

UK Accelerates ‘Loyal Wingman’ Drone Development

July 31, 2025

— Categories: Defence & Security



The United Kingdom’s Ministry of Defence (MoD) has entered the second phase of its Autonomous Collaborative Platform (ACP) programme, underscoring its commitment to integrating uncrewed ‘loyal wingman’ aircraft into the Royal Air Force’s (RAF) future capabilities. The initiative aims to bolster operational flexibility and strengthen air power in an evolving global defence landscape.

The latest phase, known as ACP Tranche 2, follows the release of a Prior Information Notice (PIN) on 29 July 2025 by Defence Equipment and Support (DE&S). The PIN calls for industry input on developing uncrewed systems intended to operate alongside current fourth-generation (e.g. Eurofighter Typhoon), fifth-generation (e.g. Lockheed Martin F-35), and future combat aircraft. A key element of Tranche 2 is the requirement for these Autonomous Collaborative Platforms to operate from UK aircraft carriers, extending uncrewed combat capabilities into the naval domain.

The broader vision for these systems is outlined in the RAF's Autonomous Collaborative Platforms Strategy, published in March 2024. This strategy outlines the integration of ACPs into the Future Combat Air System (FCAS) and the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP). 'Loyal wingmen' are envisioned as cost-effective, potentially expendable assets capable of carrying out critical tasks such as electronic warfare (EW), surveillance, and precision strike missions. Their deployment is expected to reduce the exposure of human pilots to high-risk environments and effectively increase the combat mass of air formations. The initial delivery window for Tranche 2 is projected between April 2027 and April 2029, with an estimated contract value of up to £20 million.

This renewed focus on autonomous systems marks a pragmatic evolution in the UK's defence procurement. While previous efforts, such as Project Mosquito under the Lightweight Affordable Novel Combat Aircraft (LANCA) concept, were discontinued in 2022, the lessons learned are informing ACP Tranche 2. By prioritising the development and integration of advanced uncrewed aircraft, the UK aims to preserve its technological edge and ensure its forces are prepared for future conflicts, where human-machine teaming is expected to play a decisive role. The

emphasis remains on developing these capabilities responsibly, with appropriate human oversight in their operation.