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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 modernise air capabilities with a focus on efficiency, cost reduction, and environmental sustainability.

The remotely-piloted aircraft, known as the Schiebel Camcopter S-100, is significantly larger than typical drones used by police forces and is equipped to remain airborne for up to 12 hours. The aircraft features a high-powered infrared camera similar to those found in standard police helicopters, enabling it to carry out surveillance, search missions, and support in the location of missing persons.

The National Police Air Service (NPAS), which operates air support for police forces across England and Wales, confirmed that the unmanned aircraft is not intended to replace existing crewed helicopters. Instead, it is designed to complement the current fleet, offering extended flight times with reduced operational costs. David Walters, NPAS head of futures and innovation, explained that the system could stay on task for anywhere between eight and twelve hours, compared to the two to six hours typical of manned helicopters.

Around 30 percent of NPAS deployments involve searching for missing people, a task where long-duration flight is especially valuable. The unmanned system provides an alternative to costly crewed flights, which are better suited for high-speed pursuits or complex operations requiring personnel on board. According to Mr Walters, this new approach could lead to a 90 percent reduction in emissions per flight hour, significantly improving environmental performance without compromising effectiveness.

The aircraft is operated from a ground station by a trained pilot, with a police officer managing the onboard surveillance systems. PC Matt Leeding, an NPAS Tactical Flight Officer, noted that the tools and procedures remain largely the same as with a traditional aircraft. “All we’re doing is embracing the new technology—the same service, using the same equipment, just on a slightly different platform,” he told BBC News.

Test flights are currently being conducted over the Bristol Channel during night-time hours. The programme, 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 CAA’s Sophie O’Sullivan emphasised the importance of the research, noting the role unmanned aircraft could play in future services such as healthcare logistics and rail surveillance. The unmanned helicopter trial is particularly noteworthy as it is the first to operate over residential areas, representing a step forward in integrating unmanned aerial systems (UAS) into everyday policing.

While the current phase of testing is expected to continue through October, officials have indicated that several more years of trials and evaluation will be necessary before such systems are fully operational within the NPAS fleet. Remotely-piloted aircraft are already used by HM Coastguard and the Royal Navy, but their deployment in domestic policing presents new considerations for regulation, privacy, and public trust.

As the use of advanced technology continues to evolve within public safety, the unmanned helicopter offers a glimpse into a future where police forces may rely more

heavily on quieter, more efficient, and environmentally responsible aerial support.