

Dr. Moonie: We do not expect the overall cost of the Watchkeeper Unmanned Aerial Vehicle capability to increase if it is advanced. We are currently considering, as part of our normal planning processes, whether there is scope to accommodate earlier expenditure within the Department's overall Equipment Programme.

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Watchkeeper is in an assessment phase which is expected to last up to three years. Once this phase is complete a decision will be made on moving to production. On current plans this would lead to an In Service Date of 2008.

Cetaceans

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what precautions the Royal Navy is taking to protect cetaceans. [139353]

Dr. Moonie: The Royal Navy is very aware of its responsibility for the application of good environmental practices on the high seas. The RN takes into consideration known cetacean migration routes, breeding grounds and similar information when planning exercise activity. Instructions are then issued to ships, submarines and aircraft on actions to take to minimise impact or when encountering marine activity.

Nuclear-powered Submarines

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many visits have been made by nuclear-powered submarines to each Z berth in each of the last five years. [139053]

Mr. Spellar: Since 1995 UK submarines have made 29 visits to alongside Z berths outside of UK Naval Bases. In addition to the alongside Z berths, there are a number of mooring buoys that have Z berth status in Plymouth Sound, at Spithead, off the Isle of Skye, Loch Ewe, off Rothesay, and in Loth Goil and at Mare Harbour in the Falkland Islands. Submarines use these mooring buoys, sometimes for as little as an hour or two, to carry out crew transfers or to take on high priority spare parts, and detailed records are not kept of all such visits. To provide details of all movement between Z berths within UK Naval Bases could be provided only at disproportional cost.

Details of visits to alongside Z berths are:

Location	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Southampton	0	0	1	0	0
Cardiff(1)	0	1	0	0	0
Liverpool	0	2	0	1	0
Gibraltar	4	4	3	2	6
Bermuda	1	1	0	1	0
Hong Kong(2)	1	0	1	0	0

(1) Cardiff no longer has Z berth status

(2) Hong Kong no longer has Z berth status

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list each of the ports authorised to accept the berthing of nuclear powered submarines in (a) the United Kingdom and

(b) British overseas territories and protectorates; if he will indicate for which ports public safety plans, and emergency evaluation plans in respect of incidents involving nuclear submarines, exist; and if he will set out the scope of public accessibility of such plans. [139518]

Mr. Spellar: Ports authorised to accept the berthing of nuclear powered submarines, referred to as X and Z berths, in the United Kingdom, and British overseas territories and protectorates are detailed in the answer I gave on 14 November 2000, *Official Report*, columns 575-76W.

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All ports which are authorised to accept the berthing of nuclear powered submarines have public safety and emergency evacuation plans. The plans are accessible to the public with copies held by the local authority libraries.

Mine Detection

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what contract the Defence Procurement Agency has awarded for the next phase of the vehicle-based Mine Detection, Neutralisation and Route Proving System; which companies bid for the contract; what time is set for completion of the programme; what is the total cost of the programme; and if he will make a statement. [138977]

Dr. Moonie: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Robert Walmsley to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 21 November 2000:

I am replying to your question to the Secretary of State for Defence about the vehicle based Mine-Detection, Neutralisation and Route Proving System. This matter falls within my area of responsibility as Chief of Defence Procurement and Chief Executive of the Defence Procurement Agency.

On 30 and 31 October this year, the Defence Procurement Agency awarded contracts to Ultra Electronics Ltd. of High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire and to Hunting Engineering Ltd. of Ampthill, Bedfordshire respectively, for the Competitive Assessment Phase (CAP) of the Mine Detection, Neutralisation and Route Marking System Programme known as MINDER. Each contract is worth £6 million VAT inclusive. A bid was also received from BAE Systems (RO Defence, Leicester) which was not successful in the detailed tender assessment process.

The initial capability for MINDER is planned to enter service in 2005, with incremental capability growth up to 2010. The purpose of the CAP is to determine the level of system performance that can be achieved in these timescales.

The total cost of the MINDER programme is estimated to be £344 million.

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