



AIR CADET CUTS WILL SEE MORE THAN HALF OF SQUADRONS AXED

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Cuts are likely to cause a fall in young recruits as many will now have to travel hours across the country to get flying practice, air campaigners warn.

Thousands of young Air Cadets will find it more difficult to gain valuable flying experience after a “ludicrous” and “short-sighted” decision to disband more than half their volunteer glider squadrons it is claimed.

Many of the next generation of Britain’s military and civilian pilots will now have to travel hours across the country to get their first taste of flying because the MoD is trying to save “peanuts”.

The cuts are likely to cause a fall in young recruits signing up for an organisation that traditionally proves a springboard for young men and women wanting to join the RAF and aerospace industry, air leaders warn.

A total of 14 of 26 volunteer glider squadrons are being disbanded in an overhaul of cadet flying designed to get the organisation’s aircraft airborne again after gliders have been grounded for two years over safety fears.

The RAF denies cadets will have fewer chances to fly, or the changes are simply cost-cutting, and says it will buy more powered training planes. The surviving glider squadrons will be enlarged and have new rooms for cadets to stay overnight and more simulators.

“We have the best pilots in the world, but it’s the ability to fly that sets them apart. The RAF needs to be able to continue to draw on the widest possible pool.”

Sir Gerald Howarth MP

But glider volunteers have warned it will be impossible to give cadets the same amount of flying under changes which will see the overall glider fleet fall from 146 to 88.

Andrew Brookes, a former RAF officer and chief executive of the Air League lobby group for British aviation, said the cuts were “short-sighted, just to save peanuts”.

Carol Vorderman

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Carol Vorderman is an ambassador for the Air Cadets Photo: Rui Vieira/REX/Shutterstock

He said: “It’s an air training corps, not a ground training corps, and to that extent you have to get people airborne. If you take a lot of that away, you undermine the whole point.”

Around 40,000 young people are Air Cadets and a third of RAF officers and nearly a fifth of airmen have passed through their ranks. Former cadets include Air Chief Marshal Sir Stuart Peach, the new Chief of the Defence Staff, and Air Chief Marshal Sir Stephen Hillier, the new Chief of the Air Staff.

Many cadets who develop a passion for flying go on to join the civilian flying industry or have careers in engineering or science.

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Howard Wheeldon, aerospace analyst

Sir Gerald Howarth MP, a former defence minister and pilot himself, said Britain had to maximise the opportunity for young people to savour flying if it wanted to remain at the forefront of aviation.

His own local cadet group in Aldershot is to lose its nearest volunteer glider squadron at RAF Odiham.

He said: “The reason why young people like joining the Air Cadets is they get the opportunity to fly. If you reduce the number of bases, you make it more and more difficult for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged homes to access the flying opportunities.”

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Carol Vorderman inside a flight simulator

Image not found or type unknown

Howard Wheeldon, an aerospace analyst who says his life was transformed by his first taste of flying as a cadet in the 1960s, said the disbandment had been greeted with “absolute dismay” by many in the Air Cadet and aerospace community.

He said: “The word heartbroken easily springs to mind and use of that word is hardly surprising when one realises the impact this announcement has on so many volunteers and, indeed, the air cadets that they serve so brilliantly.”

He said devoted and experienced volunteers were being unceremoniously dumped in the cuts.

He said: “These guys and girls have been responsible for introducing literally tens of thousands of cadets to gliding over the decades and they deserve very much better than being dumped like this.”

A tougher flight safety regime across the RAF meant that the cadets’ glider fleet was grounded in 2014 over safety fears. Julian Brazier, reserves minister, said the fleet had been neglected for 15 years. An audit of the gliders had found it was not possible to get all 146 airborne again.

He said the new plan would see the number of powered Grob Tutor planes rise from 45 to 70.

He said: “Air Cadet gliding was paused in 2014 due to aircraft safety concerns, resulting in a period of reduced opportunities for our Cadets to fly.

The recently announced reorganisation of Air Cadet aviation will offer gliding again across the UK, alongside a substantial uplift in powered air experience flights and simulators. I am hugely grateful to all those in the Air Cadet organisation for their continued commitment and patience on this matter.”

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