

Research Briefing

13 December 2022

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The Royal Navy's surface fleet



Summary

- 1 The Royal Navy's surface fleet
- 2 Royal Fleet Auxiliary
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- 4 Parliamentary scrutiny

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Summary

Navy Command will spend over £41 billion on equipment and support over the next decade from 2022. The Royal Navy and Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) are planning a fleet of new vessels, including frigates, supply and multi-role ships, autonomous mine-hunting systems, and ocean surveillance vessels to protect critical undersea infrastructure.

Parliament has taken a keen interest in the way the Government procures surface ships. This paper provides a short overview of the current and future fleet, the evolution of naval procurement policy and Parliamentary scrutiny of this topic.

The Royal Navy and RFA fleet

There are [71 vessels in the Royal Navy's and RFA's surface fleet](#), as of 1 April 2022.

The flagships are the two HMS Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers, equipped with the new F-35 Lightning II combat aircraft.

Type 45 destroyers protect the fleet from air attack, while specialist anti-submarine warfare frigates protect surface vessels from underwater threats. The latter also support the submarine-based strategic nuclear deterrent.

General purpose frigates, and a new fleet of offshore patrol vessels, protect the waters of the UK and British Overseas Territories and perform a range of duties, including counter-piracy and counter-terrorism operations.

Amphibious and large landing ships support the delivery of Royal Marines in the littoral (coastal or near shore) environment.

Specialist vessels survey the ocean and make shipping lanes safe from mines. Tankers and solid support ships resupply naval vessels with fuel, ammunition, food and other stores at sea.

Currently under construction are two classes of frigates for the Royal Navy: the Type 26 anti-submarine warfare and the Type 31 general purpose frigates. BAE Systems is building the Type 26 at its yards in Glasgow. The Type 31 is being manufactured by Babcock at its Rosyth facility.

Latest announcements

In November 2022 the Defence Secretary made several announcements relating to the Royal Navy's future surface fleet:

- A [12 month delay to the first Type 26 frigate](#). It is now expected to be operational in October 2028.
- The award of a £4.2 billion [contract with BAE Systems for the next batch of Type 26 frigates](#).
- The selection of Team Resolute (Harland & Wolff, BMT and Navantia) as the [preferred bidder for three new solid support ships](#) for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary.
- The [acceleration of the procurement of the first ocean surveillance vessel](#) to protect critical undersea cables, and the termination of the national flagship competition.

Evolution of naval procurement policy

The Government's approach has evolved since it [published its first national shipbuilding strategy](#) in 2017. That articulated the position that all Royal Navy warships (which it defined as aircraft carriers, destroyers and frigates) would be built only in the UK. Open competition would be applied to all other surface vessels.

The Government has since revised that approach, with a [new industrial strategy published in 2021](#) laying out the need to "maintain a maritime enterprise" within the UK. From now on, the procurement approach for each class of ship will be "determined on a case-by-case basis."

In March 2022 the Government laid out a 30-year masterplan for future ships in a refreshed shipbuilding strategy, in which the Government outlined plans to "[reinvigorate the whole British shipbuilding industry](#)."

Current issues

In recent years much of the debate about the procurement of naval surface ships has focused on where the ships are built. Supporting the UK's shipbuilding industry and retaining skills has often been at the forefront of the debate, balanced by the Government's preference for open competition to maximise value for money and meet its legal requirements.

There are also concerns about timescales and delays to programmes and the effect this may have on the Royal Navy's ability to fulfil the demands placed

on it. In a report published in December 2021, the Defence Committee worried that the Navy's fleet is "[too small and too specialised](#)". The Committee also expressed concern about the current availability of ships, with ageing vessels retained in service before being replaced with new ships.

The Scottish Affairs Committee [launched an inquiry into military shipbuilding](#) in February 2022. It is accepting written evidence until 19 January 2023.

1 The Royal Navy's surface fleet

There are 62 vessels in the Royal Navy's surface fleet, as of 1 April 2022.¹

This section takes each type of vessel in turn, highlighting any notable issues or planned out of service dates, before discussing ships under construction and the Navy's future plans.

1.1 Aircraft carriers

The flagships of the fleet are the two new [Queen Elizabeth class aircraft carriers](#). They are [designed to project power worldwide](#)² and provide what is called a carrier strike capability: the ability to launch fixed-wing combat aircraft (the new F-35 Lightning II) and helicopters. Together they cost over £6 billion. The Navy has said it intends to "routinely deploy a carrier strike group annually."³

In 2021 the first in class, HMS Queen Elizabeth, sailed to the Indo-Pacific on her first deployment.

HMS Prince of Wales was commissioned in 2019. However, while at sea she suffered a shaft coupling failure in August 2022 and is undergoing repair.⁴ On 1 November the MOD said it was not able to provide an estimate of when she would return to service.⁵

The carrier programme has been the subject of several reports by the National Audit Office (NAO) and Public Accounts Committee (PAC). This includes the 2010 decision to procure the carrier variant of the F-35 Lightning aircraft which required a change of design to the ships, and the subsequent reversal of that decision in 2012.⁶ In November 2020, the PAC blamed "poor contractor performance and inadequate departmental oversight" for delays to bringing into service the helicopter-borne Crowsnest

¹ [UK armed forces equipment and formations 2022](#), Ministry of Defence, 11 October 2022. The bulletin does not distinguish between those that are available and those that are undergoing planned maintenance or otherwise not available for deployment.

² [Nation's flagship takes to the sea for the first time](#), Ministry of Defence, 26 June 2017

³ [We're going to need a bigger Navy: Government Response](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 25 February 2022

⁴ [PQ55090 \[HMS Prince of Wales: Repairs and maintenance\]](#), 17 October 2022

⁵ [PQ69500 \[HMS Prince of Wales: Repairs and maintenance\]](#), 1 November 2022

⁶ [Carrier Strike: the 2012 revision decision](#), National Audit Office, 10 May 2013, HC 63 2013- 14 A full list of NAO reports on naval vessels can be found in section 4

radar system.⁷ Crowsnest achieved its in-service date in February 2021. However, the MOD has not given a date for when it will achieve full operating capability.⁸

1.2

Destroyers

Six destroyers specialise in anti-air warfare.

The six Type 45 Destroyers are designed to protect the fleet from air attack, operating as part of a wider maritime group. However, they can fulfil many other maritime roles, including providing fire support and air defence to forces ashore.

The first in class, HMS Daring, deployed for the first time in 2012.

There have been concerns about their lack of availability, with the Defence Committee noting that at one point in July 2021 only one of the six was not undergoing maintenance.⁹

A Power Improvement Project, intended to fix problems with the propulsion system, will require each ship to undergo 12 months of maintenance and will not be completed until 2028.¹⁰

In December 2021 the Defence Committee said the low availability of the destroyers and recognised issues in their propulsion systems are “a major cause for concern”, as are indications that the PIP timeline is slipping. The Committee said it was “extraordinary” that the Navy is prepared to wait seven years to fully repair the ships.¹¹ In June 2022 Jeremy Quin, the Minister for Defence Procurement, updated the Committee with PIP timings for individual vessels. The Minister also stated the ambition to accelerate the programme to complete PIP “as early as possible”, before 2028. However, he added that this would have to be balanced against future operational commitments.¹²

⁷ [“Debilitating” lack of funded plan for Carrier Strike threatens UK military power](#), Public Accounts Committee, 13 November 2020

⁸ [PQ29912 \[Merlin Helicopters: Early Warning Systems\]](#), 12 July 2022

⁹ [We’re going to need a bigger Navy](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 14 December 2021, para 123

¹⁰ [We’re going to need a bigger Navy](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 14 December 2021, para 123. Analysis of the propulsion system deficiencies can be found in: [In focus the power improvement project for the Royal Navy’s Type 45 destroyers](#), Navy Lookout, 10 October 2022

¹¹ [We’re going to need a bigger Navy](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 14 December 2021, para 128

¹² [Letter, dated 13 June 2022, from the Minister for Defence Procurement to the Chair, providing responses to questions from the Committee on the Royal Navy](#), Defence Committee, 29 June 2022

1 Air defence: Sea Ceptor and Sea Viper

Each of the Type 45's is equipped with the Sea Viper air defence system. They carry up to 48 Sea Viper missiles from vertically launched silos on the forecastle. The Sea Viper Evolution programme will integrate the Sea Ceptor system into the Sea Viper system. In September 2021 the MOD said roll out will be between early 2027 and the end of 2032, depending on availability of ships and operational requirements.¹³

The Sea Ceptor missile system entered service in 2018 and has been retrofitted to the Type 23 frigates as part of their major life extension refit. It will equip the Type 26 and Type 31 frigates.¹⁴

Sea Ceptor has a shorter range than the Sea Viper system and can also engage small surface targets, such as fast attack craft, as well as incoming missiles and aircraft.

1.3

Frigates

The remaining 12 Type 23 frigates will progressively transition out of service until the last retires in 2035.

The current fleet of Type 23 Duke-class frigates are a mix of general purpose and anti-submarine warfare vessels.

They have been in service since the 1980s and were originally designed with an 18-year life span. However, their out of service date has been repeatedly delayed until they can be replaced. Vice Admiral Sir Chris Gardner, then Director General (Ships), Defence Equipment & Support, acknowledged that the ships are old and suffering from "obsolescence" because of the age of the equipment, explaining the Navy is "having to spend a significant amount of money on maintaining and extending their lives."¹⁵

In 2021 the 13-strong fleet was reduced to 12 with the decommissioning of HMS Monmouth.¹⁶ HMS Montrose is the next to leave service in 2023.¹⁷ The

¹³ [PQ 51888 \[Type 45 Destroyers: guided weapons\]](#), 23 September 2021

¹⁴ [PQ 56820 \[Type 31 frigates\]](#), 25 October 2021; [PQ 51888 \[Type 45 Destroyers: guided weapons\]](#), 23 September 2021

¹⁵ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q108-111

¹⁶ [Royal Navy 'ghost ship' HMS Monmouth returns to Portsmouth to face an uncertain future](#), Portsmouth News, 13 September 2021

¹⁷ The four in long-term refit are HMS Argyll, Iron Duke, Sutherland and St Albans. [PQ20222 \[Type 23 frigates\]](#), 27 June 2022

fleet will progressively transition out of service until the last retires in 2035.¹⁸ Four of the 12 are in long-term refit (as of 1 April 2022).¹⁹

There will be a drop in the overall number of frigates after HMS Montrose retires in 2023. The MOD said in February 2022 that “on current plans, the transition into service of Type 31 and Type 26 to replace Type 23s will not introduce any capability gaps”.²⁰ Ben Wallace, the Defence Secretary, told the Defence Committee that they are working on providing more availability of ships.²¹

Future ships: frigates

Eight new anti-submarine warfare and five general purpose frigates

Plans for a new class of frigate date back to the late 1990s in what was originally called the Future Surface Combatant (FSC) programme. By 2010 this had developed into the Type 26 Global Combat Ship, with 13 ships expected to be procured without competition from BAE Systems. The expected in-service date was “as soon as possible after 2020.”²²

However, this changed in the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review. The Government opted to proceed with eight anti-submarine warfare Type 26s and procure a new class of five, lighter frigates. This has become known as the Type 31.

Type 26

The Type 26 City-class ships are designed to hunt for submarines. This requires specific design needs, including an acoustically quiet hull and sophisticated sonar equipment. These vessels will help protect the submarine-based strategic nuclear deterrent and carrier strike groups.

BAE Systems is building all eight vessels in its Glasgow shipyards. The MOD awarded a contract worth £3.58 billion for the first three frigates in June 2017.²³ On 15 November 2022 Ben Wallace, the Defence Secretary, announced the award of a further £4.2 billion contract to BAE Systems to build the next five ships in November 2022.²⁴

¹⁸ [PQ83555 \[Type 23 frigates\]](#), 17 November 2022

¹⁹ The four in long-term refit are HMS Argyll, Iron Duke, Sutherland and St Albans. [PQ20222 \[Type 23 frigates\]](#), 27 June 2022

²⁰ [We're going to need a bigger Navy: Government Response](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 25 February 2022

²¹ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q

²² [Ministry of Defence Major Projects Report 2012 Appendices and Project Summary sheets](#), National Audit Office, January 2013, HC 684-II 2012-13

²³ [PQ23718 \[Shipbuilding: Procurement\]](#), 30 June 2022

²⁴ [HCWS367 \[Type 26 batch 2 update\]](#), 15 November 2022; [British shipyard awarded £4.2 billion to build Royal Navy ships](#), Ministry of Defence, 15 November 2022

HMS Glasgow will enter service in October 2028, 12 months later than planned.

In November 2021 Jeremy Quin, the Minister for Defence Procurement, told the Defence Committee the intention was for HMS Glasgow to match the coming out of service of HMS Westminster, the oldest of the Type 23 anti-submarine warfare vessels.²⁵

However, the first in class, HMS Glasgow, is now not expected to achieve initial operating capability until October 2028, a delay of 12 months. Ben Wallace told the Defence Committee that the delay is in part due to the impact of Covid 19, but also because of supply chain issues, principally to do with the gearbox.²⁶ He told the Committee HMS Glasgow would be 12 months late into service, but that he hoped the rest of the class would come in on time.²⁷ The delay will cost the MOD £233 million over the life of the programme.²⁸ The ships are expected to progressively enter service between 2028 and 2035.

Type 31 frigates

2027 is the in-service date for the first Type 31 frigate.

The Type 31 is known as the [Inspiration Class](#). They are named after historical vessels: HMS Active, Bulldog, Campbeltown, Formidable and Venturer.²⁹

The Government [set industry an aggressive timetable](#) for the contract to be awarded in late 2018 and build to commence in 2019. However, the competition was suspended in July 2018 and restarted the following month.³⁰ Three competitive design phase contracts were awarded in December 2018, and a contract worth over £1.2 billion for 5 vessels was placed with a [Babcock-led consortium](#) in November 2019.³¹

The Shipbuilding Strategy said the goal was to have the first Type 31 frigate in service in 2023.³²

The approved in-service date for the Type 31 frigates is now 2027, according to a [letter written by the MOD's Permanent Secretary to the chair of the Public Accounts Committee](#) in January 2020. The Shipbuilding Strategy said the first vessel should be [in service by 2023](#).

²⁵ [Oral evidence: The Navy: purpose and procurement](#), Defence Committee, 2 November 2021, HC 168 2021-22, q162

²⁶ Sir Simon Lister, the managing director of BAE Systems Maritime – Naval Ships, told the Scottish Affairs committee that the gearbox was specially developed for the ship and the delay was in testing the gearbox. He said the gearbox is installed in ship 2 and is expected to arrive on time for ship 3. [Oral evidence: Military shipbuilding](#), Scottish Affairs Committee, 5 September 2022, HC 81 2022-23, q56

²⁷ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q104

²⁸ [HCWS352 \[Type 26 batch 1 Update\]](#), 2 November 2022

²⁹ [New 'Inspiration class' Type 31 warships named](#), Ministry of Defence, 19 May 2021

³⁰ [Type 31 frigate programme restarted](#), UK defence journal, 22 August 2018

³¹ [PQ23718 \[Shipbuilding: procurement\]](#), 30 June 2022

³² [National shipbuilding strategy](#), Ministry of Defence, 6 September 2017

2 Surface to surface weapons: replacing Harpoon

The Royal Navy's existing Harpoon missiles will be retired in December 2023. The cancellation of the Interim Surface to Surface Guided Weapon Competition in early 2022 leaves a gap in this specific capability until the introduction of the future cruise/anti-ship weapon (FC/ASW) programme. These will be fitted to the Type 26 frigate. The MOD has not given a date for this programme's introduction.

The MOD said that following Harpoon's retirement "the fleet will still be capable of fielding a powerful mix of offensive capabilities that can strike enemy vessels at sea." The MOD cited the Common AntiAir Modular Missile-Maritime (Camm-M) in anti-surface mode, Sea Martlet and Sea Venom missiles launched from maritime helicopters and Spearfish heavyweight torpedoes fired from attack submarines.³³ In July 2022, Ben Wallace told the Committee that "there is an interim plan" in place but it has not been to tender.³⁴

1.4

Amphibious vessels

Known as landing platform dock (LPD), HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark provide the Royal Marines the ability to deploy ashore by sea (from landing craft in the floodable well dock) or air (by helicopter). The MOD said Albion and Bulwark are due to retire from service by the end of 2034.³⁵ One is currently available while the other undergoes deep maintenance and upkeep.³⁶

In its report on the Royal Marines published in 2018, the Defence Committee "strongly oppose" the withdrawal of Albion and Bulwark before their out of service dates in 2033 and 2034.³⁷

³³ [Letter, dated 13 June 2022, from the Minister for Defence Procurement to the Chair, providing responses to questions from the Committee on the Royal Navy](#), Defence Committee, 29 June 2022

³⁴ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q119

³⁵ [PQ59032 \[HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark\]](#), 25 October 2022

³⁶ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q101

³⁷ [Sunset for the Royal Marines? The Royal Marines and UK amphibious capability \(PDF\)](#), 4 February 2018, HC 622 2017-19, para 57

1.5

Offshore patrol vessels

Five OPVs are permanently deployed in the Caribbean, Mediterranean, South Atlantic and Indo-Pacific.

Historically the River-class Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) have been used to help protect fishing stocks around the UK, with one permanently deployed to the Falkland Islands in the South Atlantic.

HMS [Tyne](#), [Severn](#) and [Mersey](#) are the remaining vessels from the original River-class fleet (HMS Clyde was decommissioned in 2019). HMS Severn was decommissioned in 2017 before being recommissioned in 2020. They continue to predominantly operate around the UK.

The first of five new batch-2 River class OPVs entered service in 2017. Unlike their predecessors, they have a helicopter landing pad.³⁸ All five are now “forward deployed” around the world on a long-term basis. Crews rotate from the UK using a three-watch system. This, the First Sea Lord told the Defence Committee, means the ships are more available for use, as they do not need to spend time sailing to and from their area of operations.³⁹

The OPVs are currently deployed to the Caribbean ([HMS Medway](#)), the Mediterranean and Gulf of Guinea ([HMS Trent](#)), the South Atlantic ([HMS Forth](#)) and Indo-Asia Pacific ([HMS Tamar](#) and [HMS Spey](#)⁴⁰). HMS Trent recently completed her re-fit in Gibraltar at the end of September 2022.⁴¹ HMS Tamar and HMS Spey can be maintained in the Indo-Pacific rather than returning to the UK. HMS Spey began a scheduled maintenance period and crew rotation in Japan on 29 November 2022.⁴²

Mine-counter measure vessels

There are 13 mine counter measure vessels in service: 6 Hunt class and 7 Sandown classes. They have plastic hulls to protect them from the threat of sea-mines.⁴³ Several vessels are permanently deployed in the Persian Gulf as part of operation Kipion, to clear mines and protect shipping in the area. Crews are rotated from the UK rather than permanently based in the region.

³⁸ HMS Clyde did have a landing pad.

³⁹ [We're going to need a bigger Navy](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 14 December 2021, para 119

⁴⁰ [HMS Tamar visits Darwin](#), Ministry of Defence, 1 June 2022

⁴¹ HMS Trent (@HMSTrent) “HMS TRENT has completed her re-fit and moved from dry dock to HM Naval Base Gibraltar - take a look at our time-lapse footage The ship will soon be heading off on deployment. Any guesses as to where?” 1 October 2022 [accessed 28 November 2022], available from: <https://twitter.com/HMSTrent/status/1576212496074960896>

⁴² HMS Spey (@HMS_Spey) “Arriving off Yokohama to the stunning & unmistakable backdrop of Mount Fuji 🏔️. We now commence a short scheduled maintenance period & complete a Watch Rotation seeing ‘Red Watch’ return and saying goodbye to ‘White Watch’ for a well earned break”, 29 November 2022 [accessed 29 November 2022], available from: https://twitter.com/HMS_Spey/status/1597499957791326209

⁴³ This helps reduce the ship’s magnetic signature

The Navy intends to replace the vessels with new autonomous systems. These plans are discussed in section 1.6.

Other vessels

The rest of the surface fleet is made up of ice patrol and survey ships, and inshore patrol vessels, which includes the two Scimitar fast patrol boats which form the Royal Navy's Gibraltar Squadron.

1.6

Future ships

The refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy, published in March 2022, [laid out a 30-year shipbuilding pipeline](#). This includes plans for several new vessels yet to be procured: new Type 32 frigates, mine countermeasure systems and support ships, a multi-role ocean surveillance capability and multi-role support ships. Further ahead, the Type 83 will replace the current Type 45's in the late 2030s.⁴⁴

Costs

The Navy plans to spend £41.1 billion on equipment and support between 2022 and 2032.

The Defence Equipment Plan 2022 to 2032 has allocated £41.1 billion to Navy Command.⁴⁵

However, the National Audit Office, in its report on the equipment plan, has raised concerns about the affordability of the plan. The NAO says Navy Command withdrew its plans for Type 32 frigates and multirole support ships from the plan in July 2022 because of concerns about unaffordability. The NAO says "the revised costing profile is likely to be significantly higher". The NAO also questions why no funding is allocated to the Type 83 destroyer, given it is likely to be needed in the late 2030s.⁴⁶ Ben Wallace told the Defence Committee the Type 32s and Type 83s "are way into the mid-2030s" but acknowledged "we will need to start the process towards the end of the 2030s."⁴⁷

Three new classes entering service around 2027 to 2028

The Defence Committee also expressed concern about potential slippage in the delivery timetable and the pressure of transitioning to three new class of vessels (the Type 26, Type 31 and fleet solid support ships) simultaneously in 2027-28. Admiral Radakin, then First Sea Lord, noted that one of the big

⁴⁴ [Refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy](#), CP 605, Ministry of Defence, 10 March 2022

⁴⁵ [Defence Equipment Plan 2022 to 2032](#), Ministry of Defence, 29 November 2022

⁴⁶ [The Equipment Plan 2022 to 2032](#), National Audit Office, HC 907 2022-23, 29 November 2022

⁴⁷ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q53

challenges is likely to be the need to crew both old and new vessels simultaneously for a period.⁴⁸

Type 32

In November 2020 Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced [plans to develop a new Type 32 frigate](#) for the Royal Navy. The Government has since confirmed plans to procure up to five of this new class of ships “to extend the Royal Navy’s forward presence around the world.”⁴⁹ These are not expected to enter service until the late 2030s.⁵⁰

Mine hunting capability

The Hunt and Sandown class mine hunting vessels will be replaced with [remotely operated or autonomous systems based on small boats](#). According to the equipment plan 2022 to 2032, the mine hunting capability programme will include:

- up to six mine countermeasures maritime autonomous mission systems
- up to four mine countermeasures LSV
- a UK mine countermeasures OSV, due to enter service with the RFA in April 2023⁵¹

Multi-role ocean surveillance ships (MROSS)

The Defence in a Competitive Age command paper [announced plans to develop a new Multi-Role Ocean Surveillance capability](#) “to safeguard the critical undersea national infrastructure on which our prosperity depends.”⁵²

In October 2022 the MOD said the first ship is expected to enter service in 2023, although no contract has yet been awarded for the construction of either ship.⁵³

However, on 7 November the Defence Secretary announced the acceleration of the procurement of the first ship. Ben Wallace said this was in response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and the need to “prioritise delivering capabilities that safeguard our national infrastructure.” The national flagship competition has been terminated with immediate effect to bring forward the

The MOD is accelerating procurement of the first ocean surveillance ship to help protect critical undersea cables

⁴⁸ [We’re going to need a bigger Navy](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 14 December 2021, para 128

⁴⁹ [Refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy](#) (CP 605), Ministry of Defence, 10 March 2022

⁵⁰ [Refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy](#) (CP 605), Ministry of Defence, 10 March 2022

⁵¹ [Defence Equipment Plan 2022 to 2032](#), Ministry of Defence, 29 November 2022

⁵² [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), CP411, 22 March 2021

⁵³ [PQ59259 \[Multirole Ocean Surveillance Ship\]](#), 13 October 2022

first ship.⁵⁴ The MOD has suggested the first ship will be fitted out in the UK.⁵⁵

The MOD says no decision has been made on whether they will be classed as Royal Navy or Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ [HC Deb 7 November 2022 c17](#)

⁵⁵ [PQ80634 \[Multi Role Ocean Surveillance Ship: Construction\]](#), 11 November 2022

⁵⁶ [PQ83753 \[Multi Role Ocean Surveillance Ship\]](#), 16 November 2022

2 Royal Fleet Auxiliary

The civilian manned Royal Fleet Auxiliary (RFA) has 13 vessels to support and resupply the Royal Navy.

2.1 Current fleet

Amphibious landing ships

The three Bay class amphibious landing ships offload troops and vehicles from ship to shore using the landing craft vessels. They also provide humanitarian relief following natural disasters.

They are due out of service early in the early 2030s.⁵⁷

Tankers and supply vessels

The four Tide and two Wave class ships resupply naval vessels with fuel and stores. They are equipped with the Phalanx gun.

Fort Victoria is the remaining oiler and replenishment ship which restocks naval ships with solid as well as liquid stores. She is expected to leave service around 2028 and be replaced by the fleet solid support ships (see below).⁵⁸ Fort Rosalie and Fort Austin were retired in 2021 and have been sold to Egypt.⁵⁹

Casualty ship

RFA Argus is the primary casualty receiving ship, a floating medical facility. It was due out of service in 2024.⁶⁰ However, the MOD has extended its life in service to “beyond 2030”. The Navy says it is exploring options, including to configure the multi-role support ships to provide medical capabilities. The MOD said in mid-2022 that “the process laydown of the medical capability is still being developed.”⁶¹

⁵⁷ [FOI 2016/08608 \(PDF\)](#), Ministry of Defence, 6 October 2016

⁵⁸ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q74

⁵⁹ [UK sells two Fort-Rosalie-class replenishment ships to Egypt](#), Naval News, 29 October 2021

⁶⁰ [We're going to need a bigger Navy: Government Response](#), Defence Committee, HC 168 2021-22, 25 February 2022; [HL7902 \[RFA Argus: Decommissioning\]](#), 28 April 2022

⁶¹ [Letter, dated 13 June 2022, from the Minister for Defence Procurement to the Chair, providing responses to questions from the Committee on the Royal Navy](#), Defence Committee, 29 June 2022

2.2

Future ships

Fleet solid support ships

Fleet solid support ships supply naval vessels with food, ammunition and spares (solid cargo, as opposed to liquid cargo such as fuel). They will replace the Fort class, of which only Fort Victoria remains in service. The Navy is aiming for the first in class to be delivered in 2028 “to meet our out of service date for Fort Victoria.”⁶²

On 16 November 2022 the Defence Secretary announced Team Resolute is the preferred bidder to provide three new vessels for £1.6 billion. Team Resolute is a consortium of the Spanish firm Navantia, and the UK based Harland and Wolff and BMT firms.⁶³ The MOD expects to award the contract towards the end of 2022.⁶⁴ The procurement of these vessels has been discussed at length by MPs (see box 3 in section 3).

Multi-role support ships

The national shipbuilding strategy refresh suggests up to 6 multi-role support ships will be procured, to enter service in the early 2030s. These will replace the capabilities currently provided by RFA Argus and the Albion class ships, namely providing medical facilities, and operate in the littoral (coastal/shore) environment with the Royal Marines.

⁶² [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q74

⁶³ [HCWS369 \[Shipbuilding update\]](#), 16 November 2022

⁶⁴ [HC Deb 18 November 2022 c960](#)

3 The Government's naval procurement policy

The Government's approach to naval procurement has evolved in recent years. A core debate for Parliament has been whether naval surface ships should be built solely in the UK.

3.1 From 2005 to present

2017 National shipbuilding strategy

The Labour Government published a Defence Industrial Strategy in 2005. It stated: "there is no absolute requirement to build all warships and Royal Fleet Auxiliary vessels onshore, but a minimum ability to build and integrate complex ships in the UK must be retained."⁶⁵ In 2009 the Ministry of Defence signed a terms of business arrangement with BAE Systems to be its "strategic complex warship design and build partner."⁶⁶

2021 Defence in a competitive age command paper

The consolidation of BAE Systems shipyards on the Clyde in Glasgow in 2013 meant the future of naval shipbuilding, and specifically the Type 26 contract, was the subject of considerable debate in the lead-up to the 2014 referendum in Scotland.⁶⁷

2022 National shipbuilding strategy refresh

In the 2015 Strategic Defence and Security Review, the Government committed to publishing a shipbuilding strategy. The Government subsequently commissioned Sir John Parker to provide an [independent report to inform the strategy](#).⁶⁸

The National Shipbuilding Strategy

The National Shipbuilding Strategy, published in 2017, stated that [warships would be built in the UK](#). It defined warships as destroyers, frigates and aircraft carriers, with all other naval ships subject to open competition,

⁶⁵ [Defence Industrial Strategy](#), Cm6697, December 2005, para B.2.18

⁶⁶ The 15-year TOBA was signed with BAE Systems predecessor, BVT, in 2009, with whom it had merged with VT Shipbuilding. The agreement committed a minimum level of workload in warship design and work to the company to "ensure our key industrial capabilities are preserved." [HC Deb 120WS](#), 21 July 2009.

⁶⁷ See for example Defence Ministers comments in 2012 (HC Deb 22 October 2012 c686-687) and 2014 (HC Deb 18 March 2014 c760) that complex warships are built within the UK.

⁶⁸ See [The Royal Navy's new frigates and the national shipbuilding strategy: February 2017 update](#), CBP 7737, 2 February 2017

unless there are compelling national security reasons to constrain a particular procurement to national providers.⁶⁹

Sir John Parker, whose 2016 report on shipbuilding had informed the strategy, later criticised the Government's decision to limit the number of categories of ships eligible for UK-only competition. He recommended UK-only competition should be considered for future defence-funded vessels, including the fleet solid support ships (see box below).⁷⁰

2021: A change of approach

The Government changed its approach in the 2021 Defence in a Competitive Age command paper. It removed the UK-only competition restriction to warships. Instead, the procurement approach of each class will be determined on a case-by-case basis. This could be “a single source procurement, a UK competition, an international competition or a blended competitive approach.”⁷¹

The MOD argued that for national security reasons the UK needs to ensure a sovereign naval construction capability:

We consider that a regular drumbeat of design and manufacturing work is needed to maintain the industrial capabilities critical for our national security and to drive efficiencies which will reduce longer-term costs in the shipbuilding portfolio.⁷²

The Government expanded on its plans to “reinvigorate the whole British shipbuilding industry” in its [refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy](#), published in March 2022. Senior managers from Babcock and BAE Systems told the Scottish Affairs Committee of the benefits of the shipbuilding strategy and the clarity of a future pipeline in investing in yards, recruiting apprentices and investing in their workforce.⁷³

The Scottish Affairs Committee, noting the importance of the military shipbuilding sector for employment in Scotland, called on the Government to “clarify definitely its position on whether current policies potentially allow for Royal Navy warships to be procured and/or built overseas.”⁷⁴ In response, the Government said it cannot guarantee the build location of

⁶⁹ [National Shipbuilding Strategy](#), Ministry of Defence, 6 September 2017

⁷⁰ [Sir John Parker's independent review of the national shipbuilding strategy in 2019](#), Ministry of Defence, 4 November 2019; Commons Library paper, [Naval shipbuilding: February 2020 update](#), CBP8807, 5 February 2020

⁷¹ [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), CP 410, Ministry of Defence, 23 March 2021

⁷² [Defence in a Competitive Age](#), CP 410, Ministry of Defence, 23 March 2021

⁷³ [Oral evidence: defence in Scotland: military shipbuilding](#), 5 September 2022, HC 81 2022-23

⁷⁴ [Defence in Scotland: military landscape](#), Scottish Affairs Committee, 24 June 2022, HC 82 2022-23, para 40

specific vessels.⁷⁵ At the time of writing the Committee is continuing its inquiry into defence in Scotland with a [focus on military shipbuilding](#).

3 The fleet solid support ships

The procurement approach towards buying three new fleet solid support (FSS) ships has spanned the shift in the Government's overall procurement approach to naval shipbuilding. It has also been the subject of considerable Parliamentary scrutiny, with MPs arguing in favour of restricting the build to UK shipyards to help retain and maintain shipbuilding skills. The GMB trade union and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions published reports setting out their arguments for why the FSS should be subject to a UK-only competition.⁷⁶

The 2017 national shipbuilding strategy defined the FSS as “non-warships” and therefore subject to international competition. The MOD argued that this would “maintain UK competitive edge for shipbuilding.” Defence Ministers also said that the UK is “obliged by law” to [procure them through international competition](#).⁷⁷ This was a reference to the Defence and Security Public Contract Regulations 2011. At the time, the contract was expected to be awarded in 2020.⁷⁸

However, in late 2019 the Government unexpectedly halted the international competition.⁷⁹ It was relaunched in May 2021, two months after the Government outlined its new naval procurement strategy in the Defence Command Paper. The refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy outlined plans to make the recapitalisation of UK industry a “prominent feature of the programme”.

On 16 November 2022 the Defence Secretary announced the preferred bidder to be Team Resolute, a consortium of Spanish firm Navantia, Harland and Wolff shipbuilder and the design firm BMT.⁸⁰ The contract price will be £1.617 billion for all three vessels.⁸¹ According to Ben Wallace, the ships will be built in three blocks: the bow and middle section in Harland and Wolff in

⁷⁵ [Defence in Scotland: military landscape, Government response](#), Scottish Affairs Committee, 26 September 2022, HC 674 2022-23

⁷⁶ [Fleet Solid Support Ships: Supporting the Royal Navy, Supporting the United Kingdom](#), CSEU, 15 May 2018; [Turning the Tide: Rebuilding the UK's defence shipbuilding industry and the Fleet Solid Support Order](#), GMB, 4 April 2018 Commons Library paper, [Fleet Solid Support Ships](#), CBP8351, 6 July 2018

⁷⁷ [PQ152792 \[Fleet solid support ships: procurement\]](#), 19 June 2018

⁷⁸ Commons Library paper, [Fleet Solid Support Ships](#), CBP8351, 6 July 2018

⁷⁹ Commons Library paper, [Naval shipbuilding: February 2020 update](#), CBP8807, 5 February 2020

⁸⁰ [HCWS369 \[Shipbuilding update\]](#), 16 November 2022

⁸¹ [National shipbuilding strategy refresh: oral evidence](#), Defence Committee, HC 181, 5 July 2022, q72

Belfast and in Appledore in Devon, the aft in Spain. The whole ship will be assembled in Harland and Wolff.⁸²

Chris Evans, the shadow Minister for Defence Procurement, questioned why they would be built partially by a Spanish firm, when more jobs could have been secured if the vessels were wholly built within the UK. He argued Labour's approach would be to "build British by default."⁸³ Dave Doogan, the SNP defence procurement spokesperson, similarly questioned why the Government awarded the contract to a Spanish rather than UK firm.⁸⁴

Vice Admiral Marshall, Director General (Ships), Defence Equipment & Support, told the Scottish Affairs Committee that he was instructed by the Defence Secretary to "maximise social value" with the FSS competition by maximising UK content and the building and integration of the whole ship in the UK. He pointed to the number of graduates and apprentices employed on the build, and the capital investment of £77 million into facilities.⁸⁵

The Chair of the Defence Committee has written to the Defence Secretary about selection of Team Resolute as the preferred bidder. Tobias Ellwood said the Committee "is concerned about the impact this decision will have on the UK's shipbuilding industry." He asked 16 questions about Team Resolute's bid and requested a response by 16 January 2023.⁸⁶

Social value

The MOD applies the Government's Social Value criteria to contracts covered by the Defence and Security Public Contracts Regulations. Social value considers social, economic and environmental impacts of Government projects and programmes.

The MOD requires a minimum 10% social value weighting to be applied to evaluations in new competitions. However, for MOD shipbuilding competitions, a minimum 20% weighting for social value will be applied.⁸⁷

Vice Admiral Marshall told the Scottish Affairs Committee that they put a heavy premium on social value in the contracting phase for the Type 31 and fleet solid support ships.⁸⁸

⁸² [Oral evidence: Defence in Scotland: Military shipbuilding](#), 6 December 2022, HC 81 2022-23, q177

⁸³ [HC Deb 18 November 2022 c960](#)

⁸⁴ [HC Deb 12 December 2022 c713](#)

⁸⁵ [Oral evidence: Defence in Scotland: Military shipbuilding](#), 6 December 2022, HC 81 2022-23, q187

⁸⁶ [Letter dated 6th December from Chairman to Secretary of State for Defence regarding concerns on the awarding of Fleet Solid Support \(FSS\) ship contract to Team Resolute](#), Defence Committee, 8 December 2022

⁸⁷ [Refresh to the national shipbuilding strategy](#), CP 605, Ministry of Defence, 10 March 2022

⁸⁸ [Oral evidence: Defence in Scotland: Military shipbuilding](#), 6 December 2022, HC 81 2022-23, q168

A general overview of defence procurement can be found in [defence procurement reform](#), CBP 9566, 10 June 2022.

3.2 The defence equipment plan

The Ministry of Defence publishes on an annual basis a rolling ten-year equipment plan. This sets out its forecast spending on equipment and support for that period.

Navy Command [plans to spend £41.1 billion](#) on equipment and support in the ten-year period 2022 to 2032. This includes spending on both new and existing equipment, and support costs. The plan says this includes the procurement of three FSS, a multi-role ocean surveillance capability, multi-role support ships and Type 26, Type 31 and Type 32 frigates.⁸⁹

However, the National Audit Office (NAO), in its assessment of the plan, says it [does not include the Type 32 frigates and multi-role support ships programmes](#). The NAO says that in July 2022, Navy Command withdrew its plans for both programmes because of concerns about unaffordability. The NAO also expresses concern about the lack of funding allocated to the Type 83 destroyer programme. The NAO says that given it is expected to replace the Type 45 between 2035 and 2038, it is unlikely that it will not need funding before 2032.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ [Defence equipment plan 2022 to 2032](#), Ministry of Defence, 29 November 2022

⁹⁰ [The Equipment Plan 2022 to 2032](#), National Audit Office, HC 907 2022-23, 29 November 2022, figure 6

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Parliamentary scrutiny

Members have raised naval shipbuilding and individual programmes in the Commons via debates, oral and written questions. The National Audit Office and the Defence, Public Accounts and Scottish Affairs Committees have also reported on aspects of surface fleet procurement over the last decade.

Debates

Below is a selection of debates on these topics. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list.

- [Fleet solid support ships](#), 18 November 2022 722 cc959-965
- [UK shipbuilding](#), 3 March 2022, HC 709 cc1266-1274
- [National shipbuilding strategy](#), 11 July 2019, 663 cc226-8WH
- [Carrier strike strategy](#), 28 February 2019, 655 cc212-261WH
- [Defence industry and shipbuilding](#), 11 July 2018, 644 cc1027-1076
- [Shipbuilding strategy](#), 23 January 2018, 635 cc76-101WH
- [National shipbuilding strategy](#), 8 February 2017, 621 cc152-177WH
- [Type 26 frigates: Clyde](#), 18 October 2016, 615 cc303-318WH

National Audit Office

The National Audit Office has examined naval capabilities in both dedicated reports and in annual reports on the defence equipment plan (and before that in major projects reports).

- [Carrier strike: preparing for deployment](#), 26 June 2020, HC 374 2019-21
- [Investigation into equipment cannibalisation in the Royal Navy](#), 1 November 2017, HC 525 2017-19
- [Carrier strike: the 2012 revision decision](#), 10 May 2013, HC 63 2013-14
- [Carrier strike: Supplemental report](#), 29 November 2011, HC 1657 2010-12
- [Carrier strike](#), 7 July 2011, HC 1092 2010-12

Public Accounts Committee

- [Delivering carrier strike](#), 13 November 2020, HC 684 2019-21
- [Carrier strike: the 2012 revision decision](#), 3 September 2013, HC 113 2013-14
- [Providing the UK's carrier strike capability](#), 29 November 2011, HC 1427 2010-12
- [Ministry of Defence: Type 45 Destroyer](#) (PDF), 23 June 2009, HC 372 2008-09

Defence Committee

- [We're going to need a bigger Navy](#), 14 December 2021, HC 168 2021-22
- [Future Anti-Ship Missile Systems: Joint inquiry with the Assemblée nationale's Standing Committee on National Defence and the Armed Forces](#) (PDF), 12 December 2018, HC 1071 2017-19
- [Sunset for the Royal Marines? The Royal Marines and UK amphibious capability](#) (PDF), 4 February 2018, HC 622 2017-19
- [Restoring the fleet: naval procurement and the national shipbuilding strategy](#) (PDF), 21 November 2016, HC 221 2016-17
- Future carrier and joint combat aircraft programmes, December 2005, HC 554 2005-06

Scottish Affairs Committee

- [Defence in Scotland: military landscape](#), Scottish Affairs Committee, 24 June 2022, HC 82 2022-23
- [The Referendum on Separation for Scotland: Separation shuts shipyards](#) (PDF), 20 January 2013, HC 892 2012-13

Commons Library papers

The Commons Library has published several papers on naval shipbuilding:

- [Prime Minister announces new Royal Navy ship: What is the Type 32 frigate?](#), Insight, 23 November 2022
- [Naval shipbuilding: February 2020 update](#), CBP 8807, 5 February 2020
- [Naval shipbuilding: September 2019 update](#), CBP 8665, 19 September 2019

- [The national shipbuilding strategy](#), DP-2019-0186, 9 July 2019
- [The Royal Navy, Brexit and UK fisheries](#), Insight, 5 February 2019
- [Fleet solid support ships](#), CBP 8351, 6 July 2018
- [The national shipbuilding strategy: January 2018 update](#), CBP 8193, 9 January 2018
- [The Royal Navy's new frigates and the national shipbuilding strategy: February 2017 update](#), CBP 7737, 2 February 2017

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