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UK Conducts First Trial of Unmanned Police Helicopter to Bolster Air Support

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The United Kingdom has undertaken its first test of an unmanned police helicopter, marking a potential shift in how air support operations are conducted by law enforcement. The trial is part of a broader effort to modernize air capabilities with a focus on efficiency, cost reduction, and environmental sustainability.

The aircraft being tested, the Schiebel Camcopter S-100, is larger than conventional drones and boasts extended flight capabilities. Designed to fly for up to 12 hours, it is equipped with the same high-powered infrared cameras used in manned police helicopters. According to the National Police Air Service (NPAS), this unmanned aerial system (UAS) is not expected to replace crewed helicopters but will complement the existing fleet, particularly for extended surveillance and search operations.

David Walters, NPAS Head of Futures and Innovation, stated that the unmanned helicopter could be a game-changer for long-duration missions. “This capability in the future will be able to stay on task anywhere between eight and 12 hours,” he said. He noted that current manned aircraft typically remain airborne for only two to six hours.

Night-time test flights are currently being conducted over the Bristol Channel during overnight hours. The program, funded by the Home Office and overseen by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) along with National Air Traffic Services (NATS), forms part of a wider initiative that includes trials of drone deliveries and infrastructure inspections.

The unmanned aircraft is operated remotely by a pilot on the ground, accompanied by a police officer managing the camera systems. PC Matt Leeding, an NPAS Tactical Flight Officer, told BBC News that the technology maintains continuity with existing procedures. “My job doesn’t change. All we’re doing is embracing the new technology, the same service, using the same equipment, just on a slightly different platform,” he said.

Walters noted that approximately 30 percent of NPAS callouts involve searching for missing persons, a task the unmanned aircraft is particularly well-suited for. “We get calls daily with a variety of different cases, from missing people to pursuits, and it’s very costly to deploy our helicopters on an hourly basis,” he explained. The unmanned helicopter is expected to reduce emissions by up to 90 percent per hour compared to crewed aircraft and produce less noise, which could result in fewer public complaints.

Equipped with forward-facing cameras and onboard radar to detect other aircraft, the UAS enhances operational safety and flexibility. While this is the first time such an aircraft is being flown over residential areas in the UK, similar systems are already in use by HM Coastguard and the Royal Navy for search and reconnaissance missions.

According to Sophie O’Sullivan of the CAA, the test results will help determine how unmanned aircraft can be safely integrated into British airspace. “We’re also working with healthcare providers to see what we can do. We’re working with companies like Network Rail to look at opportunities around infrastructure surveillance,” she added.

Although testing is scheduled to continue through October, it is expected that further trials and regulatory assessments will be needed before the unmanned helicopter becomes a permanent part of NPAS operations.