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Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems “Drones” – Public Briefing

Briefing No. 18



September 2024



Summary

The Authority previously published a Factsheet covering this topic in October 2021. This document provides an updated overview of drones and their use in policing. It also provides a summary of the oversight and scrutiny of Police Scotland's use of drones provided by the Scottish Police Authority.

What are drones?

Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems, also known as drones, are small aircrafts with a camera onboard that are piloted from the ground via remote control. This provides officers with a live aerial view of the immediate area where they are deployed.

The use of drones is controlled and authorised by the Civil Aviation Authority. Only specially trained officers are qualified to pilot drones. At the time of writing, Police Scotland have eight trained officers, with a requirement for there to be two officers present when drones are in use.

Police Scotland currently has 12 drones, with ten of these being available for use operationally and for training and two specifically for training. All the drones are manufactured by DJI and include the M300, M30t, Mini 2 and Phantom 4. The number of drones was increased by five in 2023 following [capital investment](#) to allow greater access to drones through new hubs in the east and north command areas.

Police Scotland's use of drones

Drones have been used operationally by Police Scotland's Air Support Unit since 2019 and were initially based in [Aberdeen, Inverness and Glasgow](#). Police officers using a drone must be in uniform, near a marked police vehicle and the drone must stay within their sight.

If the drone is being operated in a busy environment, officers will cordon off an area to operate the drone from. Where possible and when appropriate, Police Scotland will also notify the public and local community when there is a planned deployment of drones.

Drones can be used to support a variety of policing operations including missing person searches, major incidents and events, armed policing and public order operations as well as fire investigation and crime scene analysis.

[Police Scotland note](#) that using drones provides a more flexible and environmentally sustainable approach to support policing operations. In addition, drones are found to be [low cost, visible and effective assets](#).

Whilst drones provide investigative advantages to police operations, they may impact the public. Therefore, Police Scotland abide by a [Code of Practice](#) when using drones. Published in 2021, key aspects of this Code include:

- Drones are only used within the visual line of sight of officers;
- Drones are not used in a covert manner;
- Any drone activity, including the recording and retention of images, must comply with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018.

To ensure that Police Scotland's use of drones is ethical and proportionate, an Equality and Human Rights Impact Assessment (EqHRIA) and a Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) [have been completed](#). In the Code of Practice, Police Scotland commit to reviewing both the EqHRIA and DPIA annually.

Police Scotland's use of drones cont.

Police Scotland drones will only record images when it is [proportionate, legal and necessary](#). Any evidential imagery will be passed to the reporting officer and may ultimately be shared with the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal's Service. Images are not routinely captured when drones are deployed in a missing person investigation.

Across the period of July – September 2024, Police Scotland have deployed drones on 12 occasions across Scotland. Police Scotland Air Support Unit follow strict guidelines issued by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) who are the governing body for all drone use within the United Kingdom.

The use of drones in policing – England and Wales

Across the UK, nearly [400 drones](#) are used by police services. In September 2023, the Biometrics and Surveillance Camera Commissioner for England and Wales [published an overview](#) of the use of drones by police. Of the police forces asked for further information of their use of drones, 36 forces responded. Three of these forces reported that they did not operate drones.

Following analysis of responses, the Commissioner called for police to be provided with guidance on how drones should be used to ensure consistency. The Commissioner also suggested arrangements for the external scrutiny and ethical oversight of the use of drones be established.

Future Developments

The National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) have established a [Beyond Visual Line of Sight \(BVLOS\) Pathway Programme](#). The vision of this programme is to enable forces and partners to deliver drone capabilities to keep the public safe. Objectives of this Programme include establishing a framework for scrutiny and oversight for police drones across the UK, and to develop a pathway to achieve a sustainable BVLOS capability.

A workstream within this Programme is the 'Drone as a First Responder' workstream. This would see drones promptly deployed to incidents in urban areas, with the aim of enhancing both officer and public safety.

Police Scotland [has committed](#) to work with the CAA and partners to explore supporting BVLOS capabilities. Police Scotland often works in partnership with police forces in England and Wales.



Oversight and assurance

The Authority produced the first factsheet on Police Scotland's use of drones in [October 2021](#).

The Authority oversees Police Scotland's use of drones at the Policing Performance Committee, through the examination of publicly available operational use and performance reports. The Authority's focus is on compliance with the Code of Practice, the benefit to the public and return on the investment in new technology. Police Scotland regularly [report data to the Committee](#) on the deployment of drones as part of policing activities.

An important milestone is the recent Draft Police Scotland [Air Support Strategy](#), presented to the Authority in June 2024. As part of this paper, Police Scotland have proposed the development of 'drone hubs', to provide more localised support and to better cover Scotland as a whole. This will require Police Scotland to analyse its demand and optimise capabilities, whilst also continuing to understand evolving technology in this space.

As Police Scotland seek to implement commitments in the Air Support Strategy, the Authority will continue to provide assurances to the public. This would include ensuring that any adoption of new technology will adhere to the [Rights Based Pathway](#).

Furthermore, as Police Scotland undertakes the development of the Revised Model of Policing, the Authority will engage with Police Scotland to understand how evolving public safety needs and demand will be considered in this work.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Drones are a part of the wider set of tools available to modern policing and are used throughout the UK by police forces, including Police Scotland. They can be used in a range of policing operations.

However, it is important for Police Scotland to be transparent and proportionate in the use of drones to provide the public with assurance. To provide additional assurance to the public, the Authority oversees the use of drones by Police Scotland through its governance processes.

Keeping up to date

To keep up to date with our work, please keep an eye on the Scottish Police Authority's [website](#) where you can find papers and watch livestream committee discussions, and follow us on Twitter/X:

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Purpose of these Public Briefings

The Strategic Police Plan commits to the provision of Policing for a safe, protected and resilient Scotland. This requires designing and maintaining services which meet rising and evolving demands in a constantly changing environment.

To meet these demands, now and in the future, Scotland's police service must adapt and proportionately adopt the necessary technologies which will enable them to protect the safety and wellbeing of our communities (as outlined in the Policing Principles - Section 32 of Police and Fire Reform Act 2012). These public briefings also contribute to the Authority's statutory function to keep under review the policing of Scotland.

This series of public focused and user-friendly public briefings has been developed to provide an overview of the benefits of emerging technology and upcoming developments within policing, the policies that will govern them, and the ethical, privacy and human rights implications.