

Aging RFA Argus Declared Unsafe to Sail, Exposing Gaps in Naval Support Fleet

July 28, 2025

— Categories: Defence & Security



The Royal Fleet Auxiliary's primary support vessel, RFA Argus, has been declared unsafe to sail and remains docked in Portsmouth, raising fresh concerns over the Royal Navy's operational readiness and medical support capability.

At 45 years old, RFA Argus is the UK's only active vessel capable of delivering dedicated casualty receiving services and amphibious support. Recent inspections by the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and Lloyd's Register uncovered serious defects, resulting in the ship being classed as unsafe to operate at sea. Until repairs are completed, Argus will remain confined to port.

The ship had recently returned from a scheduled maintenance period in Falmouth and had begun trials and training exercises. Members of Parliament were given a tour of the vessel earlier this year, in what was intended to mark a return to active service.

With RFA Lyme Bay, her sister ship, also undergoing maintenance at the A&P Tyne shipyard, the UK currently has no operational amphibious support vessels. The grounding of Argus leaves the Royal Navy with a critical gap in both medical evacuation capacity and amphibious operations at a time when global commitments continue to grow.

Defence analysts have warned that the episode highlights a long-standing issue within the Royal Fleet Auxiliary: an ageing fleet stretched too thin. Operational availability has been declining, and the pressure on remaining vessels has increased. The situation is made worse by ongoing personnel shortages and retention challenges, both in the RFA and wider Royal Navy.

Argus currently holds a special designation for both aviation training and medical support. Yet even movements within Portsmouth Harbour now require special dispensation, underscoring the ship's deteriorating condition.

The Multi-Role Support Ship (MRSS) programme, intended to replace ageing vessels like Argus, is not expected to deliver new ships until the early 2030s. In the interim, the Royal Navy faces limited options for restoring capacity.

The Ministry of Defence has yet to release a timetable for repairs or outline how it intends to plug the operational gap. Questions are also mounting in Parliament over whether contingency measures, such as shore-based medical facilities or reliance on allied support, are realistic alternatives in high-risk deployments.

Until RFA Argus is restored to seaworthy condition, the UK's ability to deliver critical medical and amphibious support at sea remains severely constrained. The incident has become a stark example of the cost of delayed modernisation and underinvestment in essential naval infrastructure.