



Ministry of Defence

Air Command Secretariat
Spitfire Block
Headquarters Air Command
Royal Air Force
High Wycombe
Buckinghamshire
HP14 4UE

Ref. 2016/9493

[REDACTED]

3 November 2016

Dear [REDACTED],

Thank you for your e-mail of 12 October 2016 asking about RAF Quick Reaction Alert (QRA) launches and "calls to cockpit". You requested the following information:

- 1) *How many times has an RAF Quick Reaction Alert been launched so far this year (until the date of your response to this request).*
- 2) *How many times have QRA been launched for each year prior to this year, dating back to 1/1/2005. For each QRA, please state whether it was in response to Russian military aircraft. Please also state whether it was in response to other aircraft. In relation to others, please state the nationality of the other aircraft and also whether it was a military or civilian aircraft.*
- 5) *How many times have QRA been "called to cockpit" in the each of the same years including the current year up to the date of your response to this request. In relation to "called to cockpit" events, please state whether this was in response to Russian military aircraft or in response to others. In the case of others, please state the nationality of the other aircraft and whether it was military or civilian.*
- 7) *Please state in broad terms what is involved in a QRA and a "called to cockpit event" and the difference between them. Does a pilot in a "called to cockpit" event take off?*

I am treating your correspondence as a request for information under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOIA). We have now completed a search of our paper and electronic records for the information you requested and I can confirm that some information within the scope of your request is held.

Details of the number of days on which aircraft from the RAF's QRA were launched since 2005 is shown at Annex A. Details of the number of days on which QRA aircrew were "called to cockpit" are provided at Annex B. Statistics for 2005 and 2006 "calls to cockpit" are not held.

A “*call to cockpit*” is an occasion when the aircrew are put on a state of heightened readiness that they may need to launch their aircraft and sit in the cockpit awaiting the order to take off. A “*call to cockpit*” ceases when the aircrew are either stood down or actually launch. The figures for “*call to cockpit*” exclude actual launches. QRA launches, which means the aircraft actually took off, were to determine the identification of any aircraft approaching, or in, NATO monitored or national airspace without prior approval or not having identified themselves and which could not be identified by any other means.

We do hold recorded information on the number and nature of Quick Reaction (QRA) incidents. Section 26(1)a of the FOI Act provides that we should withhold information which would be likely to prejudice the defence of the British Isles or any Colony. Section 26(1) b of the Act provides that we should withhold information which would be likely to prejudice the capability, effectiveness or security of relevant forces. The Act requires that we have to carry out a public interest (PI) in this respect to show that the reasons for withholding the information outweigh the reasons for releasing the information.

Public Interest (PI) factors in favour of disclosing the information requested:

- The public interest in ensuring that the UK is protected from airborne threats and that the resources invested in QRA is properly employed.
- To provide a detailed measure of the level of activity in the air policing area for which we have responsibility.
- To promote an understanding of the RAF’s ability to respond efficiently, effectively and appropriately to potential threats in UK airspace.

Public Interest (PI) factors against disclosing the information requested:

- If precise or comprehensive information on the number of QRA launches and “*calls to cockpit*”, any potential aggressor or terrorist organisation wishing to use aircraft as a means to attack the UK could extrapolate this information if they were probing our defences. It would consequently provide details of which probing flights triggered a QRA reaction.
- This in turn could give the criteria that provoke Quick Reaction Alerts and indicate the effectiveness of our QRA capability.

Because deterrence is a principal function of QRA and QRA is in turn an integral part of the air defence of the UK, the disclosure of information that might compromise the QRA deterrent capability, which is an ongoing armed operational capability, would also be a disclosure prejudicial to the defence of the UK. A limited disclosure of the requirement to launch Quick Reaction Alert would provide a reasonable level of overall understanding of the level of QRA activity. As a limited amount of information has been released for some incidents as examples of how the RAF is able to respond to this kind of incident, the public interest in further disclosure of detailed incident details is therefore limited. There remains a very strong public interest in preserving the RAF’s ability to defend the UK through the effectiveness of its air defences and to maintain its full deterrence value.

I conclude that the balance of the public interest for providing full details of the number of QRA launches and “*calls to cockpit*” is firmly in favour of maintaining the exemption under S.26(1)(a)&(b) and thus of withholding the information.

If you are not satisfied with this response or you wish to complain about any aspect of the handling of your request, then you should contact me in the first instance. If informal resolution is not possible and you are still dissatisfied then you may apply for an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, 2nd Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review must be made within 40 working days of the date on which the attempt to reach informal resolution has come to an end.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may take your complaint to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website, <http://www.ico.gov.uk>.

Yours sincerely



Secretariat 3a1
Air Command

Year	No. of days QRA was launched	In response to Russian military aircraft	In response to others
2005	11	4	7
2006	8	1	7
2007	24	19	5
2008	16	11	5
2009	14	11	3
2010	11	7	4
2011	20	10	10
2012	21	9	12
2013	17	8	9
2014	20*	8	13
2015	12	8	4
2016**	7	2	5

* On 1 day QRA launched against both Russian and other aircraft

** 1 January to 30 September 2016 inclusive

Year	No. of days “called to cockpit”
2005	N/A
2006	N/A
2007	73*
2008	91
2009	42
2010	49
2011	85
2012	85
2013	137
2014	117
2015	83
2016**	81

* Excludes January-April 2007 which is not held

** 1 January – 30 September 2016 inclusive