fitted together with the bow section which will be built there.<br />Some of the 170-acre Barrow site has been mothballed in recent years but there are plans to revitalise areas.<br />In particular, a new 20,000 square metre central assembly shop costing almost ♦40 million will be built later this year.<br />This will allow the carrier section to be built undercover, rather than on the slipway, as in the past example of HMS Invincible, launched at Barrow in 1977.<br />The latest carrier project will put BAE Systems and its partners in the Aircraft Carrier Alliance under huge pressure to hit deadlines and not run over budgets.<br />The Astute programme is already reportedly more than ♦1 billion over budget and three and a half years behind schedule, although the company claims to have hit milestones since 2003.<br />The carriers will be 280 metres long, 90 metres wide and 56 metres tall.<br />The two diesel generators that power the ship will each weigh 220 tonnes and will create enough electricity to power a medium sized town.<br />They will each have a crew of just 1,450 ♦ less than half of the strength of today's Invincible Class carriers.<br />The carriers will each carry 40 aircraft such as Lightning II Joint Strike Fighter jets, plus maritime airborne surveillance (probably helicopters) and are intended to serve until 2050.</p></div>

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