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## RAF Keeps Wedgetail Aircraft Testing and Support Within the UK

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The Royal Air Force has confirmed that testing and support for its new Boeing E-7 Wedgetail aircraft will remain based in the UK, as preparations continue for the fleet's entry into service. The move underlines the UK's commitment to supporting the aircraft domestically, from initial flight trials to long-term operational readiness.

In a significant milestone, the first RAF Wedgetail, designated WT001, completed a successful check flight from Birmingham Airport in September 2024. The aircraft was modified on-site by STS Aviation Services, with more than 100 engineers and technicians involved in adapting the airframe for UK specifications. Once operational, the Wedgetail will provide the RAF with advanced airborne early warning and command-and-control capabilities.

The UK is set to receive three E-7 aircraft, a scaled-back order from the original plan of five. All three will be based at RAF Lossiemouth in Scotland, where new infrastructure, including maintenance facilities and support buildings, has been developed to support the incoming fleet. The aircraft are expected to begin frontline service in 2025.

Testing efforts have included international cooperation with Australia and the United States. RAF crews and engineers have taken part in joint trials at an Air Force Base in California, participating in air-to-air refuelling operations with U.S. and Australian aircraft. These exercises have helped ensure the UK fleet will be fully interoperable with its key allies.

Despite the progress, the decision to proceed with only three Wedgetails has raised concerns. The new fleet is significantly smaller than the retired E-3D Sentry aircraft it replaces, prompting questions over long-term coverage and resilience, especially during periods of maintenance or unforeseen downtime.

Nonetheless, keeping the majority of development and support work within the UK highlights the government's focus on building domestic capability. From aircraft modification in Birmingham to future operations in Scotland, the RAF is working to ensure that the E-7 programme is

delivered and maintained with homegrown expertise. The Wedgetail is set to play a crucial role in the UK's future surveillance and air defence strategy.