



Ministry of Defence

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

Ref. 2018/4933



27 April 2018

Dear

Thank you for your e-mail of 10 April 2018 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 Force aircraft taken off so far this calendar year in response to a QRA (until the date of your response to this request)? For each QRA, please state whether it was in response to Russian military aircraft or in response to other aircraft. Please break down each of these QRAs by date. Please provide the number and type of UK and Russian aircraft involved.

2) How many times did RAF Quick Reaction Alerts take off in the following years: 2017 and 2016? Please state whether it was in response to Russian military aircraft or in response to other aircraft.

2) How many times have QRF crews been "called to cockpit" in the same periods as in Q1 and Q2? Please state whether this was in response to a Russian or other aircraft and where possible provide the number and type of Russian aircraft involved."

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 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 and the number of days on which QRA aircrew were "called to cockpit" is shown at Annex A.

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 (PIT) 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 have any queries regarding the content of this letter, please contact this office in the first instance.

If you wish to complain about the handling of your request, or the content of this response, you can request an independent internal review by contacting the Information Rights Compliance team, Ground Floor, MOD Main Building, Whitehall, SW1A 2HB (e-mail CIO-FOI-IR@mod.uk). Please note that any request for an internal review should be made within 40 working days of the date of this response.

If you remain dissatisfied following an internal review, you may raise your complaint directly to the Information Commissioner under the provisions of Section 50 of the Freedom of Information Act. Please note that the Information Commissioner will not normally investigate your case until the MOD internal review process has been completed. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at: Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF. Further details of the role and powers of the Information Commissioner can be found on the Commissioner's website at <https://ico.org.uk/>.

Yours sincerely



Secretariat 3a1
Air Command

Number of days QRA was launched.

Year	No. of days QRA was launched	In response to Russian military aircraft	In response to others
2016	12	5	7
2017	6	3	3
2018*	2	1	1

* 1 January to 31 March 2018

Number of days aircrew were “called to cockpit”.

Year	No. of days “called to cockpit”
2016	120
2017	138
2018*	25

* 1 January to 31 March 2018