

Announcing a New Initiative: UK Drone Watch

By [Chris Cole](#)

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Since 2010, Drone Wars UK has been shining a spotlight on the military's use of drones and the impact on peace and security around the globe. Now, both in the US and in Europe, large military-grade drones which fly 'beyond visual line of sight' (BVLOS) are moving from the battlefield to the domestic front.

Here in the UK, the government is rapidly pushing ahead with plans to enable large unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to fly freely within UK airspace as part of its [Airspace Modernisation Strategy](#). These plans are keenly supported by the growing drone industry and the Ministry of Defence (MoD) who are taking a significant lead in this area with plans, for example, to fly the latest version of the Predator drone – which the MoD is calling 'Protector' – in UK airspace. Ministers argue that the planned changes present [exciting opportunities for business](#) to create high-tech jobs and to boost the economy across the UK. While these plans may well be a boon for some, it is vital that the negative aspects of 'beyond visual line of sight' (BVLOS) drone use within the UK are examined, and if such flights are to go ahead, privacy and safety protections are factored in from the start.

It should be noted that there are no plans for primary legislation to implement these changes which would give an opportunity to subject these changes to democratic scrutiny via parliamentary debate. Instead a quango, the [Airspace Change Organising Group \(ACOG\)](#), has been established by the Department for Transport (DfT) and Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), to coordinate and implement government plans in this area. We believe it is vital that this democratic deficit is publicised and challenged and the public have their say in controlling drones in UK skies.

Over the past few months, we have seen [military drones deployed at the UK border](#) to deter refugees crossing the channel, the RAF advancing plans to [fly the 'Protector' drone in the UK](#), UK [coastguard](#) and [police assessing large Israeli drones](#) for operations and [other drone test programmes advanced under the COVID crisis](#).

Alongside our continuing focus on the military use of drones, we will now have a related programme examining the opening of UK skies to large BVLOS drones and in particular their use for security and surveillance purposes within the UK.

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