

Have you got what it takes?

**Working with the National Police Air Service (NPAS)
and working together to provide air support**

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Important facts

The Government consultation paper 'Policing in the 21st Century', published in July 2010, noted that some policing functions can most sensibly be organised nationally and gave the example of a National Police Air Service (NPAS).

The Police (Collaboration: Specified Function) Order 2012, which came into force on 29 June, states that police air support must be provided jointly using a single collaboration agreement for the police areas in England and Wales.

The NPAS aims to reorganise the police air-support units to provide a more consistent service at reduced cost through collaboration (working together) between the 43 forces in England and Wales and their policing bodies. As part of the project an air-support collaboration agreement is being developed. In future this agreement will be between forces and police and crime commissioners (PCCs).

Proposals for the NPAS have the full support of chief constables, and, once it is fully in place, the savings of £15 million a year will help to protect frontline policing. The full savings depend on all authorities and forces working together to provide air support.

Background

Currently, forces either have their own air support or work in small collaborations with other forces. Up till now aircraft, mainly helicopters, have been restricted to operating in their own force area. And, when aircraft are undergoing maintenance, there is no air support available for some forces. A national air service will offer a service 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In June 2009 the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) commissioned a report on the National Police Air Operations Strategy. The report recommended a national approach, which could result in substantial savings by reducing the number of aircraft and providing better coverage of England and Wales from a smaller number of bases.

The project team have worked closely with police forces to develop proposals for NPAS and have involved police authorities on the governance and funding proposals.

NPAS is planned to start in October 2012, with groups of forces moving over time into the full service. Some reorganisation of aircraft and bases in line with NPAS has already begun.

To meet the requirements of the Police (Collaboration: Specified Function) Order 2012 (see below) we expect NPAS to be governed by a collaboration agreement under section 22A of the Police Act 1996, and to have a lead force. A draft collaboration agreement was sent round to police forces, police authorities and the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime on 30 March 2012. This is now being revised in the light of their comments. West Yorkshire Police Authority has conditionally agreed to West Yorkshire Police acting as the lead force. As lead force, West Yorkshire Police would employ all NPAS staff and own the NPAS assets (such as aircraft). It would manage NPAS on behalf of the service and receive payments from the rest of the service to cover the running costs. The set-up costs of NPAS until the end of 2014-15 will come from the police capital grant.

More information

The Police (Collaboration: Specified Function) Order 2012

The Government consulted the following policing partners about the proposed order to bring about collaboration on air support:

- **ACPO;**
- **the Association of Police Authorities (APA);**
- **the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC); and**
- **HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).**

No organisation was directly opposed to the order, but some suggested it was happening too soon, and some expressed concerns about how the NPAS would be managed, and about the precise costs and savings. The Government takes the view that the best way to deal with those concerns is by carrying out a detailed negotiation of a collaboration agreement by all forces, authorities and MOPAC. The collaboration order will focus all forces, authorities and MOPAC on reaching an agreed set of terms and conditions, and governance arrangements. In doing so they will have to take account of the benefits of collaboration to other forces and authorities, not just the benefits to their own force, as set out in the Police Act 1996 (as amended by the Police Reform and Social Responsibility Act 2011).

Overall changes to air support

The plan is to reduce the number of police helicopters operating across England and Wales from 33 to 27. Three of the 27 will be reserves. Their role will be to provide cover for periods when aircraft are not available, for example, when undergoing planned maintenance.

The number of bases used to provide air support is planned to fall from 30 to 22, but they will be based where they can offer air support to the whole country. This will mean that 97% of the population will still be within 20 minutes' flying time.

How will service to the public be affected?

In some places aircraft response times may be longer than they are now, but 97% of the population of England and Wales will still be within 20 minutes' flying time. NPAS aims to get round artificial force boundaries and offer more flexibility in using aircraft. NPAS will provide a 24-hour service seven days a week, whereas, at the moment, many air-support units operate fewer hours. NPAS will also have enough aircraft to cover for periods of aircraft maintenance.

Is the Government using this collaboration order as a way of centralising the police or merging forces?

No. Some policing functions can most sensibly be organised nationally. The National Police Air Service is a police service-led project stemming from a review of air operations that recommended a national approach that would create savings of up to £15 million a year once set up. This is about value for money and helping the police to work more effectively and efficiently, while maintaining, and in some cases improving, the police air service.